

Can The Penelopiad restore agency to Penelope and the twelve hanged maids through narrative voice or does phallogocentrism get in the way?

‘An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with.’ In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope begins by dismantling and critiquing the didactic exemplar through which the ever-present tradition of phallogocentrism has disenfranchised women. From the outset, Atwood’s reception of the *Odyssey* evokes the question of whether narrative voice alone can reallocate agency to the oppressed women seen in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In the wake of Christopher Nolan’s blockbuster cinematic reception of the *Odyssey* (an inherently phallogocentric reception with only one female character possessing over 6% of the film’s screen time, compared to Matt Damon’s 95%), Atwood’s gynocentric counter-narrative becomes an indispensable counterweight.

Atwood’s seminal novella has been widely praised in its restoration of narrative voice to the *Odyssey*’s disenfranchised women. She redefines Homer’s Penelope from a 2D symbol of marital fidelity into a real woman with her own voice. She remodels the twelve hanged maids away from simplistic treachery to a more nuanced portrayal. Yet, we cannot interpret the leitmotif of feminine agency (alongside smaller sub-themes: voice, *kratos* (authority), justice and representation) without first delving further into the term. Agency requires autonomy. French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray famously critiqued the ‘logic of the same’, suggesting that western philosophy is inherently phallogocentric with men fulfilling the position as the universal subject. The exclusion of women from the position of subject, constrained them to being the ‘other’ of the man or the same. This traditional concept of equality where women are confined to the derivative of men forces women to assimilate into the male-defined structure. Therefore, Irigaray promotes the reconfiguration of intersubjective relations:¹ the creation of a standalone female subject position which coexists alongside the male subject. Overall, Irigaray highlights that female agency requires subject power instead of mere representation within the context of men. Similarly to Irigaray, philosopher Rosi Braidotti, categorically rejects the societal norm of woman as the complementary and specular other to man. Braidotti suggests women’s agency must be distanced from patriarchal hierarchy to allow women veritable equality in respect of power and agency despite being ontologically different to men. Thus, female agency necessitates women’s capacity to possess autonomous subject positions in which they can affect their own lives and have freedom of choice and action independent of surrounding men.

Penelope most prominently demonstrates her epistemic and practical agency across both the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* through her cunning tricks and ruses. In Butler’s translation of the *Odyssey*, Penelope is described as weaving ‘a web of deceit’ as she

unravelling her shroud each night to delay her decision to marry a suitor. This artful strategy showcases her brilliant Metis (arguably equal to that of Odysseus who was so renowned for his trickery) and her quotidian agency to continue her deceit with the aid of her young network of maids. However, Homer subsequently depicts how she was caught 'unravelling' thanks to her 'shameless, irresponsible maids'. Here, 'shameless' conjures a loaded image of treachery and perfidy committed by the maids. This depiction follows the maids through to their 'most pitiable deaths' whose cause Homer portrays as the maids' collusion with the suitors and disrespect in Odysseus' absence. In comparison, *The Penelopiad* allows a lot more narrative space for the shroud ruse and attempts to question Homer's portrayal of the female characters. Penelope says that the hapless downfall of her ruse was not thanks to treacherous betrayal but simply 'an accident' since 'the young are careless'. Furthermore, Penelope uses the narrative voice she's been granted as a first-person narrator to suggest that the unravelling of her trick was in fact her fault since she laid too much responsibility on her 12 most 'lovely' and 'beguiling' 'young maids' who were susceptible to the depraved sins of the wolfish pack of suitors. These descriptions evoke pity for the handmaids who were defenceless and tried their best to help their mistress Penelope but, in the end, failed – not on account of their duplicity but through their exploitation by the powerful suitors. Furthermore, Atwood gives Penelope the discursive agency to highlight her Metis and intelligence as she explains that when retelling the story she would credit 'Pallas, Athene' for the scheme to avoid 'accusations of pride should the scheme succeed'. In contrast, Homer implies that 'God inspired' Penelope 'to set up the great loom' scheme and in doing so fundamentally neglects Penelope's craftiness and acumen. In addition, Homer's narration of the *Odyssey* portrays the quotidian burden of weaving and unmaking of the shroud as falling entirely on Penelope: evidenced by the anaphora of the singular personal pronoun 'I' alongside the verbs ('I wove', 'I unmade', 'I kept'). This stylistic choice disenfranchises the maids who Atwood's Penelope describes as being her 'most trusted eyes and ears' who 'helped' to undo 'the weaving', 'behind locked doors, at dead of night'. Moreover, Atwood's Penelope makes the reader question Homer's delineation of the maids and Penelope's relationship as simply transactional. Atwood's Penelope recounts the 'festivity' and 'hilarity' of the long nights with the maids as they 'told stories', 'shared riddles' and 'made jokes' whilst unravelling the shroud. The semantic field of happiness and enjoyment coupled with Penelope's powerfully indicative declaration of the maids and her being 'almost like sisters' underlines that their relationship went beyond that of slaves and their mistress or that of cohabitants: they were friends.

Pursuing the leitmotif of Penelope's Metis and strategic agency, it is necessary to analyse the scenes of her bed recognition-test and bow contest which reveal categorically Odysseus' veritable identity to her. Homer's *The Odyssey* details how Penelope cunningly set up the test by demanding 'Euryclea' to bring 'the bed outside this room, and put bedding upon it'. However, Homer follows this with a paragraph-long oration from Odysseus explaining how he carved this 'bed' 'with' his 'very own hands' from 'an olive tree'. Homer's phallogocentric narration strips away the brilliance of Penelope's recognition test by focusing upon and praising Odysseus' previous craftsmanship. By contrast, Atwood's narration elaborates upon Penelope's recognition test by explaining that only herself, 'Odysseus and Actoris' (a maid who

‘was long dead’) knew about the bed stump’s derivation. Given from the perspective of Penelope rather than Odysseus, this narrative accents Penelope’s cunning and ability to devise strategic tests. This role reversal contradicts the phallogocentric tradition of reason and ‘logos’ being associated solely with men by showcasing female rationality. Furthermore, Homer depicts Penelope orchestrating the bow contest to find a new husband rather than to find out if the beggar was Odysseus. Homer writes in detail about Odysseus who ‘took the bow, and held it up, and examined it all over’ before stringing the bow ‘without effort’ and passing an arrow ‘clean through’ the twelve axes. This narrative account emphasises the prowess of the hero Odysseus and his brilliance in winning the contest to the surprise of the suitors. However, Atwood’s Penelope suggests that it may categorically neglect the strategy and thought employed by Penelope in the implementation of the contest. Penelope exclaims with conviction that she ‘knew Odysseus was the beggar’ and that ‘only Odysseus could perform the archery trick’: she ‘set the whole thing up on purpose’. Atwood gives discursive authority to Penelope and consequently allows readers to perceive Penelope’s intelligence and that her ruses were not thanks to any ‘divine plan’ or ‘accident’ as the ‘songs claim’. As Ben Woodward argues, Atwood allows for the previously diminished and marginalised characteristics of Penelope to be highlighted. Yet Hilde Staels’ theories suggest that Atwood reveals the patriarchal society’s suppression of women’s brilliance through the phallogocentrism of praising only male virtues.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida is credited with introducing the term Phallogocentrism. The portmanteau is derived from two significant concepts: logocentrism and phallogocentrism. Phallogocentrism (phallus referring to the male genitalia) refers to the implicit societal centrality of the masculine as the expected norm and highlights the focus on the masculine. Logocentrism denotes the prioritisation of reason and logic within western cultures with the paternal nature of logos associating masculine with veritability and logos. On the other hand, ‘the feminine’ has become an ontological metaphor for females and their supplemental nature to men which is treated as almost dangerous. Phallogocentrism relies upon the preconceived framework of binaries such as reason and emotion, active and passive, subject and object. Consequently, these binaries neglect the inherently fluid and complex nature of life and instead focus on the phallogocentric perspective with the feminine left behind as the other. The masculine – the phallus- is always privileged as superior, active and rational (proprietor of the logos trait) whilst the feminine is relinquished to being inferior and the supplement to the masculine. The association of logos to these patriarchal biases continues to exist in the modern day where men are perceived as more ‘active and rational’ than their ‘passive and irrational’ female counterparts. The rendering of women as passive rather than the active subjects is essential to our understanding of agency in *The Penelopiad*.

While Atwood’s narrative voice gives Penelope and the twelve maids discursive authority, agency demands practical autonomy and relative subjectivity. In essence, voice determines who speaks whereas agency concerns who possesses power. Naturally there is overlap as narrative authority can be viewed as form of personal power to influence but nevertheless a woman may possess voice without possessing agency. Atwood undeniably reclaims the authorial power for the subaltern women –

giving Penelope the first-person narration and the Chorus for the hanged maids. However, reclamation alone is not enough to restore agency.

Atwood undoubtedly restores narrative voice with Penelope's first-person narration and the chorus of the maids. However, I wonder if Atwood's reclamation of discursive authority results in the tangible proof that narrative voice does not equate to material and veritable female agency. Atwood portrays Penelope as orating posthumously: 'now that I'm dead, I know everything'. This framework of reception is infallibly reinterpreting *après-coup* and thus is categorically unable to undo or change the lives of its characters and their outcomes. Furthermore, Penelope exclaims her desire to 'do a little story making' since the rest had 'run out of air' which stands as ironclad proof of her newly-restored voice and discursive authority. Nevertheless, Penelope undermines this newfound voice on the very first paragraph of the book where she admits what she 'wished would happen' like 'many wishes failed to come true'. The admission of failure to fulfil her wishes underlines the fact that she may have regained her voice but the door to changing her past story remains firmly locked. On top of this, Penelope notes that her sack of words was of 'of reasonable size' but predominantly in reference to her 'eminent husband'. This metaphorical concept of each person's sack perfectly portrays the phallogocentric nature of Homer's narration by showing that all the words related to her were in relation to or said by her late husband- relinquishing her to the position of a passive bystander whose only prowess was her husband's success. Yet again, this proves that Atwood may give the disenfranchised women a voice but not the ability to rewrite the past and their portrayals. While Homeric Penelope's fidelity is presented as deserving of 'all the honour and glory', Atwood delves deeper into the rationale behind this representation of fidelity. Atwood patently acknowledges the fidelity in saying Penelope is 'an edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with'. This metaphor presents Penelope as being perverted into a patriarchal symbol which equates female subjugation and oppression with virtuous fidelity. Penelope's discursive authority allows her to pose these questions to the reader. Yet the facts of her marginalisation stay constant. Penelope highlights her own lack of agency in the maids' deaths: 'What could I do?', 'I bit my tongue. It's a wonder I have any tongue left, so frequently have I bitten it over the years'. The image of biting one's tongue being equated with honourable virtuous qualities of fielding is strikingly problematic. The suggestion that silence is Penelope's most virtuous quality showcases both Penelope's oppression and her complete lack of agency. Furthermore, Homer's *Odyssey* explores the gruesome deaths of the maids which were not a 'clean death' but the 'most pitiable death'. Homer describes their hanging as a routine process of each one following the other and each having a noose tied around their neck and then waiting. This portrayal of their death highlights their innate lack of autonomy as they succumb to their death hopelessly unable to fight. While Atwood is able to bring alive these maids' voices, she cannot change their brutal slaughter in the most dishonourable of ways. Atwood comedically attempts to give the chorus of maids an opportunity for justice with the trial but the antics of 'Athena being called to defence' and the 'Angry Ones' being summoned ensues. Atwood may change the court of public opinion, but the maids cannot receive reparation as their fates are already sealed.

Elsewhere, Homer describes Penelope so worried that she was 'unable to eat or drink' before being told by her maid Euryclea to 'wash her face' and 'offer prayers'. Similarly, Atwood's Penelope describes crying so much she believed she 'would turn into a river' despite 'how much she prayed and offered up sacrifices'. Both these accounts portray the helplessness of Penelope who must resort to prayer and sacrifices as her only mean of practical autonomy to help her son. Atwood's account reads more emotionally and evokes pity for Penelope who seems hopelessly sad at the thought of losing her son. In both excerpts, her agency stays at a constant low as she is unable to do anything except offer hopeful prayers. The patriarchal system in which the epic is based is responsible for Penelope's passive helplessness as she doesn't know herself what her options are: she would never dare imagine sailing across to follow her dear son because phallogocentric ideals would present that as a ridiculous thing for a woman to consider.

Overall, *The Penelopiad* describes the normalised abuse of young women. If a man wishes to sleep with a young woman, they 'could not refuse' and it 'did no good to weep'. Furthermore, a dark picture of male authority emerges in Penelope's traumatic account of her near death at the hands of her father. While Atwood allows Penelope to illuminate these abuses, her narrative voice mirrors therapy chairwork. No matter how much she says, she cannot undo her trauma. This engraved trauma and institutionalised misogyny pervades Penelope's story from being nicknamed 'patient' to never contradicting or digging deep or asking awkward questions to her husband. She explains these actions by saying that 'happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampage'. These words accent women's only option is to acquiesce mutely to oppressive and abuse men. As much as Atwood's quote here begs modern-day readers to investigate Homer's misogynistic expectations, it demonstrates clearly that institutional phallogocentrism and misogyny cannot be remedied or cured by allowing the victims to speak. Such ingrained misogyny ensures that Penelope would never be able to regain agency because she would not want it. Her belief that passive objectivity is her best path to success outlines how little she can even imagine true female agency. So she fails Irigaray's agency test as Penelope cannot even imagine the creation of a separate subject position for herself away from men.

Edith Hall emphasises that reception is essential since it reinterprets antiquity with modern ethical and societal framework. This argument highlights why Margaret Atwood chose Homer's *Odyssey* to start the conversation around gender struggles, patriarchy and marginalised women. In this context, *The Penelopiad* becomes a critical text fostering the cultural dialogue between Ancient Greece (and historical interpretations of *The Odyssey*) and modern-day society with our contemporary feminist values. Similarly, Lorna Hardwick highlights the perennial exchange between antiquity and modernity with both illuminating each other. By handing over narrative voice to the disenfranchised women, Atwood's reception reveals the contemporary feminist implications of Homer's phallogocentric narration. Furthermore, Goldhill's theory around the inherent political inflections of classical reception helps to underline how Atwood's reception aims to contest the almost ubiquitous tradition of male-dominated

literary interpretations and to shine a light on the previously marginalised voices of female characters. The term 'revisionist mythmaking' popularised by Alicia Ostriker pinpoints how I'd describe Atwood's reception piece: she rewrites the tale from oppressed and hitherto neglected perspectives without rewriting the plot line or events of the story. This categorisation is crucial to the question of agency as her reclamation of voice does not change the events or plot line that happened. Sticking true to Homer's story, Atwood is restricted to merely changing how the characters are represented and written about.

In conclusion, Atwood's revisionist mythmaking reception undoubtedly restores narrative voice and discursive authority in a powerful way for Penelope and the hanged maids. Atwood's reception is also very important for the modern dialogue with this ancient text considering contemporary moral and ethical ideals. However, the societally ingrained phallogocentrism ensures that 'the right doors' remain 'locked' preventing females from accessing true agency. Therefore, the paradox remains that representation without institutional reform yields testimony, not remedy.

Bibliography:

Atwood, M. (2005) *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Braidotti, R. (2011) *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. 2nd edn. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, J. (1981) *Positions*. Translated by A. Bass. London: Athlone Press.

Goldhill, S. (2006) 'Cultural history and aesthetics: why Kant is no place to start reception studies', in Martindale, C. and Thomas, R.F. (eds.) *Classics and the Uses of Reception*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 56–70.

Hall, E. and Stead, H. (eds.) (2015) *Greek and Roman Classics in the British Struggle for Social Reform*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hardwick, L. (2003) *Reception Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Homer (1999) *The Odyssey*. Translated by S. Butler. Project Gutenberg. Originally published 1900.

Irigaray, L. (1985a) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by G.C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Irigaray, L. (1985b) *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by C. Porter with C. Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Martindale, C. and Thomas, R.F. (eds.) (2006) *Classics and the Uses of Reception*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Nolan, C. (dir.) (2026) *The Odyssey* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

Ostriker, A.S. (1986) *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Staels, H. (2009) "'The Penelopiad' and 'Weight': contemporary parodic and burlesque transformations of classical myths", *College Literature*, 36(4), pp. 100–118.