

## ***The Penelopiad: Dislodging the Myth of Penelope as the Archetype of Faithful and Patient Wife***

by  
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Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey*, is narrated by Penelope and the twelve maids. It aims at dislodging the traditional myth, which presents Penelope as the archetype of faithful and patient wife. Although Penelope is disciplined with Odysseus' threats of slaughtering her if she proves to be unfaithful and Eurycleia's folk sayings stressing hard work and dedication, Penelope, herself, refuses to be made an example of the considerate, trustworthy and all-suffering wife. As she is often depicted in contrast with the radiant seductress Helen, Penelope asserts that she had to compensate for her lack of beauty with her modesty, cleverness, devotion and discretion. However, it is suggested that she envies Helen's sexual liberation. Moreover, her rebellious character surfaces when she complains about the childish acts of gods and mocks the stupidity of Zeus; pulls down her veil to hide the fact that she is laughing at her father, begging for her to stay with him; daydreams about with which suitor she would rather sleep or dreams of Odysseus being eaten by the Cyclops or torn apart by the Sirens; traps Eurycleia into almost giving away Odysseus. Eventually, Penelope is associated with the moon-goddess and/or High Priestess Diana and thereby with Artemis, Selene and Hecate. Reminiscent of Artemis, who is the guardian of springs and streams, Penelope, being Naiad born is half-water and is depicted weeping most of the time. Selene is known for her numerous love affairs, and similarly, there are rumours that Penelope have slept with all of the suitors. Echoing the worship of Hecate, who is associated with witchcraft and wisdom, Penelope's cunning plan and secret gatherings at night with her maids to untie the knots of the shroud resemble some dark ritual.

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Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey*, is narrated by Penelope and the twelve maids. It aims at dislodging the traditional myth, which presents Penelope as the archetype of faithful and patient wife. Although Atwood's Penelope is disciplined with Odysseus' threats of slaughtering her if she proves to be unfaithful and the servant Eurycleia's folk sayings stressing hard work and dedication, Penelope refuses to be made an example of the considerate, trustworthy and all-suffering wife. Northrop Frye asserts that "[a] myth may be told and retold: it may be modified or elaborated, or different patterns may be discovered in it" (32). Margaret Atwood, likewise, modifies or rather undermines the archetype of Penelope by retelling the classic myth from the subversive point of view of Penelope herself.

Carl Jung maintains that "[t]he contents of the collective unconscious [...] are known as *archetypes*" (*Archetypes* 4) and "so far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned we are dealing with archaic or [...] with universal images that have existed since the remotest times" (4-5). Accordingly, social conventions imposed on you may sound "natural" or as if they were your own ideas. Penelope complains that "[s]o much whispering goes on, in the dark caverns, in the meadows,

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that sometimes it's hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside of your own head" (Atwood 9). The whisperings might as well be read as the conventions and archetypes of patriarchal society. They eventually start to sound as if they are second nature rather than impositions not only because they are legitimised due to their historicity, but also because they are practised over and over again.

Just as Scheherazade tells stories to save the lives of other women, Penelope addresses the female readers: "Don't follow my example, I want to scream in your ears" (Atwood 2). She tells us her story to save women from being reduced to mere archetypes at the hands of patriarchal society. After the murder of her twelve maids, Penelope starts to complain about having to keep silent: "It's a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years" (160). When called for witness in the trial of Odysseus, she confesses to the judge: "I was often asleep" (180). It is patriarchy's servant Eurycleia, indeed, who drugs Penelope's drink rendering her inactive and making her sleep throughout the slaughter of the suitors and the maids. Yet, Penelope owns that she played her part as well: "I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang [Odysseus'] praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep" (3). Her silence and playing along culminates in her being turned into "[a] stick used to beat other women with" (2). Eventually, Penelope repents and refuses to be moulded into an archetype of the considerate, trustworthy and all-suffering wife or into a patient Griselda figure.

Penelope's narrative challenges the "official version." She says, "it's my turn to do a little story-making. [...] So I'll spin a thread of my own" (4). Penelope refers to her storytelling as spinning a thread. Besides, her name is etymologically derived from the Greek word *Penelopeia* which is probably related to the Greek word *pene* meaning "a thread on the bobbin" ("Penelope"). This reminds us of Roland Barthes's analogy which resembles producing a text to spinning and weaving a fabric, and the text itself to a tissue or a spider-web (*Pleasure* 64). Furthermore, the word *fabricate* is derived from the Latin word *fabricatus*, meaning "to fashion, build," and also "to tell a lie" ("Fabric"). Barthes also argues that "myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (*Mythologies* 110). On that note and keeping in mind that Jung and Karényi suggest that "archetypes appear in myths and fairy-tales" (*Introduction* 100), it is also possible to draw an analogy between story-telling and mythmaking / archetypes. Like stories, myths and archetypes are fabrications.

Penelope starts telling her story *ab ovo*, that is, starting with her birth. She has been subdued by the men in her own family with fear of death since her childhood. Her mother's strategy of seeming absent-minded and indifferent, and her father's attempt to drown her when she was a child are the main reasons for Penelope's "self-sufficiency" (Atwood 11), "reserve [...] [and] mistrust of other people's intentions" (9). Additionally, Odysseus tells Penelope that if the word about their marriage bed got out, he would know Penelope cheated on him and murder her. She also fears that Telemachus might think the best way to stop his mother from marrying one of the suitors and thus robbing him of his fortune would be to murder her. So Penelope has always felt disposable and feared a possible threat to her very life, first from her own father and then from her husband and her son, all of whom are representatives of the patriarchal society.

The marriage of Penelope and Odysseus is loaded with connotations of death as well. Penelope describes her waiting for one of the suitors to win her hand in marriage as, "I sat there shrouded by my bridal veil" (Atwood 42). The use of the

word *shroud* is curious, in that it associates Penelope's wedding dress and thereby her marriage with death. Actually, "the consummation of marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape [...] a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing" (44). Evidently, women are tamed with this myth interrelating marriage and conquest, rape and death, rendering men as victimisers and women as victims. Although Odysseus suggests pretending instead of really exerting violence on Penelope, he, nevertheless, uses a lot of verbal violence threatening her throughout their marriage to make sure she would be faithful.

Odysseus is depicted as "a persuader" with "a wonderful voice as well, deep, and sonorous." He is "an excellent raconteur" while Penelope is the silent and inactive listener as befits the archetype of any woman drawn by patriarchal society (Atwood 45). Besides, Adrienne Rich points to the fact that "[w]omen have always been seen as waiting: waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wars, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new child, or for menopause" (39). However, after Odysseus sails away for Troy, Penelope does not idly wait for his return. On the contrary, she takes on the duty of running the estates. Penelope treasures her newly found authority so much that after Odysseus arrives and slaughters the maids, she wishes for yet another war, which would make men sail away and leave her once again in charge.

That Penelope stays in another room in the women's quarters after Odysseus leaves is indicative of her newly found individuality and freedom. Obviously, Penelope needs the male authority figure to be absent so as to flourish and experiment with and exercise her niches. For instance, exercising her written and oral authority, she keeps inventories and tells the spinners and weavers what to do and illustrating her oratory skills and power of persuasion, she trades for supplies and becomes known for her bargaining skills. Moreover, she also proves her manual skills, handling swine-herding, lambing and calving. After each hard day Eurycleia draws Penelope baths and serves her refreshments. However, all these comforts come with a price tag; Eurycleia feeds Penelope with folk sayings about dedication and hard work. Folk sayings are yet another means of checking the female and are thus forced upon her especially now because Penelope deviates from the path of a woman and crosses the boundaries of the female / male spheres. For this reason, although Penelope builds up her husband's estates, she reveals this to him "with womanly modesty" (Atwood 89). She also makes sure to attribute her cunning stratagems to someone else, either a deity or a man, not to attract too much attention to her wit, which would render her a possible threat. She credits Athena for her plan about the shroud and Odysseus for her plan about asking the suitors to use Odysseus' bow, promising to marry the one who succeeds.

Actually, the only means of productivity women are allowed is to give birth. Hence, Penelope's sole duty as a wife is to give Odysseus a son, an heir, and by doing so before Helen does, Penelope gains her one and only victory over her. However, Penelope is definitely not a conventional mother figure; she lets Eurycleia take care of her son Telemachus, as if he was the latter's son. Eurycleia does not even let Penelope teach Telemachus manners and causes him to be spoiled in the end. After Penelope runs the estates for twenty years, Telemachus, now that he is grown up, wants to take over. He asserts his authority by making scenes with the suitors, which makes Penelope worried that he will be murdered by one of them. Moreover, Telemachus informs only Eurycleia that he will sail away in search of his father, and on his return, he defies Penelope's parental authority accusing her of "being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment" (Atwood 128).

While Telemachus rebels against his mother, Penelope rebels against the gods, comparing them to “a pack of ten-year-olds with a sick cat to play with” (Atwood 135). She complains about the childish acts of gods and reckons they cast dice to decide which mortal’s life they will ruin just for fun. As yet another hint of her rebellious character, Penelope is attracted to the dark side and the villains in Hades. She admits that “[t]he dark grottoes are more interesting – the conversation there is better, if you can find a minor rascal of some sort” (Atwood 16). Accordingly, she also enjoys “the conversations about such uncouth and dirty matters” (88) she has with her swineherd, who comes to her for advice.

As for her statue celebrating the virtue of Modesty, erected for her modestly putting down her veil instead of saying she prefers her husband to her father, she mockingly tells the readers that she pulled down her veil to hide the fact that she was laughing at her father, who was begging for her to stay with him. Similarly, she laughs silently after tricking Eurycleia into almost revealing Odysseus’ disguise. Penelope also dreams of Odysseus being eaten by the Cyclops or torn apart by the Sirens. Moreover, she admits going, accompanied by two maids, to the hall the suitors are feasting to hear their praises although she knows they are not sincere, and daydreaming about which one she would rather have sex with if she had to choose. It seems that Penelope would rather be a Helen archetype than plain Penelope, for she obviously enjoys playacting Helen and envies her sexual liberation.

As far as Penelope is concerned, Helen, convinced that she has descended from the gods, thinks she is not condemnable and, thus, her ambition, “selfishness and [...] deranged lust” (Atwood 76) brings about the sufferings and sorrows of many through the Trojan War. Helen, in return, deems Penelope as being cynical and vulgar, because the latter is constantly pessimistic and not as “giving” as Helen is. Actually, Helen defies social conventions and Penelope, subconsciously, envies and even wishes her dead by suggesting “Helen should have been kept in a locked truck in a dark cellar” (Atwood 79), which recalls a tomb in a mausoleum. She also hates Helen because Odysseus, due to his oath, has to join Menelaus in the Trojan War and help him bring Helen back. However, Penelope is neither sorry for Odysseus nor concerned for his safety, she simply feels frustrated that she will be bereft of her “midnight pleasures” (Atwood 79), which proves she is indeed not so much different from Helen as she thinks or claims to be.

As she is often depicted in contrast with the radiant seductress Helen, Penelope asserts that she had to compensate for her lack of beauty with her modesty, cleverness, devotion and discretion. Penelope is an ugly duckling compared to the swanlike Helen. Penelope’s father nicknames her as duck because a flock of purple-striped ducks rescues her from drowning. Considering that her father tried to drown her, and that *duck* means “to plunge the whole body or the head momentarily under water” (“Duck” Def. 2.3), the nickname implies his murder wish as well. It also means “a heavy, plain-weave cotton fabric” (“Duck” Def. 3.1), which associates Penelope’s nickname, just like herself, with weaving. Additionally, Odysseus calls Penelope “[m]y poor duckling” and assures her that he “would never throw such a precious girl into the ocean” (Atwood 48), implying that he values Penelope’s life for the sake of her dowry. Nonetheless, Penelope is well aware that the contestants are not after her but “what comes with [...] [her] – the royal connection” and the dowry. “No man will ever kill himself for love of me,” she complains. Once again, her envy is obvious despite her efforts to hide it saying, “I would not have wanted to inspire those kinds of suicides. I was not a man-eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquests just to show she could” (29).

Helen is associated with the swan, just like Aphrodite, due to her swan-like beauty and swaying walk. The word *swan* means "a person or thing of unusual beauty, excellence, purity" ("Swan" Def. 1.2) and it is etymologically derived from Proto-Indo European base *\*swon-/swen-* meaning "to sing, make sound" ("Swan"). So, singing associates Helen also with the Sirens and Circe, who use their singing voices to seduce men. Penelope, too, is a seductress even though she does not use her singing voice but, like Eve, her oratory skills, wits and cunning to seduce and trick the suitors. Although Penelope accuses Helen of being a constant and devout flirt "dispensing dazzling smiles" making each man "feel that secretly she was in love with him alone" (Atwood 42), this is, indeed, exactly what Penelope herself does with her suitors, trying to calm them while she constantly postpones making a decision.

The juxtaposition of Penelope and Helen continues with the symbolisms of asphodel and hyacinth. Penelope's subconscious admiration and envy of Helen afloat when she says she has grown bored of the fields of asphodel in Hades and aspires for hyacinths and crocuses. The white asphodels suggest the archetype of plain Jane and the faithful wife while hyacinths and crocuses are suggestive of Helen. The "deep purplish blue to vivid violet" ("Hyacinth") colour of hyacinths is reminiscent of the colour purple which is associated with classical deities and thus reveals the god-like aspirations of Penelope as well as Helen who, as mentioned above, claims to have descended from gods. Just as crocuses are "showy, solitary flowers, which are among the first to bloom in the spring" ("Crocus") so is Helen a rare beauty and the first to get married, although it is Penelope first to give birth to a son.

Eventually, Penelope is also associated with the moon-goddess and High Priestess Diana and thereby with Artemis, Selene and Hecate. Penelope's mother is a Naiad, which not only makes her a semi-goddess but also foregrounds her being depicted as Diana. Artemis is associated with childbirth and fertility. Similarly, not only does Penelope give birth to a son but she also makes Odysseus' estates flourish in his absence. Artemis is very protective of her purity. Penelope, too, claims to have remained loyal to her husband in spite of the rumours. Reminiscent of Artemis, who is the guardian of springs and streams, Penelope, being of Naiad born, is half water and is depicted weeping most of the time. Naiads, being nymphs with bodies of fresh water, were, likewise, in custody of rivers in Hades. Moreover, Penelope, now that she is dead, resides in Hades like Hecate does. As far as Selene is concerned, she is known for her numerous love affairs. Likewise, there are rumours that Penelope has slept with all of the suitors. On the one hand, Penelope maintains that she has encouraged the suitors and received expensive gifts from them, trying in vain to compensate for their expenses. The maids, on the other hand, claim that Penelope did nothing to stop their slaughter because they knew her affairs with the suitors and needed to be silenced. The rumours about Penelope sleeping with all the suitors and then giving birth to Pan is, in itself, indicative of how wisdom of women is viewed by patriarchal society. Hélène Cixous avers that women have always been silenced, repressed and reduced to a horrifying myth of Medusa, although Medusa is "not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (342). Accordingly, Pan is the god of mischief and chaos, which suggests Penelope's wisdom can only give birth to havoc and bedlam. Within the light of Cixous's argument, Penelope's decision to tell her story as a cautionary tale for women is quite rebellious too.

While dealing with the suitors, Penelope takes her mother's advice: "Water does not resist [...] Water is patient. [...] If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does" (Atwood 43). So when her oratory skills fail her, Penelope

resorts to cunning, and tricks the suitors into believing that she has consented to marrying one of them after weaving for her father-in-law a shroud. Echoing the worship of Hecate, who is associated with witchcraft and wisdom, Penelope's cunning plan and secret gatherings at night with her maids resemble some dark ritual. Afterwards, she claims to have been inspired by Athena, the goddess of weaving, and makes sure not to take the enmity of a mortal for her wit or the blame if her plan does not work. Penelope sets twelve maids to help her with her weaving and at nights untying the shroud "behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years" (114). She is delighted with the merry singing of the maids. They share stories, riddles and jokes, which once again correlates storytelling and weaving. The maids, apparently, play the role of the priestesses of Diana. That they drink wine reminds us of the Bacchic rituals and that they eat bread with honey reminds us of the sacrifices to chthonic deities--such as Hecate--who live in the dark recesses of the earth. Honey is believed to "appease the spirits below the earth" (Dietrich 115). Moreover, both the Bacchic rituals and chthonic sacrifices took place at night (Mikalson 37) like the untying of the shroud.

Due to the aforementioned analogy between fabric and text, the weaving of the shroud might as well be likened to Scheherazade's telling stories. It is also her father-in-law's shroud that she is weaving like every dutiful daughter-in-law, but also symbolic of her desire to do away with the patriarchy. Penelope is seemingly weaving a shroud but it is merely a fabrication to delay marrying one of the suitors. Since Penelope, as discussed above, draws a connection between marriage and death, she uses this fabrication, the pretext of the shroud, to evade death.

The shroud is called "Penelope's web," owing to its remaining mysteriously unfinished (Atwood 119). Penelope is not pleased with the analogy because it makes Penelope the spider, that is, the victimiser rather than the victim, whereas she claims that she was not trying to entangle anyone, but was merely trying to avoid being entangled. Indeed, she causes the twelve maids that helped her to be entangled in her web and ironically to be hung. Penelope does not care for the safety of the maids; she orders them to spy on the suitors and causes them to be seduced or raped. The only comfort she provides them is having Eurycleia wash them and rub them with olive oil after they have been raped. Furthermore, she does not inform anyone else about her secret plan and how she told the maids to "say rude and disrespectful things" (117) about her, Telemachus and Odysseus; thus, she causes the maids to be hung by Odysseus as a punishment for their disloyalty. Penelope herself admits that her "actions were ill-considered, and caused harm" (118), which, in the end, makes her no different from Helen whom she accuses of causing the deaths of many at the Trojan War.

Although Helen mocks Penelope, calling her "the faithful little wifey" and asking "what with the weaving and so on" (Atwood 188), Penelope's weaving has obviously more to it. Penelope is trying to create her own discourse and write her own destiny. Nevertheless, she is not willing to drink from Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, and reincarnate because she believes her new life or lives could be even worse than her previous one. After all, it is still a man's world with Telemachus in the parliament and Odysseus a general, an invader, a tycoon, a headhunter, always the bringer of chaos, havoc and death, a film star; an inventor, and an advertiser always the pretender and seller of lies. She refuses to be reduced to an archetype, while trying to adapt once again to a man's world.

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