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## Rereading Penelope's Web

### The Anxieties of Female Authorship in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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The importance of Penelope and the centrality of her weaving to the narrative of Homer's *Odyssey* is often overlooked in dominant critical approaches to the text. Richard Heitman attributes this to the continuing influence of some of the interpretive practices associated with the analytic school and its focus on identifying 'the authentic core of Homeric poems' and questioning the authenticity of post-Homeric additions to the text. The importance of Penelope's actions to the narrative has consistently been undermined by these practices: 'all references to her weaving and unweaving of a shroud for Laertes in order to forestall the suitors are writ small' and 'have done a great deal to marginalize her' (Heitman 2005: 2–3). However, in the last thirty years, a significant amount of feminist criticism has convincingly argued for the centrality of Penelope and her weaving to the plot of the *Odyssey*. Feminist readings of the *Odyssey* often cast Penelope's weaving and unravelling of Laertes' shroud as an act of resistance against the suitors and the threat they pose to her independence and as a signature or allegory for female authorship.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Penelopiad* (2005), Margaret Atwood uses a similar set of critical approaches and interpretive strategies in her feminist reading and rewriting of the *Odyssey*. Through their association with weaving,

<sup>1</sup> For a representative overview of feminist approaches to the *Odyssey*, see Winkler 1990; Heilbrun 1990; Katz 1991; Felson-Rubin 1994; Cohen 1995; Clayton 2004; Heitman 2005.

Atwood recasts Penelope and the twelve maids hanged at the end of the *Odyssey* as literary representations of female authors who present alternative accounts of the *Odyssey*'s events. They question and reject the way in which their characters have been represented and interpreted in androcentric discourse. Penelope's narrative is used to question the veracity of Odysseus' 'official' version of events as depicted in the *Odyssey*.<sup>2</sup> In this representation, Atwood can be seen to play on the oral origins of the androcentric primary epic and on weaving's negative cultural associations with a dubious and inauthentic female oral tradition in order to explore the anxieties of female authorship. Such an approach ultimately creates a new text which resists androcentric discourse by exposing the indeterminacy of meaning in the *Odyssey* and emphasizing the openness of the text to new interpretations and revisions.<sup>3</sup>

The term 'anxieties of female authorship', as used here, derives from feminist critics' attempts to adapt Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) for use in models of female literary history. In Bloom's model of text production, the new author suffers a kind of oedipal anxiety over the extent of the influence of his precursor and attempts to suppress this influence by misreading him, in order to 'clear imaginative space for himself' (Bloom 1973: 5). This model assumes the presence of a male poet in dialogue with a male literary canon and pays no attention to the possibility of a female author. Showalter's use of Bloom's theory in relation to female authors implies that the latter are incapable of identifying with male precursors (1997). In this model of literary history, the 'anxieties of female authorship' stem from the female author's belief that the male dominance of the textual field suggests that she should not be writing at all. Showalter builds her alternative female literary history on the foundations of a theory that is complicit with Bloom's implication

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of undermining and challenging the *Odyssey*'s patriarchal narratives Atwood utilizes a number of different narrative techniques including shifts in focalization, genre change, and multiple conflicting first-person narratives of the same event. On the role of burlesque and parody through genre change, see Howells 2008; Staels 2009; van Zyl Smit 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Braund regards the postmodern indeterminacy of *The Penelopiad* as problematic to Atwood's feminist rewriting practice (Braund 2012: 206). Brown shares this general critical position: while 'the modern reader is likely to view the novel as a contest between an antiquated patriarchal narrative, and a . . . female voice which "corrects" the earlier version', the conflicting narratives of Penelope and her maids mean that it 'can also be read as a battle . . . between the voices of different women' (Brown 2012: 213).

that female authors are 'weak poets', incapable of successfully 'completing' the work of their 'strong' male precursor poets (Bloom 1973: 14). This distinction between male and female types of anxiety regarding the authority to create is also made by Gilbert and Gubar (1984: 45–92). They argue that a female author cannot and does not experience an 'anxiety of influence' in the same way as her male counterpart. A new female author encounters a textual field that is predominantly male and patriarchal. Her attempt to identify with her male precursors forces her recognition 'of her own gender definition':

Thus the 'anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship'—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her. (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 49)

The concept of a 'more primary' anxiety of female authorship is problematic because it does not account for a model of authorship in which a female author does identify with both her male and female predecessors. Nor does it consider the possibility that a female author might identify with a female precursor whose representation of women and female creativity is negative. Using the broader term 'anxieties of female authorship' allows for a wider conceptualization of the potential vectors of influence and their attendant anxieties. It also allows for a closer examination of the intricate ways in which these vectors of influence and anxiety may interact and manifest in women's writing.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood can be seen to stage and interrogate many of the theoretical problems associated with feminist theories of influence and anxiety. Atwood's rewriting is based upon the appropriation of three key aspects of Antinous' account of Penelope's weaving in Book 2 of the *Odyssey*: 1) Penelope's weaving is an act of cunning, trickery, and deception; 2) the intelligence and skill that Penelope has demonstrated are abnormal in a woman and can only be the gift of the goddess Athena; 3) Penelope's material circumstances force her into creating a textile (text) that can never be complete. These are extrapolated into core themes and are used at key points in the narrative of *The Penelopiad* to explore the relationship between the new female author and her male and female predecessors. In doing so, Atwood challenges and confronts the cultural myths of female creative inadequacy and the self-sacrifice required of the female artist, which contribute to the anxieties of female authorship.

The suitors' infringement upon Penelope's household forces a change in the function of Penelope's weaving from the domestic production of cloth to using her skill and creativity to defy and resist the patriarchal law of the state, which demands that since her husband is missing and presumed dead, she must remarry. Under the premise that she must fulfil her final obligations to her late husband's family.

Penelope states that she must finish weaving Laertes' shroud before she chooses a suitor: 'my suitors . . . / go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until / I can finish off this web . . . / this is a shroud for old lord Laertes, . . . / I dread the shame my countrywomen would heap upon me, / . . . if a man of such wealth should lie in state / without a shroud' (*Odyssey* 2.96–103).<sup>4</sup> Antinous then reports Penelope's deception to the Ithacan assembly: 'by day she'd weave at her great and growing web— / by night, . . . / she would unravel all she'd done. Three whole years / she deceived us blind. / . . . one of her women . . . told the truth / and we caught her in the act' (2.105–9). He defends the suitors' occupation of Odysseus' household, and blames Penelope's trickery for the damage and drain on resources they have caused on Odysseus' estate. This is the one substantial instance in the *Odyssey* where Penelope is credited with a clear attempt at resisting the suitors and restoring peace to Ithaca: 'So long as she persists in tormenting us, / quick to exploit the gifts Athena gave her— / a skilled hand for elegant work, a fine mind / and subtle wiles too . . . / So, we will devour your worldly goods and wealth / as long as *she* holds out, . . . / Great renown she wins for herself, no doubt, / great loss for you in treasure' (2.116–26).

It is important to note that Antinous reports Penelope's act of speech within his narrative. Atwood rereads Penelope as a character whose original representation has been undermined by successive acts of interpretation that have failed to pay adequate attention to her voice of resistance and the function of her weaving in the *Odyssey*. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's weaving and speech act become a narrative of resistance to the way in which her character has been represented and interpreted by her male predecessors. In this Atwood can be seen to reject the notion that female authors suffer from a primary anxiety of authorship.

<sup>4</sup> Translations from the *Odyssey* are taken from Fagles 1997. ~~All subsequent references are to this edition and translation.~~

The classical representation of Penelope's weaving as a failure and a deception presents a serious problem for the feminist writer seeking to reinvent her as a female author. Penelope's failed attempt to trick the suitors necessitates the continual unravelling of her work, suggesting a dubious, flawed text that can never be completed. These negative connotations are inevitably carried over in Atwood's use of the metaphor of textile as text and must be challenged in order to present Penelope as a positive representation of female authorship.

The final aspect of Atwood's appropriation of Penelope's weaving concerns the way in which Antinous attributes her skill to the influence of Athena. Antinous assumes that Penelope could not have come up with such an elaborate ruse on her own, and that she must have had help from the goddess. Atwood rereads the presence of Athena as a representation of an Author/god predecessor, whose influence Penelope must undermine or reject in order to declare her creative autonomy and the right to tell her own story. This appropriation is used to address the woman writer's anxieties of authorship in relation to her female predecessors.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood uses the negative implications of Penelope's weaving to stage and challenge what Gilbert and Gubar might term Penelope's 'more primary' anxiety of female authorship. Atwood figuratively represents the creative lack and inauthenticity of Penelope's narrative by associating female storytelling with a dubious peasant oral tradition, juxtaposed against the high cultural authority of Odysseus' version of events as depicted in the male written text of the *Odyssey*. However, Penelope repeatedly points to the fact that Odysseus is also a liar and a trickster: 'He was always so plausible. Many people have believed . . . his version of events . . . Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar' (Atwood 2006: 2).<sup>5</sup> The only difference between his storytelling and that of Penelope and her maids is that everyone believes his lies, whereas everyone suspects Penelope's narrative to be a deception. Atwood rejects the notion of the female author's creative lack, by disassociating Penelope from the tradition of peasant orality and presenting her as the aristocratic author of a written text. Atwood's Penelope is a disembodied shade who does not have the

<sup>5</sup> All in-text references of *The Penelopiad* refer to the 2006 paperback edition.

ability to speak (1), thus associating the spinning of her thread with the creation of a written text:

it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work up to it: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children—folks with time on their hands. Once, people would have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel—there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts—but who cares about public opinion now? . . . So I'll spin a thread of my own. (3–4)

Through the use of genre change in successive chapters, Atwood further collapses the dichotomy between the authority of the written word and the inauthenticity of orality by pointing to the fact that the *Odyssey* is a primary epic. In Atwood's refiguration of Penelope and Odysseus as trickster-storytellers, the representation of male and female creativity is brought to equal status not by conveying a sense of authority onto her female-storytelling characters, but by creating a representation of male storytelling that is equally inauthentic.

It is important to note that there is no concrete reference to written language in the Homeric epics.<sup>6</sup> Neither Penelope nor Odysseus actually writes texts in the *Odyssey*. However, if we read Penelope's weaving as metaphor for her creation of a written text it is possible to interpret Penelope as Atwood's representation of a female author, who writes her secondary epic in response to the stories that male characters (such as Odysseus and Agamemnon) tell about her in the primary epic of the *Odyssey*. Using this configuration, it is possible to read Atwood's Penelope as a female author who does not suffer from a primary anxiety of authorship because she is able to identify with the representation of male storytellers in her source text. Atwood's Penelope may be said to identify with Odysseus as a male predecessor who is depicted in her source text as a master of deception whose storytelling has been extremely successful despite the fact that he has no inherent authority to create.

The novel begins with Penelope's first-person italicized statement: '*Now that I'm dead I know everything*' (1). Penelope's death is represented as the

<sup>6</sup> Glaucus' story of Bellerophon's exile does contain a brief reference to the 'murderous signs' inscribed on a 'folded tablet'. This could be interpreted as a coded letter sent by Proteus to his father-in-law, instructing him to kill Bellerophon (*Iliad* 6.198–202). However, the question as to whether this 'constitutes . . . an explicit reference to writing' remains the subject of some debate. See Saïd 2011: 83.

end of her attachment to her female body: 'Since being dead—since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness—I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again' (1). Penelope's lack of a sexualized female body—a state of 'liplessness' and 'breastlessness'—can be read as Atwood's rejection of the notion that a female author suffers from a far more profound anxiety regarding the construction of her authorial identity. Penelope is a disembodied, 'boneless' shade inhabiting the underworld. This is symbolic of the removal of her gendered authorial identity, from the text to a place outside representation.

Penelope might be said to inhabit the words that she is writing but she has no position of authority over them: 'Down here everyone arrives with a sack, like the sacks used to keep the winds in, but each of these sacks is full of words—words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you'. Penelope's sack of words is 'of a reasonable size'. However, most of the words that have been spoken about her 'concern' Odysseus and the extent of her fidelity to him (1–2). If we read this as a metaphor of the literary representation of women, Atwood can be seen to suggest that it is not the lack of female representation that she is seeking to change through her rewriting practice, but the way in which women have been represented. Penelope believes that her reputation has misrepresented her true character. She states that 'some say' that Odysseus' stories have made 'a fool' of her (2). This may be read as Atwood's acknowledgement of the previous feminist criticism and rewriting practices that have attempted to 'recover' Penelope from her maligned position in the *Odyssey*. However, Atwood suggests that few people have ever questioned the authority and authenticity of Odysseus' storytelling.

Penelope objects to her representation in the *Odyssey* as an archetypal loyal wife and paragon of female virtue who has continually been upheld as an example to women: 'Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been?' (2). This alludes to an epigraph to *The Penelopiad* drawn from Book 24 of the *Odyssey* (Atwood 2006: xiv). The shade of Agamemnon praises Penelope's virtue and upholds her as an example to all women, unlike his own wife Clytemnestra:

'Happy Odysseus!  
... —what a fine, faithful wife you won!  
... The fame of her great virtue will never die.  
The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind,  
a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope.  
A far cry from the daughter of Tyndareus, Clytemnestra—  
what outrage she committed, killing the man *she* married once!—  
(*Odyssey* 24.193–200)

The comparison between a virtuous Penelope and a murderously unfaithful Clytemnestra is cut curiously short by Atwood. In *The Penelopiad*, the intertext ends at line 199 where Agamemnon proclaims that songs will be sung in honour of Penelope. Atwood's truncated quotation refuses to uphold the virtue of Penelope as a role model for the proper behaviour of women in the absence of their husbands. Atwood refuses Homer's comparison between a faithful and unfaithful wife, and suggests that to compare Clytemnestra and Penelope is grossly unfair: Penelope's suffering at the hands of the suitors is not comparable to the suffering inflicted on Clytemnestra by her husband. Having suffered the trauma of rape, forced marriage, and the sacrifice of her daughter at the hands of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra had ample provocation. The murder of Agamemnon is not the evil, coldblooded attack that Homer's *Odyssey* suggests.

In the chapter 'A Low Art', Atwood's Penelope confronts Agamemnon's assessment of her character and virtue. Penelope views the songs that Agamemnon promises will be sung about her as a collection of 'edifying legends' that promote suffering and passive endurance as a female virtue. Atwood reduces the perceived permanence and authority of the *Odyssey* by suggesting that it is nothing more than a collection of myths and legends that have been told and retold by a succession of 'singers' and 'yarn spinners' (2). By pointing to the oral origins of the *Odyssey* as a primary epic, Atwood casts doubt on the stability of the text. Myths are inherently open to interpretation and are subject to change and manipulation in each retelling.

Penelope is angry that Agamemnon's story about her continues to be used as a 'stick to beat other women with' and she wants to beg women: '*Don't follow my example, I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours!*' (2). This can be read as Penelope's recognition that she has until now been complicit with a patriarchal representation of herself as a woman whose



art is inextricably attached to her suffering. It is curious to note that Atwood's Penelope does not identify Homer as a male precursor poet. She never mentions Homer by name, and she makes no attempt to contact her creator, or to challenge the creative choices he made in creating her character. This is because Penelope understands her characterization in terms of a legend or myth of femininity that has no specific origins in the imagination of a single author. However, Atwood does associate this 'official' *Odyssey* with the creative 'feminine' voice, influence, and authority of the goddess Athena. This is not as strange as it may first appear: Athena emerges fully formed from the patriarchal godhead and often functions as conduit for Zeus' authority and power. She is also the 'presiding deity' of the *Odyssey*, which has a long and complicated history of being associated 'with the feminine' (Suzuki 2007: 263).<sup>7</sup> Atwood's appropriation of Athena plays on her importance as the presiding patron goddess of the *Odyssey*, and combines Athena's patriarchal authority with the *Odyssey's* association with the feminine. In doing so, Atwood rewrites Athena as a female precursor poet whose text is complicit with patriarchal representation.

When Penelope attempts to speak against her representation she finds that she cannot make herself heard or understood over the patriarchal authority of Homer's *Odyssey*: 'when I try to scream, I sound like an owl' (2), and so she chooses to remain silent most of the time. The simile likening Penelope's voice to that of an owl is undoubtedly an allusion to Athena. This is significant because it is here that Atwood first implies that there is a negative relationship of literary influence between Penelope and Athena. Atwood's Penelope demonstrates a concern that any attempt she makes to tell her own story will simply sound like the voice of Athena. When Penelope does speak it is always in praise of Odysseus: 'I kept my mouth shut; or if I opened it, I sang his praises' (2). Penelope often chooses silence over sounding like her predecessor because to speak like Athena is to be complicit with Agamemnon's assessment of her character and Odysseus' official version of events. It is only Penelope's later rejection of Athena's authority over her text-making that allows her

<sup>7</sup> Suzuki aligns *The Penelopiad* with this critical tradition and argues that the novel was partly inspired by the *Odyssey's* 'representation of the creative process as feminine—as exemplified by Athena's sponsorship of Odysseus... and of Penelope's weaving and unweaving of Laertes's shroud' (2007: 263–4).

to offer an effective challenge to her representation in the ‘official’ male narratives of the *Odyssey*.

Penelope initially finds it difficult to make herself heard and ‘understood’ in our ‘world’. Although Penelope’s disembodiment was earlier used to imply that she is writing her story, Atwood’s use of ‘I have no listeners’ and ‘whisper’, and her repeated use of ‘squeak’ to describe Penelope’s authorial voice as one that is barely audible and might be mistaken for ‘breezes rustling the dry reeds’ (4), suggest an oral text, and the creative inadequacy associated with it in *The Penelopiad*. Atwood’s creation of Penelope’s authorial identity may be seen as problematic. By presenting Penelope as a disembodied shade, Atwood depicts the voice of her female author-character as being so weak that Penelope believes her quest to have her story heard has failed before it really begins. Atwood may be suggesting that the myths of a female creative lack that persist in literary representation are too strong for the feminist author to change by creating one positive representation of female authorship.

However, Penelope is determined to ‘spin a thread’ documenting her experience of the events depicted in Homer’s *Odyssey*, even if nobody will ever hear or read it: ‘I like to see a thing through to the end’ (4). This suggests that while Penelope believes that her writing will be ineffective, she feels that she has an obligation to try. Even if the feminist author cannot change the negative literary representation of female creativity on her own, she can help to promote and propagate positive representations in her work. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood suggests that when female authors produce negative representations of female creativity it can be extremely damaging to their female descendant author’s sense of authorial identity and creative autonomy.

In contrast to the simple technique of undermining the authority of the female author’s male precursors in order to reject dominant male discourses on female creativity, Atwood gives far more space to the discussion and representation of the complexities of the anxieties of authorship experienced by the new female author in relation to her female predecessors. Atwood’s Penelope refuses Athena’s direct authority over her creativity. Atwood alludes to Antinous’ praise of Penelope’s cunning, her keen mind, and her skill in weaving, which he attributes to the influence of Athena: ‘I was nothing special to look at. I was smart though: considering the times, very smart. That seems to be what I was

known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion' (21). Penelope later denies Athena's authority over her art by stating that it was her own idea to invoke Athena and claim her as the source of inspiration for her weaving trick:

I used to say that it was Pallas Athene, goddess of weaving, who'd given me this idea, and perhaps this was true, for all I know; but crediting some god for one's inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as blame if it did not. (112)

Penelope does not entirely discount the possibility that she was inspired by Athena, but she was not consciously aware of it. Read as an allegory of a condition of authorship, Penelope's recognition of Athena's divine influence may be interpreted as her identification with a female precursor, in which she acknowledges a possible debt to her. Atwood's Penelope asserts her creative autonomy by suggesting that she invoked Athena as the inspiration for her weaving because she did not want to be held responsible for the consequences of her undoing of the text. Borrowing the patriarchal authority of Athena made her act of creativity seem like the respectable and pious act of a dutiful wife. The presence of Athena in Antinous' account of Penelope's weaving is transformed from a perceived attempt to undermine her creative autonomy into a conscious attempt on Penelope's part to protect herself and her text from accusations of female creative lack. Reduced from her position as Author/god, Athena becomes part of Penelope's text and enables her writing as an act of resistance against the patriarchal representation of her character as a paragon of female virtue.

It is also important to note that Penelope claims to be the author of part of Antinous' speech. She states that in order to make her ruse appear more convincing she deliberately said 'melancholy things' such as 'This shroud would be a fitter garment for me than for Laertes, wretched that I am, and doomed by the gods to a life that is a living death' (113). Atwood suggests that Penelope's authorial voice is already present in the text, but has been masked by Homer's attribution of her words to a male character. Homer's Antinous speaks for Penelope in order to justify his own actions and to assert the suitors' right to occupy Penelope's household. Atwood refuses to align Penelope with Athena because the goddess's presence in the *Odyssey* enables Antinous to create a male fantasy of female inadequacy that justifies the suitors' desire to possess and

control Penelope. Penelope can be seen to create a new voice for herself that is not complicit with a patriarchal discourse of femininity.

Atwood also compares Penelope's resistance to her representation as a paragon of female virtue with Helen of Troy's eager acceptance of her role as an archetypal seductress in the *Iliad*. Helen is also represented as a weaving woman. In Book 3 of the *Iliad*, Helen weaves a tapestry depicting both armies of the Trojan War engaged in battle and 'struggles . . . suffered all for her' (*Iliad* 3.132–3).<sup>8</sup> This may be read as a metaphor for Helen's acknowledgement and acceptance that she is responsible for having 'authored' or caused the war. Helen's narrative of the Trojan War is accepted by male characters because what she weaves reflects a seductive image of their power and their right to possess her. As with Penelope in the *Odyssey*, this signature of female authorship is juxtaposed against the meeting of an all-male council. Priam sits conversing with his ageing counsellors, who are too old to engage in battle so instead sit and watch the war play out beneath them. The elders talk about Helen's 'terrible', 'ravishing' beauty, and comment that while they understand why men are so willing to go to war over her, it is time to end the 'sorrow' of war and let her return home (*Iliad* 3.156–160). Unlike Penelope, who is absent from Nestor's council and is only spoken of by men, Helen is invited to sit and talk with Priam. She helps him to identify the the Achaean heroes, and tells him stories of their great deeds and family lineages (3.177–243). Priam accepts Helen's stories because he wants to hear from the woman whose unparalleled beauty caused the Trojan War. Helen's text reflects and endorses Priam's version of events.

Atwood rereads this episode as another instance in which a woman's story is only accepted as part of the dominant tradition because it does not challenge dominant patriarchal discourse. Whereas Atwood's Penelope has to reclaim her voice from Antinous' speech at Nestor's council and is very concerned that she will never be able to make herself heard because she must contend with Odysseus' voice and version of events, Helen is represented in *The Penelopiad* as a female author who has always found it very easy to have her voice heard, disseminated, and reproduced in dominant representation.

<sup>8</sup> Translations of the *Iliad* are taken from Fagles (1998). ~~All subsequent references are to this edition and translation.~~

In *The Penelopiad*, Helen and Penelope are both characters who are summoned up out of the underworld by new authors when they are alluded to or written about in the new text. Helen is more often conjured up by these ‘magicians . . . messing around in the dark arts’ and ‘risking’ their ‘souls’ because of her reputation as a seductress, ‘a woman who’d driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames’ (21–2). This is because Helen has cultivated her reputation as a seductress, by making up stories about herself and her exploits that propagate her original representation in the *Iliad*. Helen loves to be written about and has ‘fun’ playing the seductress every time she is reborn into a new text: ‘Then she’ll make a speech about how naughty she’s been and how much uproar she’s been causing and how many men she’s ruined. Empires have fallen because of her, she’s fond of saying’ (186–7). There is no indication in the *Iliad* that Helen’s outpouring of grief, guilt, and shame is not genuine (3.172–6). However, in *The Penelopiad*, Atwood suggests that Helen’s self-loathing speech was nothing more than a seductive pose: a feigned performance of grief and remorse designed to ingratiate herself with Priam. Atwood’s reinterpretation of her character and behaviour amplifies Helen’s complicity with her own myth in *The Penelopiad*. Unlike Helen, Penelope is rarely ‘summoned’ from the underworld. This is because she has consistently fought against the interpretation of her character in the *Odyssey* as a virtuous wife. Penelope does not want to be written about in a new text unless she can be sure that her new ‘life’ would be significantly better than the one she lived in the text of the *Odyssey*: ‘I can see the point, but I don’t want to take the risk. My past life was fraught with many difficulties, but who’s to say the next one wouldn’t be worse?’ (188). Penelope is also unlike Helen in her refusal to become complicit with patriarchal myths regarding her character and female virtue. This contrast is used by Atwood to assert the independence of Penelope’s narrative.

Penelope attempts to disrupt the authority of Helen’s story and rejects her as a female predecessor by pointing to the fact that the tales she tells about her powers of seduction and her ability to destroy empires are based upon a patriarchal myth of femininity that can easily be reinterpreted: “I understand the interpretation of the whole Trojan War episode has changed,” I tell her, to take some wind out of her sails. “Now they think you were just a myth. It was all about trade routes” (187). Helen accuses Penelope of being jealous of her reputation and the ease with

which she can return to the ‘upper world’ (188). The success with which Helen has her narrative accepted and reproduced in dominant representation is not shared by Penelope who remains a disembodied shade, who cannot make herself heard in the ‘upper world’ (the text). Penelope is reporting Helen’s speech, in which the latter believes that Penelope’s attempt to cast doubt on the authority and veracity of her text stems from a recognition of her (Penelope’s) creative inadequacy and her inability to achieve the success and fame of her predecessor. Penelope’s narrative is indicative of her anxiety that her text will never be taken seriously because she refuses to be complicit with patriarchal interpretations of her character.

In spite of this anxiety, Penelope refuses Helen’s offer to take her with her on her next trip to the upper world, or to use Helen as a model for her writing, although this would make it easier for her narrative to be disseminated. She is unwilling to make the compromise of complicity with the dominant interpretation of her character as a paragon of female virtue. Penelope is not attempting to clear an imaginative space for herself by pointing to a mistake that her predecessor has made and attempting to complete her precursor’s failed text. She is rejecting her predecessor’s model of authorship entirely and choosing to write differently, despite her anxiety that what she writes may never be read.

This may suggest that Atwood views her female precursors as harmful to her feminist rewriting practice. In having Penelope reject Athena and Helen as female precursors, Atwood suggests that the fact of an author being female is no guarantee that her text will contain positive representations of women and female authorship. Penelope declares creative autonomy over her narrative by creating a new way of writing that refuses to be complicit with her representation in the *Odyssey*. She then teaches this skill to her maids. Penelope becomes a precursor by rejecting the negative influence and authority of her female precursors. This is further emphasized through Atwood’s representation of Penelope’s relationship with her mother.

In the chapter ‘Waiting’, Penelope states that when Odysseus left for the Trojan War, she found herself overwhelmed by the responsibility of running his estate and keeping control of her household. She believes that she was never prepared for this role as a young girl and suggests that this is the fault of her mother’s poor example: ‘She disliked ordering the slaves about . . . and she had no use at all for weaving and spinning. “Too

many knots. A spider's work. Leave it to Arachne," she'd say' (86). Penelope's ability to weave is presented as the means by which she is able to maintain control of her household and her slaves. This is a rereading of Antinous' account of Penelope's weaving, as an act of resistance that allows her to maintain control over her household.

Penelope's mother speaks of herself as an immortal who has no need to 'hoard' food stores (86). She has no use for weaving and believes that it is beneath her. Penelope's mother also tries to dissuade her daughter from weaving and from teaching her art to her maids. Penelope states that she has to 'learn from scratch' (87) how to run and maintain her household. She achieves this by raising her slaves to be loyal to her and teaching some of her slaves to weave so that they can aid her in her trick of weaving Laertes' shroud. Penelope's ability to weave is directly connected to the running of her household and so Penelope's statement that her mother was a poor example and that she had to teach herself can be read as a rejection of her literary female precursor, an assertion of her own creative autonomy, and a desire to propagate her writing technique by teaching it to new authors:

Though slave garments were coarse, they did fall apart after a while and had to be replaced, so I needed to tell the spinners and the weavers what to make. . . . if a pretty child was born. . . . I would often keep it and rear it myself, teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant. . . . Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, was one of these. (87–8)

Atwood appropriates the minor character of Melantho from the *Odyssey* to represent the maids' voice of resistance against the patriarchal infringement of the female-ruled domestic space of Penelope's household. Melantho is the only maid who is named in the *Odyssey*. She is the insubordinate and ungrateful maid who mocks Odysseus 'shamelessly' for his appearance as a beggar. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus suggests that the maids should be weaving at Penelope's side. He orders Melantho and the other maids to go 'to the room where your queen and mistress waits. / Sit with her there. . . / combing wool in your hands or spinning yarn' (*Odyssey* 18.314–16). The narrator suggests that Melantho's speech is an act of disloyalty to Penelope, who has 'brought her up' and cared for her: 'her heart / felt nothing for all her mistress' anguish now' (18.321–4). In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood refigures Melantho's inadvertent confrontation with Odysseus into an active and conscious act of resistance against

patriarchal control. Atwood uses this in conjunction with Melanthis's association with Penelope's weaving, and the fact that Melanthis was raised by Penelope, to refigure the twelve hanged maids as female authors—who have been taught their voice of resistance by Penelope. However, this giving of a voice of resistance to her twelve maids is then shown to have backfired. After the maids are executed and become, like Penelope, dead authors who write from a position outside of representation, they can observe everything that has been said about them and come to hold Penelope and her weaving partially responsible for their deaths. The maids now use their position in the underworld as an oppositional space from which they contest the *Odyssey*, critical interpretations of their significance, and Penelope's version of events. Like Penelope before them they also reject the authority of their female predecessor and claim the autonomy of their text and their right to their own voices and stories.

Nevertheless, the appropriation of Melanthis's character is problematic and may be seen to damage the coherence of Atwood's rewriting practice. A significant portion of Penelope's narrative is given over to asserting the creative authority and autonomy of the female author. However, Atwood's rewriting of Melanthis, and the use of the maid's voice to represent those of eleven other women, somewhat undermines Atwood's rejection of the discourse of creative inadequacy implicit in many theories of an anxiety of female authorship.

Atwood presents a nuanced and interesting exploration of the contradictions and ideological conflicts that are present in feminist interpretive strategies and the anxieties of female authorship. Atwood consistently suggests that the *Odyssey* is not a static text. Its meaning is dependent upon the socio-historical circumstances into which it is transposed. The *Odyssey*—a foundational text of androcentric thought and its later revisions and interpretations—can be used to speak to and for women and to explore contemporary issues in feminist literary theory.

However, this exploration does cause problems for Atwood's own rewriting practice. Rewriting Penelope as positive representation of female authorship comes to imply a reduction in the status of the male authored-text and representations of male authorship. Staging the relationship between female authors and their male predecessors as one of conflict or as a battle for control over literary representation ill suits



feminist rewriting practices that seek to bring about equality in male and female literary representation.

Moreover, while Atwood presents *The Penelopiad* as the product of a positive creative dialogue with male-authored source texts, the female-authored stories that arise from that dialogue are used to stage the feminist author's quest for creative autonomy as a rejection of her female precursors. The use of mother/goddess figures to stage a negative relationship between the new author and her female predecessors implies that female authors suffer from a negative anxiety of authorship. In these significant respects, *The Penelopiad* may be seen to inadvertently reproduce the very discourse of female creative anxiety and inadequacy that Atwood initially sought to write against.

