

Penelope's Autobiography: *homophrosune*, Female Heroism, and Atwoodian Invention
in *the Penelopiad*

In *the Odyssey*, the quality that enables Odysseus and Penelope to maintain their sense of connection through a twenty-year separation is *homophrosune* (Foley, 1985). In *the Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood furnishes a biography of Penelope that enhances the couple's affinity and like-mindedness even as it draws on conflicting mythological traditions. In this paper, I will discuss how Atwood reconstructs elements from ancient accounts, and composes some of her own (charges of "subversive female voices" notwithstanding, Howells 2006), to both enhance the couple's *homophrosune* and portray Penelope as a female version of the hero whose survival is dependent on cleverness and self-sufficiency.

Atwood parallels several of Penelope's experiences from both her childhood and life after her marriage to those of Odysseus in *the Odyssey*. For example, just as the young Odysseus' life was threatened by his grandfather Autolycus during the boar hunt (*Ody.* 19.390-475), so too was Penelope's life threatened by her father Icarius when he tossed her into the sea (*Pen.* 7-10). In having Icarius attempt to dispense with Penelope as a child in reaction to the prophecy that she would weave his shroud, Atwood intertwines a situation from Homer (Penelope weaving Laertes' shroud) with a tradition that Odysseus himself would be killed by his child (Hyginus 127; Proclus F, Apollodorus Epi. 7.36). Atwood cleverly disguises her invention by suggesting that Icarius misheard the oracle (*Pen.* 8); misunderstood prophecies abound in ancient myths. Penelope's rescue by some ducks (*Pen.* 9) furnishes an interesting parallel to Odysseus' rescue from the sea by Leucothea (*Ody.* 5.333ff.). Significantly, Penelope herself avers that the two experiences contribute to their *homophrosune*: "Had they known where the boar was hiding out, had they led him into a trap?....I liked to think so. I liked to think I had something in common

with my husband: both of us had almost been destroyed in our youth by family members. All the more reason that we should stick together and not be too quick to trust others” (*Pen.* 47). The Atwoodian invention of Icarus’ attempted filicide is important in that it results in Penelope’s “mistrust of other people’s intentions” (9) as well as her description of herself as “a child who learned early the virtues – if such they are – of self-sufficiency” (11). Atwood’s backstory thus evokes and enhances Penelope’s independence and self-possession in the *Odyssey*. Other parallel experiences include their being held “captive” by suitors (Penelope at home, Odysseus by Calypso), their uses of their talents as ruses (Penelope’s weaving, Odysseus’ bow and axeheads), and failing those in their charge (Penelope, her maids; Odysseus, his crew). The slippery nature of their speech is paramount.

By echoing or alluding to events and circumstances concerning Penelope found not in Homer but in other mythographers (such as traditions of her unfaithfulness to Odysseus during his absence: e.g., Penelope [143] addresses the charge that she slept with Amphinomous, a detail recorded by Apollorodus [Epi. 7.38-40]), Atwood combines multiple traditions, complicating the ethical portrayal of her Penelope to compose a character who offers a clever commentary on the qualities that not only unite this husband and wife, but allow them to survive in challenging circumstances. In addition, she cleverly answers certain questions (such as exactly when Penelope recognizes Odysseus) while allowing other questions to remain open (such as whether or not Penelope actually was unfaithful).

As she employs ancient traditions in her construction of Penelope’s autobiography, Atwood suggests that Penelope is actually more clever and perhaps more heroic than Odysseus. Penelope may describe herself as “plain-Jane Penelope” (37), but she undercuts such false modesty with the acknowledgement of divine lineage on her mother’s side: “Naiads were a dime

a dozen in those days; the place was crawling with them...Nevertheless, it never hurts to be of semi-divine birth.” (7). This puts her in the company of other semi-divine figures such as Achilles, Perseus, Heracles and Helen. Penelope thus adroitly moves from referring to herself as “nothing special” to claiming heroic status. This kind of double-speak pervades Penelope’s entire account; in that, she proves herself to be not merely a match for Odysseus, but even to surpass him. After all, in the *Odyssey*, she inspires him to rage when she lies about their bed (*Ody.* 23.180ff). Through Penelope’s own slippery words, then, Atwood invites us to reevaluate her experiences, her strengths, and her questionable assertions; as *polytropos* as Homer’s Odysseus may have been, Atwood’s Penelope is more so.

Bibliography

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