

## ‘There is another story’: Writing after the *Odyssey* in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I explore how Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) provides a retrospective vision of an *Odyssey* that has already happened – and, by so doing, opens up an extended investigation of what it means to receive the texts and myths of the classical past. By responding to and reformulating the tale of the *Odyssey* after the event, Penelope’s storytelling mirrors the process of reception – what James Porter has called a ‘retrospective’ form of reception, where the classical is ‘identifiable only *après coup*’ (2006: 53). But I also suggest that there is a second layer to Atwood’s allegorising of classical reception in *The Penelopiad*: one which, by consciously correcting the narrative of the *Odyssey* via the subversive counter-story of the maids, showcases a vision of reception as retelling and complicating classical texts, both by inserting a new (and often subversive) narrative, and by emending the multiform text of the *Odyssey* to the ‘correct’ edition. *The Penelopiad* thus becomes an exploration of what it means to interpret narratives within the classical tradition – suggesting that we are not only respondents to, but also, like the maids, direct participants in the classical past.

For those of us who are interested in both the study, and the practice, of classical reception, there is an important question which we must all face. How can we respond, in dynamic dialogue, to a past civilisation, a dead language, a closed literary canon, one which is ‘visible and identifiable only *après coup*’ (Porter 2006: 53)? Is ‘response’, in fact, even a word we can use? How can we engage meaningfully with something that has *already been* – and what is the point of doing so at all?

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These kinds of questions are nothing new, of course. They have been central to the development of reception studies over the past twenty to thirty years, and a dialogic approach to classical reception – where we are seen as *participants in*, and not only *observers of* – the classical past, has become a far more mainstream approach in classical scholarship in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Rather than repeating critical trends here, however, I want to focus on a contemporary writer who engages, in her own way, with what it means to rewrite the past; and in particular, how writers and readers in the twenty-first century both receive

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2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the most influential exponents of modern hermeneutics, articulated the dialogic relationship between text and interpreter perhaps most neatly: ‘the classical is what is preserved precisely because it signifies and interprets itself: ie, that which speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past, a mere testimony to something that still needs to be interpreted, but says something to the present as if it were said specially to it. What we call ‘classical’ does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in *its own constant communication* it does overcome it. The classical, then, is certainly ‘timeless’, but this timelessness is a mode of historical being’ (Gadamer 1975: 257) [emphasis mine]. Gadamer’s student, Hans Robert Jauss, took this emphasis on the interplay between the horizons of text and reader to a new level in his 1967 lecture at the University of Constance, proposing a new form of what he called *Rezeptionsästhetik*, or ‘poetics of reception,’ where the focus would be placed as much upon the aesthetic response of the reader as the rooted historicity of the original text: ‘in the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience’ (Jauss & Benzinger 1970: 8). This has been actively reflected in classical reception, most notably in Charles Martindale’s important 1993 volume *Redeeming the Text* (Martindale 1993) (and in 2013, a twenty-year retrospective on Martindale’s work was published in *CRJ* 5(2), including a keynote paper by Martindale [Martindale 2013]); see also Hardwick 2003, Hardwick & Stray 2011, Hardwick & Harrison 2013, Leonard 2009, Martindale & Thomas 2008, Porter 2006.

and respond to the so-called ‘closed texts’ of the classical canon. I am interested in looking at what happens after the *Odyssey* – in particular, how the reception and characterisation of Penelope in Margaret Atwood’s 2005 novel, *The Penelopiad*, is affected by Atwood’s awareness of the *Odyssey*’s status as a canonical, closed, received text. As Vanda Zajko points out, ‘Atwood’s heroine, in her self-conscious belatedness and awareness of the dynamics of appropriation and selection, functions as an allegory of reception theory’ (2011: 195). I will build on Zajko’s observation to suggest that Atwood attributes to Penelope a consciousness of her belatedness in *The Penelopiad*, whilst at the same time foregrounding the instability of the text itself through the subtle unravelling of her voice enacted through the maids, whose subversive tale throws doubt upon the reliability of Penelope’s voice as a narrator.<sup>3</sup> Penelope’s self-presentation becomes both an emendation of the notoriously complex and multiple versions of the *Odyssey*’s text to the correct edition, a staged claim of narrative fidelity to an unstable source text, and a statement of the very instability of the text itself. *The Penelopiad* thus both re-affirms and undercuts the Homeric *Odyssey*, in a move that presents the importance (and difficulty) of engaging with classical texts and, at the same time, refutes traditional models of mono-directional influence.

First, however, we must begin by situating Atwood’s *Penelopiad* within a tradition of Odyssean receptions, and – in particular – in comparison to contemporary modernist,

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3. On belatedness in the *Odyssey*, see Burgess 2014, and on writing beyond the ending, see Roberts 1997.

postmodernist, and feminist interpretations of the *Odyssey*.<sup>4</sup> Mihoko Suzuki identifies a strong feminist strain in Odyssean receptions, beginning with Samuel Butler's *Authoress of the Odyssey* (Suzuki 2007: 263):

With Athena as its presiding deity *The Odyssey* has been associated with the feminine even before the rise of feminist criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century. Samuel Butler claimed in *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) that the author disguised herself in the character of Nausicaa; in *Homer's Daughter* (1955) Robert Graves followed Butler in imagining Nausicaa, here a priestess of Athena, as the protagonist who discomfits her 112 suitors. Andrew Dalby's recent *Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic* argues that both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by a woman (2006, 150-53, 203-04).<sup>5</sup>

Edith Hall, in her recent monograph on Odyssean reception, notes that the *Odyssey* – and the figure of Penelope in particular – is peculiarly suited to adaptation, in that it is the complexities of Penelope's portrayal that ask the reader to 'make guesses to "fill in" the gaps in Penelope's psychological profile, thus giving her a strange extra-textual status of her own ... It is in having to respond actively to Penelope's characterization that over the

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4. For an excellent survey of the reception history of the *Odyssey*, see Hall 2008; see also, by way of comparison, Hall's predecessor in tracing Odyssean receptions, Stanford 1954. For specific studies of modern Odyssean receptions, see, for example, Davis 2011, Friedman 2007, Murnaghan 2002.

5. See also Hall 2008: 116-117.

last century many authors have found inspiration' (Hall 2008: 120). Referring to Carolyn Heilbrun's 1985 lecture, 'What was Penelope unweaving?' (later published in 1990 in her collection of essays, *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*), as a turning point in the evaluation of the role and function of Penelope in novelistic reinterpretations, Hall suggests that Heilbrun instigated a movement amongst female writers in which Penelope became 'emblematic of the feminist project of rewriting the literary canon' (124).<sup>6</sup> Heilbrun's essay responds to Froma Zeitlin's 1981 chapter in Helene Foley's *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, where Zeitlin suggests that Penelope is presented in the *Odyssey* with a choice between two possible roles: 'that of the faithful woman who receives the beggar in disguise and welcomes him, or that of the woman who, surrounded by men ... practices the wiles of seduction, although another man's wife' (1981: 206). Heilbrun responds (1990: 108):

Zeitlin's is a totally accurate description. But, I would like to suggest, Penelope is faced, not with one story, or even two, but with an as-yet-

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6. See also Zajko 2008: 47, 'the process of "reclaiming" a tradition here might ... be described as the process of creating literary role models which enable contemporary women to forge empathetic links with the women of the ancient world.' See by way of comparison Rich 1972: 18, where Adrienne Rich argues that writing in response to the past is an act of 're-visioning' that is central to the feminist project: 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh.'

unwritten story: how a woman may manage her own destiny when she has no plot, no narrative, no tale to guide her. Imagining, inventing, she weaves and unweaves and knows, when the stranger appears, that the time for the enacting of her new story has come.

She continues by connecting this open-endedness of Penelope's tale to her vision of the necessity of her reworking and remaking by female authors (p.109):

We cannot yet make wholly new fictions; we can only transform old tales, and recognize how women have transformed old tales in the past. Out of old tales, we must make new lives.

A more recent article on Penelope's reception in twentieth-century American women poets by Isobel Hurst, published in 2009 – almost twenty-five years after Heilbrun's lecture – articulates a similar idea (p.279):

Giving a voice to a mythical character who is silent or who says little in the original text is a strategy frequently used by women poets who are attempting to deconstruct the old myths which exclude them and construct new ones ... Penelope, whose thoughts and feelings remain largely hidden, is a major female character in a canonical poem who is open to reinterpretation.

So too Sheila Murnaghan (2015: 186):

Modern writing about Penelope, both academic and creative, makes

its clearest contribution by interpreting an enigmatic text, reading between the lines to answer such questions as how Penelope feels about her Suitors, how willingly she accepts her role as patiently waiting wife, how and when she recognizes Odysseus, and how much control she exercises over the direction of the plot.

Examples of twentieth-century feminist Penelopean receptions are manifold. Amongst English-language verse receptions alone are H.D.'s 1924 poem, *At Ithaca*, which imagines Penelope at her loom weaving Odysseus' fate; Dorothy Parker's 'Penelope' (1928), with its evocative final line, 'They will call him brave'; Edna St. Vincent Millay's 'An Ancient Gesture' (1956), which writes a history of female weeping that goes back to Penelope; Louise Glück's 1996 *Odyssey* cycle in her collection *Meadowlands*, including 'Penelope's Song,' hinting at a darker side to Penelope with insinuations of infidelity; and Mary Zimmerman's *Odyssey* (a theatrical adaptation of the epic, first produced in 1999).<sup>7</sup> Novelistic reworkings of Penelope's tale began, as Hall notes, 'just two years after Heilbrun's incendiary lecture' (2008: 124) with Inge Merkel's *Odysseus and Penelope: An Ordinary Marriage* (1987) – suggesting that Heilbrun's implication of Penelope's story with the project of re-writing the tales of the women of the past either had an important

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7. Other verse interpretations in English include Louise Glück's 'Ithaca' (1995), Linda Pastan's 'You are Odysseus' (1982), and Wallace Stevens' 'The World as Meditation' (1954). For non-Anglophone Penelopean receptions in verse, see, for example, Francisca Aguirre's collection of poems on the *Odyssey*, *Ítaca* (2004), Borges' poem 'Odyssey, Book Twenty-Three' (1972), and Yannis Ritsos' 'Penelope's Despair' (1968). See further Doherty 2008, Gardner & Murnaghan 2014, Hurst 2009, Kossman 2001: 270-273 and Murnaghan 2015: 185-186; also Hall 2008: 126.

impact on female authors' reception of classical women, or was highly accurate in pinpointing movements in contemporary literature. Merkel, an Austrian classicist, tells Penelope's story as she waits for Odysseus' return as its own form of trial, detailing her lack of sex, her eating and drinking problems, her near infidelities – thus questioning the idealised depictions of 'prudent Penelope' over the centuries and throwing them into sharp contrast. In fact, although Penelope's affairs are never consummated, Merkel implies that Penelope's adultery was equivalent to Odysseus' (generating Penelope as a kind of anti-hero, whose heroic ordeals/errors match those of Odysseus): both Penelope and Odysseus 'had committed adultery. He in the way of men and she in the way of women' (2000: 157). In 2005, the second of the Penelopean receptions in novel form, Adèle Geras's *Ithaka*, was published. Geras, like Atwood, splits her narration between two female parties, Penelope and Klymene, the (newly-invented) grand-daughter of Eurycleia. Penelope's gradual shift from weaving Odysseus' adventures to the shroud traces her growing distance from Odysseus, until eventually, she chooses to abandon him and the weaving altogether and chooses her lover, Leodes (2005: 244, 318). And yet Athene, who was the initial inspiration and command for the weaving of Odysseus' web, commends her choice: 'You have been more faithful than any husband has a right to demand. Years and years went by before you even looked at another man. Your weaving has kept him alive. The stories you have told in your work' (p.334). In this sense, Geras' Penelope has her cake and eats it, too; or, as the goddess Aphrodite puts it, 'it's perfectly possible to love two men at the same time' (p.91). In other words, Penelope was unfaithful, true, but it was natural, and her scant work at her weaving still kept her husband alive; all that was required was the lie from Klymene to

bolster Penelope's reputation – 'she's famous all over the islands for her devotion and loyalty' (p.342) – to secure her image forever.

Atwood's sense of coming 'at the end' – both as a receiver of the *Odyssey*, and in the wake of the upsurge in feminist interest in reworking Penelope's tale – is expressed in the opening of *The Penelopiad*, which starts at the end in many ways. Penelope opens her fictive autobiographical narration after her death, in the Underworld, retelling her story in hindsight from a state of 'bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness' (p.1).<sup>8</sup> Her purpose in addressing the reader is quite clear: 'now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making' (p.3). The first statement – 'now that all the others have run out of air' – demonstrates that Atwood's Penelope is fully aware that she is telling her story after, and in response to Odyssean receptions – but also, in a more basic sense, to the *Odyssey* itself. In her introduction a page or so before, Atwood makes explicit reference to what she sees as the canonical status of the *Odyssey*, the 'official version' that 'gained ground' (p.2) to instate itself into the canon. As we will see, Atwood's presentation of a single 'version' of the *Odyssey* is – given the *Odyssey*'s multiform textual history from oral performance to written (and transmitted/emended) text – not quite as straightforward as it first appears.<sup>9</sup> But at the opening of *The Penelopiad*, with its self-conscious beginning at

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8. See Collins 2006: 59, Howells 2008: 6-8. That Penelope is in the Underworld is, as Suzuki aptly points out, a reference to Odysseus' *katabasis* in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* (Suzuki 2007: 269).

9. The bibliography on the textual history of the Homeric epics is vast; excellent overviews are provided by Graziosi 2002, Jensen 2011 and Nagy 1996; Nagy's emphasis on the 'multiformity' of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is particularly useful here (Nagy 1996: 107-52).

the end, the Odyssean epic is (initially, at any rate) presented as a certain, fixed, finished entity. The present of Penelope's narration, after her death, and after the canonising of the Odyssean text, thus appears as a representation of Atwood's post-classical reception and reinterpretation of the Odyssean original, and Penelope's characteristic patience – 'hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited...?' (pp.2–3) – morphs into a metaliterary symbol of the gap between the original text and the current reinterpretation. The very first sentence of the novel – '*now that I'm dead I know everything*' – reinforces the impression of Penelope's (and Atwood's) relationship to a fixed and pre-defined text, showcasing a Penelope who, in contrast to the often-noted ambiguities of her characterisation in the *Odyssey*,<sup>10</sup> does indeed know how the story will end, precisely because it *has already* ended. Atwood's novel begins at a point at which the ending is already, by definition, pre-determined, both in that the character of Penelope is figured as already dead (the ultimate τέλος θανάτου, or 'end of death,' *Od.* 5.326), and in that the tradition of the 'official version' of the *Odyssey*

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10. Richard Heitman points out that the supposed 'inconsistencies' in Penelope's characterisation tend to be written off, either by analytic critics who suggest that the 'serious illogicality [of book 19] supports the probability that an earlier version ... has been extensively but inadequately remodeled by the large-scale composer,' or by oralists who adduce oral composition to suggest that such 'mistakes' 'flow naturally from the difficulties of oral composition and from the singer's continual need to vary his song' (Heitman 2005: 4). Other scholars have attempted to reconcile these differences by positing an earlier recognition of Odysseus (Harsh 1950, Vlahos 2007, on which see Reece 2011); adducing feminist approaches to question the poem's androcentric view (Clayton 2004, Doherty 1995, Murnaghan 2009); placing a postmodernist focus on Penelope's indeterminacy (Felson 1994, Katz 1991, Zeitlin 1995); emphasising Penelope's similarity to Odysseus (Winkler 1990), or her moral agency as a character (Foley 1995); or providing a neo-analytic reading of other potential oral plots contained in her several options (Reece 2011). For a longer treatment of the various scholarly approaches to the Penelope problem, see Doherty 1995: 31-64.

(as Atwood puts it) is already known. Reception of the classical past, in this scenario, thus becomes, quite literally, a ‘post-script’ – something written after the fact.

So how is reception possible within such a static framework? What space is left for interpretation? There are a plurality of responses to these questions that could, and have, been made; I will focus here on two of them. The first has already been outlined above, in Heilbrun’s vision of the feminist attitude to the stories of the past as ‘transform[ing] old tales’ to ‘make new lives’ (1990: 109). A second answer, however, lies in a reassessment of the perceived ‘fixity’ of the original text – an approach espoused by Atwood herself in an essay written in 2005 for *Publisher’s Weekly* in the wake of the publication of *The Penelopiad*:

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.<sup>11</sup>

Lorna Hardwick aptly suggests that there are certain ‘faultlines’ or ‘“fuzzy connections” between ancient and modern, that is, relationships, chronologies, and patterns of meaning that do not have settled criteria across all examples of transmission and mediation’ (2007: 49) and that it is a particular quality of ‘literary practices’ (that is, fictional re-interpretations of ancient texts) to be able to ‘work across these’ (p.51). Similarly, from a theoretical standpoint, Hans Robert Jauss, one of the most influential voices in reception

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11. On Atwood’s mythic revisioning, see Wilson 2000.

theory, argued that ‘the very history of effects and the interpretation of an event or work of the past enables us to understand it as a plurality of meanings that was not yet perceivable to its contemporaries’ (2001: 7).<sup>12</sup> The often-noted inconsistencies in Penelope’s characterisation in the *Odyssey* – seemingly faithful to Odysseus and recognising him as the beggar, and at the same time encouraging the suitors and putting off the recognition, as for example in the famous passage at *Od.* 18.158-168 where a double determination is given to Penelope’s descent to the suitors<sup>13</sup> – make her a particularly good vehicle for such a vision of reception. As Atwood herself writes in her introduction to *The Penelopiad*, ‘the story as told in the *Odyssey* doesn’t hold water; there are too many inconsistencies’ (p.xv). These ‘inconsistencies’ in Penelope’s characterisation in the *Odyssey*, I would suggest, provide a unique opening into which receivers of the *Odyssey* can write the possibility of different endings, different plots.<sup>14</sup> Describing her impetus for writing *The Penelopiad*,

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12. See n.2 above.

13. τῆ δ’ ἄρ’ ἐπὶ φρεσὶ θῆκε θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη, / κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρονι Πηνελοπιείη, / μνηστήρεσσι φανῆναι, ὅπως πετάσειε μάλιστα / θυμὸν μνηστήρων ἰδὲ τιμήσσεια γένοιτο / μᾶλλον πρὸς πόσιός τε καὶ υἱέος ἢ πάρος ἦεν (‘the goddess, grey-eyed Athena, then put a desire in the heart of the daughter of Icarus, prudent Penelope, to show herself to the suitors, so that she might flutter their hearts and be more honoured than before in the eyes of her husband and son,’ 18.158-162). Note that there is controversy here over whether the ὅπως clause refers to Athena or Penelope; see Byre 1988: 160, Emlyn-Jones 1984: 10, Harsh 1950: 7. All translations are mine unless otherwise acknowledged.

14. Howells, in her important article on Penelope as narrator in *The Penelopiad*, sees the ‘inconsistencies’ in Homer’s text as initiated by the contrasting gender stereotypes implicit in assumptions about women ‘as either submissive and domestic, or as duplicitous schemers and *femmes fatales*’ (Howells 2008: 9), whereas I locate it in the ambiguity of Penelope’s characterisation in the *Odyssey* itself.

Atwood (2005b) states that it ‘allowed me not only to revisit an ancient and powerful tale, but to explore a few dark alleyways in the story that have always intrigued me.’ Atwood’s reference to ‘dark alleyways’ – similar to Hardwick’s ‘faultlines’ – with the metaliterary metaphor of the road connecting to the Homeric οἴμη or ‘path of song,’<sup>15</sup> thus points directly to the attraction and openness to interpretation provided by Penelope’s ambiguous presentation in the *Odyssey*.

Atwood’s novelistic reworking of the *Odyssey* provides an overt engagement with the potential for identifying and working across faultlines in the Odyssean narrative through alternative female viewpoints from the start, in that it is named after her eponymous heroine, Penelope. The title, *The Penelopiad*, directly imitates the formation of the title of the *Odyssey* after Odysseus, stating quite unambiguously that this is the story of Penelope.<sup>16</sup> It is, in other words, the ‘herstory’ of the *Odyssey*;<sup>17</sup> but it is also, at the same time, an exposition of precisely those ‘inconsistencies’ of plot and characterisation in regards to Penelope which have occupied so many scholars. As Atwood envisions it, Penelope, as both revisionist feminist *and* revisionist narratologist (that is to say, a commentator on issues of plot, narrative, and authorial voice), is determined to redress the wrongs done to her in the subsequent retellings of her story, and so takes it upon herself to ‘do a little story-making ... now that all the others have run out of air’ (p.3). The perception

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15. See Ford 1994: 42 n.78 and Nagy 1996: 63 n.20.

16. Susanna Braund notes that Atwood’s choice ‘impl[ies] that an ancient Greek heroine like Penelope has just as much right to have her story told as any ancient Greek hero such as Achilles or Odysseus or Theseus’ (2012: 203).

17. On the term ‘herstory’ see Spongberg 2002: 185, and also Forfreedom 1973 and Johansson 1976.

with which we started, that post-classical literature is always pre-determined by its foreknowledge of endings, as symbolised in Penelope's opening statement, is instantly undercut by the sentences that follow: '*Now that I'm dead I know everything*. This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true' (p.1). It is by espousing Penelope's view, then, by refusing her full knowledge of the plot and by exploiting those apparent inconsistencies in the Odyssean narrative, that a space is created in which a new Penelope can be formed. This is not, as Shannon Carpenter Collins (2006: 61) would have it, a tale that deals in truth; it is, in fact, precisely in its exploration of narrative inconsistency that deeper insights about the nature of texts and their recomposition in reception emerge.

The disjunction between the opening statement of Penelope's full knowledge and its contradiction in the following sentences sets up a contrast and incongruity which operates throughout *The Penelopiad*. On the one hand, we have the Penelope of the 'official version' of the *Odyssey*, as Atwood puts it (p.2), who is looking back on the *Odyssey* with perfect knowledge of a complete and canonised text. On the other, undercutting the voice of the Odyssean narrator, we are given the shadow of the new, postmodern Penelope of *The Penelopiad*, who is troubled by her lack of knowledge, separated, disjointed, exploiting the difficulties within the text.<sup>18</sup> The Penelope of the 'official version' is faithfully presented by the narrator in summary at the opening (pp.2-3):

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18. Although Atwood (in an unpublished interview with Deborah Weiner and Cristina Bacchilega in 1987 cited at Ingersoll 1991: 17 n.1) denies the classification of her work as postmodern, many critics have noted a distinct postmodern strain that runs throughout her work: see Braund 2012: 206, Deer 1994: 110-129, Hutcheon 1988: 138-159, Ingersoll 1991, Palmer 1995. My observations are in contrast to Collins' argument,

Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? ...

Of course I had inklings, about [Odysseus'] slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his – how can I put this? – his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep. I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages.

On the surface of the text, the Penelope of *The Penelopiad* is perfectly in line with (one view of) her portrayal in the *Odyssey*: the first of the two roles granted her by Zeitlin, that of the faithful wife. She describes her susceptibility to tears – 'after such excursions I would retire to my room and dissolve in floods of tears. (Excessive weeping, I might as well tell you now, is a handicap of the Naiad-born. I spent at least a quarter of my earthly life crying my eyes out...)' (p.10) – a motif which recurs throughout the *Odyssey*.<sup>19</sup> She describes her

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who locates the subversive retelling of *The Penelopiad* entirely in the voice of the maids (Collins 2006: 58-9).

19. See, for example, *Od.* 16.38-9, οἷζυραὶ δὲ οἱ αἰεὶ / φθίνουσιν νύκτες τε καὶ ἡμέατα δάκρυ χεοῦση ('the nights and days wear on endlessly for her in lamentation, shedding tears').

‘cleverness’ (p.29), a central characteristic of the *Odyssey*’s περίφρων Πηνελόπεια (‘prudent Penelope’). She defends her recognition of Odysseus in the beggar from the very first, playing into the view put forward by Harsh (1950), implying that her actions were entirely aimed towards her reunion with Odysseus:

The songs claim that the arrival of Odysseus and my decision to set the test of the bow and axes coincided by accident – or by divine plan, which was our way of putting it then. Now you’ve heard the plain truth. I knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this archery trick. I knew that the beggar was Odysseus. There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose. (p.139)<sup>20</sup>

Most significant of all, perhaps, however, is her defence of her fidelity to Odysseus.

At this point I feel I must address the various items of slanderous gossip that have been going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years. These stories are completely untrue. (p.143)

Penelope goes on to enumerate the ‘charges’ against her: the allegations that she slept with Amphinomus, and the suggestion that she slept with *all* the suitors. The evidence against her which she refutes is threefold: Anticleia’s silence to Odysseus in the Underworld, her

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20. See Suzuki 2007: 269-70. Note that Suzuki mistakenly identifies this as a nod to the feminist critical position, rather than as Penelope’s attempted emendation of the text of the *Odyssey* (‘the songs claim...’); as we have seen above, most contemporary feminist critics tend to emphasise Penelope’s multiplicity and ambivalence.

leniency towards the maids, and Odysseus' failure to reveal himself to her as soon as he returned (the suggestion is that he mistrusted her, and therefore wanted to be sure of her fidelity before revealing his identity). At one point, she even goes so far as to comment directly on the ambiguous passage at *Od.* 18.158-168, mentioned above, where (on one reading) Penelope appears to declare her wish both to entice the suitors and win honour in her husband's eyes.<sup>21</sup> But Atwood also adds in a further crucial piece of information. At 18.281-283, just after Penelope descends from her chamber, the poet explicitly states that Odysseus, present in the hall disguised as a beggar to see and hear Penelope's descent, 'rejoiced because she drew from them gifts and charmed their hearts with winning words' (γῆθησεν ... / οὔνεκα τῶν μὲν δῶρα παρέλκετο, θέλγε δὲ θυμὸν / μελιχίους ἐπέεσσι). In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood's Penelope states, 'I used my supposed encouragement to extract expensive gifts from them – scant return for everything they'd eaten and wasted – and I draw your attention to the fact that Odysseus himself witnessed and approved of my action' (p.144). Atwood here adduces Odysseus' subsequent judgement of Penelope's actions as he writes her into his plot of patience and fidelity, and uses this to re-inscribe Penelope's fidelity and good intentions back upon the contested passage earlier in book 18 – in just the same manner, in other words, as a backwards-read model of reception.

There is a different, and perhaps even more productive, way of reading this passage, however. Atwood's Penelope's response to the *Odyssey* here is, I would argue, not only retrospective (to borrow Porter's term again), but also *corrective*. By asserting her fidelity in this chapter, Penelope aligns herself with the final judgement of her conduct in

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21. See n.13 above.

the *Odyssey* as given by Agamemnon, ὡς εἶ μέμνητ' Ὀδυσῆος, / ἀνδρὸς κουριδίου ('since she remembered Odysseus well, her wedded husband', *Od.* 24.195).<sup>22</sup> And it is not just marital fidelity that is at stake. In the three-page chapter of *The Penelopiad*, 'Slandering Gossip', which constitutes Penelope's defence, Atwood has Penelope speak in a number of distinctly metaliterary terms. Each refutation is prefaced by a literary reference: 'The songs say...' (p.143), 'the more outrageous versions', 'such a monstrous tale', 'some songs aren't worth the breath expended on them', 'various commentators have cited' (p.144) – all suggesting an underlying subtext to Penelope's defence: namely, that she is engaged, not only in defending the truth of her story, but also in *emending the text of the Odyssey to the correct edition*. The reference to commentators is particularly striking, with its semantic ambiguity between 'reporter' and 'emender of text', hearkening back to the long-standing tradition of commentaries on Homer which began in Alexandria and which subsequently sparked centuries of text over the 'correct' version of Homer<sup>23</sup> – and it also, of course, looks back to and complicates the 'official version' of the *Odyssey* alluded to on p.2. In this sense, then, Penelope's assertions of her fidelity to Odysseus are not simply expressions of the marital bond: they are also narratological claims to her textual fidelity to the *Odyssey*.

But as we have seen, the narrative of the *Odyssey* is much more complicated than the text of the 'official version', given both its complex history of transmission and emendation, and the faultlines in the text and its reception which allow multiple readings of Penelope's 'two possible roles' (Zeitlin 1981: 206). And in fact, throughout *The Penelopiad*,

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22. On Penelope and memory, see Mueller 2007.

23. See n.9 above. For an introduction to the Homeric scholia, see Dickey 2007: 18-27.

Penelope's assertions of fidelity, not only to Odysseus, but to the *Odyssey* itself, are consistently undermined and disrupted by Penelope's propensity for exaggeration, acting, and lies.<sup>24</sup> 'Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better', she admits. 'So much whispering goes on ... that sometimes it's hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside of your own head' (p.8). When Telemachus returns from the journey she 'already knew about' (p.122), or Odysseus arrives in the palace disguised as a beggar, she 'didn't let on [she] knew' (p.137), but acts a perfect part of duplicity, priding herself in her ability to conceal what she knows. She describes her longing for her husband to Odysseus-beggar 'as he would be more inclined to believe it' (p.138) if he thinks she thinks he is a beggar, and determinedly holds herself off from Odysseus, since 'the hardness of my heart ... would reassure Odysseus ... I hadn't been throwing myself into the arms of every man who'd turned up claiming to be him' (p.170). Yet it begs the question: if Penelope *had* been faithful, why would she have needed to act the part of innocence and hard-heartedness? Her assertions above that 'these stories [about her infidelity] are completely untrue' are somewhat undermined by her pride in her part-playing with Odysseus.

It is at this point that the tears in the seams of the Odyssean narrative start to become apparent. Penelope's ambivalence in the text of the *Odyssey*, encapsulated at *Od.* 18.158-168, begins to come into question as Penelope's tale-telling in *The Penelopiad* both narrates the Odyssean story and subtly undermines it. The close connection between lying and storytelling in the *Odyssey*, symbolised most particularly by Odysseus' Cretan Tales

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24. On Penelope's untrustworthiness as a narrator, see Howells 2008: 11-12.

(or Lies), is particularly salient here.<sup>25</sup> Both Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Penelope in *The Penelopiad* are crafting tales that present, on the surface, a plot of faithful reunion between husband and wife, whereas infidelity and lies are in fact – explicitly for Odysseus, with his liaisons with Calypso and Circe; implicitly hinted upon in *The Penelopiad* by Penelope’s anxious assertions of her fidelity – the ugly truth.<sup>26</sup> As she puts it at the close of the novel, in Atwood’s rendering of Penelope and Odysseus’ famous reunion: ‘The two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other’ (p.173).<sup>27</sup> Atwood’s characterisation of Penelope as a liar/storyteller thus creates her as a bard-figure, first emending the Odyssean text, then telling her own story across the faultlines of the *Odyssey* and its reception to re-create a new and competing text. In effect, she is exploiting the possibilities latent in the Odyssean text to create a poem of her own.

Penelope’s hinted-upon propensity to lie, to undercut the narrative of the *Odyssey* with a vision of what might have been, is magnified by the other, competing oral narrators of *The Penelopiad*, the chorus of maids, who intersperse Penelope’s narrative with songs,

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25. On Odysseus’ Cretan Tales, and the link between lying and story-telling in the *Odyssey*, see Haft 1984, Trahman 1952 and Walcot 1977.

26. Compare the drama of the maids, ‘The Perils of Penelope’, where one of the maids personifying Penelope exclaims: ‘While he [Odysseus] was pleasuring every nymph and beauty, / Did he think I’d do nothing but my duty? / While every girl and goddess he was praising, / Did he assume I’d dry up like a raisin?’ (p.149).

27. See Collins 2006: 60-1. It is worth noting here that, in *Odyssey* 23, Odysseus’ version of the *Odyssey* which he tells Penelope is heavily edited, most significantly in regards to his sexual infidelities: see Katz 1991: 189 and Thalmann 1984: 162, 231-232.

chants, dances, lectures, and even a court scene, functioning as a form of tragic chorus.<sup>28</sup> Their competing, mostly sung oral poetics creates an oral *agon* in contrast to Penelope's prose, 'transform[ing] *The Penelopiad* into a polyphonic narrative where their dissident voices counter the authenticity of Penelope's confession' (Howells 2008: 12).<sup>29</sup> Penelope, in the main body of the narrative, continually emphasises her love of the maids:

The male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones, not without permission. This could be a tricky issue. They sometimes fell in love, became jealous, just like their betters, which could cause a lot of trouble. If that sort of thing got out of hand I naturally had to sell them. But if a pretty child was born of these couplings, I would often keep it and rear it myself, teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant. Perhaps I indulged some of these children too much. (pp.87–8)

At first glance, this paragraph seems to describe nothing less than a benevolent attitude towards her slaves. But on a second reading, the undercurrent of ambiguity and lies which runs beneath Penelope's voice in *The Penelopiad* comes through. The disparaging comments about the slaves sometimes attempting to emulate their 'betters'; the implication that she only keeps good-looking slaves, whilst selling the rest; and her use of the neuter 'it' to describe them – all serve to make her voice and her assertions of love for her maids deeply and unsettlingly problematic.

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28. Described as 'a chanting and singing Chorus' (p.xv); see Braund 2012: 202 and Suzuki 2007: 272.

29. See also Collins 2006: 59.

This undercurrent to her attitude to the maids is opened up and explored by their own allegations in the songs and ditties that intersperse Penelope's narrative. Their claim is nothing less than that it was Penelope's request of them to spy upon the suitors which ultimately led to their rape and death at the hands of Odysseus. Whilst Penelope presents it as a surprise and the cause of much emotion (pp.159–61), the maids have another version to give. In a play they present called 'The Perils of Penelope' (which, appositely, follows on the heels of Penelope's assertions of her sexual fidelity analysed above), the maids describe Penelope's promiscuity in shameless detail (pp.147–8):

As we approach the climax, grim and gory,  
Let us just say: There is another story.  
Or several, as befits the goddess Rumour,  
Who's sometimes in a good, or else bad, humour.  
Word has it that Penelope the Prissy  
Was – when it came to sex – no shrinking sissy!  
Some said with Amphinomus she was sleeping.  
Masking her lust with gales of moans and weeping;  
Others, that each and every brisk contender  
By turns did have the fortune to upend her,  
By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan  
Was then conceived, or so the fable ran.  
The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain –  
But let us take a peek behind the curtain!

As the only ones who were ‘privy to [her] every lawless thrill’ (p.150), they claim, Penelope and Eurycleia decided to ‘stop their mouths by sending them to Hades ... And [Penelope] in fame a model wife shall rest – All husbands will look on, and think him blessed!’ (p.151) The reference to Penelope’s ‘fame’ is an unmistakable allusion to Agamemnon’s description of Penelope’s κλέος at *Od.* 24.192-198, the glory that is created and transmitted through poetry.<sup>30</sup> Penelope’s self-preservation as the ‘model wife’ in the ‘official version’ of the *Odyssey* thus rests entirely on the deaths of the maids, whose untold, silenced story is resurrected in *The Penelopiad* to accuse Penelope at last.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that the duality of Penelope’s explicit presentation in *The Penelopiad*, as opposed to the subtext that runs beneath the surface of the text, is represented visually in the cover of the 2005 Canongate edition: Penelope is drawn in outline on the front – suggesting the ‘official version’ – while the hanged maids are depicted on the back, as the subtext or alternative version of the story. Even more interestingly, perhaps, the rope on which they are being hanged is a continuation of the thread of Penelope’s hair and the text of the title, suggesting

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30. As Nagy has pointed out, κλέος, cognate with κλύω, can refer to encomiastic narrative, i.e. epic poetry, as the vehicle of fame: Nagy 1974: 231-55 and Nagy 1999: 16. See also Katz 1991: 6.

31. Yet, it is important to note, this is not only a literary commentary on the textual formation of the *Odyssey*: it is also a question of class, and a hierarchy in which the subaltern is silenced. Recent discussions of Atwood’s *Penelopiad* have drawn attention to issues of race and class: see, for example, Staels 2009: 9 and Suzuki 2007: 11-14. The silencing of the maids here plays into Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous commentary on the ‘gendered muting’ of the subaltern (Spivak 2010); see further Shetty & Bellamy 2000. Penelope is a woman, and thus subaltern, but also a queen; the maids, as women *and* as maids, are doubly subaltern.

the power of words to define the way in which the story is told, and the inherent textuality of the ambiguity over the maids' fate.

Penelope's song, then, which on the surface enacts innocent fidelity, patience, loving care of her maids and paradigmatic womanhood, becomes an indictment against her, where the rupturing of her tale through her subtle indications of the instability of the text and the competing oral narrative of the maids introduces an undercurrent of murder, infidelity, and lies.<sup>32</sup> The story of Penelope is so intricately woven in the space between lies and contrasting voices, the *agon* of oral and textual poetics, that, by the end, the gap between her presentation in the *Odyssey* and her portrayal in *The Penelopiad* is so ruptured as to be irreconcilable – a true postmodern retelling. The unravelling of Penelope's web becomes the perfect symbol of the postmodern text, incomplete, disjointed, an unfinished tale which has no easy answers.

Thus the narrative of the *Odyssey* which Atwood's Penelope gives us on the surface – of faithfulness, her obedience to the Odysseus-plot in letting Odysseus reveal himself – is re-formed through her complicity in Odysseus' crime, her lies, her broken voice into a troubling, disjointed *Penelopiad* where Penelope and Odysseus are figured as liminal figures on the boundary between bard and liar. On the one hand, we might read this as a simple recontextualisation of the conspicuously Odyssean trope noted above, the tricky similarity between tale-tellers and liars.<sup>33</sup> But Atwood's unravelling of Penelope's voice serves to take her adaptation of Homer and the classical past one step further. She presents us with nothing less than the problem of the textual tradition itself – the basic

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32. See Howells 2008: 10.

33. See n.25 above.

prepostmodern assumption of the unity and wholeness of the text. Penelope's words become an exploration of what it means to make a narrative, to tell tales, to interpret stories in a tradition that stretches back to 'official versions' which may, themselves, be as problematic and complicated as their receptions. Atwood confronts us with the question of the extent to which we can trust retellings – both the original and its subsequent interpretations. *The Penelopiad* therefore becomes as much a commentary on the problem of narrative and its reception as it is on the role of Penelope within the *Odyssey* – and in this, perhaps, lies its most significant nod to the *Odyssey*.

So what, in the end, is Penelope's song? We have seen that the apparent inconsistencies of Penelope's characterisation in the *Odyssey* construct two potential roles for Penelope, as faithless adulterer or faithful wife waiting for Odysseus' return. In *The Penelopiad*, I suggest, Atwood deliberately undermines Penelope's self-presentation as a faithful wife and benevolent queen through the rupturing of Penelope's voice and the alternation of Penelope's tale with the testimony of the maids she had killed. Put in the position of full knowledge of the textual tradition of the *Odyssey*, the receiving text plays with the Odyssean motif of Penelope's incomplete knowledge to imagine what the story might look like with a Penelope who did know what the ending would be – what a tale might sound like, told by a Penelope who was able to frame her own narrative.

The disruptive power of Penelope's story, then, is clear. Fiction in the female voice has taken it upon itself to use its narrative agency, its powers of voice-assimilation and the manipulation of the instability of the textual tradition and the faultlines across which reception is enacted to explore the ambivalences and complexities of Penelope's character

– and in so doing, it opens up new insights into our reading of the *Odyssey*. It is no coincidence that Atwood's *The Penelopiad* picks up on the complexities of the inconsistencies between Penelope and Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, and turns these into two different and competing voices, each of which undermines the other. When it comes to Penelope, the question is always one of perspective; and that is something that the act of literary reception, with its ability to gaze back across the faultlines to the texts of the past, is particularly poised to exploit.

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