

Feminist Retelling of a Greek Myth: Reclaiming the Voice of Penelope

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Abstract

Rewriting classical myths from a feminist perspective has gained much popularity lately. Since female characters in literature, especially in mythologies, have either been silenced or largely misrepresented, many contemporary writers seek to adapt well-known stories to depict modern concerns and to challenge the prevailing stereotypical representation of women by advocating a feminist ideology that rejects patriarchal bias. One very successful example of such an attempt is Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2007). In this novella, Penelope reclaims her voice to narrate her version of the famous *Odyssey*. By questioning gender roles and class differences, this retelling connects its ancient storyline with contemporary themes and cultural debates. This article aims to demonstrate how such feminist retellings enable women to assert themselves and support the aim of just and equal treatment in society, culture, and literature. Moreover, it illustrates the enduring importance of myths and argues that feminist revisions can change the patriarchal nature of the literary canon.

Keywords

Feminism – Retellings – Greek Myths – Revisionist Mythmaking – Margaret Atwood

Penelope – More than just a Faithful Wife

Everyone has probably heard about Odysseus, the man who had the idea of deceiving the Trojans with a wooden horse, and about his famous ten-year-long journey back home. His so-called 'Odyssey' has even made it into our everyday language: we use the word as an idiomatic expression for a very difficult, long trip that is marked by many changes. However, in this article, Odysseus and his journey will not be the main subject of interest. Instead, it will focus on the women of the myth, namely his wife Penelope and her maids. Compared to other women in classical myths, Penelope is quite popular. She has been labeled the 'ideal' wife by men for centuries. Her loyalty and dedication to her husband have been used as a prime example for other women in both reality and the fictional world of literature and have strongly shaped the perception of female gender roles.

However, the stereotypical, submissive portrayal of Penelope is outdated, inaccurate, and extremely unjust. This is why many authors have attempted to rewrite the *Odyssey*, or parts of it, in a variety of genres. For instance, a collection of poems by Carol Ann Duffy entitled *The World's Wife* (1999) presents stories, myths, and fairy tales from the point of view of neglected and ignored



women. In her poems, Duffy uses witty, satirical, and playful elements to give female characters, such as Penelope, a voice to express their own thoughts and feelings. Duffy's poem about Penelope rejects the traditional interpretation of the patient and desperately waiting wife, and instead criticizes Odysseus' image as a brave and cunning hero. However, not only poetry has been composed to alter the old(-fashioned) narratives of myths. Many contemporary authors have used other genres to create new and different perspectives on these ancient stories – such as the nonfictional *The Gods of Olympus: A History* (2014) by Barbara Graziosi or the dramatic comedy *Eurydice* (2009) by Sarah Ruhl, for example.

Among the most celebrated prose retellings of the *Odyssey* is *The Penelopiad*. This novella by Canadian author Margaret Atwood renders the events of the story from two different points of view: one is Penelope's version of the ancient myth, and the other one is the version told by her maids. Atwood, who is well-known for her gothic writing style and her work on the dangers of ideologies and sexual politics, had been interested in classical myths ever since the publication of her poetry collection *Double Persephone* back in 1961 (Howells 5). According to Atwood, myths are timeless stories that can be altered again and again to meet different needs and purposes: "Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages; they take on other meanings" (Atwood, "The Myths Series and Me"). This opportunity – to give a voice to unknown, previously neglected, perspectives of a familiar story – motivated her to rewrite the *Odyssey*. However, it is important to mention that many other feminist writers also decided to reclaim women's voices in literature by rewriting well-known stories and classics from a female perspective and based on women's genuine experiences. Other popular adaptations of Greek myths include Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) or *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) by Pat Barker. These so-called 'retellings' are new, often updated or altered versions of an already existing story ("Retelling"). The story is typically "about historical and fictional individuals memorialized for their heroism or holiness, adventurousness or mischief" (Stephens 91). Retellings include the literary domains of fairy tales, myths and mythologies, medieval romance, tales, and even modern classics. By turning away from male-oriented narratives towards the inclusion of women and other previously overlooked characters, retellings also help to create new myths which actually celebrate female experience, individuality, and autonomy. At the same time, through the integration of contemporary themes and language, they adapt old myths to the standards of modern times and thereby preserve the traditional stories for future generations.

Literary scholars such as Alicia Ostriker and Harriet Macmillan have discussed this wish for reinterpreting already existing myths and giving a voice to previously silenced characters under the label of 'feminist revisionism' (Ostriker 87; Macmillan 199). The principle aim of this theoretical approach is the "challenge [...] and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (Ostriker 73). By connecting feminist critical engagements with classical myths, these retellings are more than just "responses to the classical [male] tradition" (MacMillan 87); they are "vivid engagements with the modernist literary canon and valuable contributions to ongoing discussions about the generation of meaning in twenty-first century literature" (87). Hence, I argue that feminist revisions of Greek myths have the potential to change the patriarchal nature of literature, culture, and society. Moreover, such retellings give women the possibility to finally pass on their own language, to recognize and appreciate its specific meanings and traditions, and to involve them in the process of culture making.

To illustrate the enduring and powerful importance of myths, I will take a closer look at *The Penelopiad*. By correcting unjust portrayals of women, and by enabling them to finally express

their own emotions, thoughts, and perspectives, this retelling offers a liberating narrative that includes genuine female experiences and supports the equality of the sexes in literature and society alike. Before analyzing the novella, I will first provide a brief account of the original events from Homer's *Odyssey* and his portrayal of Penelope. Then, I will examine how Atwood's novella characterizes Penelope and how her narrative breaks with traditional gender roles. Lastly, I will analyze the function of the maids in *The Penelopiad*.

The Representation of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*

Homer's *Odyssey* is considered one of the greatest works in world literature, with great influence on European literature, especially during the time of the Renaissance (Myrsiades xi). The epic poem consists of twenty-four books and renders the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, who is trying to find his way back home after the end of the Trojan war. *The Odyssey* is widely recognized as the sequel to Homer's first epic poem the *Iliad*.

The plot of the tale does not follow the chronological order of events. The poem starts right in the middle of the story. Previous events are only presented in the form of an analepsis. The first four books are set in Ithaca and describe the life of Penelope, Odysseus's wife, and their young son, Telemachus. Both have to fight off Penelope's suitors who are in doubt of Odysseus's return from Troy and want her to remarry, so that one of them can inherit Odysseus's kingdom and assets (Homer I-IV). The next four books introduce the main character, Odysseus, who is held hostage by the nymph Calypso on the island of Ogygia for seven years. As Calypso finally releases him, Odysseus suffers a shipwreck, caused by the god Poseidon, and lands on the shore of another island, called Scheria, where he is welcomed by the king and queen of the Phaeacians, whom he tells the story of his adventurous return from Troy.

In books nine to twelve, Odysseus recollects the previous events that he and his crew endured. This includes their escape from the Lotus-Eaters with their memory-erasing food, the one-eyed cyclops and son of Poseidon Polyphemus, and the cannibal Laestrygonians, only to end up at the island of the witch-goddess Circe, who turns half of the men into swine. After a year on Circe's island, Odysseus and his remaining men set off again, reaching the western edge of the world, where Odysseus makes a sacrifice to the dead. This summons the old prophet Tiresias and several other spirits, including his own mother, who tells him about the disturbing situation of his household back home in Ithaca. With Circe's help, they are able to pass the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, only to hunt the sacred white cattle of the sun god Helios, who then punishes them with another shipwreck in which everyone but Odysseus dies. Finally, he is washed ashore on Ogygia, where Calypso compels him to be her lover for seven years (IX-XII).

The remaining half (books thirteen to twenty-four) reports Odysseus' arrival in Ithaca, where he has to face Penelope's suitors. After learning about the circumstances of his household, he disguises himself as a beggar. Together with his son, he devises a plan to punish the suitors. Penelope arranges an archery competition for the suitors to finally determine whom she should marry. Odysseus wins that competition and reveals his true identity. While he kills the suitors, he orders Telemachus to assassinate the disloyal maids of Penelope who consorted with the suitors.

Since Penelope is only part of the story in the beginning and in the end, and her character is primarily presented by Odysseus' own rendering, she inhabits a very passive role. At the beginning of the poem, Penelope is simply introduced as "Icarius' daughter" (Homer 79) and the mother of Telemachus, who is a "fine son" (161). Thus, little is revealed about her character. Only when she talks about Odysseus do readers learn about her thoughts and emotions regarding his

absence and the scheming of the suitors, which she has to endure because of it. Her sadness and desperation are expressed throughout the whole poem, as she is either “dissolving in tears” (80) or “sobbing uncontrollably” (158) with a “heart so wrung with sorrow” (162). This portrayal of her implies that she is completely ruled by her emotions and has no influence or control over her actions. This is also shown when her son leaves to search for his father. Once he is gone, “her knees gave way on the spot, her heart too. She stood there speechless [...] tears filling her eyes” (157). Thus, she is depicted as helpless, overemotional, and dependent on either her husband or her son.

Yet, Penelope also successfully deceives her suitors for more than three years. Through the infamous trick with the shroud and her thoughtful behavior towards the men, she manages to manipulate them in order to keep herself and Telemachus safe. After finding out about her scheme, the suitors call her “the matchless queen of cunning” (90) and describe her and her tricks as follows:

For three years now, getting on to four, she’s played it fast and loose with all our hearts, building each man’s hopes – dangling promises, dropping hints to each – but all the while with something else in mind. This was her latest masterpiece of guile: she set up a great loom in the royal halls and she began to weave [a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes], and she would lead us on: Young men, [...] go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until I can finish off this web. [...] So by day, she’d weave at her great and growing web – by night, by the light of torches set beside her, she would unravel all she’d done. (90)

Consequently, Penelope is not completely powerless after all as her tricks demonstrate wit and cleverness and allow her to actively influence her own story.

Despite all those years of his absence and the struggles she has to face, Penelope still praises Odysseus. She calls him her “lionhearted husband” (158) who “excelled in every strength” (158) and whose “fame resounds through [the whole world]” (158). But not only Penelope admires the noble character of Odysseus. The goddess Athena also calls him a “strong” (76) man and tells Telemachus that if he truly is Odysseus’ son, he will be “brave and adept” (98) like him. Thus, Penelope’s devotion, Athena’s praise, and the fact that Calypso and Circe fall in love with him, reinforce the notion that all women want to please men and accept the superiority of the male sex. Meanwhile, the men of the *Odyssey* clearly degrade the women. Odysseus describes his wife to the nymph Calypso with much less pleasing words: “She falls far short of you, your beauty, [your] stature. She is mortal after all and you, you never age or die” (174). When Odysseus summons the prophet Tiresias, the ghost of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, appears as well. He advises Odysseus to “never indulge [his wife] too far” (313). Moreover, he should “[n]ever reveal the whole truth, [...] just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest” (313). Even though Agamemnon declares Penelope a “steady” (314) and “wise” (314) woman, he tells Odysseus that “the time for trusting women’s gone forever!” (314). However, in the end, he praises Penelope once more and says to Odysseus: “[W]hat a fine, faithful wife you won! What good sense resided in your Penelope – how well [she] remembered you [...]. *The fame of her great virtue will never die.* The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind, a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope” (594; emphasis added). Therefore, Penelope is again portrayed as the epitome of faithfulness and praised for fulfilling her wifely duties. Furthermore, the song that Agamemnon mentions would end up being Penelope’s most famous legacy.

Yet, while Odysseus is presented as the brave and glorious hero, conqueror and trickster, Penelope does nothing but wait for his return, unable to move on with her life without him. Therefore, her character is only known for two qualities: Either in the role of the loyal wife who is

only able to weep and cry due to the absence of her beloved husband or as the witty and manipulative trickster who fools her suitors for more than three years. As Judith Fletcher fittingly describes the contrasting manner of the two characters: “He wanders far and wide [...]; she never leaves the house as she longs for his return” (77). Consequently, Penelope never fully transcends the role of the faithful wife in Homer’s *Odyssey* and is thus always linked to Odysseus, even when he is absent.

Rewriting Female Experiences and Breaking Gender Roles in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*

While Homer’s *Odyssey* focuses first and foremost on Odysseus and only regards Penelope as a side character, Atwood changes the narrative of the story completely. Instead of focusing on the travails of Odysseus and his return from Troy, she decided “to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xix). Through this revisionary narrative, Penelope is able to rectify her own representation. Moreover, she is given the opportunity to point out how Homer misrepresented her in his depictions of her life and character, and how he was quick to judge and expose her female weaknesses.

In the novella, written in the form of a mock-epic, Penelope recounts her life in her afterlife from twenty-first century Hades. As the title suggests, the focus is on Penelope and her struggles. Her narrative begins with her birth and her childhood in Sparta, then moves on to her marriage to Odysseus, his departure, her trouble with the suitors in his absence, and the aftermath of his return. In the end, she describes her life in Hades and the legacy of the characters of the *Odyssey*. It is important to note that, even though Atwood does not diverge much from Homer’s story, the main focus of *The Penelopiad* is not on Odysseus’ adventures, but on what happens at home during his absence (Henriques 442).

While he cheated on her on several occasions, Penelope is the epitome of virtue and faithfulness in Homer’s version of the *Odyssey*. Due to her limitless loyalty and absolute devotion to her husband, she is considered the perfect wife and completely fits into the man-made ideal of the ‘angel-woman,’ which has been used to teach and remind women how they should act upon their ‘natural’ role. Since Penelope’s only purpose is to please a man, in this case Odysseus, her own experience is completely neglected. Moreover, as Avery Crews argues:

Within the original, Penelope has little to no personal impact on the tale and her only true influence is in her defiance of the suitors’ desire to marry her and take her husband’s wealth and kingdom through the weaving and unweaving of Laertes’s funeral shroud. The only role that Penelope plays within *The Odyssey* is that of Odysseus’s wife and Telemachus’s mother with no power that strictly belongs to her. (51)

However, in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope fights against this image of “the quintessential faithful wife” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xvii), and finally abandons her passive roles as a wife and mother. By focusing on her perspective, Atwood challenges the patriarchal aspect of the myth, draws attention to the unjust depiction of women in classical literature, and explores how much gender roles actually affected the poem and its characters.

The novella begins with the introduction of Penelope. She discusses “her roots, the manner in which she came to be Odysseus’s wife, her feelings about her actions, and her depiction of herself as the obedient wife” (Crews 51). Due to the fact that Penelope is one of the central narrators in the retelling, it is possible to include additional information about her, such as her

background, and most importantly, her character. That is why she decides to address the “edifying legend” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 2) that the original story has created about her and gives her own version of events. Through Penelope’s narration, readers learn that she is in fact much more than just Odysseus’ faithful wife. Her opinion influences the manner in which she describes other characters and the events that take place within her version of the epic (Crews 51).

One character, who is portrayed quite differently in comparison to the original, is Odysseus. While Odysseus is the honorable hero in Homer’s version, readers are presented with a different interpretation of his character in *The Penelopiad*. In this retelling, Penelope calls her husband an unscrupulous liar and trickster (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 2-3). She claims that these qualities are also the reason why he was able to make so many people believe his story for centuries: “It was a specialty of his [Odysseus]: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away. 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).

However, even though she “knew he was tricky and a liar,” she admits that she “believed him” because she never thought that he “would play his tricks and try out his lies on [her]” (2). She simply “wanted happy endings in those days” (3). That is why she either “kept [her] mouth shut; or [...] sang his praises” (3). Yet, in hindsight, she regrets this decision and urges readers – and women in general – to not follow her example (2). After realizing “how many people were laughing behind [her] back,” were “making jokes about [her],” or “turning [her] into [...] several stories,” stories she did not want to hear, she chose to “do a little story-making” herself, in order to finally rectify the presentation of events (3).

Through her portrayal of Odysseus as a man willing to cheat for his personal gain, the character of Penelope disrupts the pre-established gender roles of our society and criticizes conventional assumptions about the superiority of the male sex (Crews 52-53). By degrading his character and describing his actions in a realistic, “non-heroic manner” (51), Atwood breaks away from the standards of traditional masculinity and questions “the validity of the patriarchal system that is in place within society [in ancient Greece] and now” (52).

This also shows when Penelope had to take on some of Odysseus’ roles in the household during his absence. While she was completely overwhelmed with her situation in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Atwood’s Penelope embraces her new position. She gains authority, confidence, and autonomy through it. As she is “running all the vast estates of Odysseus by [herself]” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 85), she also rejects the common notion that all women need to learn domestic crafts such as weaving, while men are the “sword-wielders and spear-throwers” (25). By performing a task that is usually connected to men, Penelope proves that women are not only good at being a mother, a wife or a sister, but that they are also able to thrive in power positions. Therefore, these new responsibilities enable her to break free from the limits imposed on her by Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Yet, Penelope is aware of the fact that taking over male tasks requires a cautious approach to not offend or displease other men. That is why she metaphorically acts like water, a homage to her mother who was a water nymph. Like water, she circumvents obstacles (or problems), is running in between the cracks (of everyone else’s story) and is patient and consistent in her actions (Collins 62). At the same time, Penelope’s ability to take on a man’s role also casts doubt on the traditional concept of marriage. In her opinion, marriage was a mere “arrangement” where the woman was “handed over [...] like a package of meat” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 39) in order to please her husband. While men could simply continue with their life as it was, the only purpose of a marriage for women was to bear as many children as possible, preferably sons, and take care of

the household. As a consequence, their lives never left their familiar surroundings. Nevertheless, Penelope is aware of the important role that children played back then: “Marriages were for having children, and children were not toys and pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along. These things could be kingdoms, rich wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. Through children, alliances were forced; through children, wrongs were avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world” (24).

However, Penelope does not reject all traditional household duties that women were expected to perform. In fact, apart from her “devotion to [her] husband, and [her] discretion” (21), Penelope is also known for her weaving. She describes the craft of weaving as an advantage that proves to be a “great convenience to [her] later on” (8) in the deceit of the suitors. Moreover, as Charlotte Guest points out, weaving symbolizes female power and autonomy in many Greek myths (7). In Atwood’s text, this motif also appears in form of the Fates who write the stories of men at their looms and cut the threads at their deaths, or in the case of Philomela who weaves a tapestry of her rape after her rapist cut out her tongue in order to silence her (7). Thus, weaving works as a way of expressing genuine female experiences. While we never learn the thoughts of Penelope in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in *The Penelopiad*, she is finally able to describe her famous plan herself:

I set up a large piece of weaving on my loom, and said it was a shroud for my father-in-law, Laertes [...]. Not until this sacred work was finished could I even think of choosing a new husband, but once it was completed I would speedily select the lucky man. [...] No one could oppose my task, it was so extremely pious. All day I would work away at my loom, weaving diligently [...]. But at night I would undo what I had accomplished, so the shroud never got any bigger. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 112-13)

Although Penelope owes this trick to her own cleverness, she claims that it was “Athene, goddess of weaving, who’d given [her] this idea” because she knew that “crediting some god for one’s inspiration was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not” (112). This balancing act of pleasing the suitors and keeping them at bay, without losing her virtue or being unfaithful to her husband, demands more cleverness and wit than Odysseus needed on his adventures (Collins 64).

However, even though she is aware that she is “smart [...] considering the time, very smart” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 21), Penelope also knows that she is not flawless either. While she denies sleeping with any of the suitors (143), she confesses that she enjoyed their compliments (104), and even admits that she had “occasionally daydreamed about which one [she] would rather go to bed with, if it came to that” (105). Interestingly, when she and Odysseus recounted their struggles and she proudly tells him about her “trick with the shroud [...], her deceitful encouragings of the Suitors” (172), including the “skilful ways in which [she] misdirected them” (172-73), and the fact that she “would never have even so much thought of betraying [him]” (173), she refers to *both* of them as “proficient and shameless liars of long standing” (173). This portrayal of her as witty and flawed helps to identify with her more easily. Additionally, the sarcastic and colloquial tone of the narration and the involvement of modern influences, like her knowledge about contemporary culture, politics, and society, make Penelope appear more human. Thus, Atwood succeeded in creating “a bridge between ancient Greece and our modern world” (Henriques 442).

Yet, Penelope is not the only woman in this retelling who is able to fight against her stereotypical, predetermined role. Retellings are not only able to question gender roles but can challenge a variety of injustices. *The Penelopiad* also addresses the issue of class and class relations

by giving a voice to Penelope's maids, whose perspective was completely neglected in Homer's original story.

The Function of the Maids

Atwood herself states that her initial motivation to rewrite the *Odyssey* stemmed from the wish to include characters that have been neglected before: "The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been hunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xix). So, even though Penelope's narrative aims to prove that the original story is wrong, her own version is also clouded by her attempt to rectify her role which at the same time neglects the perspectives of others, including that of her maids (Collins 59).

Hence, Atwood's purpose in rewriting the *Odyssey* "is not to defend or/and voice one single female but rather to report a collective feminine experience by highlighting the fact that all females regardless to their position in society share a common challenge which is to have the right to be self-represented" (Selt and Kaid Berrahal 65). By using the maids as representatives for women who have suffered abuse and trauma, she demonstrates how the misogynistic attitude of our culture has been utilized to justify violence against women (Richards 186). In addition, the inclusion of a collective voice breaks with common feminist rewriting practices. While Penelope's narrative exemplifies the individual female experience, the narrative of the maids reflects the shared experience of many women and, therefore, supports the claim that one single voice cannot adequately represent the experience of all women (185). Through the use of the chorus, Atwood gives the maids the chance to render their own experiences, impressions, and opinions, and at the same time reveals what life in ancient Greece may have been like for slaves. Moreover, since a chorus in a classical Greek drama was typically used to mock the main action of the play, the maids' chorus also undermines the accuracy of Penelope's narrative (186). By presenting a different perspective and commenting on Penelope's version, their story represents a third, new, and independent point of view on the events. Thus, this additional shift of perspective does not only link questions of gender to class issues, but also exposes the conventionality of the epic and enables the narrative to take on different forms and purposes within the novella.

One of the purposes of the maids' narrative is to show and criticize the social oppression they had to suffer because of their lower class. Compared to Penelope, who grew up as a princess with certain privileges, the maids had a different life since their birth:

We were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in the palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk, as children. [...] We were told we were motherless. We were told we were fatherless. [...] We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 13)

Since they were bought, they were regarded as mere objects which had to please their masters and fulfill their every wishes. This included being available sexually for their masters, which shows that were sexually objectified and humiliated by men. As a consequence, they were subjected to class and gender exploitation. Their voices did not matter and their only duty was to "hear and obey"

(52), not to speak for themselves. Hence, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the maids were not allowed to tell their version of the story, nor permitted to defend themselves.

However, in *The Penelopiad*, the maids are finally able to break free from social convention, gain autonomy and grow beyond their ascribed role. Moreover, they are not described as possessions, but as human beings with feelings, opinions, and personal lives. In contrast to the original story, Atwood's Penelope does not refer to them as her servants, but as her friends and closest confidants during Odysseus' absence. She describes the twelve women as "pleasant girls, full of energy" (113), the "youngest [and most] beautiful" (160) among all her maids. In fact, she trusted them so much that she did not only tell them about her plan to deceive the suitors, but also involved them in its implementation: "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. [...] We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. [...] We were almost like sisters" (114).

Whereas the maids in the classical story consorted with the suitors at their own will and were thus killed for their disloyalty to their master, in *The Penelopiad* we learn that "[s]everal 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). Even though Penelope "comforted the girls as best as [she] could" (116), she still encouraged them to interact with, and spy on, the suitors to learn about their strategies: "You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they'll confide in you and we'll know their plans. [...] I even instructed them [the maids] to say rude and disrespectful things about me and Telemachus, and about Odysseus as well, in order to further the illusion" (117). With this additional information, Atwood removes the connotation of the unruly maids who merely slept with the suitors as an act of disobedience. Instead, she grants them agency for their actions because they simply fulfilled their duty by carrying out the commands of their mistress (Crews 53). Moreover, this proves that, even though Penelope claims that she loves them, the concept of sisterhood is still overthrown by the power dynamics that exist between different classes and by the patriarchal standards which enforce societal and cultural competition among women (53).

Yet, Penelope takes the blame for how her secret got exposed. While in Homer's version one of the maids is accused of revealing the conspiracy, Atwood's Penelope claims that it was her "own fault" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 115) that the suitors uncovered her trick and that including her maids in the action was "ill-considered and caused harm" (118). Due to the fact that no one else apart from her and the involved maids knew about her scheme and her instructions to them, the behavior of the maids was deemed as "disloyal" (158), "impertinent" and "rude" (159). Since treachery was considered a major crime back then, and the maids had no chance to defend themselves, they were hanged. Even though Penelope claims that she "never would have hurt them" (115), she was unable to save them: "What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life. [...] Dead is dead, I told myself" (160).

However, in Hades, the maids use their reclaimed voices to tell a different story – their story. They claim that Penelope was in fact partly responsible for their murder. In contrast to her version, they insist that she actually slept with some of the suitors and hence feared that they might expose her true self (148). Thus, they present Penelope's character in a whole new light. In chapter 21, they recite a dialog between her and Odysseus' former nurse Eurycleia, in which the former tells the latter to "point out those maids as feckless and disloyal" (150), in order to "stop their mouths" (151) and to "save [her] and Odysseus' honour" (150). This portrayal of Penelope as a woman who consciously puts the blame of her mistakes on her maids in order to achieve her own

survival, and to maintain the myth of the virtuous wife, conflicts with the previously described portrayal of herself (Korkmaz 41). As Shannon Carpenter Collins fittingly summarizes: “When choosing sides, she chose the side of the powerful” (65).

Therefore, the narrative of the maids also functions to question the truth of Penelope’s account. Since she is a self-confessed liar (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 173) and the maids assert that “the truth [...] is seldom certain” (148), readers have to repeatedly reconsider the reliability of each perspective. The inconsistencies and contradictions show that all narratives are to a certain extent suspect, subjective, unreliable, and not completely true. This implies that not only “male myth-makers create myths in time but [that women can also] create [them] according to their own agenda as in the case of Penelope, who has consciously deceived humanity under her virtuous wife mask” (Korkmaz 42). In the end, Atwood herself acknowledges that the “true story lies among the other stories, a mess of colors like jumbled clothing thrown off or away” (*Selected Poems* 58), and hence declines to resolve the question of whether to believe Penelope’s self-defense or the maids’ accusation (Suzuki 274).

Yet, the maids do not only contest Penelope’s version but also openly express their hostile attitude toward Odysseus. Now that they are dead, they know that he was the one who “required [their] death” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 193) without an understandable reason. They call it “an act of grudging, [...] an act of spite, [...] an honour killing” (193). By combining paradoxical elements like hyperboles and understatements, and mythic and real influences, Atwood criticizes the class differences and the sexist social practices of ancient Greek in a very humorous way (Khalida and Tabassumb 25). In addition, the use of contemporary settings and customs demonstrates that women and people that belong to a lower class in society still have to face similar problems. One example for this is chapter 26, entitled “The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 175), where the maids finally seek justice and send Odysseus to a twenty-first-century tribunal (Brahimi and Ben Djoudi 30). Thus, to use the words of Suzuki, “Atwood re-visions the maids not merely as silent victims sacrificed to the interests of patriarchy [...], but as energetic satirists of the dominant order, who literally put Odysseus on trial” (275).

In this trial, the maids accuse Odysseus of killing them in cold blood for nothing (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 177), whereas he claims that killing the suitors was “self-defence” (177) and that he was “acting within his rights” (178) when he hanged the maids since they had sex with his enemies without his permission. Even though the judge points out that sex without permission is considered rape, and that the maids were “forced to sleep with the Suitors because if they’d resisted they would have been raped anyway, and much more unpleasantly” (182), the case is dismissed because the “[standards] of behaviour were different then” (182) and it would be “unfortunate if this regrettable but *minor incident* were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career” (182; emphasis added). To Howells, this chapter is a “satire on patriarchal institutions” (14), since Odysseus, although he is obviously guilty, is protected by the superiority of the male sex.

Furthermore, this scene shows that although Penelope and her maids have contradicted Odysseus’s version of the *Odyssey* with logical arguments, their voices cannot alter the outcome. Nevertheless, the maids still manage to get their own kind of justice and revenge. By turning them into ghosts, who follow Odysseus everywhere he goes, Atwood rereads them as silenced women whose voices and stories are recovered despite all circumstances (Richards 118):

Now you can’t get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or in your afterlife or any of your other lives. We can see through all your disguises [...] [We’re] right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke [...] We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. We’re here to

serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 192-93)

Therefore, they represent all women that have either suffered under the patriarchal standards of society or were denied any protection by it, simply because they were considered 'unworthy' and no one believed them. Through their collective voice, they finally find the strength to call out for justice and directly speak to the conscience of their oppressor (in this case Odysseus).

Conclusion

Even though myths are considered as outdated, fictional stories of the past, this article shows that they hold much more potential and influence than their reputation suggests. Through adaptation and retelling, these old stories can be utilized to uncover and challenge injustices of race, class, and gender. As I have shown in this article, retellings like *The Penelopiad* are able to create a space for female authors to produce alternative narratives which offer women the possibility to fight against stereotypical gender roles and misrepresentations that have been imposed on them by men. Thus, the feminist revision of myths supports the goal of a political, economic, social, and personal equality of the sexes, and aims for a fair representation of women in literature.

The narratives of Penelope and her maids both voice a resistance to the ways in which they have been represented in Homer's *Odyssey* (Richards 187). By breaking free from the canonical (and masculine) epic form, and by constructing new identities for Penelope and the maids, while not straining away from the plot of the *Odyssey* (Henriques 441), Atwood argues for the reappraisal of social and cultural standards that have limited female participation and female voices, back then and now (Crews 54). Even though they are only able to tell their truth after they are dead, because the patriarchal society does not permit women to express their views and attain freedom, both narratives actively challenge the stereotypical gender role of women by "[rewriting] themselves, transgressing histories, spatial and temporal linearities, [...] national identities and cultures, laughing, singing, and colouring, becoming and coming their existences" (Korkmaz 102).

This makes *The Penelopiad* a story worthy of retelling. Through the use of gender and class differences, multiple narrative voices, opinions, and reflections, Atwood creates a complex story that is more relevant than ever. While Homer's Penelope only plays a minor, passive, and man-made role in the legend of her husband, Atwood's Penelope is more than just the epitome of the faithful wife. Instead, she offers an authentic female experience and embodies autonomy, independence, and freedom.

Yet, Penelope is not the only one who is fighting for her voice to be heard and whose perspective has been neglected before. Her version competes with the narrative of her maids, who were unrightfully sacrificed because they obeyed their mistress and followed her orders. Thus, the characters of the maids ask us to undermine the authority, veracity, and importance of stories and narratives in general, and actively expose the issue of class conflict (Richards 239). So ultimately, "[by] unearthing the ancient female voice within us all, [Atwood] creates a new myth that transforms our vision of the world, both internal and external, bringing us closer to feminine truth and self-actualization" (Keating 499), and reserves "the hope for a new world where women can [liberate themselves] from societal constraints and become [autonomous] individuals" (500).

Although the characters are fictional, they still represent and appeal to women nowadays. Through the inclusion of modern influences, the retelling links tradition and fiction with contemporary issues and reality. Thereby, we are able to identify with the characters and the plot.

However, feminist retellings are only the first stage in improving the literary representation of women and women writers. To fully overcome the patriarchal nature of language and literature, we need to further challenge its male domination and find more ways to include genuine female experiences and perspectives into the literary canon. Yet, I am convinced that retellings like *The Penelopiad* enable women to assert themselves, facilitate them to become a part of the imaginary world of literature and remind them of their worth. For women are not defined by any man-made stories, as Penelope and her maids prove: they are perfectly capable of writing their own stories.

Author Biography

Celina Plaß is a student in two master programs at the Leibniz University Hannover, where she also received her bachelor's degree. Her recent academic interests focus primarily on the intersections of cultural studies, history, and gender studies. The article above is based on a revised excerpt from her bachelor thesis titled "Feminist Retellings of Greek Myths: Reclaiming the Voices of Penelope, Circe and Lavinia." When she is not drowning in assignments, she enjoys (non-academic) reading, cuddling her pets, being outdoors, watching movies, and going out with her friends.

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