

PENELOPE UNMASKED: A MYTH RETOLD

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Abstract

The paper reflects the concept of uncovering concealed facets of Penelope's character or narrative, implying a more profound examination and reworking of the tale. Unlike more traditional interpretations, this one offers a fresh perspective and shed light on aspects that were previously hidden or ignored. This implies delving further into the tale and reinterpreting it by revealing hidden aspects of Penelope's character or narrative. From a feminist perspective, this study analyses Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad's* historical framework. By reimagining the most famous narrative in Western literature, *The Penelopiad* goes beyond narrative parallelism by giving the mythological past a crucial dimension that illuminates the present.

Keywords: Myth, Penelope, Odysseus, Homer, Margaret Atwood, Mythical Retelling.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's literary works are acclaimed for their comprehensive exploration of several issues, such as gender and identity, religion and mythology, and the utilization of language. This research largely focuses on the retelling of mythical myths, which is a captivating aspect of her body of work. When a myth is retold, it honors the essence of the original narrative while also incorporating the contemporary understanding and interpretation of the storyteller. This duality means that the retelling respects the foundational elements of the myth while infusing it with new insights, thus creating a version that is both faithful and fresh. The process of retelling myths involves blending parts of the original tale with the author's unique perspective, resulting in a literary work that sheds new light on age-old stories. This approach not only preserves the tradition of the myth but also ensures its relevance in modern times by addressing current themes and issues.

Myth retelling is more than just recounting events, it also involves questioning and re-establishing the significance of different ideas. Traditional, ethnic, or racial narratives, as well as national and individual histories, as well as significant political and social events, fall under this category. Myths are not only kept alive but also updated to reflect modern issues and ideals through this process of re-addressing. When Atwood retells a myth, she might look at how past events shape people's identities or how traditional stories can be reworked to bring up issues of gender, power, and resistance. There are many ways in which this process shows how myths have been created and shaped by the political and social contexts in which they are shared and reshaped. Authors add to a conversation going on between the past and the present by using stories in this way. They give readers fresh ways to think about and interact with well-known stories, which makes sure that

these myths stay powerful and inspiring. Retelling myths is basically a dynamic interaction between custom and innovation, connecting stories from the past with things that happen now.

The Penelopiad is a 2005 novella by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, who is well known for her novels, essays, and poetry. It is written from the perspective of Penelope, who reflects on the events of Odysseus, her existence in Hades, and several other topics. Additionally, the work also provides a perspective on the murder of the twelve maids that occurred at the close of the original narrative. Homer's famous epic, *The Odyssey*, which chronicles Odysseus' adventures after the Trojan War, serves as the source material for Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Notably, Atwood's adaptation is written from Penelope's viewpoint, Odysseus' wife, who endures a twenty-year wait for his return. Classical mythology typically depicts women in one of two roles: as antagonists or as helpless bystanders to the heroes who get all the attention. But modern poets such as Margaret Atwood are reinterpreting ancient tales through a feminist lens.

The narrative structure of the story is conveyed through the perspective of Penelope, who serves as the primary narrator. This recounting encompasses her childhood in Sparta, Penelope's marriage with Odysseus and life in Ithaca, her anguish and isolation after Odysseus left for Trojan War, the pressure caused by suitors who besieged her home, the cunning plan involving the shroud, and the eventual homecoming of Odysseus after two decades, resulting in his killing of the suitors and the maids. Parallel to Penelope's narration, the twelve maids also are provided with a narrative voice. Penelope's narrative, like the format of Greek theater, incorporates the maids' recitations as a chorus-like element. These recitations serve as a reflection on the maids' unfortunate destiny under the control of Odysseus and Telemachus. The novella is segmented into 29 chapters, with 18 chapters narrated by Penelope and 11 recited by the maids. According to Renaux, the chapters spoken by Penelope, as well as those sung by the maids, would offer their own renditions and creations of their stories (5).

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the spotlight is solely on Odysseus, who executes his maids for associating with the unwelcome suitors of his wife, Penelope. Penelope herself remains a dutiful figure, quietly awaiting her husband's return in the background. Her bond with Odysseus defines every part of her existence: she is his spouse, the child's mother, and oversees his estate (Van Zyl Smit 394). However, Margaret Atwood reimagines this classic myth in *The Penelopiad*, offering a fresh perspective where the clever Penelope is finally given her voice. In Atwood's retelling, Penelope recounts her story from the Underworld, freed from her earthly troubles and responsibilities by death. This newfound freedom allows her to express her deepest thoughts without fear of judgment or insult. Also, the twelve maids, who were executed by hanging on Odysseus's orders, reappear in songs and ballads, emphasizing the injustice they endured being sexually assaulted and executed purely due to their perceived social inferiority.

In *Penelopiad* Margaret Atwood addresses unanswered issues left by the original narrative, delving deeper into questions such as the circumstances leading to the maids' execution and Penelope's true actions (Atwood 21).

In the novella's introduction, Atwood explicitly outlines her intent to reinterpret the classical epic, disclosing her persistent preoccupation with the tragic fate of the hanged maids. She states that these figures have "always haunted" her, and she ensures that in *Penelopiad*, Penelope is portrayed as being similarly affected and troubled by their unjust execution (Atwood 21). By replacing Odysseus with Penelope, Atwood offers a feminine perspective on a renowned tale, demythologizing it.

While Penelope's relationship with Odysseus remains significant, the novella also highlights her connections with other characters, significantly her relationship with Helen and her interactions with the maids constitute some of the most pivotal elements of the book (Suzuki 275). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's character is portrayed as "witty, blunt, and somewhat ungracious" (Khalid 47), a departure from the flawless and faithful wife depiction she receives in *The Odyssey*.

Penelope finds a sense of belonging with the maids, forming a bond akin to sisterhood where they share stories, laughter, and secrets: "We were almost like sisters" (Atwood 114). Among them, Penelope feels secure without having to compete in a male-dominated world. However, their relationship eventually turns sour. Penelope tasks the maids with monitoring the suitors waiting for her to choose a new husband, even if it means they must endure sexual advances or assault. She justifies her conduct by asserting that controlling the maids is a method to please Odysseus upon his return, asserting that it is a way of serving one's master, and he will be very pleased upon his homecoming (Atwood 117).

Consequently, her yearning to be reunited with Odysseus compels Penelope to exploit her authority over the maids, damaging their relationship. Additionally, Penelope's discontent towards Helen is not rooted in a desire to imitate her, but rather in perceiving Helen as a potential threat to her relationship with Odysseus. Helen's actions resulted in Odysseus, who represented Penelope's primary sense of connection, departing for Troy.

Moreover, Helen's renowned beauty and captivating allure prompt Penelope to question whether Odysseus prefers Helen to herself, contemplating why he continues to think about Helen (Atwood 64). Therefore, when Penelope mourns that Helen is the cause of all her suffering (Atwood 131), she signifies that Helen disrupts her connection and sense of belonging with Odysseus.

A neglected part of the Penelope story is examined in *The Penelopiad*—the twelve maids who served under Penelope and what became of them. These maids occupied pivotal roles in Penelope's household, all of whom were either enslaved or born into servitude. The maids became Penelope's valued confidantes and aides during the invasion of her suitors because she was left alone to administer the estate when her mother-in-law died, Odysseus's nurse was sidelined, and her father-in-law withdrew from state matters. The maids are condemned to death when Odysseus returns twenty years later, accusing them of conspiring with the suitors, even though Penelope is unable to save them.

During her extended wait, persistent advances from suitors, and profound guilt over what she perceives as her inability to protect her maids, Penelope's reunion with Odysseus is marred by this tragic event. On the other hand, Odysseus and Telemachus succeeded in re-establishing their authority in Ithaca.

The Penelopiad gives Penelope a platform to express herself, dispelling the notions of her immutable purity and faithfulness, in contrast to *The Odyssey*, where she plays a supporting role.

In *The Penelopiad*, the Twelve Maids relentlessly harass Odysseus in the afterlife, closely following his every action. The maids vow to seek revenge against Odysseus, declaring that he will never escape them, whether in his current life, afterlife, or any future existence (Atwood 192).

They critically examine their own killings from an anthropological perspective and even simulate a trial, aiming to make Odysseus pay for his crimes. But Odysseus consistently opts to depart from Penelope to elude the persistent presence of the Maids, with the intention of being reborn. Meanwhile, Penelope continues to reside in the fields of asphodel, and the process of their separation and reunion repeats ceaselessly in the underworld.

CONCLUSION

In this regard, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* offers a fresh perspective within the narrative tradition, showcasing the potential of revisionist mythmaking. Atwood's work is not merely a sorrowful tale of women, but a sharp critique of a society that treats women as mere accessories in a man's world and deems those from lower economic classes as expendable.

By giving voice to the most marginalized women in the story 'the maids' Atwood highlights the complexities of female interactions, highlighting that women's interactions with each other are complex and nuanced. This represents a significant evolution in feminist rewriting, yet it also raises questions about the challenges of such endeavors: prioritizing certain voices often means silencing others.

Atwood's portrayal of the maids aims to provide them with a meaningful presence and to challenge established historical interpretations, as Niemann notes (46). She gives the maids space to articulate their perspectives, yet Penelope remains the central figure of the story a wealthy, white woman. In contrast, the maids are depicted collectively, their individual identities overshadowed, highlighting a disparity in portrayal within the story.

Thus, while *The Penelopiad* opens new possibilities in narrative and feminist discourse, it also underscores the inherent difficulties in rewriting myths, where elevating one perspective can inadvertently marginalize others.

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