

EMERGING VOICES

Unweaving the Shroud: A Feminist Stylistic Analysis of the Chorus of the Maids in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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The *Odyssey* has for long grabbed the attention and imagination of critics, readers and authors around the world. Its popularity and importance as a milestone of classic literature led to endless analyses, discussions and even adaptations. One of the well-known and critically acclaimed adaptations of the *Odyssey* is Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. It is a contemporary parodic revision of the *Odyssey* from a feminist perspective (Rodríguez Salas 2015, 20). It is narrated from a dead Penelope's point of view with the twelve maids as a chorus, commenting on and interacting with Penelope's narration. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope and the maids are entangled in the snares of patriarchy although they belong to different social classes. And upon Odysseus's return, the maids were hanged on the basis of tarnishing Odysseus's honor by indulging in physical pleasure with Penelope's suitors. The association between the maids and the suitors as victims of the egoist patriarchy of Odysseus is shown in the fact that the maids were forced to wipe away the blood and remove the dead bodies of the suitors before they themselves get hanged. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood removes Homer and Odysseus as narrators and replaces them with Penelope as the main narrator and the maids as a chorus. However, Atwood's chorus does not function in the same way the traditional Greek chorus did in classical Greek theatre. This paper uses feminist stylistics as a critical approach to examine how Atwood uses the chorus as a primary space for the maids as subalterns to tell their own version of the events rather than a secondary voice complementing Penelope's narrative. It is a response against the traditional representation of Penelope and the maids. "Traditional" here means both "usual" and "canonized"

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Methodology

This paper follows Sara Mills's definition of and approach to feminist stylistic analysis in her landmark book, *Feminist Stylistics* which was first published by Routledge in 1995. This is because Mills's book provides a sustained yet accessible account of feminist stylistics as a tool for the analysis of texts, whether literary or otherwise. Mills is able to draw a road map for both stylistics, feminist writing, and criticism, and then bring them together in a formula that can be used to explore aspects of texts where gender and power intersect with linguistic representation.

Stylistics is the analysis of literary works at the level of words and sentences using the theoretical models of linguistics (Mills 1995, 3). It developed as a reaction against other modes of literary criticism which sought to locate the meaning of the text outside of it. Stylistics works to explain how the author's linguistic choices shape the meaning of the text. It, therefore, claims to be neutral and objective since the basic theoretical rules of language (for example: sentence structure) are relatively stable and it is how a writer chooses to use language that produces different results. Stylistics is inward-looking and, traditionally, it has not considered the context of a text's creation or its critical reception. The stylistician in the traditional model worked in a formalist manner and has not commented on the text's standing within the canon or considered factors like gender, race, or class in the analysis (7). This is why for the sake of exploring gender dynamics in the text under examination, the present article adopts an analytical method which combines stylistics with feminism namely, feminist stylistics.

Feminism is challenging to encompass in one simple definition because of the various trends within it as a movement or trend in literary criticism. For the sake of convenience, the present study will stick to a rather general description of feminism, with particular emphasis on the concepts of agency and voice. In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (2015), Lois Mcnay devotes a whole chapter to discussing agency where she defines it as "the capacity of a person [...] to intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed, according to some criterion or another, to be independent or relatively autonomous." (2015, 40). However, according to Mcnay, this autonomy is not distributed equally because "some individuals have demonstrably "more" agency than others" which makes agency "always a situated conception, inseparable from an analysis of power." (41). Put simply, a patriarchal context limits women's agency in varying degrees because they are the group with less power, if any. Voice as a critical concept is related to representation and visibility. "To have a voice" is a metaphor for having a space and means to represent oneself -linguistically or otherwise- and to be seen and heard. However, according to Mills, "the language as it is used at present and the resources available within it reveal to us the struggles, both political and moral, over whose voices should be represented and mediated" (1995, 9). Language, then, is a site of conflict over voice, and analyzing texts stylistically reveals whose voices are heard over others and how to create a more balanced scene where all voices are equally represented.

Feminists believe that women are oppressed and treated differently from men, which makes them subject to individual and institutional discrimination, and that society is organized in a way to ensure and secure the benefit of men (Mills 1995, 2). However, feminists are aware that women are not a homogenous group, and that even men do not benefit equally from the system (3). Feminist stylistics, thus, is an appropriate tool for approaching the two texts of interest for the present study because it uses linguistic analysis to explore the underlying messages of a text, especially the ones related to gender representation. Feminist stylistics shows awareness that while gender is outside the text, it plays a significant role in its integral structure. In other words, feminist linguistics traces how language is used in a text to construct a particular gendered identity or describe particular power dynamics related to gender. As such, feminist stylistics is deliberate, and scholars in this case assert their presence, and highlight the political importance of this kind of analysis, whereas the traditional researcher in the field of stylistics prefers to efface his or her presence (29).

Feminists believe that women write in a way that is essentially different from that of men. It is *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. But Mills believes that trying to define feminine writing as "different" implies a criterion against which this writing is a deviation. By default, the criterion will be the masculine writing because it has been prevailing and recognized as the official version for centuries. Thus, trying to distinguish a particular way of writing as womanly further establishes men's writing as the norm. This is why, according to Mills, feminist writing is more about position than style. Rather than simply deciding how to write because they are women, women writers adopt "a range of different positions, depending on their locating of themselves within a predominantly male or female tradition." (Mills 1995, 43). This act of locating or positioning dictates the stylistic choices of the feminist text. This is what the present study seeks to explore: how did Atwood produce a new version of a classical text by placing herself differently within the canon. Atwood decided to parody the text rather than showing its usual reverence which comes with the traditional reading. Mills replaces the concept of the feminine writing with the notion of "female-affiliation" which means that a text can be feminist or sympathetic towards the feminine without having to be written in a style that only women are capable of.

The Penelopiad: Representational Justice For The Maids

The Odyssey, the Greek epic presumably written by Homer around the eighth or seventh century BC, is a sequel to the *Iliad* and starts where the *Iliad* ends. Odysseus's famous horse trick allowed him and his soldiers to sneak into Troy and take it down, thus winning the Trojan War. The journey back home proved challenging for Odysseus because he had to face the wrath of many gods and goddesses. For twenty years after the war, Odysseus was either kept captive on desolate islands or faced the horrors of the open sea. Meanwhile, his wife Penelope had been waiting for him patiently at home. With hardly any news reaching Ithaca

about Odysseus, the word started to spread around that he might be dead. Seeking control over Odysseus's estate and money, suitors flooded Odysseus's home asking for Penelope's hand in marriage. Penelope wanted to remain unmarried and loyal to Odysseus, so she kept delaying her decision about choosing any of the suitors. She used the pretext of weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes as a final act of gratitude for Odysseus's family and household. What must be highlighted is that firstly, Penelope appears briefly at the beginning and the end of the text. Secondly, most of the epic actually focuses on Odysseus's adventures and misfortunes. Thirdly, most of the episodes are narrated by Homer or Odysseus himself while Penelope's point of view is hardly presented.

Margaret Atwood's novella/play *The Penelopiad* is a parody of the *Odyssey*. The etymological origin of "parody" is the Greek *parōidia*, which means "a song sung alongside another" or "a counter song". The original meaning of "parody", then, is a comparison, or rather, a contrast between two works played against each other. The word "parody" later acquired connotations of ridicule. The present article uses "parody" in its original meaning as the juxtaposition of texts through reproduction with the aim of moral evaluation rather than mere ridicule. Irony and laughter can definitely be part of parody, but they are tools of criticism rather than an end in themselves. Linda Hutcheon points out that "there is nothing in the root to suggest the need for this comic effect or ridicule as there is in the *burla* [joke] of burlesque, for instance" (Hutcheon 1978, 202). In fact, some scenes in *The Penelopiad* are quite serious and dark. The primary function of parody in this text is presenting a counter moral position through literary revisit. In this sense, the differences between the original and the parody are designed to present the parodist's comment on the original, not belittle it. For Hutcheon, the effect of modern parody lies in the dramatization of differences – cultural and otherwise - implied in the contrast created by the parodist (204). These differences are what Atwood is highlighting in her parody; the social and cultural setting that allowed murdering the maids to pass without much questioning speaks to an audience vastly different from the contemporary audience. With a work, the size and impact of the *Odyssey*, it is important to point out gender/class biases that cannot pass today as acceptable and in doing so, to achieve a sort of literary or symbolic justice for the overpowered groups in the text. This is how parody becomes a site for resistance. In producing a parody, "the parodist transforms the original text in order to subordinate the parodied point of view" (Rossen-Knill 1997, 728) and places another point of view as the dominant one to comment on incidences of moral, social or literary controversy in the original text.

The Penelopiad is narrated from a dead Penelope's point of view with the twelve maids as a chorus commenting on and interacting with Penelope's narration. With the suitors rioting and asking for a decision, Penelope bought time by weaving her father-in-law's shroud at day and unweaving it at night, with the help of her maids. However, as time passed, the pressure grew on Penelope to provide an answer. Hospitality in the Greek society of that time was highly valued and to mistreat or

dismiss a guest would have damaged Penelope's reputation and caused her more harm than she was trying to avoid. Hence, the only way to prolong a marriage to any of the suitors was through wasting time by keeping them distracted and entertained. The entertainment was through food and sex. The food was handled by the servants or even the suitors themselves, and twelve of the prettiest maids were turned into objects of sexual harassment or even rape for pleasure. When Odysseus finally managed to reach Ithaca, he killed *all* the suitors and *all* maids. This is the moral dilemma that Atwood builds her text on. If the maids are expected to obey the commands for their lady, why were they killed? To what extent is Penelope involved in the patriarchal scheme that objectifies women and facilitates their abuse then blames it on them? Or is Penelope a victim herself?

These questions stem from a feminist reading of the *Odyssey* where the maids and Penelope come out as subalterns, oppressed (in varying ways and degrees) by patriarchy represented first and foremost by Odysseus himself. According to Sara Mills, the focus on a central female character and her relationships with other female characters are features that indicate a "female-affiliated" text (1995, 46). But this could be problematic considering Atwood's recurrent objection to be classified as a feminist writer. In fact, Atwood's stand should not deter a feminist reading of works; the point is to approach them with the proper definition of feminism in mind. What Atwood is rejecting is getting imprisoned in a literary position where she has to treat every female character as a victim and write nothing but defenses of women. This is viable as it prevents feminism from becoming a mere fixed reaction against patriarchy. For Atwood, feminism means treating women as normal human beings capable of both good and evil. Actually, many of Atwood's female characters are evil, including Penelope. The point is not to portray women as angels all the way but to shed better light on their interaction with patriarchy by either reinforcing or resisting it. In a *New York Times* interview in 2017, Atwood was asked if her *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist text. Atwood's response is worth quoting because it shows what feminism means for her:

If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and/or so victimized they are incapable of moral choice, no. If you mean a novel in which women are human beings — with all the variety of character and behavior that implies — and are also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure and plot of the book, then yes. In that sense, many books are “feminist.” (Kalorkoti 2017)

Feminist for Atwood as defined in the previous passage means allowing female characters to be effective and crucial to the narrative. In this sense, describing the *Penelopiad* as a feminist text in this paper does not mean that it is written to defend the women in the *Odyssey*, all and every one of them. It simply means that Atwood zooms in on the community of women who have been extremely vital in shaping the plot of the *Odyssey*, but have been marginalized in and by the canonized narrative

which treats the *Odyssey* as literally a one-man-show. Like any community, some of the members are good and others are evil. It is the moral choice that matters, not gender. So, according to Atwood, being a female character in a feminist work does not by default make the woman a victim. What is meant by calling a work feminist or female-affiliated is that space, the focus it puts on women and the voice it gives them to speak for themselves, whether for or against the cause. This is what Atwood did by making the story about Penelope rather than Odysseus.

Shifting the perspective from the traditional male hero of the epic to his female counterpart allows for a fresh understanding of the events, especially one event: the murder of the maids. Though Penelope is now the narrator and does occasionally win the reader's sympathy, the text is designed to primarily avenge the maids as Atwood "ultimately sacrifices the protagonist's agency in favor of the apparently secondary maids, who steal the novella" (Rodríguez Salas 2015, 20). In this sense, even the word "her" in the title of act 1, scene 1 "Penelope Begins *her* Story" (my italics) becomes ironic; for the story is not hers. Even in terms of structure and organization, the scenes are a sequence of a soliloquy by Penelope, immediately followed by a maids' chorus in a movement similar to poetry slams. Penelope is "spinning a thread of her own" (28) that the maids unspin. In unspinning Penelope's thread, the maids prove to be the true spinners/creators of the feminist narration that exposes both gender-based and class-based oppression. Through their comments and remarks which often contradict Penelope's words, the maids are weaving a shroud for the injustice that has befallen them. Here lies another irony: not only is Odysseus not the hero he is propagated to be, but neither is Penelope the clever weaver of shrouds and schemes of which the original text sings. The maids thus become "the true perpetrators of the Penelopian metaphor" (28). Even the chant "*The Wily Sea Captain*" seems to be about Odysseus, but the real protagonists are the sailors. The maids completely take over the real deconstructive narrative to the point where they perform even the male roles. Here class and gender merge because the sailors are subordinate to Odysseus just like the maids are subordinate to Penelope.

Atwood chose Penelope and not the maids to tell the story only because Penelope has the clue that could have saved the maids' lives. Even though she was drugged and missed the execution event, she remained silent afterwards and chose to turn the page and enjoy a happy ending, no matter how fake. It is ironic that Penelope was shunned in her room and allowed out only after the main event of the execution. Both Penelope and the maids were silenced by Odysseus's presence. Atwood gives Penelope her voice back only to make it clear that Penelope is part of the misery of the maids as she is the one who told Odysseus's nurse, Eurycleia, to report the twelve maids as behaving immorally:

Penelope:

Oh then, dear Nurse, it's really up to you
To save me, and Odysseus' honour too!
Because he sucked at your now-ancient bust,

You are the only one of us he'll trust.
Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal,
Snatched by the Suitors as unlawful spoil,
Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be
The dotting slaves of such a Lord as he!

Eurycleia:

We'll stop their mouths by sending them to Hades –
He'll string them up as grubby wicked ladies! (Atwood 2019, 62)

It is to be noticed that in this encounter, Eurycleia's solution is to silence the maids by getting them killed. Atwood brings both Penelope and the maids from death to reopen this cold case and un-silence the maids. This is why Atwood makes the chorus of the maids immediately echo the conversation:

The Chorus Line, in tap-dance shoes:

Blame it on the maids!
Those naughty little jades!
Hang them high and don't ask why –
Blame it on the maids!
Blame it on the slaves!
The toys of rogues and knaves!
Let them dangle, let them strangle –
Blame it on the slaves!
Blame it on the sluts!
Those poxy little scuts!
We've got the dirt on every skirt –
Blame it on the sluts! (Atwood 2019, 43)

Here, two female characters namely Penelope and Eurycleia are enforcing the patriarchal value system and are participating in plotting an honor crime. They know that, as Shannon Collins observes, "a woman's only way to power [...] is through access to powerful men" (2006, 62). The powerful man in the story is Odysseus. As slaves, the maids do not have access to Odysseus in the sense that while he listens to Penelope and his nurse, he refuses to listen to the maids. The only "voice" uttered by the maids in Odysseus's presence is wailing and weeping, feminine voices of distress and sadness. They were inarticulate in the original version. The maids are parodying the plot by repeating it with even more intense vocabulary – "sluts" repeated twice, "toys"- in contrast to the milder "disloyal", "shameless" and "polluted" by Penelope. The intensity is deliberate on Atwood's part and Rachel Head points out that "[t]hroughout Atwood's story, the intensity of the maids' chorus lines never wavers" (2019, 67). This is to emphasize the moral ugliness and the amount of injustice that has befallen the innocent maids.

At the beginning of the novella/play, Atwood's Penelope seems keen on exposing the "official version" which has been publicized as "an edifying legend" about her being the archetype of the faithful (Atwood 2019, 9). This legend has done more harm than good as it propagated enduring prolonged suffering as a merit in a good woman, particularly a good wife. Penelope says that she wants to scream against that legend in the reader's ears: "I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours!" (2019, 4). The word "scream" invokes a sense of urgency and of a strong revolt and immediately associates narration with having a voice to express oneself. Breaking the narrative illusion and addressing the reader directly means that although she was powerless in the past, Penelope now wants to change the present by warning people against the trap for women in the official version of her story. This is how the text as a feminist revision engages with the classic literary tradition to subvert it. The legend of the faithful wife was propagated by the "singers, the yarn-spinners" (2019, 4). The word "singers" refers to the fact that epics belong to an oral tradition, and by the bards, but the singers are also yarn-spinners. In associating singing with yarn-spinning, Penelope is bringing together the art of narration and the art of spinning and weaving as two sides of a coin. Both writers and yarn-spinners align threads into an organized, structured form, and Penelope is now spinning her own thread: "So I'll spin a thread of my own" (Atwood 2019, 10). Act 1, then, raises expectations in the reader of what follows as Penelope's story.

Act 2, however, is a chorus by the maids. It does not only interrupt Penelope's narration, but also forwards the story to its end when Odysseus returns and kills the maids. The act is entitled "The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme" and the title is significant. In the *Odyssey*, the maids were hanged by a rope extending from one wall to another in Odysseus's yard. The rope is thus associated with violent death. Here in the *Penelopiad*, the rope is associated with jumping and singing; its association with death is violated and reversed. The rope becomes a visual symbol of injustice. In addition, the word "rhyme" links the maid to the "singers, the yarn-spinners" (2019, 4), the narrators who weave stories. So, in act 2, the maids are telling their story, and the story starts with an accusation directed at both Penelope and Odysseus, and meant as a plea for the reader's sympathy:

we are the maids
the ones you killed
the ones you failed

we danced in air
our bare feet twitched
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch
from there to here
you scratched your itch

we did much less
than what you did
you judged us bad

you had the spear
you had the word
at your command

we scrubbed the blood
of our dead
paramours from floors, from chairs

from stairs, from doors,
we knelt in water
while you stared

at our bare feet
it was not fair
you licked our fear

it gave you pleasure
you raised your hand
you watched us fall

we danced on air
the ones you failed
the ones you killed (Atwood 2019, 37)

As seen in these verses, the *Penelopiad* from the beginning is ruthless in its attack on both Odysseus and Penelope for their actions against the helpless maids. Any kind of sympathy with Penelope achieved in act is wiped out, at least shaken, by the maids' description of their souls leaving their bodies: "we danced in air/our bare feet twitched/it was not fair." This description occurs in the original text: "their feet danced for a little, but not long" (Homer 1998, 424). An important change is introduced by Atwood, though: the addition of the comment "it was not fair". The original text focuses on the duration of the twitching not being long- "not long", "only a little- it was not long"- perhaps to give the impression that the maids did not suffer much. With the death of the maids, this episode ends and the injustice of the murder without trial goes unpunished. Atwood invokes the maids from death allowing them to comment on their own murder. The only justice that the maids can have occurs in the world of the dead where, ironically, gendered identities are negated: notice the negation of the word "breast" in describing death as a "state of

bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness". Breasts are a mark of femininity and their absence marks a genderless spirit. With the erasure of the material presence and the gender mark (no bones, no breasts) both the gender-based and the class-based oppression are elevated, and the maids can now confront, condemn, and haunt both Penelope and Odysseus. They face Odysseus with the fact that he is the one who had illicit sexual adventures with "every goddess, queen, and bitch/from there to here" (Atwood 2019, 12). He was still held a hero and was not judged for his behavior. He and Penelope also had the upper hand over them being their master and their lady. Penelope used the maids as a human shield to protect herself from the suitors and Odysseus murdered them without a chance to defend themselves. The maids, thus, intervene in Penelope's narration, by commenting on and revising it to prevent her from "weaving" a shroud for the truth about their life and death. They "unweave" her perspective because it does not acknowledge the whole truth and tends to deceive both self and listeners/readers. The chorus, being in the service of the action through comments or explanations as is the case in Greek theatre, alerts the reader to the fact that two narrative lines will be presented: one by Penelope, and the other one by the chorus of the maids.

In Act 3, Penelope moves on to describe her childhood. The fact that Penelope is of semi-divine birth gave her an advantage denied to the maids. Although, like the maids, she was treated as a worthless being "a dime a dozen" (Atwood 2019, 13), she at least has the status of an aristocrat. The maids then are doubly oppressed; first because of their gender and second because of their low birth in a society where hierarchy was strictly observed. Yet, Penelope's story has become a "stick used to beat other women with" (9) by expecting them to follow her example.

The incidents of Penelope's childhood are cruel and strange. It is ironic that the oracle who is supposed to represent insight is unable to read the future clearly; for her gods "often mumble" (Atwood 2019, 13). There are toxic messages hidden under a sacred, God-sent façade and this is clear in the concise and powerful image of the "Divine Snake" who has spoken into the oracle's ear. Atwood is criticizing the ancient habit of hurting oneself or someone else because of a vague message spoken by a person who cannot even explain it clearly. The oracle saw Penelope in the future weaving a shroud and thought it is for her father. Upon knowing the prophecy, the father tried to kill his daughter before she puts him in a shroud, that is, cause his death and bury him. Thus, Atwood is parodying the Greek tradition of seeking oracles for guidance.

This part shows that weaving in *The Penelopiad* is used both as a metaphor for storytelling and as an actual craft. In its literal meaning, it affected the direction the events of Penelope's life will take. She was almost killed because of a prophecy about a shroud. After she survived, she used weaving as a coping mechanism by pretending to be occupied with it:

It's always an advantage to have something to do with your hands. That way, if someone makes an inappropriate remark, you can pretend you haven't heard it. Then you don't have to answer. (Atwood 2019, 13)

This remark reveals Penelope's personality as one which is not confrontational, and it foreshadows her resorting to weaving to escape the pressure of the suitors. Another personality trait is revealed when Penelope casts doubt on the whole oracle episode. She says it is possible she invented this tale to make herself feel better; to find a reason for her father's cruelty other than his being simply cruel: "but perhaps this shroud-weaving oracle idea of mine is baseless. Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better" (Atwood 2019, 13). The word "perhaps" is repeated twice to emphasize her uncertainty in addition to words like "baseless" and "invented" which indicate hesitation. This presents an important aspect of Penelope's character which is her readiness to fake narratives to make herself feel better. It is possible that Penelope is trying to construct a story where she magnifies her status as a victim and tries to evade her role as a victimizer of the maids. This is why Atwood built the structure of the novella/play as contrasting, slamming scenes, one by Penelope followed by one by the chorus of maids.

In Act 3, which is a quick look at Penelope's childhood, she proclaims that she is the daughter of a careless mother and a superstitious father. Her emotional insecurity and trust issues appear in the thoughts that come to her mind while walking with her father thinking that he might push her off a cliff or bash her to death with a rock. This is the root of her "mistrust of other people's intentions" (Atwood 2019, 9). This is echoed in the nurse's reply to Penelope that her heart "has always been mistrustful" (Wilson 2018, 373) when Penelope did not believe Odysseus's own nurse telling her that he is back home. At this point the reader has gained some knowledge of Penelope and even started to sympathize with her again.

The maids appear right after this incident in act 4 to talk about their childhood: "We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents" (Atwood 2019, 16). The repetition of the word "too" links their story to Penelope's and starts the contrast between them. They were children like Penelope one day and they had the wrong parents too. While Penelope's parents were wrong because they were careless and cruel, the maids' parents were wrong because they were "poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us" (Atwood 2019, 16). Atwood here is showing how being born into poverty or slavery immediately translates into suffering, and perhaps eventually the death of the child. Even with her difficult childhood, Penelope is still more privileged than the maids who are not the children of gods or demi-gods or nymphs or Naiads (16). Penelope is lucky enough to be born into an elite class. In fact, the two classes are linguistically contrasted in the two successive sentences containing words related to upper and lower classes (my italics):

Poor parents, *slave* parents, *peasant* parents, and *serf* parents [...] These parents were not *gods*, they were not *demi-gods*, they were not *nymphs* or *Naiads*. (Atwood 2019, 16)

The key words in Act 4 that are related to the suffering and oppression of slave children in the elite palaces are numerous and significant. Firstly, there are verbs of violence or physical exertion: "we drugged", "we were kicked awake", "we ground the flour", "we ate the leftovers" (Atwood 2019, 16). Secondly, there are the verbs related to emotional abuse: "we were told we were motherless. We were told we were fatherless. We were told we were lazy. We were told we were dirty. We were dirty" (16). At this point, the children internalize the insult and the passive construction "we were told" changes into an active statement "we were dirty". The passive voice in "we were told that we have families" reflects the helplessness of the maids to know the truth of what was being told to them. Unlike Penelope and the rest of the aristocrats who can trace their family tree easily and clearly, the maids do not have access to knowledge even about themselves. Cutting the maids off of their families early in life makes manipulating them easier because they have nowhere else to turn: it is a psychological entrapment parallel to and enforcing their physical entrapment in the house of the master.

The association of these poor, working children with dust is made stronger through the panorama of relationships they had with it as it becomes their "concern", "business", "specialty" and even their "fault": "Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls" (Atwood 2019, 16). Thirdly, Act 4 is also abundant with negatives indicating the high degree of emotional and physical deprivation, the children went through: "*no one* dried our tears", "*no rich gifts*" were given to them, "It did us *no good* to weep, it did us *no good* to say we were in pain" (16). This ultimately led to their "snatching" what they could through subtle gestures and ways (17). Following Mills model of analysis, the use of verbs of violence, the negation of agency through the extensive use of the passive voice and the repeated "no" are linguistic enactments of the subjugation of the subalterns.

So far, the subjugation is class-based. The children are treated badly by their masters. One sentence by the maids, however, is especially important for both the plot itself and this study. While describing the misery of their childhood, the maids say: "If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse" (Atwood 2019, 16). Here enters the gender factor as the maids are degraded to the point where they are not allowed to resist the sexual advances of men around them. Even being pretty which is a virtue in upper classes was taken against those children-turned-into-maids: "If we were pretty children our lives were worse" (16) because they attract more men. At this point, the oppression of the subalterns doubles as both class and gender-based. They are exposed to sexual abuse or even blunt rape and denied the right to resist. The word "nobleman" is repeated twice to show that those male guests had

power over the maids by the mere virtue of their class. The word "nobleman" is actually ironic because there is nothing noble about forced sex. "Nobleman" is used both literally as a class designation and ironically as a critique of the morals of this class. The maids were made available to the men of the house (gender) and to the elite guests (class). This alludes to the maids' verses in Act 2 where they say that Odysseus judged them "bad" and the repetition of "it was not fair". If they could not refuse any sexual advances, how could Odysseus accuse them of ruining his household and betraying him by sleeping with the suitors? In addition, the maids are victims because they deliberately pretended to reciprocate the interest the suitors had in them in order to distract them from Penelope and this is based on Penelope's own orders and plan with the maids. This is why the maids unweave the yarn that Penelope spins. Firstly, Odysseus himself was kept a sex slave by Circe and Calypso and could only escape with the help of the Gods. This is why the maids say "we did much less/than what you did". Odysseus, like the maids, was exposed to forced sex (or so he said) but because of his gender and class he was not judged as a "bad" person.

Secondly, Penelope shows the same ability to scheme and design plans as Odysseus. Through female bonding, she managed to form a work team with her maids to outsmart the suitors by unweaving the shroud at night and entertaining the suitors during the day. This bonding is manifested in describing the maids as becoming "sisters":

They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was they who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years. Though we had to do it carefully, and talk in whispers, these nights had a touch of festivity about them, a touch – even – of hilarity [...] We were almost like sisters (Atwood 2019, 64)

The word "sisters" implies companionship as well as erasure of class differences. Penelope's plan could have saved Ithaca, but it turned into a blood bath when male arrogance and egoism intervened, represented by Odysseus. In addition, there is cruel irony in Penelope telling the maids that what they are doing is actually part of serving their master and the girls' feeling "better".

‘Never mind,’ I said to them. ‘You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they’ll confide in you and we’ll know their plans. It’s one way of serving your master, and he’ll be very pleased with you when he comes home.’ That made them feel better. (Atwood 2019, 65).

The innocence, loyalty and suffering of the maids make their killing the more appalling. The maids become "scapegoats for the sake of patriarchy" (Rodriguez Salas, 27).

The betrayal of the maids by Penelope is presented in the chorus line "The Perils of Penelope, A Drama". This shows the vital role the chorus is playing in unweaving Penelope's narrative and exposing her as an accessory in a crime of honor fueled by sheer male egoism. This scene is not in Homer's original, hence it is meant to provide space for the subaltern to tell their story and seek justice. Peeking from behind a curtain, the maids listen to Penelope's instructions to Eurycleia about them. The word "curtain" shows that in the original text, when they were alive, this act of betrayal was hidden from them. The maids trusted Penelope and believed they were being good servants by obeying her. Now that they are all dead, they can peek behind that symbolic curtain and reveal to the readers/audience what actually happened. It is interesting that both Penelope and Eurycleia are played by maids in this scene. This is to show that this is the maids' own part of the story; the narrative constructed by them. The details of the betrayal are shocking:

Penelope:

Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal,
Snatched by the Suitors as unlawful spoil,
Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be
The dotting slaves of such a Lord as he!

Eurycleia:

We'll stop their mouths by sending them to Hades –
He'll string them up as grubby wicked ladies!

Penelope:

And I in fame a model wife shall rest –
All husbands will look on, and think him blessed!
But haste – the Suitors come to do their wooing,
And I, for my part, must begin boo-hooing!

The Chorus Line, in tap-dance shoes:

Blame it on the maids! (Atwood 2019, 81)

The words used by Penelope to phrase the false accusation are deliberate and well-chosen: "feckless", "disloyal", "unlawful", "polluted" and "shameless". Those are the maids she earlier described as "almost sisters". Penelope is linguistically framing the maids and is using Eurycleia as a messenger to carry the words to Odysseus. In this part, the chorus of the maids is fulfilling one of the tasks of the original Greek chorus which is to reveal hidden information and fill in the gaps by narrating any event happening off stage. And like the Greek chorus, they also conclude the play. But unlike the Greek chorus, rather commenting on the events and presenting the morals

of the story, the chorus of the maids re-establish their position as subalterns who continue to seek justice:

we had no voice
we had no name
we had no choice
we had one face
one face the same

we took the blame
it was not fair
but now we're here
we're all here too
the same as you

and now we follow
you, we find you
now, we call
to you to you
too wit too woo
too wit too woo
too woo (Atwood 2019, 105)

In these lines, the maids are an abstraction; a concept rather than an actual set of individuals "we had one face/one face the same". They now speak for all the subalterns and the voiceless. Their presence, though immaterial, is real and vivid "but now we're here/we're all here too/the same as you". They are here to seek justice and they are keen on it. They say "and now we follow/you, we find you/ now, we call/ to you to you". The use of the simple present rather than the past or the future tenses presents their words as a matter-of-fact. This is the new status quo because feminism allowed such subjugated groups to have a voice in literary works where they were underrepresented.

Conclusion

Atwood borrowed the chorus from the ancient Greek theatre. However, the function of the chorus in *The Penelopiad* is somehow different from what it used to be in ancient Greece. Atwood's chorus does not only comment on the events or fill in off-stage parts; it actually creates a parallel narrative that puts itself in contrast to the narrative of the main character Penelope. There is a dialectical relationship between the two narratives both thematically and linguistically as the maids take up a keyword from Penelope's segment then move on to elaborate on it from their own side of the story. Gradually, it is revealed that the most severely subjugated and hushed group of female characters in the *Odyssey* are the maids. The fact that the

text focuses on a group of women and the dynamics of their interaction makes the text "female-affiliated" to use Sarah Mills's term. It is a text that turns attention away from Odysseus and his sailors to Penelope and her maids, thus placing feminist issues of voice, representation, and authority at the center. It is true Penelope is herself to an extent a victim of the patriarchal society of the time. She is pursued by the suitors for her money and property and she is almost forced to choose one of them. The traditional narrative, constructed by men (Homer, Odysseus) has for centuries chosen for her the archetype of the faithful wife, going to great lengths to remain loyal to her husband. Feminism acknowledges the differences in the way different groups of women experience patriarchy and gender-bias. This is why though Penelope is objectified as a trophy in the competition among the suitors, "First prize, a week in Penelope's bed, second prize, two weeks in Penelope's bed" (Atwood 2019, 60), she is made fun of for being less beautiful than Helen: "Close your eyes and they're all the same – just imagine she's Helen, that'll put bronze in your spear, haha!" (60). The sexual insults directed at her are demeaning: "When's the old bitch going to make up her mind?" (60), but she is still privileged by her class because none of the suitors can force her into any kind of relationship. They were waiting for her permission and choice. More importantly, she did not refrain from reflecting all the patriarchal practices on her maids: she offered them as sex toys to entertain the suitors and protect herself and called them "sluts" twice and also "the toys of rogues and knaves!" She said,

Blame it on the maids!
Blame it on the slaves!
The toys of rogues and knaves!
Let them dangle, let them strangle –
Blame it on the slaves!
Blame it on the sluts!
[...]
Blame it on the sluts! (Atwood 2019, 83)

The maids were sacrificed as scapegoats because they were regarded as disposable creatures to be blamed, insulted and even killed with absolutely no consequences. Penelope also displayed fragile femininity by blaming Helen rather than Odysseus for the twenty-year-wait. This is apparent in the title of act 11 "Helen ruins my life". Penelope asserts that the Trojan War was launched because of Helen and because of this war, Odysseus left Ithaca and could not return for twenty years. She is practicing toxic patriarchy by always blaming the women around her for men's conduct.

Although *The Penelopiad* is feminist and female-affiliated, it does not clash with Atwood's reluctance to be classified as a feminist writer. For Atwood, feminism is not blind to the fact that women do victimize other women and act in a more patriarchal manner than men. The group most voiceless and oppressed are then the

maids whose chorus function as a vehicle for exposing and resisting Penelope's domination over both themselves and the narrative. The maids at the end became an abstraction in the form of the subaltern seeking justice and voice. The text thus "serve(s) as a performative enactment of the silenced female voices of the *Odyssey*. They may furthermore serve as a pointer, an invitation extended to the reader to go in search of silenced voices haunting other texts of the Western literary canon" (Jung 2014, 42).

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