

From the mouths of “babes”: Multivocalism in Atwood’s *Penelopiad*

Margaret Atwood’s post-modern response to the *Odyssey*, *the Penelopiad*, offers a view of the epic through the words of some of its characters, a method that contrasts with the epic style of the omniscient narrator. By giving the story(ies) to the shades of Penelope and her Maids, Atwood shifts the perspective of the telling of the *Odyssey* from the masculine, heroic angle to that of the feminine, subjective (in the two senses of being subjects and being personal) perspective. These multiple points of view naturally differ, particularly since the central figure, Penelope, is characterized as slippery in speech and her Maids are portrayed as childlike, yet savvy. In their vocalizations, they often contradict one another or make comments that elicit uncertainty as to whose words are more reliable. In fact, Penelope herself is characterized as particularly elusive (perhaps even subtly deceptive) in her speech, just as Odysseus can be, and thus is presented as a narrator of questionable reliability; indeed, Atwood enhances the *homophrosune* that husband and wife enjoy in the *Odyssey* by portraying Penelope’s experiences as parallel to those of Odysseus in several detailed incidents and instances. For example: both Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Penelope in the *Penelopiad* have fraught relationships with family members; are nearly killed in youth; unwittingly make a fatal error that prolongs their separation; fail to protect those in their charge (he, his crew and she, her maids); are held captive by those who desire to marry them; refuse to take a different spouse; employ both deceit and a device over which they have special control in order to deal with the suitors; and tend to test those closest to them. Thus, counter to various critical reviewers (e.g. Simon Goldhill, Caroline Alexander, and Elizabeth Hand) who find Penelope a less than convincing or compelling figure, I argue that Atwood has depicted Penelope as a character completely befitting her wily husband with a result that demonstrates what great literature should do: raise questions and elicit multiple (and at times multivalent) interpretations. In my presentation, I will demonstrate how *the Penelopiad*, through its paralleling of details in the ancient epic and technique of multivocalism, portrays Penelope as a slippery speaker whose tale, like her husband’s, is suspect. As Atwood’s multiple narrators contradict themselves and each other, their contrasting points of view enhance inconclusive aspects in the story of the *Odyssey* and simultaneously call the heroism of Odysseus into question.

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