

1. Recognizing the female Characters and their Identities: A Critical Assessment

The thesis focuses on *The Penelopiad*, a novella by Margaret Atwood that retells the story of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. The novella, specifically, recaps Penelope's life from modern perspective; Penelope recalls her family life in Sparta, her marriage to Odysseus, her dealing with suitors during Odysseus' absence, and the aftermath of his return. In *The Odyssey*, Penelope, daughter of Icarius of Sparta and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy, is portrayed as the ideal and typical faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy, weeping and praying for the return of Odysseus. In the novella, Atwood presents the female characters, especially Penelope and the twelve maids silenced and repressed in the classical Greek myth with their bold voice and assertive position. The research tries to analyze why the novelist gives them dominant roles and much space in the overall structure of the text. In present novella, Atwood presents the same Penelope and other characters with their strong voices and assertive positions, hence, the depiction of female characters in the novella appear positive and different from the mythic depiction of female characters in Greek mythology.

At the same time, Atwood mixes together the memories and voices of the twelve maids with the narrative thread of Penelope. Following the thinkings founded by the feminist critics like Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showlter, Simone de Beauvoir etc. the project tries to explain that in the novella Atwood has given Penelope and the other female characters wise, witty and judicious voice to tell their story and maintain their dignified existence. The research assesses that the female characters celebrate their dominant roles in the novella. By highlighting their prominent role, the novella

asserts that the author has sought to reconfigure the prevailing identity and existence of female characters.

In *The Penelopiad*, the hero's long suffering wife, Penelope, retells the myth of *The Odyssey* from her own point of view. Left on the island kingdom of Ithaca to defend for herself while her husband competes with a Cyclops, revengeful gods and witches, Penelope tells of her efforts to confuse the many suitors who seek to take over Odysseus's absence for ten years. She waits and maintains her hard times while Odysseus fights to secure the return of her beautiful cousin Helen, to end.

This is also the story of Penelope's twelve maids and their murder by Telemachus and Odysseus upon his return. The myth describes them as having drunk with the suitors to capture the palace of Ithaca, indirectly making them responsible for the long hours of gambling and rutting within its halls. Penelope reveals that her maids are in fact spying on the men, delaying their attempts to kill Penelope's son Telemachus. Their intention is to forcibly marry her and seize her husband's kingdom in the process.

Events are narrated by the long dead Penelope, now a ghost, wandering through Hades. She has been observing the progress of human history and has developed over time a certain hollow sense of humour. Atwood uses the character of Penelope as her mouthpiece and intends *The Penelopiad* as a corrective to Homer's epic. By having the narration itself takes place in the present day, Atwood mocks the pretensions of Homer's characters, all of whom are still wandering around the underworld. She jokes the events occurring in the myth with an ironical twist. Penelope herself never really believes in the gods, as all, she observed in her life was misfortune and violence.

Penelope's life is spent in a state of passivity; it is a quality that is lauded within Homer's tale. Her patience and forgiveness of her husband's indiscretions elevated as virtues. Atwood reverses this role by showing how Odysseus won her hand and took her to Ithaca as his bride in order to weaken her father in any future conflict between Sparta and its neighbours. She could always see it through her husband's lies and omissions. But, the original epic makes she chose not to speak up as she knew he enjoyed fooling everyone. Now she reveals the fact she knows activities that Odysseus cheated. In fact, most of her dignified silences from Homer's epic are retold by Atwood as Penelope furiously trying to repress her laughter at the foolishness of people around her.

In the novella, Atwood tells that the three women rule Penelope's life. Her mother-in-law, Anticleia, is stern and unloving, treating her son's wife at all times inconveniently. Eurycleia, the palace wet-nurse, replaces her as mother to her own son Telemachus. And finally, there is Helen, her cousin, who ruins her life, having ignited the conflict that took her husband away for twenty years and sets the events in motion that would lead to the occupation of her home and the murder of the twelve maids. Atwood uses these three women to represent the archetypes of female identity in mythology – the matriarch, the crone and the whore. By doing so, she avoids any of these traits in Penelope's Character.

The anger is here. The twelve maids act as a chorus throughout the book. They speak in verse initially, but later they mock the incidents that were explained in the original version of the epic. Sometimes, the story seems to be retold from their perspectives. With Penelope as a sarcastic character narrator, they also become sarcastic and ironical.

The Penelopiad, nominated for Man Booker International Prize 2005, by Margaret Atwood, has produced a great deal of upheavals in the minds of literary scholars and critics since it was published in 2005. The novel has been perceived from different angles. Appreciating the overall contents the text encompasses, Valerie Miner, in *Women's Reviews of Books*, comments:

In *The Penelopiad*, Odysseus's wife demonstrates more agency and complexity than in most versions or interpretations of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. Long fascinated by myth and archetype, Atwood is a natural choice to summon Penelope's "true" story by employing a metafictional narrator. (21)

According to Valerie Miner, the book gives the more agency and space to various interpretations. In this sense, the original epic by Homer was reductive, for it did not give various voices and sufficient space to struggle. Moreover, it has the metafictional qualities too. Atwood in the novella chooses Penelope as the true and is reliable narrator to expose the inconsistencies present in the Homer's epic.

Another critic, Nicole Estvanik, commenting on its comic and parodying taste in *Literary Journal*, examines the novella as a comic relief. He adds:

The Penelopiad's pivotal maids, serve as an accusatory Greek chorus and also as barbed comic relief. In Hades--where "people are now free to speak what they think in a way they weren't free in life" --they've finally gained *the* voices that Homer denied them. The maids' version is not *the* same --it usually isn't. They always know too much. (75)

According to this critic, the novel is the comic version of the original epic. It presents the events and the characters in a comic manner that ridicules the original events and

situations. The critic is right in that it parodically presents the events and evokes the irregularities of the novel.

Similarly, the editor, in *The Washington Times*, praises the artful imitation of the myth by the author and the ability to relate it to life. He appreciates:

. . . Atwood paints a shrewdly insightful picture of what life in those days might actually have been like. . . . By turns slyly funny and fiercely indignant, Ms. Atwood's imaginative, ingeniously-constructed 'deconstruction' of the old tale reveals it in a new—and refreshingly different—light. (12)

The main concern of *The Washington Times* in the text is to take the literature, here text is how the author captures the day to day life in a literary piece. In this sense, literature is an imitation of the life. That is to say, the text reflects the context and events the characters in the novella involve during the then time. Atwood is keen to capture the picture of those days with her imaginative and insightful power. She tells the mythical ideas and situations in a refreshingly different light.

Another critic, Peter Conrad, considers the novella as the homely tale.

According to him, the sequence of events and characters in the novella deal with the homely issues and conflicts. He further adds:

The Penelopiad, despite its somewhat scary title and academic summary, is actually quite a homely tale, full of intimate thoughts, scraps of legend, and humorous theories that Penelope comes up with on why different people in the story acted the way they did. Her account is peppered with arch observations about Ancient Greece gods, demi-gods and customs. (10)

For him, the novella is not only important because it explores the family values but also it makes a close observation about the ancient values too.

The novella is the good account of the famous ancient Greek myth with some significant alterations, without a doubt, as the aforementioned critics view the book. However, the present research emphasizes why the author foregrounds the female characters and their existence almost subverting their role in previous versions of myth. The study by employing the feminist scholarship as its theoretical tool explores how Atwood in novella redefines the myth from the perspective of the long suffering hero's wife and the unfortunate twelve maids. It explores the female issues and experiences in the light of feminist scholarship.

Feminism is a collective term for the systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. The term tends to be used for the women's rights movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men. Feminists are united by the idea that women's position in society is unequal to that of men, and that society is structured in such a way as to benefit men to the political, social, and economic disadvantage of women. However, feminists have used different theories to explain these inequalities and have advocated different ways of redressing inequalities. There are geographic and historical variations in the nature of feminism.

Historically, feminist thought and activity can be divided into two waves. The first wave, which began in about 1800 and lasted until the 1930s, has largely concerned with gaining equal rights between women and men. The second wave, which began in the late 1960s, has continued to fight for equality but has also

developed a range of theories and approaches that stress the difference between women and men that draw attention to the specific needs of women. Feminist scholarship advocates for the plight, right, and the position of a female in the given society and circumstances. However, the development in feminism covers the wide area of study. So, the following study will catch the feminist thinking laid by the figures like that of Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter and Simone de Beauvoir who value the existence, individuality and identity of the female characters. They basically advocate for the female identity in the society in which chauvinism denies the female existence as equal to that of the male.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" – Simone de Beauvoir's idea distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired (301). So identity is always there in the society but it has been hidden by the male ideology and social construction. It has to be explored. For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women. This assumption not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but forms the subject for whom political representation is pursued. "This reveals important lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all. Representation is the normative function of the language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women" (Butler 273).

Atwood's feminist concerns emerge clearly in the novel. The novel features female characters as intelligent and self-conscious modern women searching for identity. They are featured as assertive and able to maintain their position and criticize the male and misbehaviors done upon them. So the female characters in the novel stop being the toys of the male and patriarchal domination. The distance between the male

and female in novel has been reduced largely and Atwood also redefines the myth about the relationship between male and female in the novel. Simone de Beauvoir, regarding the relationship between male and female in *The Second Sex*, says:

It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice. Once she ceases to be parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and universe there is no longer need for a masculine mediator. (689)

Beauvoir's idea of liberty is not gained from anything else or for the matter guaranteed by someone else. It should be self-pursued and captured. For this, a female should cease to be a parasite in the society. She must come up with her assertion and boldness. The heroine [hero] and the maids in the novella come with very quality and redefine the myth from their own point of view.

In this context, the text reveals that Penelope, the faithful wife, is tortured by gossip of her husband's infidelities. Nymphs are raped, mortals are abused by gods and goddesses at their profound whim, and earthly freedoms are granted or denied at will. The ancient myth cannot portray the women having equal status in the society. They silently remained there in their dominated status even if they have feeling of silent revolt in their minds. They could not expose their dissatisfaction because of the utmost imposition of the male rules and regulations. But, Atwood presents the female character being dissatisfied with the position they had in their lives. The characters in the novella justify that "women feel just as the men feel" (Woolf 822). Virginia Woolf outlines the potentiality of women empowerment in her essay "A Room of One's Own". According to her, million women are condemned to a still doom, and millions

are in silent revolt against their lot. Women are supposed to be very calm generally. But women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and field for their efforts as much as their brothers do. She further adds:

They suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings to playing piano and embroidering bags. (822)

Woolf in her formulation of female potentiality says women need to exercise their faculties and efforts as they have potentiality to do things on their own like their fathers, husbands and brothers. Atwood has invented a vividly realized female community that was barely acknowledged by Homer in the ancient myth. She gives a nice platform to the characters where they can play with their efforts and can talk about the wrong doings of the male.

In this context, it can be claimed that Penelope is a marginal figure in the original text. She indeed plays a central role in the development of the plot. In general, Homer's epic holds Penelope up as a laudable heroine, whose famous faithfulness and endurance during her husband's absence are regarded as rare and exceptional virtues. Like her husband, she is known for her cunning which she uses to devise plans in order to stop her impending remarriage. However, despite her importance the *Odyssey* does not provide insight into Penelope's motives. She is portrayed 'from the outside'. Although the epic does focus on what she says and does, her thoughts, feelings and inner motives are not disclosed. For some scholars, the interpretation of the entire work depends on the question of "what was Penelope

really up to” (Atwood xxi), which, of course, is subject to much speculation and debate.

A feminist interpretation of Penelope focuses on the fact that the character is portrayed as extremely multi-faceted. It does not at all conform to the cliché that women in antiquity had extremely little choice regarding their social roles and could only pick one of a number of one-sided female stereotypes. It rejects the idea the women would never be thought of as respectable and desirable at the same time. It is so because in the novella, Atwood delineates her characters as being independent on their own. They do not repent for the marriage. They do not hesitate to point out the inconsistencies of male doing.

To a man it seems natural that it should be the wife who does the housework and assumes alone the care and bringing up of the children. The independent woman herself considers that in marrying she has assumed duties from which her personal life does not trouble her. She does not want to feel that her husband is deprived of advantages he would have married a "true woman"; she wants to be presentable, a good housekeeper, a devoted mother, such as wives traditionally are (Beauvoir 703). The women in the text go beyond the male expectations and rise above the boundaries set by the patriarchy and the male ideology. The text also reflects and advocates the strict system of social roles and hierarchical structures that characterized Greek society, as well as a set of morals, values and ideas of propriety, the violation of which was considered a great offense.

The text is a revision of the ancient myth. The revision is important because the revisiting of the myth means here the reformulating the female identity. It is the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new

critical direction. While language and literature is considered quite definitely a masculine domain, the reclaiming of female self knowledge and self-definition, and consequently the culture as whole in the novel is understood as an essential prerequisite. Re-vision hence here aims to challenge the dominant 'truth' through the retelling of the very narrative that is considered normal reflections of the social experiences. It rejects the oppressive structures, hierarchies and the differences. It redresses an imbalance between two species: male and female, in the society countering each other. It gives voice to the oppressed specifically marginal one, granting the subject positions to those who have traditionally been defined as having position of the Other.

II. Female identity in *The Penelopiad*

The Penelopiad redefines the canonical and original *Odyssey* from the perspective of Odysseus's wife Penelope. The female characters, especially Penelope and the twelve maids in Atwood version appear with their bold voice and assertiveness. The characters in this novella appear having their status, agency and position. In the novella, they have their own voice and assertion. The novelist gives them dominant roles and much space in the overall structure of the text. Here, they can criticize the society they live in and the characters they suffer from. By highlighting their prominent role, the novella asserts that the author has sought to reconfigure the prevailing identity and existence of female characters.

The story, however, is not made up entirely of the rejection of the original *Odyssey*. The story also addresses original themes, as the story concentrates less on politics, heroic quests or divine intervention. But on a deeper level, the story focuses on the female characters and their narration of their past from the gendered perspectives. The characters in the novella present their problems when they were alive; they recount difficulties of relationships and everyday life in family or society. Penelope's viewpoint concerns with the social identities of women and illustrates the limited social roles given to them. In the very beginning, Penelope remembers her childhood:

When I was young my father ordered me to be thrown into the sea. I never knew exactly why during my lifetime, but now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud. Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would live forever. (7)

While Odysseus's story recounts fights with sea monsters and encounters with goddesses, Appleton says Penelope's story deals with household duties and her rebellious teenage son and on a deeper level with "her loneliness in a hostile and unsympathetic world". Her story deals with the situation having to pretend and hide her true feelings, the situation that is insecure about her own identity and purpose (57). This contrast highlights the fact that her life was spent in a state of passivity, a quality that is lauded within Homer's tale. Her patience and forgiveness of her husband's rashness considered as virtues. Atwood reverses this by showing how Odysseus won her hand and took her to Ithaca as his bride in order to weaken her father in any future conflict between Sparta and its neighbours. She could always see through her husband's lies and omissions but she chose not to speak up as she knew he enjoyed fooling everyone. In fact, most of her dignified silences from Homer's epic are retold by Atwood as Penelope furiously trying to repress her laughter at the foolishness of people around her.

The Penelopiad does not glorify the acts of Odysseus. Instead of the male hero, Odysseus, *The Penelopiad* focuses on the female protagonist. And it covers not only the events that form the plot of the *Odyssey*, but Penelope's entire life story in the form of a memoir. In addition to that, the chapters of Penelope's tale are mixed together with chapters told from the collective perspective of her maids, who were hanged for their betrayal at the end of the *Odyssey*. *The Penelopiad* hence provides two different female perspectives: one from Penelope and another is from maids' perspective. The choice to re-tell the *Odyssey* from a female perspective by "giv[ing] the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (xxi) as the author states in the "Introduction", clearly echoes the practice of feminist revision. The textbook clarity outlined in the "Introduction" almost seems to mock the naivety

of representation of the female experiences in the patriarchal structure of the mythic ages.

The novella attempts to define female experience by re-writing the male canon. On the surface level, the novella may indeed pursue the proclaimed almost detective-story-like goal of finding the ‘real’ answers to the questions, "What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to" (xxi). Any deeper exploration into the world of *The Penelopiad* will soon explore the female issues and problems in the society of Homer’s time. The simple evident is that Penelope criticizes her “eminent husband” from the beginning (2). She speaks against him: “what a fool he made me, some say. It was specialty of his: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away” (2).

Homer’s *Odyssey* is a story about storytelling itself. It is a recitation of a blind poet who recounts the stories told by a famous liar and adventurer. The poem contains narrative within narrative. The epic begins with the Goddess Athena relating to her father the story of Odysseus' troubles getting home from the siege at Troy. Telemachus leaves Ithaca in search of news of his father, and is diverted by the stories of Nestor and of Menelaus. He is deceived by their own exploits, those of Odysseus as well as the other heroes of the Trojan War. Odysseus narrates his wanderings to a fascinating Phaeacian court. Even in the Underworld, Anticleia tells Odysseus the story of his besieged wife, left back home. A storyteller needs all the help he can get. In the Greek epics, women do not star in their own tales so much as play supporting roles in the adventures of others (Collins 62-3).

In contrast, Atwood gives Penelope the central role of narrator which reverses the narrative structure of *Odyssey*. Now the events and things are presented from the perspective of Penelope. The maids are indeed hardly more than plot devices in

Homer's epic poem. They get merely a secondary focus. In this version, their roles and their relevance to Penelope's life have been foregrounded. The emphasis on the existence of the women characters has been acknowledged:

Later I found that Odysseus was not one of those men who, after the act, simply roll over and begin to snore. Not that I am aware of this common male habit through my own experience; but as I have said, I listened a lot to the maids. No, Odysseus wanted to talk, and as he was an excellent raconteur I was happy to listen. I think this is what he valued most in my ability to appreciate his stories. It's an underrated talent in women. (45)

Here, Penelope asserts self and even happens to criticize the doings of Odysseus. He did not want to talk with the maids and Penelope keenly appreciated his stories. This ability is the most valued ability in the eyes of Odysseus.

After all *The Odyssey* is Odysseus' story. This version does not touch upon the female characters as it speaks of the adventurous and brave incidents of male characters. But, in this version, each of the woman character also has a story to tell though their versions may be different from the original one. Odysseus's adventures and the devastating Trojan War is less focused. Instead, the impact of the war and effect of cause of war upon female and marginal characters is highlighted. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Penelope, Odysseus' long-suffering and faithful wife. She was left behind in Ithaca to fight off the advances of marriage, hungry suitors who intend to grab Odysseus' possessions. In the story of *Odyssey*, Homer tells of a patient and faithful wife, one who protects the rights of her husband and son. She is compared to the wicked wife, Clytemnestra, who murders her husband upon his return from Troy. Homer makes it clear: Penelope is the example to follow;

Clytemnestra is the example to avoid. So Penelope is depicted as faithful and domestic woman (Carpenter Collins 66-7).

The story told about Penelope in the *Odyssey* makes clear the fact that she is blameless. Like everything else in this epic, however, this estimation of her guiltlessness depends on one's perspective. Odysseus comes home to a wife who has been faithful. From the perspective of her son, Telemachus, for whom she has protected his father's estate, she is blameless. From the perspective of her twelve young female slaves, condemned by Odysseus she may implicitly share in the guilt of their murders. It is from this last viewpoint that Atwood turns to Homer's poem about storytelling. As far as the tale of Penelope goes, "The story as told in the *Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies" (xv). Atwood asks, "What was Penelope really up to?" (xv). The fate of the twelve maids of Penelope bothered Atwood. Why are these maids killed? Their role in the story of Odysseus and Penelope lacks. Being slaves themselves, the maids are not granted the voices to narrate their own stories; they cannot justify their actions themselves. They are not able to craft a defense, they are hanged.

The story of Odysseus and Penelope is suspect from the beginning, since they are both "by [their] own admission – *proficient and shameless liars of long standing*" (173). However, Odysseus' listeners are usually seduced into believing him as Penelope explains: "He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters" (2). His exploits, as he recites them to the Phaeacians in the *Odyssey*, are heroic. Odysseus constructs a heroic identity for himself, the purpose of which is to provide a model for the rest of his society. The hero of the epic symbolizes the best virtues of a culture. The hero is not only to be

admired but also imitated. But virtues of Odysseus are re-identified in the Penelope's version. Here, she criticizes him as "this was like say he was a cheat and thief", the qualities he inherited from his grandfather Autolycus who was reputed for the very qualities and to have never won anything fairly in his life. His identity as a brave, trustworthy, virtuous and so on is also reconfigured.

Penelope's role in the "official version" is as the "considerate," "trustworthy," and "all-suffering" wife (2). This role, however, she cautions women to avoid. She describes this original version of herself as "An edifying legend. A stick used to bat other women with" (2). Penelope warns other women off: "*Don't follow my example. . .*" (2). But the only other narrative option, besides the official version, turns out to be slanderous. Penelope recognizes that there are also those "laughing at me behind my back," and these gossips, she claims, "were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself" (3). In fact these are conceptions about Penelopiad are the myths which control her existence. They created the myths: "These convulsive shadows are nothing more than the feminine in its pure state. It is the stupidity and baseness of the men of today that have lent air of positive worth to feminine deficiencies" (De Beauvoir 230).

The "slanderous gossip" claims that she either slept with one of the suitors, Amphinomus, or that she slept with all of them successively (143). Not liking either version some may deny that Penelope remained faithful to Odysseus. They accuse her of companying with Amphinomus of Dulichium, or with the suitors. Penelope after death informally decides that "Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making" (3). Penelope faced up accusation and had to endure the story making due to the fact that "I have no mouth through which I can speak. I can't make myself understood, not in your world, the world. . . I have no listener, not on

your side of the river” (4). This is a bitter criticism to the story making of the original version and now she seeks herself to make little story-making. This shows that the depictions and characterizations in the original stories were just fictitious; they were not based on reality.

In the novella, Penelope redefines the image of Odysseus as "heroic". As Penelope notes, it is "hard to know what to believe" (91). She is confused and cannot decide whether believe him or not. While the original story about Odysseus matches the story that he tells of himself, what we might call the "true" version, in the sense that it is the version of the story as the character himself sees it. The old version about Penelope does not fit the "true" version according to Penelope's perspective. Neither does the slander or the gossip, the jokes told behind her back. Calling the stories they tell about themselves the "truth," and the stories told about them by others "slander". There is a curious reversal. Odysseus' truth turns him into a mythic figure, one who fights monsters and seduces goddesses. Penelope's truth, on the other hand, remains firmly grounded in the reality because she is the character who lived near that reality. Her tools are commonsense and patience. The slander about Odysseus – that the goddesses were whores, and that the monsters were innkeepers – is mundane. The slander about Penelope becomes mythic. However, the rumors about Odysseus do nothing to affect his reputation or affect his status. The rumors about Penelope operate differently. If Odysseus were to believe the rumors, her status and even her life might be a sacrifice.

In addition to redefining the position of Odysseus, Penelope even criticizes her own husband. At this point, she departs from her social role as obedient, submissive, calm, innocent wife. She crosses the boundaries created in the society. She characterizes Odysseus as the cheater and thief never winning anything fairly. While

there was a game in which the contest was who is to win over Penelope as bride, she narrates:

He was clever though, they said. In fact he was too clever for his own good. The other young men made jokes about him – "Don't gamble with Odysseus, the friend of Hermes", they said. "You will never win". This was like saying he was a cheater and thief. His grandfather Autolycus was well known for these very qualities, and was reputed never to have won anything fairly in his life. (31)

Penelope is able to survive with her status intact because, like Odysseus, Penelope is clever. She would prefer to be beautiful, but she regretfully concedes that "I was not a man-eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen . . ." (29). But like her more beautiful cousin, whose power lies in her ability to sway men. Penelope also gains power through her association and access to powerful men. She tries to be independent; she ceases to be parasite. According to de Beauvoir, the independent women

traverse most of the distance that separated her from the male, and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice. Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles, between her and the universe is no longer and need for a masculine mediator. (689)

Penelope begins to stand on her own. She does not need to negotiate between her and the system she is living in. She all alone becomes assertive and bold to face up the challenges that come across.

Atwood's idea of telling *The Penelopiad* through the vantage point of dead allows freedom to Penelope in retrospection. She is not bounded any social ties and

marital bonds. And the retrospection should give the clearest view. In fact, there is still too much that she can't see: "*Now that I'm dead I know everything. That is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true*" (1). What she could not do when she was alive, she does now. She could not see when she was alive because she was within the social codes and cultural bonds. Her death is the benefit to tell the facts and retell the reality. What Atwood does that is different is she gives voice to those voiceless maidens, the slaves of Penelope, the group of the suitors, and the victims of Odysseus and Telemachus. The maids in the novella are not constraint by family, social and cultural values. Instead, they are free to express their dissatisfaction and complaints about the social order and parameters of the then society. Atwood makes them speak explicitly about the oppression and exploitation they endured. They were not simply maids. They were not mere slaves and drudges. They were in fact,

twelve moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal but deadly goddess of the moon? Could it be that we were ritual sacrifices, devoted priestesses doing our part, first by indulging in orgiastic fertility-rite of behaviour with the Suitors, then purifying ourselves by washing ourselves in the blood of the slain victims – such heaps of them, what an honour to the Goddess! – renewing our virginity, as Artemis renewed by bathing in a spring dyed with the blood of Actaeon? (164)

This is the fact about the maids the Penelope's version of the story outline. Atwood does justice to the maid by making them speak about their pathos in the novella. The twelve maids were not only the slaves but they were also the ritual sacrifices. Their

existence in *Odyssey* was not more than that of scapegoats. They lived the life of animal.

The original version of the story treats the maids merely as the plot devices and they are merely the salves and drudges. They do not have any voice to speak out and there is no one to listen to their voice too. They were used not only by the family members of the Odysseus but by the Suitors who came to take the hands of Penelope in the absence of Odysseus. In this sense, *The Penelopiad* is actually the story of the twelve maids that, still not being fully articulated. It slips through the cracks and openings of others' storytelling in terms of songs. The story the Maids manages to tell and show the politics of storytelling itself. Atwood gives sufficient space to amplify the voices of the maidens. She makes them to speak through the songs and poem in which they outpour their pathos themselves about the dominations and exploitations they endured.

The poetic form given to them is stylistically significant here. A poem or the poetic form violates the rules and regulations; it deviates from the common norms. Poem celebrates the freedom of expression. In the similar way, the maids in poetic form enjoy the freedom of expression. They speak in free verse:

If I was a princess, with silver and gold,
 And loved by a hero, I'd never grow old:
 Oh, If a young hero came a-marrying me,
 I'd always be beautiful, happy, and free! (51)

This is the verse the first maid speaks in the chorus line: "If I was A Princess, A Popular Tune". The verse gives her freedom of expression and she wishes here to be a princess with silver and gold. She would be loved by hero rather than to be a slave to

her master. She would be happy, beautiful and free with a hero. This is an inner wish of the maid. But the reality outside is very different.

Atwood's most important innovation in *The Penelopiad* is to bring the maids who were executed by their master upon his return to the center. As she states in the "Introduction": "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (xv). By contrast, Homer's *Odyssey* appears to accept their fate without any doubt. Penelope questions the idea of giving them such a fate. Odysseus's preoccupation with woman's sexual fidelity is displaced from Penelope onto Helen, Clytemnestra, Aphrodite and Odysseus's maids. In a bold reinterpretation of one of the most well-known moments in the *Odyssey*, Atwood has her Penelope claim that the twelve geese slaughtered by the eagle who claimed to be Odysseus were not the suitors, but her maids: "In the event, Odysseus was wrong about the dream. He was indeed the eagle, but the geese were not the Suitors. The geese were my twelve maids, as I was soon to learn to my unending sorrow" (140). Here Atwood is claiming that not only was Odysseus wrong, but Homer was as well for assigning such a fate to the twelve maids.

Atwood calls attention to the repression of the violence imposed upon the maids. If the *Odyssey* was complicit with Odysseus and Telemachus who "snuffed" out the maids' lives, Atwood gives importance and voice to the maids themselves (157). They appear in various "Chorus Lines", mock Homer's description of their final moments: "Their feet danced for a little, but not for long" (163). They lament the injustice of their violent fate:

we danced in air our bare feet twitched it was not fair with every
goddess, queen, and bitch from there to here you scratched your itch

we did much less than what you did you judged us bad you had the
spear you had the word at your command. (5-6)

The satiric chorus immediately recalls those in Aristophanes. Through their exposing light-hearted parody Atwood makes a more serious point: the maids function as a tragic chorus, commenting on the actions of the hero, Odysseus. The actions of “heroic” Odysseus were unjustifiable and injudicious. He judged them because he had a position and power. He had the spear and words in command.

Atwood reconfigures the *Odyssey* by incorporating more female characters in the novella in contrast to *Odyssey* where Odysseus's men constituted "the many". Atwood endows the maids with a privileged perspective and voice as satirists who powerfully review the ideology of the dominant order that normalized their slaughter by regarding them as unchaste and disloyal. She exposes the gender privilege that Odysseus holds over the maids, complaining about the sexual double standard. His possession of "the spear" and "the word" are the means by which he enforces patriarchal forces. In a later Chorus Line: “If I was a Princess, A Popular Tune”, the maids shift their attention to issue of class:

I fetch and I carry, I hear and obey. It's Yes sir and No ma'am the
whole bleeding day; I smile and I nod with a tear in my eye, I make the
soft beds in which others do lie. Hard work is my destiny, death is my
fate! (52).

They reveal the causes of the exploitation, injustice, and oppression on them. They disclose that the cause was the fate given to them: the fate of being from lower class and being female. The maids made the beds soft not for them but for other to lie. They fetch and carry every order only to please their masters. The conversation they spoke most was “yes ma’am and yes sir” (52). Hard work was their destiny and death was

reward for their hard work. Gender and class come together in another "Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, an Idyll" in which Atwood vividly imagines the maids and Telemachus as they grew up together:

Infants when he was an infant, wailing just as he wailed, Helpless as he was helpless, but ten times more helpless as well, For his birth was longed-for and feasted, as our births were not. His mother presented a princeling. Our various mothers Spawned merely, lamed, furrowed, littered, Foaled, whelped and kittened, brooded, hatched out their clutch. We were animal young, to be disposed of at will, Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, discarded when bloomless. Like the crocus, the rose, the sparrows engendered in mud. (66-67)

Penelope contributes to the revisionary account of the maids by commenting on the distance the patriarchy keeps between the maids and the prince (male), Telemachus as they grew up in their infancy. The maids comment that being the girls and from the lower class, their births were not feasted and revered as his birth was. But, in the novella, Penelope treats them as:

They were pleasant girls, full of energy; . . . They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was they who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years. (113-14)

So, the twelve maids in the novella appear with the new and more positive identity. At most, they can speak of their past and comment on it.

In addition to the stories that Odysseus, Penelope, and the Maids tell about themselves, there are also the stories told about them by others. The stories told about Odysseus make him a hero. The stories told about Penelope make her either a good

wife or a bad wife. But the stories told about the Maids turn them into traitors. It is clear that what is said about these protagonists has real consequences in their ultimate fates. Odysseus will thrive, Penelope will survive, but the Maids will die. But the novella recounts what made the maids' fate so from the graveyards. The maids recount their fate when they were alive:

And we, the twelve who were later to die by
 His hand
 At his father's relentless command,
 Sailed as well, in the dark frail boats of
 Ourselves
 Through the turbulent seas of our swollen
 and sore-footed mothers
 who were not royals queens, but a motley
 piebald collection brought, traded, captured, kidnapped from
 serfs and strangers. (66)

According to this chorus song, the twelve maids have been exploited and dominated in the state of Odysseus. They could not exercise their freedom and dignity. They were like slaves, taking care of the domestic life, taking care of the things: "he was fathered; we simply appeared, / Like the crocus, the rose, the sparrows/ engendered in mud" (67). Their lives are twisted in taking care of Telemachus's life; they are also children when he was a child, they are his pets and his toy things, mock sisters, his tiny companions. They also grow as he grows, laughed also, ran as he ran.

Atwood not only does give them the space to recount their pity, misery, sorrows and pathos but also clarifies the assertion of their will: what they could do if

they were free and have enough position to do so. The maids say they could kill Telemachus if they had known that they would be killed by him. In their words:

That he was foredoomed to swell to our
Cold-eyed teenaged killer.
If we had known that, would we have
Drowned him back then?
Young children are ruthless and selfish: everyone wants to live.
Twelve against one, he would not have stood
a chance
would we? In only a minute, when nobody
else was looking?
Pushed his still-innocent child's head under
the water
with our own still-innocent childish nurse-
maid hands
And blames on waves. Would we have had it in us? (69)

The maids review the causes of their death, here. They also assert boldly that they could kill Telemachus if they had known. The point is that in the novella the maids enjoy their agency to speak and criticize about the atrocities done upon them.

Atwood foregrounds the struggle of Penelope in the novella to locate her identity. Atwood presents her in contrast to Helen, the beautiful woman. Where Helen's tool is beauty, Penelope must use her wits in order to align herself with the men who control the conditions of her life. Penelope makes use of the one piece of advice her mother, a Naiad (water nymph), that she gives Penelope on her wedding day. Her mother secretly tells her: Water does not resist. Water flows. "When you

plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall; it will not stop you" (43). But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. "Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you cannot go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does" (43).

Therefore, Penelope becomes like water, running in between the cracks of everyone else's story. Her patience, if it is not a virtue, is certainly good strategy. Wait for the husband to come home; wait as long as it takes. Then, surely, no one can question her devotion and virtue. Penelope's patience wears away the rumors. A woman's only way to power is through access to powerful men is questioned and reversed here. In essence, the urge is to go against it and not to follow the same order.

Penelope falls in constant competition with her cousin Helen, with her mother-in-law Anticleia, and even with Odysseus' old nurse Eurycleia. What these women compete for is the attention and approval of the men around them. Helen, although conventionally viewed as a kind of archetypal female, would have made a good Greek hero. Her desires were those of a man of Greece, not a woman. Atwood writes that Helen "wanted to make a name for herself. She longed to stand out from the herd" (76). Her ambition is like the ambition of a Greek hero, to make a mark and ensure her name so that her story would be remembered. Helen's battlefield, however, must be the field of romance, because that's the only place through which she can have access to those with power. But the costs are the same; she counts her victories through the number of men who have died for her. Even after her return from Troy, she is able to make conquests. Penelope's own son describes the now middle-aged Helen as being "radiant as golden Aphrodite" (132). And in death she is followed around by an adoring crowd of spirits, all waiting for her to take a bath. Even without

a body, she is willing to get undressed "even in the spirit". She spitefully tells Penelope: "I do feel that because so many of them died for me – well, because of me – surely I owe them something in return" (154).

In the chapter "Helen Ruins My Life", Penelope openly criticizes Helen and says that she is the perfect cause of her ruins. Helen recounted the stories of Peirithous and the Athenian war; she took the deaths as a tribute to her. The sad fact is that people praised her so often and filled her with so many gifts and adjectives. She thought she could do anything she wanted. She wanted to make a name for herself. She longed to stand out from the herd (76). Penelope's main foil and rejected role model is Helen. Helen is gifted with extraordinary, possibly divine beauty, which she self-consciously exploits to exert power over men by appealing to their desires. She benefits from the fact that she enjoys what is expected of her: being the center of male attention and as the object of the male gaze. She thoroughly embraces the stereotypical role of the beautiful but superficial woman. Due to her physical qualities, she is so desirable to men that she can get away with almost anything. She breaks the rules of society by eloping with a stranger; she commits adultery, and sends her whole country into war. Yet, she is not punished. Rather, she is crowned at the Spartan court with her husband.

Penelope realizes that the man-made ideal of the 'perfect' woman is based on superficiality and misguided values. She is openly disgusted at Helen's behaviour and the male reactions it evokes. Yet, she cannot help desiring Helen's social success. This type of treatment and redefining the original virtue of Helen also problematizes the question of female power in patriarchal society. Helen's beauty, then, is a source of power; it is the power which can never be available to Penelope. Due to the inherent inequality between the two women on the basis of their appearance, Helen's

line of action is never a real option for Penelope. It is the injustice of this inequality that haunts and embitters Penelope.

Penelope portrays that the way Helen is treated in the canonic Homeric text as mistaken, reveals Helen's true flaws beneath her perfect appearance. Even in the *Odyssey*, Helen is not an entirely positive character, but she is never really held responsible for the damage she causes. Her male contemporaries treat her more like a precious object or prize that is stolen by strangers and must be retrieved. In addition to that, her beauty seems to be enough of a redeeming feature to forgive everything what she has done (Suzuki 12).

Criticizing the superficiality of the male viewpoint, Penelope, highlights Helen's negative characters and traits that did not appear in the 'male' version of the story, because it was solely concerned with Helen's appearance. Here, like the gods are criticized, she is portrayed as cruel and childish, finding pleasure in the suffering of others. On top of this, she is shallow but also two-faced beneath her superficial flawlessness. Penelope comments:

The part of the story [the story about Theseus and Peirithous] she enjoyed the most was the number of men who'd died in the Athenian war: she took their deaths as a tribute to herself. The sad fact is that people had praised so often and lavished her with so many gifts and adjectives that it has turned her head. She thought she could do anything she wanted, just like the gods from whom – she was convinced – she was descended. (76)

Penelope reveals that Helen was worshipped in the original epic and she got a worshipping attention. Helen even considered herself as the descendent of the gods thus she is independent to do anything as per desires. The original epic glorifies the

image of Helen. She questions later in the text that "why she couldn't she have led a normal life"(76)? Normal lives were boring and Helen was so ambitious and she desired to be distinct from the herd.

According to Penelope, "when Telemachus was a year old, the disaster struck. It was because of Helen, as all the world knows by now" (76). Helen eloped with a prince of Troy, named Paris, was a younger son of King Priam and understood to be very good looking. Helen previously was married to King Menelaus. Menelaus was in a red rage and so was his brother Agamemnon because of the slight pinch to the family honor. They had sent messengers to Troy, demanding the return of both Helen and the plunder but these had come back empty-handed. As Odysseus was listening to this account, he went white, and remained silent. He had sworn it on the part of Menelaus. So it is a powerful one. Every man who swore it will now be called upon to defend the rights of Menelaus, and sail off to Troy, and wage war to get Helen back. According to Penelope, the departure of Odysseus is the main cause of Penelope's suffering in her life. And the departure is caused by Helen. Hence, Atwood retells the story minutely from the eyes of Penelope to foreground the experiences of Penelope.

Atwood foregrounds the experiences of Penelope by highlighting the female rivalry in the story. At home in Ithaca, Penelope the young bride finds herself in competition with her mother-in-law, Anticleia, both for dominance in the household and for the place in the eyes of Odysseus. Penelope is a plum of a prize for her son, for after all, "a princess of Sparta is not to be sneezed at" (62). The reality of Penelope, however, is all too inconvenient. Anticleia dislikes of Penelope is evident when she tells us that Anticleia would have been better pleased if Penelope had died of seasickness on the way to Ithaca. Her most frequent expression to Penelope was, "you don't look well" (62). Penelope would have lacked the supporter in Ithaca if it

had not been for Odysseus' old nurse, Eurycleia. Penelope says Eurycleia "made a point of taking me under her wing, leading me about the palace to show me where everything was, and, as she kept saying, 'how we do things here'" (61). But even this kindness is colored by competition for an "inside position" (161) with Odysseus:

[Eurycleia] talked all the time, and nobody was the world's expert on Odysseus the way she was. She was full of information about what he liked and how he had to be treated, for hadn't she nursed him at her own breast and tended him when he was an infant and brought him up as a youth? Nobody but she must give him his baths, oil his shoulders, prepare his breakfasts, lock up his valuables, lay out his robes for him, and so on and so forth. She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn't how Odysseus liked things done. (63)

Eurycleia will also take over the care of Penelope's son when he is born. Thus Penelope's only way of making herself vital to her husband is through her "ability to appreciate his stories" (45). It is, she claims, "an underrated talent in women" (45). This talent is what Odysseus "valued most" in his wife (45). So Penelope must compete with Helen's superior beauty, Anticleia's superior attitude, and Eurycleia's superior knowledge and experience about domesticity and the surroundings.

Penelope shows this type of assertiveness and confirmation which is in the words of De Beauvoir is "militant action" of the females "who have confidence in their future, can give ethical meaning to thankless daily labour" (690). But it is not mere pettiness that drives this feminine competition. Penelope may need her husband's affection and approval for psychological reasons. More importantly her

very survival depends upon it. Who would she be if she were not the wife of the king of Ithaca? At least as Odysseus' wife, she is afforded some protection and care.

Without that protection and care, she would be as vulnerable as the maids.

Atwood makes Penelope strong by showing Penelope's skillful handling of the suitors who surround her home. She needs to please them enough to be able to put them off, to keep them from harming Telemachus and forcing her to marry one of them. Her survival, and of her son, depends on the continual delay of the suitors' desire. So she manipulates them. "It's . . . true," Penelope admits, "that I led the Suitors on and made private promises to some of them, but this was a matter of policy" (143). Survival means keeping the suitors happy without losing either her virtue or her hand. She attempts to balance everything. This balancing act calls for as much daring and cleverness as Odysseus ever needed in his adventures. Penelope's survival costs the death of the maids. In the end she is unable to save her Maids from Odysseus' revenge. But from the beginning, her policy works against the best interest of her twelve favorite Maids: "This plan came to grief. Several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (115).

Penelope recognizes of course, that her "actions were ill-considered and caused harm" (118). But in order to survive, she has to please the suitors enough so that they will continue to be patient. When Odysseus returns home, he is informed by Eurycleia of which Maids grouped with the enemy. These are forced to cleanse the hall of the blood of the suitors. Then, their childhood companion, Telemachus, hangs them, suspending above the ground "twenty-four twitching feet" (191). Penelope has been locked away in her room during the slaughter of the Suitors and its aftermath, but because she hadn't shared her plan with Eurycleia. Penelope recognizes her own

involvement in their deaths. But she goes to meet Odysseus calmly, and without comment about the twelve dead Maids. She feels the loss:

What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It's a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years. Dead is dead, I told myself. I'll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their souls. But I'll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me, as well. (160)

To protect her own reputation, she cannot openly mourn for the young women, for whose deaths she is indirectly responsible. She must remain with the men. Within this men's world there exists a double standard. Males are more powerful than females, and aristocrats are more powerful than slaves. There is a sexual double standard as well. Odysseus's time with Circe is not held against him in the least. His hero status is confirmed by his being the lover of a goddess. But it is tough for the women to exist being sexually active. Within this system, the Maids lose on all fronts. They are female, they are slaves. And whether through rape or through seduction, they are sexually active. To help openly the Maids, Penelope did not have position and the approval of the powerful males.

The novella exemplifies the tense relationships that exist not only between men and women, but also among women. On the other hand, each of the other female characters is also perceived as a potential role model for Penelope. Most of Penelope's peers are evaluated as negative examples. They seem to provide hints how not to act. It is problematic that Penelope's own perception of her female contemporaries seems to be supportive of the dominant discourse of patriarchy. There is a gap between her perception of the complexity of her own personality and her perception of the women around her, in whom she does not see the same complexity

and individuality. In her eyes, they merely fulfill social functions and stereotypes constructed by the patriarchal system. Their characters have been shaped and structured according to the prescribed categories.

Penelope encounters two 'surrogate' mother figures at the Ithacan court. Anticleia is the aged queen, mother of Odysseus, and Eurycleia is an old slave woman, former wet-nurse to the infant prince. She is the woman who really raised him. Both are mother figures to Odysseus so that their portrayal corresponds closely to the stereotype of the mother-in-law. With their names slight variations of each other, they act as different incarnations of the same type. They both represent the traditional order of society.

Through their role as mothers of powerful men, they make it their cause to support and maintain the old order. About her mother-in-law, she comments: "My Mother-in was circumspect. She was a prune-mouthed woman, and though she gave me a formal welcome I could tell she didn't approve of me. She kept on saying that was certainly very young" (60). Similarly, about Eurycleia Penelope notes:

"The woman who gave me the most trouble at first was Odysseus's former nurse, Eurycleia. She was widely respected – according to her – because she was so intensely reliable. She'd been in the household ever since Odysseus's father had bought her, and so highly had he valued her that he hadn't even slept with her" (60).

They perceive younger woman as unwanted rivals. They think that they can be assimilated into the same structures of wifedom, motherhood and make submissive to men that they have been habitual into.

Anticleia also sticks with the traditional gender roles though she does not hold the prominent role. It is clear, however, from Penelope's tale that she is not a

sympathetic character. Her interest in Penelope reaches as far as her wealth, ancestry and social standings make her a good match for “her adored son Odysseus” (62). But she treats her daughter-in-law with cold disdain and with open dislike. As Penelope poignantly puts it: “A princess of Sparta was not to be sneezed at – but I think she would have been better pleased if I’d died of seasickness on the way to Ithaca and Odysseus had arrived home with the bridal presents but not the bride” (62).

Anticleia makes no attempt of introducing Penelope into the courtly household. Instead, she makes her feel like an unwelcome outsider. Eurycleia, on the other hand, a stock example of the mother-in-law, is “at least friendly” (62) to Penelope. She remembers how “Eurycleia made a point of taking me under her wing, leading me about the palace to show me where everything was, and as she kept saying, ‘how we do things here’” (62). Likened by Penelope to a mother, she is a busybody who is ever in motion to pamper the male members of the royal household. She likes to have everything under her control. She, too, is somewhat reluctant to let Penelope assume her place as Odysseus’s wife. She ideally likes to restrict her responsibility to the sole purpose of giving birth to an heir. She takes all other wifely and motherly duties herself: “She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn’t how Odysseus liked things done” (63).

While both of Penelope’s ‘surrogate’ mothers represent traditional social structures, her actual biological mother is an exception. She is a naiad, a non-human, supernatural being. She is placed to some extent, outside of society. Hence, she is largely unaffected by social rules and mores. Her interest in motherhood is therefore comparatively slight, so that she is not much of a support for her daughter. Penelope’s impression of her mother is less. She lacks more intimacy and familiarity with her.

Her portrayal seems somewhat abstract. Her name, for example, is never revealed, and she is characterized mainly through the symbolic aspects of water: “beautiful, but chilly at heart”, with a “short attention span and rapidly changing emotions”, but “elusive” (10-11). It becomes clear that though the naiad may occupy a place outside society, she is still somehow included into its framework. She has certain characteristics which are perceived as typically feminine.

Like Eurycleia and Anticleia, another interesting female character from Homer’s poems is mentioned only briefly in Penelope’s tale is Clytemnestra. She acts as a foil both to Penelope and Helen. With her husband away at war, her situation is initially very similar to that of Penelope. However, unlike Odysseus’s wife, she is not patient and virtuous. Instead, she commits adultery, which brings her in line with Helen. Her crime, however, is graver than Helen’s. She does not stop short at adultery but turns murderous by plotting her husband’s death together with her lover. Helen may be indirectly responsible for the deaths of thousands of men, having caused a war. She can successfully pretend innocence and passivity in order to avoid the consequences of her crime.

Clytemnestra, on the other hand, breaks the rules openly and recklessly. She assumes an active role in the plot, without the protection of lies and pretense. This, above all, must be the reason why she is perceived as so monstrous character. She pays for it with her life, as she is soon killed by her own son, who is obliged to avenge his father. In her case, breaking the rules of society equals self-destruction. Helen and Clytemnestra represent two different ways of planning the power structures and the network of rules of that society. Neither of the role of them is a suitable option for Penelope. Clytemnestra revenges the murder of the daughter she shares with Agamemnon, Iphigenia, who is sacrificed by her father in order to raise favorable

winds to carry the Greek fleet to the shores of Troy. This is welcomed in *The Penelopiad*. It is a form of the resistance against the male superiority. In the *Odyssey*, Agamemnon's brother Menelaus tells a tale of his sister-in-law as being murderous and adulterous wife. There is perhaps not much difference between the two. However, it might be imagined that Clytemnestra telling a different tale. She might explain the history behind her betrayal of her husband, clarify her reasons, and thereby justify her actions. She might make a convincing argument, a comment against her husband that would revise his story.

Both of these two women are shown a more or less slight hint that they want independence from the patriarchal boundaries. Helen falls victim to the patriarchal desire of making her beautiful to drag the male attention. On the other hand, Clytemnestra bears the risk of going against the patriarchal social order. But Penelope is stuck in the middle, so that both alternatives appear impossible to her. Helen and Clytemnestra are women of the same age as Penelope, who exemplify different ways of breaking the rules. She lives in the middle way, a complexity she bore all over her life. Atwood reveals this complexity of Penelope.

However, the stereotype of femininity which is represented by Penelope's biological mother shows feminist ideas of a positive and independent form of femininity. The positive evaluation of such feminist independence, however, is to some degree undermined by Penelope's portrayal. As it is clear that the naiad is not a particularly loving or nurturing mother, she does not support Penelope during her childhood. She does, however, impart a piece of wisdom to her daughter on her wedding day, which is worth quoting. It represents a key idea of femininity— a specifically 'feminine' way of doing things and of solving problems with the help of symbol of water:

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hands into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that my child. Remember that you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (43)

A woman will not succeed to face an obstacle by addressing it directly and openly. She will have to go behind and around it, and slowly manipulate the situation, until a favorable state is reached. This may require masking one's true intentions and hiding one's real face. It represents a more positive side to role-playing that helps to pursue individual aims under the guise of secrecy. To Penelope the connection is clear: "I remembered my mother's advice to me. [...] For this reason I pretended. . ." (108).

The Penelopiad explores the 'fluid', subversive, and perhaps specifically feminine power within the structures of patriarchal society itself. This is exemplified by the ends to which Penelope uses her newly gained independence. "As the years passed I found myself making inventories [...] and planning the palace menus and wardrobes" (87). Throughout her former life she was kept away from such tasks. She turns out to be an adept household manager, under whose guidance the court prospers. Here, it is remarkable that even while gaining her first impression of independence, she does so with her husband in mind:

My policy was to build up the estates of Odysseus so he'd have even more wealth when he came back than when he'd left – more sheep, more cows, more pigs, more fields of grain, more slaves. I had such a clear picture in my head – Odysseus returning, and me – with womanly

modesty – revealing to him how well I had done all what was usually considered a man’s business. On his behalf, of course. (88-9)

The same tendency of firmness can be observed in Penelope’s treatment of the suitors. As they appear on the scene and resolution, she makes up her mind to marry one of them. Her options are, either to side with the suitors, pick one of them, and thereby replace Odysseus. It was against the patriarchal values of the time. She dared to go to the distant. Though she was not particularly interested in the suitors, she made up her mind of choosing one of them. It was the situation that Odysseus's death was still unconfirmed. And the eyes of the public and her son upon her, going behind her husband back could have disastrous consequences, as the examples of Helen and Clytemnestra show.

She decides to defy the suitors. Penelope finds herself in the morally good position of both following her own heart and observes the standards of social propriety. The crucial point is that in the absence of her husband, it is her to keep Odysseus’s emptied position from being filled by an impostor until he returns. By following her mother’s advice, Penelope indeed pursues a uniquely feminine activity, she still does so to replace traditional power structures and patriarchy and to become the master of own fate. Penelope knows that her line of action must have a proper balance. She must not turn them away or lock them out because if she did, “they’d turn really ugly and go on the rampage and snatch by force what they were attempting to win by persuasion” (107). Nor can she surrender to their insistence. Aware that she cannot defeat the suitors in an open, physical confrontation, she keeps them at bay, sending ambiguous signals:

For this reason I pretended to view their wooing favourably, in theory.

I even went so far as to encourage one, then another, and to send them

secret messages. But, I told them, before choosing among them, I had to be satisfied in my mind that Odysseus would never return. (108)

Pressured from all sides, Penelope thinks up a trick to get herself more time to postpone the decision indefinitely. So that she will get enough time to plan and think over it.

What *The Penelopiad* emphasizes in comparison to the *Odyssey* is the role of the maids. In Atwood's work, Penelope picks twelve maids to assist her. She attempts to reveal all that she has woven during the daytime. Compared to her representation of other female characters her, description of these maids is amazingly positive: "They were pleasant girls, full of energy; [...] it cheered me up to hear them chattering away, and to listen to their singing. [...] They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace" (112-3).

There are many threads of storytelling that operate simultaneously in *The Penelopiad*. There are three "protagonists" whose stories have been explored in the novel: Odysseus, Penelope, and the Maids. Each of these three protagonists has a story to tell: Odysseus through the public performance of a hero showing his adventures in an epic poem, Penelope within the text of Atwood's novel, and the Maids obliquely through the voice of the chorus, songs and rhymes.

III. Self-reflexivity and Upstaging Female Subjectivity

In *The Penelopiad*, female characters especially, Odysseus's wife and the twelve maids enjoy more agency and complexity than in most versions or interpretations of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. Long fascinated by myth and archetype, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* tells Penelope's "true" story. In essence, it foregrounds the female characters and reconfigures them who were merely the plot devices in the original version of the Homer's epic. The opening words: "Now that I'm dead I know everything", introduce Penelope as a metafictional narrator, commenting on stories within stories from her position of retrospection in Hades. This self reflexive quality of the novella helps the narrator to reveal the true story inside the epic.

There is more to Penelope than the devoted, chaste wife who waits twenty years for heroic Odysseus to return from his adventures with Trojans, sirens, nymphs, goddesses, and the Cyclops. Her manner of story-telling is witty, lonely, raging, confident and bitter. The lot of Penelope is followed by a subplot presented by twelve maids in chorus. These young servants join her as children, keep her company in bad times, spy on the threatening suitors and are murdered by Odysseus and son Telemachus. The maids remind that if Penelope was separated by sex, they were further disadvantaged by both class and sex. The author presents them with the sufficient space to expose their realities and experiences. In the novella, they narrate all the incidents before they were mercilessly raped and murdered by Telemachus.

Penelope's use of narrative justice in *The Penelopiad* as a means to redefine Helen for her various acts of violence exposes the ancient understandings and structures of justice. The novella shows that how the Penelope's justice emerges from the same patriarchal structure. Penelope's use of her personal narrative attempts to

'rewrite' the wrongs committed by Helen and works to produce the refined version. Atwood suggests her similar use of narrative as justice in admitting that writing allows her to "satisfy her desire for revenge" (44) and to create identities "that will survive death" (45).

The fact that Penelope portrays the maids in such a positive light is not only a result of her almost motherly relationship to them; it also seems to be directly connected to their social position. They are lower class and in no position of power, which sets them apart from Penelope's social setting. They do not engage in the role-playing that the characters from the upper class need to assert their social status and identity. In a world where only the aristocrats count they hardly have an identity at all. They do not have to worry about respectability and reputation. This independence from the rigid social structures of the upper class, in the protagonist's eyes, makes them trustworthy and reliable. The maids typically deliver information, and their information is distinguished from the pompous and hypocritical man-made tales. In comparison to the majority of the other characters who are generally portrayed as more powerful than Penelope, their lack of power also makes them appear harmless and unthreatening. No other character is described by the narrator with such earnest affection and without an impression of disdain.

To Penelope, it is the presence of the maids and a feeling of female support in facing a common opponent that turns the bitter knowledge into positive experience. In some retrospective passages, the narrator, goes with irony and contempt and expresses the delight felt by her younger self: "These nights had a touch of festivity about them, a touch – even – of hilarity. [...] We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. [...] We were almost like sisters" (114).

To conclude, Margaret Atwood picks up the thread from feminism and female solidarity. The creation of a self-defined female identity in the novella sets free the female characters from the prescribed roles of the patriarchal world order. This beautiful and certainly desirable idea of the Homeric epic is immediately problematised with irony and contempt. Thus, in a world which is governed by male power, female solidarity is revealed.

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