

MUTLIPL NARRATIVES, MUCH POSITIONALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S MYTHOPOEIA IN *THE PENELOPIAD*

Kiran Yadav, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Abstract:

*This paper explores the dynamic trajectory of Greco-Roman mythopoesis through the narrative and ideological content of Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad*. It looks at Atwood's reformulation of cultural narratives and myths by domesticating and familiarizing them. Her revisionist and corrective approach towards the Homeric myths entails a subsequent change in genre which works towards liberating the erstwhile 'formal' conventions and characters.*

Keywords: *Mythopoeia, genre, cultural narratives, identity formation.*

Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out...they double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings. -Atwood

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad: The Myth Of Penelope and Odysseus* appeared in 2005 in the series *The Myths* edited by Karen Armstrong, published by Canongate publishing house, 'with the intention of having one hundred myths retold by the year 2038' (Staels 100). The 'oral' Epics of the Homeric Age (which were only secondarily 'written') thus underwent a generic and semantic transformation in terms of a postmodernist conception of narrative and contemporary ideology. This shift in the epistemological universe does not necessarily imply a condemnation or distortion of the 'primitive' rather, by disclosing the 'primitive' in terms of the 'modern' Atwood exposes the fissures and inconsistencies of both. In Atwood's mythopoeia, 'the object of search is not the primitive...Primitivity in its most relevant sense is a character to be recognized not by its *when* but by its *what*' (Wheelwright, 575) what thus emerges is a system conjoined by both the ages and relevant because 'it stirs even in our minds today some dim response of recognition' (Wheelwright, 575) even if this recognition is to be radically transformed and discovered anew.

Atwood takes cognizance of the fact that Homer's *The Odyssey* is not the only version of the story of Odysseus and Penelope and that there were several myths and epic-cycles in circulation which were told in different ways at different places. Contesting the notion that there can be an 'authentic' version of reality, Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad* presents several versions of narratives but restrains from upholding one over the other.

The hanging of the twelve maids of Penelope, and, Odysseus's meeting with the ghost of Agamemnon in Hades where he [Agamemnon] congratulates Odysseus on his choice of a wife who is patient and wise enough to wait and long for the 'husband of her youth'¹ (Homer, 151) for more than nineteen years (words that have turned Penelope into a literary archetype of a perfect [submissive] womanhood) unlike his own wife Clytemnestra who killed him 'as a man fells an ox at its manger' (Homer, 150) immediately upon his return to Argos after years of the Trojan War, acted as a trigger for Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Here, she undertakes a corrective and feminist revision of Homer's *The Odyssey* and plays around the enduring myth of Penelope so that the Epic adventure now becomes a much more sensational

adventure within the marital home. *The Penelopiad* is a postmodernist novella that works by breaking the barriers between fiction and reality and exposing the inconsistencies of any kind of a linear, temporal segregation between ages. Though Penelope, in consonance with the oral culture, 'begins' with the 'story of her birth' and from the vantage, ostensibly omniscient, point of death she exposes the impossibility of a holistic understanding even in the underworld.

Quite literally, *The Penelopiad* lies at the cross-roads of literary genres². By 'novelization of the epic form'³, Atwood bridges the hierarchical gap between 'high' and 'low' literary genres and liberates it from constraints, tautness and formal conventions of the former thus bringing it closer to human experience and contemporizing and familiarizing it. She uses the postmodernist techniques of parody and burlesque travesty to insinuate a new orientation whereby, not only is the 'high' brought 'low' but, the 'low' is now designated as the contemporary and collectively validated 'high'; novel thus becomes the epic of the modern age. When the universe of myth with its hyperbolic notions of heroism and patriarchal leanings is brought closer to the modern world of indeterminacy and viewed from a feminist lens (and into 'the zone of crude contact' (Bakhtin, 23)), it not only liberates the genre but also the protagonist. It allows Penelope to speak more freely as "who cares about public opinion now" (Atwood, 3)⁴. Thus, the change in genre is also reflective of the change in ideologies and position.

In consonance with Bakhtin's perception of the novel form as constitutive of multi-layered narratives and a 'multi-language consciousness' (Bakhtin, 11), there are two intertwining narratives in the novella - the major narrative of Penelope speaking from the underworld, relating her life, marriage and Odysseus' journey etc. and the minor, yet equally important, narrative of the twelve maids who were unjustly hanged to death by Odysseus. The narrative of the twelve maids continues to incessantly haunt and impinge upon Penelope's narrative, it functions as a lyrical interlude which employs a large range of poetic genres from an idyll to a nursery rhyme and from an anthropology lecture to a 21st century courtroom drama. They reformulate cultural narratives to provide narrative justice while 'positioning myths within quotidian settings and investing them with the unexceptional issues of daily existence' (Kapusanski, 2) and foregrounding 'personal myths'⁵ of the erstwhile tenuous kind.

Penelope herself is very conscious with demarcating the official version of her narrative from the unofficial one i.e. to distinguish between "the slanderous gossips going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years" (112) and 'plausible' events (since there cannot be actual events as Penelope herself contests her narrative by referring to it as a 'fabrication', 'a spinning of [yet another] thread'). If one were to believe the rumours doing the rounds about Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope had an affair with one of the suitors - Antilochus and had slept with all 100 of them and given birth to the great god Pan. Penelope's rumours thus place her on a pedestal and accords her the position of a great woman (as it would be a big deal to give birth to a god). Odysseus's rumours on the other hand massively downplay his epic heroic stature so that the 'plausible' story of Odysseus visiting the 'Land of the Dead' to consult the spirit of Tiresias becomes 'merely the night spent in a gloomy cave full of bats' (73). Circe is no longer the beautiful goddess who offers immortality to Odysseus rather a high class prostitute worker and Odysseus was simply 'sponging off the Madam' (67), Odysseus's encounter with the one-eyed giant Cyclops deflates to his brawl with a 'one-eyed tavern keeper[...] over non-payment of the bill' (67) and the island of Sirens, crossing past which gained immense *kleos* for Odysseus, now becomes a 'high-class Sicilian knocking shop- the courtesans there were known for their musical talents and their fancy feathered outfits'(73).

Penelope is aware of the duplicity of minstrels who inflate Odysseus's heroism and epic stature in her presence to gain expensive gifts and yet is not much averse to keeping up appearances. Although she saw through Odysseus's disguise as a beggar she, very strategically, decides to keep mum about it as she knew that "he was looking forward to the big revelation scene" (136) and only when "[she had] shed a satisfactory number of tears"(137), so that it would reassure him of her loyalty, that she 'allowed' Odysseus to reveal himself. Such a hidden narrative takes Homer's *The Odyssey* on a completely new tangent as the

agency no longer lies with Odysseus or even the bard alone. Penelope's narrative thus works through a continuous process of demythologization of what was credited to be true and a subsequent *mythologization* of the new and erstwhile tenuous accounts. Thus, the maids enter the mythic universe by exalting themselves as the “companions of Artemis, virginal but deadly moon goddess” (129) with Penelope as the “incarnation of Artemis herself” (131). While this empowers them vis-a-vis their almost inexistent presence in *The Odyssey*, it also functions as a parody of the basic human urge to mythologize events so that everything now reduces itself to “pure symbol and no more real than money” (133). Similarly, the myth of the chaste, patient and loyal Penelope is deconstructed by the maids when they say “Word has it that Penelope the Prissy/ Was when it came to sex- no shrinking sissy!” (116)

Thus, Atwood creates a parody-like version of the official Homeric stories. Her use of parody is in consonance with Hutcheon's definition of postmodern (metafictional) parody as 'repetition with a critical difference' (Hutcheon qtd in Staels, 101). Hutcheon accords a serious function to parody as 'a technique that focuses on inherent limitations of past forms of writing. It underlines the inbuilt historical character of modes of writing in terms of form, style and subject matter' (Staels, 101). In *The Penelopiad*, rather than allowing an external agency to control her narrative and silences, Penelope takes over the job herself and narrates from an ostensibly vantage, all comprehensible point of after-death;

“Now that I am dead, I know everything” (*The Penelopiad*, 1)

However, her narrative exposes the impossibility of such a totality. She, for example, still did not know the ulterior motives of the suitors who persisted in pursuing her despite her being 'quite old'. Similarly, she would never know why Eurycleia wanted to get the maids hanged without asking her permission. Such narratives, contingent upon the genre of their genesis, expose the fissures underlying the layers of apparent lucidity.

Where Penelope confesses that she “never would have hurt them [the maids], not of my own accord” (91) and that they were like sisters working on a shroud, the maids are adamant till the very end to prove the opposite. Their version is that Penelope collaborated with Eurycleia to get them hanged [“Blame it on the maids”] in order to avert the punishment for her promiscuity in her husband's absence. The parody behind how Penelope inspired the 'statue of modesty' too works towards the process of demythologizing. As per her own submission, when her father requested her to stay rather than go with Odysseus to his kingdom, she pulled down the veil because she could not control her laughter at what she believed to be her father's schmaltzy emotions but, her act was very conveniently interpreted as her “being too modest to proclaim in words [her] desire for [her] husband” (41). Thus, *The Penelopiad* works by familiarization, deglamorization and domestication of the erstwhile inaccessible narratives.

'As a true postmodernist narrator, Penelope is aware of the importance of employment in any account and of how positionality would produce a differently embroidered account so that it is “hard to know what to believe” (6)' (Bottez, 50). Odysseus's position as a male hero allows him to construct 'plausible' stories and - 'many people believed that his version of events were the true one [...] even I believed him from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me' (2). The maids' peripheral position in *The Odyssey* bracketed them out of the privilege of story-telling (one of the 'inconsistencies' in *The Odyssey* that Atwood refers to) and it is only when they speak in *The Penelopiad* that we see an uncanny return of the suppressed. Though Penelope refers to Odysseus's stories as the 'nobler versions', in *The Penelopiad*, she, rather than Odysseus, comes out as an 'excellent raconteur'. The one who succeeds in telling likely stories was very likely to be believed. Thus, rather than the 'truth-value', it is the logicity of the narrative and the power that the narrator yields that determines its likeliness to be accepted. Penelope herself says, “The two of us were - by our own admission- proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we toldeach other” (138).

By adjudicating Helen as an appropriate recipient of prospective punishment (albeit, it is never

given to her), Penelope, through her narrative seeks to justify her position vis-a-vis the larger mythical force manipulated by Helen. She starts to “spin [her] web”(3) when she realised that people were turning her into several stories both 'clean and dirty' and not the ones she would like to hear about herself; “[...]how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind I'd prefer to hear about myself...Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself.”(3)

Despite being witty and clever, Penelope always remained inferior to Helen and thus, Atwood introduces a new dimension of jealousy between the two cousins. The psychological onslaught that Penelope had to face (her husband had gone to war for several years and all for Helen's sake) make her want to get Helen whipped for her transgression however, the irony is, “but she didn't. Not that I mind. Not that I minded” (18). Helen's divine beauty seem to have given her a transcendent position where unlike women like Penelope, her 'demand' would never decrease as she gets the benefits of her divine connections (Penelope also mentions the number of calls that Helen gets to visit the world of the living). 'Penelope's focus on Helen's use of cruel words as 'her sting' and her broad use of judicial phrases such as 'aided and abetted' and terms such as 'evidence', 'witnessed' and 'proof' confirm how Penelope is consciously acting as a moral agent and attempting to reckon Helen's past and present, public and personal transgressions'(Kapusanski, 4). Penelope was usually left speechless by Helen's not-so-modest ways and she makes it a point to criticise her squarely when she says “Helen Ruins My Life”(57) and admonishes her coquetry in Hades as “My wittiness, or your bare-naked tits-and-ass bath treat for the dead”(122). Where Homer never criticised Helen directly in *The Odyssey* despite the age's strong patriarchal leanings, Penelope on the other hand demythologises the idealised image of Helen.

The maids' narrative exposes the vulnerability of a particular section of the society to acts of violence which went unpunished and unrecorded. They describe themselves as “we were animals young, to be disposed of at will”(54) whereas Telemachus - who was of the same age as them- had them at his disposal for whatever purposes he required. Atwood uses narrative as a correctional method to bring the maids to justice. Their frequent interruptions within Penelope's narrative - where they cynically refuse to uphold any sympathy or justification that Penelope would give for their murder - culminate as

“It was an act of grudging, it was an act of spite, it was an honour killing [...] We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row”(157)

And thus their collective decision to haunt Odysseus and Penelope, forever. Even the 21st century court of law proves inadequate to serve suitable justice to these maids who 'still' move with their 'twitching feet that don't touch the ground' (153) thereby exposing the biased nature of judicial processes.

Atwood's mythopoeia works by overlapping the cultural narratives of myths with the individuated genre of fictional autobiography. The dead narrator of the now antiquated genre in which she first appeared recounting her still evolving experiences into newer genres after thousands of years is a testimony to the belief that myths can never be stabilized or reduced to a dogma as their definition keeps on changing and they keep on adapting to newer narratives. Thus the fundamental interdependence of myths and narratives also signifies that myths cannot be captured in the linear language of rationality rather, they themselves connote a way of envisaging. In order to understand the Homeric myths in the present context one must, 'with a patient effort of emphatic imagination [be] willing to think [of] ourselves into the primitive milieu, we must renounce, at least temporarily, our all too smug assurance of knowing where fact leaves off and fiction begins'(Wheelwright, 579).

The Penelopiad thus works by deconstructing the near normative assurance and confidence of the author figure in 'creating' characters which s/he believes to be one-dimensional. It presents several versions of the same 'reality' and works towards de-stabilising the 'once' stabilised myths by accommodating them into a different narrative - that of the novel form. Rather than foregrounding

feminine silence and submissiveness, in a rather radical shift, here, the reader never hears a male voice. In *The Penelopiad*, as a refreshing break, the apparent male protagonist is always spoken for and never even spoken to. It is in this sense that the novella becomes a 'contradictory counterpart' to Homer's *The Odyssey*. However, this subversion does not necessarily grant it totality and coherence, the narrator remains as unsure of her narrative as she was and the novella succeeds in praxis what the maids merely claim i.e. it leaves us "[And we leave you] none the wiser" (78).

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2. Smit, B.V.Z. "From Penelope to Winnie Mandela - Women who Waited" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 15.3 (2008): 393-406. Jstor. 08 November 2016.

Footnotes:

1. Homer. *The Odyssey* translated by E.V. Rieu. Penguin Books Ltd., 2003. All quotes refer to this edition.
2. Margaret Atwood herself has written a play by the same name and ideological, narrative content.
3. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* talks about the 'novelization of other genres' through the use of parody and travesty. By this he means that the erstwhile 'formal' genres when novelized, become more free, flexible, linguistically liberated, indeterminate, semantically open-ended and 'come into a living contact with unfinished still evolving contemporary reality'.
4. Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2005. All quotes refer to this edition.
5. Term borrowed from Carl Gustav Jung. 'Personal Myths' essentially refers to an acknowledgement of the roots of ideas in individual experience. For ex. the maids in *The Penelopiad* mythicise themselves by comparing their condition with the twelve maidens of Artemis and see Penelope as an incarnation of Artemis herself.