

Spinning a Thread of One's Own from Homer to Atwood

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Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is one of the titles in Canongate Myth Series, a series of novels written by contemporary authors to offer their reception and retelling of ancient myths. Atwood's novel is a gendered continuation of Homer's epic the *Odyssey*, but, as mentioned in its Introduction and Notes, Atwood has also drawn on many other mythical sources, especially for Penelope's life. The novel mostly focuses on the lives of Penelope and the maids rather than the adventures of Odysseus during his homebound journey following the Trojan War, or those of Telemachus. Penelope and the twelve hanged maids narrate the classical myth, with the benefit of hindsight, from the 21st century and from Hades. Atwood asserts that she has always been haunted by the hanged maids, which is probably why, in Chapter xxiii, entitled "Odysseus and Telemachus Snuff the Maids", she portrays them like the ghosts of female victims in Japanese horror films while referring to snuff films in the title. Atwood has also been haunted by two questions after reading the epic: what was the actual reason behind the hanging of the maids and what was Penelope really doing? In the continuation Penelope and the hanged maids answer these questions, but their answers contradict one another. So do their narratives. The maids accuse Penelope of having affairs with the suitors and having the maids hanged so that they cannot tell about her affairs whereas Penelope puts all the blame on Eurycleia. Like the original epic, Penelope's narrative abounds with inconsistencies and contradictions, which makes the readers wonder if Penelope is just another Helen, albeit a more clever and ruthless one when it comes to keeping her deeds a secret and getting away with it. Suffice it to say that, in her continuation, Atwood does not really provide any answers to the questions that haunt her. She only makes sure that they haunt her readers as well.

I aim to deliberate over how Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, as a continuation of Homer's *Odyssey*, uses gender as a means to subvert the male-forged myths regarding masculinity and femininity, whereas the original epic is regarded as misogynistic in spite of the character of the faithful, patient, cunning, and, yet, modest Penelope. Penelope's and the twelve maids' narratives in *The Penelopiad*, just like the novel itself, prove that it is possible to disrupt the phallogocentric male discourse, the myth of Penelope and Odysseus to be specific, by repeating, retelling, and re-interpreting it. Judith Butler sees gender as a mechanism

that produces and naturalizes notions of masculine and feminine. Accordingly, many feminist theorists, such as Sheila Murnaghan, Lilian Doherty, Luce Irigaray, Seyla Benhabib, and Amy Allen, believe that gender is a cultural and social determinant of any discourse and narrative. However, just as Toril Moi does, Butler argues that it is also possible to use this very same mechanism to deconstruct and denaturalize such notions.¹ As Vanda Zajko points out, the historical distance allows Atwood to reject and upset the gender ideology of Homer's epic.² It allows Penelope and the twelve maids, the marginalized, suppressed, and silenced female characters of the epic, to escape from the "[z]one of silence";³ to use Irigaray's terminology, to spin their own threads, to tell their own tales in the first person in the continuation, and to subvert the phallogocentric discourse of the original epic. Indeed, the maids' narrative undermines not only Homer's epic but also Penelope's own narrative in the continuation. Atwood's novel is an "inversion"⁴ as well as a continuation of Homer's epic, in that it turns around the portrayal of female characters in the epic to designate their opposites. Moreover, at the end of the novel, the maids make sure that the Erinyes, alongside the maids themselves, will haunt Odysseus everywhere, including all narratives down to marginal notes, so that he finds no rest in any new life into which he is reborn or in any discourse.

In Atwood's continuation Penelope complains about the official version gaining ground. Homer's epic, resonant with Butler's performative, is a compilation of authoritative examples enacted and reenacted, told and retold by different characters.⁵ Atwood's Penelope resents the original epic, for it turns her into "[a]n edifying legend" and "[a] stick used to beat other women with"⁶ by praising her patience and loyalty. Penelope's resentment of the original epic, in turn, echoes the fear of being defined by the phallogocentric discourse and being trapped in the male-forged gender myths and images of the patriarchal ideology.⁷ Penelope's decision to spin a thread of her own and tell her own story to upset the original epic, yet again, draws a parallel with the feminist theorists' analogy between weaving and women's language and writing. As far as

1 Cf. Murnaghan (1987) 107, Doherty (1995) 87, Speer (2005) 49, Benhabib et al. (1995) 2, Allen (2007) 165, Moi (1985) 78, 131, and Butler (2004) 42.

2 Zajko (2008) 206.

3 Irigaray (1985) 113.

4 In *The Penelopiad* Atwood does exactly what Annette Kolodny calls "inversion." See Kolodny (1975) 80.

5 See Butler (1995) 205.

6 Atwood (2005) 2.

7 Kolodny (1975) 83; Moi (1985) 36.

femininity in writing is concerned, Hélène Cixous suggests that “writing and voice are entwined and interwoven” while Justyna Sempruch likens herstory to Arachne’s weaving. Luce Irigaray, likewise, maintains that women’s language not only weaves its own discourse but also avoids being entangled in the phallogocentric discourse.⁸

The female figures in Homer’s epic turn to weaving as a means of spinning a story, fabricating a lie, or controlling destiny. Athena, the artisanal goddess and inventor of weaving, challenges Arachne to a tapestry making contest, but when Arachne wins with a tapestry depicting the deeds of deities in a sarcastic and mocking manner, the goddess turns her into a spider.⁹ It is also noteworthy that the word “spider” etymologically means “to spin.” Penelope, waiting for her husband Odysseus to return home and trying to make her suitors wait, fabricates a lie and claims that she has to weave a shroud for her father-in-law before marrying one of the suitors. The shroud remains unfinished for years because every night she secretly undoes what she has done during the day. Circe is believed to weave destiny and thus to know everyone’s fate. As for the Fates, their will is above even the will of gods.¹⁰ Clotho spins, Lachesis measures, and Atropos cuts the thread of life thus apportioning everyone’s destiny. Hence, Odysseus’ desire to control the Fates in Atwood’s continuation.

It is not only Penelope and the maids who spin a tale of their own to overturn the male-forged myths. In Homer’s epic Helen interferes with Odysseus’ narrative in an attempt to include her own narrative, praising her own *kleos*, glory, in which she claims to have recognized Odysseus in his beggar’s disguise and helped him and the Greeks in Troy. Odysseus, in contrast, tells that Helen has tried to have the Achaeans killed by mimicking the voice of each one’s wife to make them come out of the Trojan Horse. In the continuation Helen, in like manner, tells a different version of the story of her abduction as a child and claims that the men who died in the Athenian war were a tribute to herself. Moreover, in the continuation, Helen seems to avoid being entangled in the web of phallogocentric discourse by overplaying the gender role ascribed to her through Irigaray’s mimicry, that is through miming her own sexuality in a masculine mode.¹¹ According to Penelope, Helen practices and, indeed, overdoes gender roles by flirting with her dog, mirror, comb, and bedpost. She

8 Cf. Cixous and Clément (1996) 92, Sempruch (2008) 54, and Irigaray (1985) 29.

9 See Feldherr (2010) 60, 42; Buxton (2013) 195.

10 See Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008) 318; Campbell (1991) 179–180.

11 See Moi (1985) 135 and Irigaray (1985) 27, 76. Similarly, Butler defines gender as “a stylized repetition of acts.” Butler (2010) 191.

exploits the sexual stereotype of the seductress for her own political purposes; she practically does anything she wants to do and gets away with it. Contrary to Irigaray's general assumption,¹² Helen is compensated for her efforts because her pleasure does come from being chosen as an object of desire by men. Actually, Penelope is projecting her suppressed desires and transgression onto Helen even though she claims that she never transgressed. She moans that no man will ever kill himself for her. As opposed to the ugly duckling, "plain-Jane Penelope" who "weren't exactly a Helen,"¹³ Helen has a swan-like beauty and is not ashamed of displaying her sexuality. She takes baths where everyone can watch her in Hades and shows a bare breast when she is conjured to the world of the living. Most importantly, Helen remains as a menace to the phallogocentric order, being naughty, causing uproar, even making empires fall, each time she is reborn. Penelope is still jealous of Helen in the afterlife because she is never summoned by conjurers whereas Helen, on the contrary, "was much in demand. It didn't seem fair—I wasn't known for doing anything notorious, especially of a sexual nature, and she was nothing if not infamous."¹⁴ Penelope chooses not to be born again and again into the same phallogocentric power structure so as not to legitimize socially established gender roles through reenactment.¹⁵ So, her only means of acquiring knowledge as to what is going in the world of the living is through conjuring, dreams, or infiltrating the new ethereal-wave system, that is taking a peep through television screens. Not surprisingly, every profession Odysseus and Telemachus have when they are reborn, has to do with disguise, deceit, and unscrupulousness. As Penelope mentions, Telemachus is "by nature a spinner of falsehoods like his father."¹⁶ Telemachus is a Member of Parliament while Odysseus has been a French general, a Mongolian invader, a tycoon in America, a headhunter in Borneo, a film star, an inventor, and an advertising man. In other words, the father and the son play the role of the new hero of the Western society who, as Karen Armstrong avers, "was venturing into uncharted realms for the sake of his society."¹⁷

12 See Irigaray (1985) 84.

13 Atwood (2005) 37, 102.

14 Atwood (2005) 20.

15 See Butler (2010) 191.

16 Atwood (2005) 137.

17 Armstrong (2005) 127. According to Alan G. Johnson, too, this new hero of the Western society is mostly male. See Johnson (2005) 91–92. Robert A. Segal, states, similarly, that hero myths, one example of secular myths, are created as a result of the decline of religion and rise of science. See Segal (2013) 116.

Penelope acts outside her gender roles in Homer's epic, but chooses to remain silent and not to take credit for her cunning. Instead she attributes most of it to either Athena, another female character, albeit a deity, or Odysseus. In the epic Odysseus' twenty-year absence leaves Ithaca in disorder and at the mercy of the suitors, who are determined to consume Odysseus' livelihood, and thereby Telemachus' inheritance, to force Penelope into choosing one of them for marriage. In contrast, in Atwood's continuation, what Penelope accomplishes during the absence of Odysseus is the very definition of heroic male identity, which, for Sam Keen, consists of knowing how to manage a place to which one is entrusted and how to make astute decisions regarding the handling, usage, and preserving of what one is left in charge.¹⁸ Regardless, she gains *kleos*, not as a hero, but as a patient, loyal, and thoughtful wife protecting the *oikos*, the household, because phallogocentric discourse defines heroism with regard to men and what men do. Penelope's not taking credit for her cunning plans and informing Odysseus about how she has been single-handedly running his estates "with womanly modesty"¹⁹ illustrates what Cixous calls a woman's aptitude to "deappropriate herself without self-interest"²⁰—not posing a threat to a man's authority within the framework of phallogocentric order. Irigaray points out that in terms of masculine parameters, which define female sexuality as a lack of phallus, a woman, being "marked phallicly" by her father and/or husband is regarded as nothing but commodity with a use and/or exchange value.²¹ Therefore, she tries to compensate for what she lacks through subservient displays of love towards her father as well as her husband, through giving birth, preferably to a boy, to substitute for the penis she lacks.²² Accordingly, Eurycleia keeps reminding Penelope that her "job" is to "have a nice big son for Odysseus";²³ which mirrors the constant and contemporary effort to confirm an allegedly natural association between femininity and maternity as well as to reduce the social role of women to reproduction.²⁴ Consequently, Penelope's only victory over Helen is her giving birth to a son before the latter.

18 Keen (1991) 180.

19 Atwood (2005) 89.

20 Cixous and Clément (1996) 87.

21 Irigaray (1985) 31.

22 Irigaray (1985) 23–24.

23 Atwood (2005) 63. Doherty notes that in classical Greek societies the primary roles of men were being a citizen and a warrior, whereas the primary roles of women were being a wife and a mother. Doherty (2003) 137.

24 Butler (2004) 182, 186.

Likewise, Eurycleia herself seems to fill in the gaps in her repressed sexuality, to use Irigaray's discourse yet again, by playing the role of the surrogate mother first to Odysseus, then to his son Telemachus, and eventually to a dozen dead babies in Hades, which seems like her eternal punishment for having served the phallogocentric male order.

Staying alive seems to be a challenge in itself in both the epic and the continuation, let alone asserting oneself or gaining *kleos*. In the continuation Penelope points out the fact that Odysseus' grandfather and Penelope's father attempted to kill them as children. Odysseus threatens to dismember and then to hang Penelope if he ever finds out she has been unfaithful. Penelope also fears that Telemachus might be considering killing her to get rid of the suitors and keep his inheritance. Indeed, by associating her bridal veil with a shroud, Penelope draws a connection between marriage and death long before her husband and her son pose threats to her very life.²⁵ Telemachus has grown up without a father, though with Athena as his guide and patron. He needs to learn to assert himself, establish his authority in Ithaca, and surpass his father, whom he has not had a chance to know. Penelope makes sure her son hears only the nobler versions of the tales about his father's adventures, the ones praising Odysseus as a handsome and intelligent warrior. Orestes, who had to kill his mother Clytemnestra to avenge the murder of his father Agamemnon, is yet another example drawn for Telemachus. Irigaray defines the patriarchal order "as the *organization and monopolization of private property to the benefit of the head of the family.*"²⁶ As seen in the example of Telemachus, as soon as he comes of age, the son is responsible for the protection and prosperity of his father's estate in his absence. In the *Odyssey* Telemachus insists on choosing the songs for the banquet, making a speech, and taking over his father's bow. In the continuation, similarly, Penelope is not pleased at all that, after running the palace for twenty years in the absence of her husband, her son is now at the age to order her about and claim his authority to take over his father's duties. On the one hand, Telemachus accuses his mother of being overemotional, lacking reason, and judgment. On the other hand, he accuses her of being cold and unaffectionate towards Odysseus upon her long-absent husband's revelation of his identity. Penelope gets so irritated at the way her son treats her that she wishes for another Trojan War just so she could send him off to war and get rid of him. Anticleia might as well be right to blame Penelope, instead of Helen, for Odysseus' having to go to war. Odysseus pretends to have gone mad

25 Akgün (2010) 37–38.

26 Irigaray (1985) 83.

to avoid keeping his promise and going to Troy to bring Helen back. Allegedly to show that Odysseus will not recognize her or their son and to prove her husband right, Penelope carries the baby Telemachus to the field. However, when Palamedes puts the baby in front of the plough Odysseus is driving, Odysseus stops the plough in order not to kill his son. Having his madman disguise ruined thanks to his wife, he has to go to war.

In *The Penelopiad* Penelope affirms that Odysseus and she have both admitted to be "proficient and shameless liars of long standing."²⁷ They start playacting and using deceit on their first night as a married couple upon the suggestion of Odysseus. The bride is presumed to be stolen, while "the consummation of marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape ... a mock killing."²⁸ Odysseus suggests that Penelope pretend to be hurt and scream to satisfy those listening outside their bedroom. It should be noted that he does steal Penelope and her dowry and take both to Ithaca after the wedding instead of living with his wife's family in Sparta as the old custom requires. Furthermore, with the help of Tyndareus, Helen's father and Penelope's uncle, he cheats in the running competition for the hand of Penelope in marriage; he drugs his opponents who are competing. After Odysseus wins the contest, marries Penelope, and takes her to Ithaca, Tyndareus' grandchildren will rule in Sparta.

Besides bringing Penelope and her dowry back to Ithaca thanks to his craftiness, Odysseus is also accused of being a usurper who overthrows the Great Mother cult. His refusal to be beheaded at the end of his rightful term and sacrificing the suitors and the maids as substitutes bears resemblance to "the Empire of the Selfsame" which is "erected from ... The fear of expropriation, of separation, of losing attribute. In other words, the threat of castration has an impact."²⁹ Armstrong emphasizes that catastrophe and bloodshed are the central features of the myth of the dying vegetation gods. The ever-dying and ever-living god "epitomises a universal process, like the waxing and waning of the seasons"³⁰ and the moon. The god or his impersonator needs to die so that he can be reborn and fertilize the goddess to produce new crops.³¹ The maids in Atwood's continuation play the role of the twelve moon-maidens of Artemis, the moon goddess, while Penelope plays the role of the High Priestess. After indulging in orgiastic fertility rite behavior with the suitors, the maids purify

27 Atwood (2005) 173.

28 Atwood (2005) 44.

29 Cixous and Clément (1996) 80.

30 Armstrong (2005) 53.

31 Coupe (1997) 24; Frazer (1978).

themselves in the blood of the murdered male victims, thereby renewing their virginity. Finally, as a re-enactment of the dark side of the moon phase, the maids sacrifice themselves.³²

Since agriculture is neither a peaceful nor a contemplative task, as Armstrong puts it, the Great Mother is not a gentle or consoling goddess.³³ In both the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* the desire of a woman is portrayed as an "insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole."³⁴ Reminiscent of the Great Mother and Irigaray's definition of the desire of a woman, Penelope, too, is regarded as a hazard to Odysseus' life. Hence, Agamemnon's warning and cautionary tale in Hades. The *Odyssey* ends with Odysseus' reaffirming his manhood and kingship whereas *The Penelopiad* ends with a reclaiming of the matrilineal cult of the Great Mother, representing Penelope as the High Priestess and the maids as the priestesses of the moon goddess Artemis, and condemning Odysseus, the usurper, to an eternal punishment. Nancy Fraser maintains that "gender justice now encompasses issues of representation, identity, and difference."³⁵ Accordingly, *The Penelopiad*, as a gendered continuation of the *Odyssey*, offers Helen, Penelope, and the twelve maids self-representation.

Almost all female figures in the original epic and in its continuation transgress the boundaries and dismantle the gender roles ascribed by the phallogocentric order. In addition, Froma I. Zeitlin asserts that in the *Odyssey* every female character provides for the building up of the conglomerate character of Penelope.³⁶ In Lacanian terms Penelope is "the reflector and guarantor of an apparent masculine subject position,"³⁷ that of Odysseus to be specific. She also serves as a point of reference for Odysseus whenever he encounters a woman, be she a human, a goddess, or a monster. In Homer's epic Penelope's loyalty to her husband is confirmed by numerous characters including Agamemnon, Anticleia, and Athena. In Atwood's continuation Penelope accordingly claims that she is not a man-eater, a Siren, or a Helen, but she actually embodies in her character all human and non-human female figures of Homer's epic who assist Odysseus, delay his *nostos*, homecoming, or threaten his life. As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson mentions, Atwood, in her continuation, "even unpicks the apparent goodness of Penelope" to explore "the darker side of female (human)

32 Atwood (2005) 164.

33 Armstrong (2005) 48.

34 Irigaray (1985) 29.

35 Fraser (2013) 160.

36 Zeitlin (1996) 45.

37 Butler (2010) 61.

nature."³⁸ Penelope is seemingly passive, patiently waiting for her husband to return home from war in the epic, but she is subverting the phallogocentric discourse as well as gender roles in the continuation. Athena bestows upon Penelope her skill in weaving, intelligence, and talent at rhetoric; and makes her look more beautiful not only to enthrone Odysseus but also to encourage the suitors to give her gifts. Therefore, in Homer's epic, Penelope attributes her idea of the shroud to Athena and her idea of challenging the suitors to string her husband's bow to Odysseus, whereas, in Atwood's continuation, she explains that it was all her own idea, but that she reckoned that if she attributed it to a goddess, she would avoid being punished by gods, like Arachne was, because of her boasting and *hubris*.

Athena is the goddess of wisdom and war as well as spinning and weaving; she is the protector of heroes and the guardian of cities. Penelope, likewise, is known for her intelligence, weaving, and protecting the *oikos*. Just as Athena does not have a mother, so Penelope has an absentee mother and a cold and distant mother-in-law. Of all the Olympian deities, Athena alone is allowed to wear the aegis and carry the thunderbolt of her father Zeus. Similarly, Penelope is in charge of ruling the estates of Odysseus and is in possession of his bow after he leaves for Troy. Besides, the story of Athena's turning Arachne into a spider after the latter hangs herself resembles the story of Penelope's shroud, which was called "Penelope's web,"³⁹ thereby associating Penelope with a spider aiming to catch the suitors like flies. Additionally, Penelope's name etymologically means "thread." In *The Penelopiad* Penelope does not appreciate the spider analogy and argues in her defense that she has been the one trying to avoid entanglement. She also notes that the suitors are furious not only because they are fooled, but because they are fooled by a woman. Therefore, she pretends not to have recognized her husband when he is disguised as an old beggar; she considers it "an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness."⁴⁰

As regards trickery and gender, Marilyn Jurich avers that since a woman is regarded as fragile and feeble-minded, hence incapable of forming a plot, she has "double impunity."⁴¹ According to Jurich, women employ tricks in order to achieve social change by upending the codes of limitation and oppression.⁴² Penelope, however, reinforces the existing order and employs its codes

38 Macpherson (2010) 21.

39 Atwood (2005) 119.

40 Atwood (2005) 137.

41 Jurich (1998) 225.

42 Jurich (1998) 18–19.

to manipulate and oppress the maids, in that she professedly waits for the right moment to tell Odysseus about her twelve confidant maids, who have been following her orders, and causes them to be eventually hanged for their seeming disloyalty. This illustrates what Zajko calls Penelope's "self-conscious belatedness and awareness of the dynamics of appropriation and selection"⁴³ in *The Penelopiad*. Like Calypso conceals Odysseus in a cave on her island, Penelope conceals her cunning plans from the twelve maids as well as the suitors it seems. Just as Circe enchants Odysseus' companions with her singing and weaving, so Penelope weaves, whereas in Atwood's continuation her maids sing. Penelope is supposedly weaving a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes during the day, while at night she undoes her day's work with the help of her maids who also entertain themselves by singing, sharing jokes, and telling stories. Penelope's sweet talk to seduce the suitors as well as the maids' songs replace the Sirens' singing with their honey-sweet voices to seduce the sailors. Additionally, in the *Odyssey* Arete and Nausicaa play the roles of good wife and daughter, protecting the *oikos* while Ino saves Odysseus from drowning, as opposed to Helen and Clytemnestra who delineate the scale of turmoil a woman can cause by making a decision when her husband is away. Helen runs away with Paris and causes the Trojan War, which claims hundreds of thousands of lives. Clytemnestra plots with her lover the murder of her husband Agamemnon to avenge his sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to be able to sail to Troy. In Hades Teiresias warns Odysseus against the suitors waiting in Ithaca, while Agamemnon tells his wife Clytemnestra's betrayal as a cautionary tale. Despite owning that Penelope is known for her loyalty, he still warns Odysseus against a possible similar betrayal on his return home. Having been warned in advance, Odysseus avenges himself on the suitors thanks to Athena, Telemachus, and Penelope. In the continuation, similar to Helen and Clytemnestra, Penelope is secretly attracted to rascals and has been flirting with the suitors while she plays the role of the patient and loyal wife who waits for her husband and protects the *oikos*.⁴⁴ According to some rumors, she has been sleeping with all of the suitors and has given birth to Pan. It is also noteworthy that Clytemnestra and Helen are Penelope's cousins. In other words, both Penelope and Odysseus have crafty and unscrupulous relatives. Odysseus' grandfather Autolycus is the son of Hermes, god of thieves and tricksters. It is also rumored that Odysseus' mother Anticleia has been unfaithful and that Odysseus' father is indeed Sisyphus, yet another crafty and deceitful figure. Fur-

43 Zajko (2008) 195.

44 See Akgün (2010) 38–39; Neethling (2015) 122.

thermore, Penelope reminds us of the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis, for she brings about the death of her twelve maids as well as a hundred and twenty suitors.

The transformations and physical appearances of the goddesses and female monsters also underline women's transgression of boundaries. Circe transforms Odysseus' companions into pigs and eventually back into men only because she does not want to see Odysseus sad. Athena can transform herself into a man or a bird in the *Odyssey*. Athena makes Penelope look more beautiful before she meets Odysseus while she helps Odysseus put on the disguise of an old beggar and, when she takes off his disguise, makes him look more handsome. Scylla is a female sea monster with twelve feet, six long necks and heads, and three rows of teeth in each mouth, which enables her to devour six of Odysseus' companions at one go. Actually, Circe advises Odysseus to choose Scylla over Charybdis, yet another female sea monster, whose giant whirlpool would easily sink Odysseus' ship and kill everyone on it. The Sirens have the body of a bird and the head of a human woman. Penelope's Naiad mother reminds us of a sea monster, too: swimming around like a porpoise; eating raw fish, heads first, with her sharp pointed teeth; and suddenly killing an annoying maid in *The Penelopiad*. Moreover, at the end of the continuation, the maids invoke the Erinyes, "the dreaded Furies, snake-haired, dog-headed, bat-winged"⁴⁵ to haunt Odysseus while the maids themselves transform into owls, evocative of the Harpies, birds with faces of human women, fetching the wrongdoers to the Erinyes.

As another means of subversion, like Cixous and Bakhtin, Moi points out to the revolutionary attitude of laughter which overthrows the codes and norms of the established order and replaces them with new and slippery ones.⁴⁶ In Atwood's continuation, Helen, Penelope, and the maids laugh at the expense of others in celebration of their cunning, if small, acts of disobedience and rebellion. Helen has her "patronizing smirk."⁴⁷ Penelope confesses that when her father has begged her to stay in Sparta instead of going to Ithaca, she has pulled down her veil not because of her modesty, but to conceal her laughter. She also wants to giggle behind her veil, looking down at the short legs of Odysseus during their marriage ceremony. She laughs at the expense of the suitors with whom she flirts, encouraging them to give her expensive gifts to compensate for their expenses. Again, she silently laughs after tricking

45 Atwood (2005) 110.

46 Bakhtin (2000) 170; Cixous (1976) 888; Moi (1985) 40.

47 Atwood (2005) 34.

Eurycleia into almost revealing the identity of Odysseus when he is disguised as a beggar, by asking her to wash his feet so that she can behold his scar. Much to Penelope's amusement, Odysseus almost throttles his old nurse to stop her from revealing his identity. As for the maids, they laugh and giggle while working in the outbuildings. Becoming "polished and evasive", they master "the secret sneer";⁴⁸ they spit in the food they serve, drink the leftover wine, and steal meat. Penelope's letting Odysseus and Telemachus hang the maids might be her way of finally making them stop laughing at her, since she often complains that she could not stop the maids laughing at her expense. As a matter of fact, Penelope's mother could suddenly kill a maid who has happened to annoy her as well. Besides, Penelope does not even feel sorry when the maid she brought from Sparta dies—not for the maid at least. She only resents the fact that she is left alone in a strange land among strange people.

Towards the end of Homer's epic, Odysseus, disguised as an old beggar, praises Penelope by comparing her to a benevolent king who maintains fertility and order in his kingdom. At the end of *The Penelopiad* the maids' narrative suggests that just as Odysseus has restored order and reaffirmed his manhood and kingship by murdering all the suitors, so Penelope has maintained her reputation as a patient and loyal wife at the expense of the maids. As if to draw attention to this parallelism, in the continuation, the maids perform a sea shanty in sailor costumes impersonating Odysseus' companions and singing about their adventures. They also sing a rope-jumping rhyme about Odysseus' and Telemachus' killing and Penelope's failing them; they claim that they are rendered weak and silent whereas their master and mistress have the spear (power) and the word (official epic singing their praises). Penelope, likewise, believes that the geese she is feeding in her dream before an eagle comes and kills them represent not the suitors but her maids. In the meantime, Penelope does nothing to protect the geese (the maids) from the eagle (Odysseus). Furthermore, in the epic, Penelope claims that Helen would not have run away with Paris if she had known that the Achaeans would bring her back, which is regarded as Penelope's "unconscious vindication of what we do not know (will never know) with regard to Penelope herself."⁴⁹ Correspondingly, in Atwood's continuation, the maids claim that Penelope has been sleeping with the suitors and that that's why she begs Eurycleia to have Odysseus kill the twelve maids who are privy to her secrets. The maids mourn that dirt is both their specialty and fault, in that they are Penelope's source of information and gossip, but,

48 Atwood (2005) 14.

49 Zeitlin (1995) 144.

at the same time, their knowledge poses a threat for Penelope. Given that Penelope excels at deceit and has managed to fool even Athena and Odysseus with her seeming modesty and loyalty respectively, the maids might as well be telling the truth about her affairs. After all, Penelope concurs that she finds it delightful “to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act.”⁵⁰ She also admits that she has enjoyed flirting with the suitors; she has encouraged them and sent secret messages to them, and has even daydreamed about with which one she would rather sleep.

Homer’s epic opens with an emphasis on the fact that Odysseus’ companions have died of their own foolish acts, no matter how hard Odysseus has tried to save them. Nevertheless, Odysseus’ being the only one who returns home does not necessarily praise his leadership or display his bravery and prowess. Nor does it prove that his *metis*, cunning, and resourcefulness can indeed be regarded as heroic qualities. Until Elpenor’s spirit in Hades asks Odysseus and his companions to go back to Circe’s island and bury his body properly, he has not even noticed that they have left behind one of his men when they have sailed away from that island, let alone that Elpenor has died. Also, Odysseus keeps his companions in the dark about the advice, instructions, and gifts given to him by their hosts and hostesses to protect themselves against the challenges awaiting them throughout their *nostos*. He takes Circe’s advice and chooses to sacrifice six of his companions to Scylla without telling his companions about the monsters or his decision. Likewise, he only warns them not to touch Aeolus’ gift instead of telling them what it really is. His companions think that Odysseus is not willing to share the guest gifts. They open the bag of winds to see what is inside and set all the winds free, which takes them back to Aeolus’ land and prolongs their *nostos* right when they have got so close to the end of their journey that they could see Ithaca. Being asleep is the excuse of Odysseus for not preventing his companions from committing foolish acts, such as opening the bag of winds and eating the golden flock of Apollo. He is once again asleep when he arrives in Ithaca and when the Phaeacians leave him and his guest gifts on the shore. Likewise, in the continuation Penelope claims that Eurycleia must have put some sleeping draught in her drink to comfort her and make her sleep throughout the murder of the suitors and the maids. When Odysseus eventually returns to Ithaca, he has no companions left alive to bear witness to or to contradict his tales of *nostos*. In other words, as some critics believe,⁵¹ Odysseus’ narrative, his heroic self-revelation,

50 Atwood (2005) 117.

51 See Doherty (2003) 142; Attebery (2014) 38.

may be mere lies. Accordingly, like Odysseus' self-proclaimed heroism, his life-threatening adventures with sea monsters and goddesses are diminished to drunken mutinies, tavern fights, ear-bitings, nosebleeds, stabbings, eviscerations, expensive warehouses, and a cave full of bats in Atwood's continuation. Similarly, in the epic, Penelope has no confidant maids left alive to contradict her tales of how she has remained loyal to Odysseus. In the continuation, however, as mentioned above, the twelve maids' narrative contradicts not only the epic, but also Penelope's retelling in the continuation.

The *homophrosynē*, like-mindedness, of Penelope and Odysseus in the epic is appropriated in the continuation to bend gender roles, to deconstruct the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity, and to show their artificiality by ascribing the same qualities to both male and female figures. Odysseus, like Penelope, embodies most of the life-threatening qualities of the female figures he encounters during his *nostos*. As Penelope notes, like Circe, the Sirens, and Calypso, he is "a persuader", and "an excellent raconteur" with "a wonderful ... deep and sonorous" voice.⁵² Not to mention his disguises, cunning devices, and plans. The strongest weapon of Odysseus and Penelope is their wits. Among their specialties are making a fool of everyone and getting away with it, although Penelope projects the latter onto Helen. Yet another resemblance between Odysseus and Penelope is their excessive weeping and slipperiness. Odysseus cannot hold back his tears while listening to the bard at Alcinous' court sing about the Trojan War. Also, on Calypso's island, he spends most of his time sitting on a rock, gazing towards Ithaca, and weeping. Both Odysseus and Telemachus cry a lot when they are reunited after twenty years. Odysseus cries again when he holds his wife at the end of the epic. As for Penelope, being the daughter of a Naiad, she is "well connected among the fish and seabirds."⁵³ Water is her element and birthright whereas excessive weeping is her handicap. Penelope confesses in the continuation that she often lies down on her bed and cries. Additionally, as discussed above, she is reminiscent of the nonhuman female figures who are, in a manner, personifications of the sea and pose a danger of being concealed (Calypso, Circe, and even Nausicaa), swallowed (Scylla), engulfed, or obliterated (Charybdis)⁵⁴ for Odysseus and his companions during their *nostos*. As numerous mythologies do, Cixous deems water as the feminine element whereas Moi claims that mimicking the phallogocentric discourse's equation between woman and fluids only strengthens

52 Atwood (2005) 45.

53 Atwood (2005) 9.

54 Schein (1995) 19; Doherty (2003) 162.

that discourse. Irigaray, on the contrary, compares woman's language to fluids, in that both are continuous, endless, compressible, and dilatible at the same time.⁵⁵ Likewise, in the continuation, heeding her mother's one good piece of advice, Penelope tries to behave like water instead of opposing the suitors. She embraces her fluidity and employs "the feminine resource of evasiveness"⁵⁶ to keep the suitors waiting for her decision.

The narrative of the maids is similarly fluid, mercurial, and permutable. The intertwined chapters narrated by Penelope and the maids in turns, but not in any particular order, bring to mind weaving as well. Moreover, these intertwined chapters delineate how the phallogocentric order allows a woman to experience herself "only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess."⁵⁷ The chapters narrated by the maids are titled "The Chorus Line", but each chapter also has a subtitle indicating its genre. The maids narrate each chapter using a different genre from a rope-jumping rhyme to an anthropology lecture to a court trial videotape. In addition to the constantly changing genre, "sweeping away syntax"⁵⁸ and disposing of capitalization and punctuation celebrate chaos, diversity, and what Cixous calls a new, feminine language that ceaselessly capsizes phallogocentrism. Moi argues that masculine rationality favors reason, order, and unity over irrationality, chaos, and fragmentation, which it associates with femininity and silences and excludes.⁵⁹ The maids' telling of their story chapter by chapter, each chapter written in a different genre and thus exhausting the male discourse as well as order, is suggestive of Irigaray's claim that it is futile to try to trap women in an exact definition in any "discursive machinery."⁶⁰ What is more, the narrative of the maids is the return of the repressed, which, according to Cixous, is "an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed."⁶¹

As far as Moi is concerned, feminism not only rejects but also transforms power.⁶² In Atwood's continuation, the male judge, representing the phallogocentric order, accepts Homer's epic as "the main authority on the subject"⁶³

55 Cf. Moi (1985) 117, 142 and Irigaray (1985) 111.

56 Spacks (1976) 24.

57 Irigaray (1985) 30.

58 Cixous (1976) 886.

59 Moi (1985) 160.

60 Irigaray (1985) 29.

61 Cixous (1976) 886.

62 Moi (1985) 148.

63 Atwood (2005) 179.

and dismisses the case during the trial of Odysseus not to be guilty of anachronism. Then, the twelve maids condemn Odysseus to an eternal punishment, like the ones given to Sisyphus and Tantalus in Hades. An eternal punishment from which neither the patronage of Athena nor his many ways can save him. Actually, Odysseus' punishment as well as his crime is a poetic reflection of his name, which means "he who receives and inflicts pain." The victimizer of the epic is transformed into the victim in the continuation. In the continuation Odysseus has a much worse fate than those of Achilles and Agamemnon who envy him in the epic. Just as Poseidon does in the *Odyssey*, so the Erinyes and the maids haunt Odysseus in *The Penelopiad*. In the epic, in order to make peace with Poseidon, who prolongs and makes Odysseus' *nostos* fatally hazardous because he has blinded the god's son Polyphemus the Cyclops, Odysseus has to leave home one last time to go to the innermost land and introduce the god of the sea to the people who have not even heard of the sea. In the continuation he is doomed to be an eternal wanderer. The Erinyes, assuming the appearance of the corpses of the maids, alongside the maids in the form of owls, will haunt Odysseus "on earth or in Hades, wherever he may take refuge, in songs and in plays, in tomes and in theses, in marginal notes and in appendices!"⁶⁴ No matter how many times Odysseus is reborn, in every single one of his lives, he always dies a horrible death, be it a suicide, an accident, a death in battle, or an assassination, which reflects Penelope's dreams in which the adventures of Odysseus during his *nostos* end in gruesome demises, with the Cyclops bashing his head and eating his brains or the Sirens tearing him apart with their birds' claws. Atwood, consequently, does not only reject Homer's authority on the subject in her gendered continuation, but also dismantles the patriarchal discourse and order, embodied by the epic as well as its hero, of any power whatsoever by providing the narratives of Penelope and the maids, the heretofore silenced and repressed characters.

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64 Atwood (2005) 183.

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BRILL'S COMPANION TO
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EPIC



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The epics of ancient Greece and Rome are unique in that many went unfinished, or if they were finished, remained open to further narration that was beyond the power, interest, or sometimes the life-span of the poet. Such incompleteness inaugurated a tradition of continuance and closure in their reception. *Brill's Companion to Prequels, Sequels, and Retellings of Classical Epic* explores this long tradition of continuing epics through sequels, prequels, retellings and spin-offs. This collection of essays brings together several noted scholars working in a variety of fields to trace the persistence of this literary effort from their earliest instantiations in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer to the contemporary novels of Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood.

Contributors are: Buket Akgün, Antony Augoustakis, Neil W. Bernstein, Emma Buckley, Marta Cardin, Reinhold F. Gleib, Marie Louise von Glinski, Adam J. Goldwyn, Nickolas A. Haydock, Orestis Karavas, Martha Klironomos, Kristin Lindfield-Ott, Jardar Lohne, Calum A. Maciver, Elizabeth Minchin, Francine Mora-Lebrun, and Anne Rogerson.

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