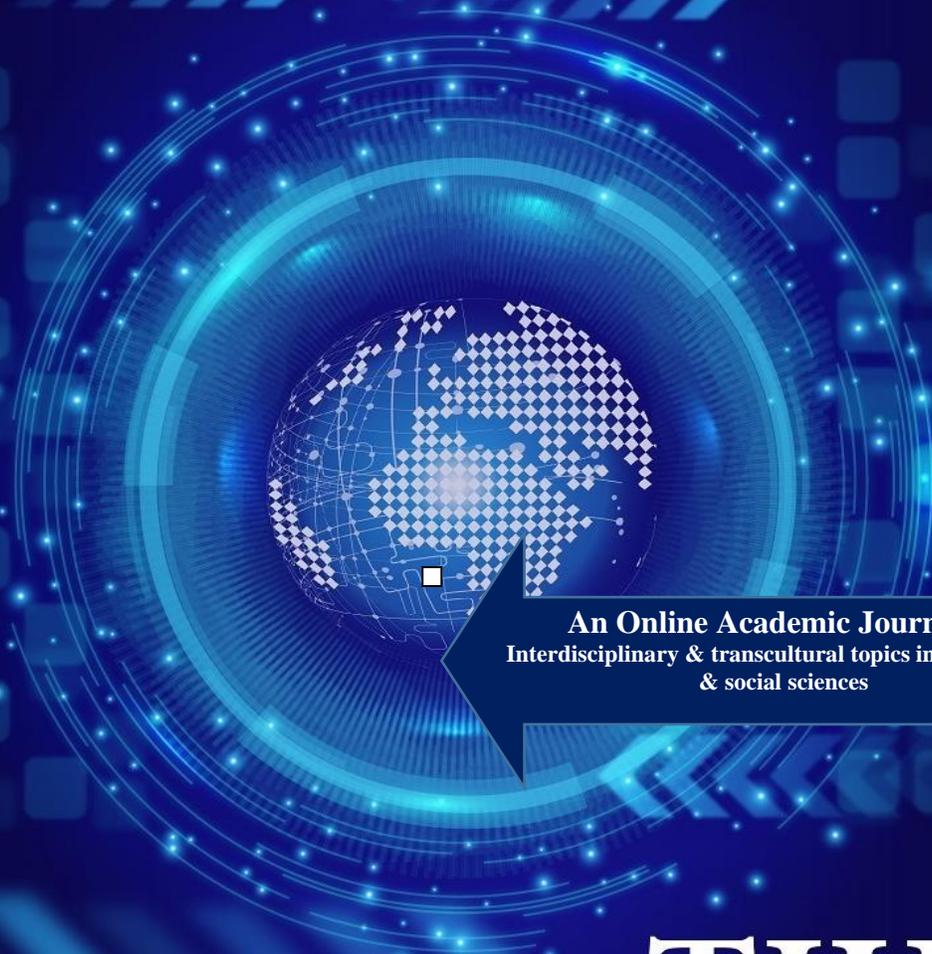


Transcultural Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences

Print ISSN 4239-2636 Online ISSN 4247-2636



An Online Academic Journal of
Interdisciplinary & transcultural topics in Humanities
& social sciences

TJHSS

BUC Press House



Volume 4 Issue (3)

July 2023

Transcultural Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS) is a journal committed to disseminate a new range of interdisciplinary and transcultural topics in Humanities and social sciences. It is an open access, peer reviewed and refereed journal, published by Badr University in Cairo, BUC, to provide original and updated knowledge platform of international scholars interested in multi-inter disciplinary researches in all languages and from the widest range of world cultures. It's an online academic journal that offers print on demand services.

TJHSS Aims and Objectives:

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▣ Print ISSN	2636-4239
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The Maids in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*: Transgenerational Haunting

Dina Abd Elsalam

Department of English Language and Literature,
Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University, Egypt.

Email: d.abdelsalam@alexu.edu.eg

Abstract

Margaret Atwood confesses in her "Introduction" to *The Penelopiad* that she has always been haunted by the maids who were hanged in *The Odyssey* upon the orders of Odysseus. In Homer's epic, they were given no voice, and their side of the story was silenced. In *The Penelopiad*, which is Atwood's rewrite of *The Odyssey*, Penelope becomes the heroine of the work and the twelve maids play the role of the chorus. Both Penelope and the maids relate their stories from the underworld, and haunt the text as ghosts who have come back to vent. Though Penelope is the main narrator, the maids, who represent the chorus, keep intervening in the action. Their intervention counterbalances the narrative and forces Penelope to reveal some secrets which she would have preferred to conceal, had they been absent. Based on the work of Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, and Jacques Derrida regarding transgenerational haunting, the paper will focus on the narrative of the maids in *The Penelopiad*, as it is the one that has always haunted Atwood. Not only are the stories of the maids subversive in content, but they are equally subversive in form. In a postmodern streak, Atwood parodies the epic form, and juxtaposes different styles and genres to disrupt the grand narrative of Odysseus, and the epic form through which it was delivered. In so doing, the narrative of the maids is allowed to surface and to present itself in defiance of established and canonized structures.

Keywords:

Margaret Atwood, *Penelopiad*, haunting, postmodernism, Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, Derrida

Introduction:

Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* is a rewrite of Homer's *Odyssey*. It was published by Canongate in 2005 in *The Myths* series where writers were commissioned to retell old myths afresh in "a contemporary and memorable way" (*The Penelopiad* vii). Unlike Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope becomes the heroine of *The Penelopiad* and the twelve maids play the role of the chorus. The story is now recounted through Penelope's eyes, who adopts the voice of the first-person narrator, and it covers Penelope's childhood in Sparta, her marriage to Odysseus and life in Ithaca, her suffering and loneliness after Odysseus joined the Trojan war, the tension that ensued with the suitors who invaded her house, the ruse of the shroud, Odysseus's eventual return after twenty years and his killing of the suitors and the maids. Similarly, the twelve maids are given a voice. As is typical of Greek drama where the chorus comments on the action, Penelope's story is punctuated with the recitals of the maids, who comment on their dismal fate at the hands of Odysseus and Telemachus. The book is divided into twenty-nine chapters, eighteen narrated by

Penelope and eleven recited by the maids, and “the chapters narrated by Penelope as well as those sung by the maids will present versions and inventions of their own stories” (Renaux 5).

Interestingly, in the final lines of her “Introduction” to *The Penelopiad*, Atwood clearly states: “I’ve always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself” (xxi). Thus, though *The Penelopiad* is mainly a rewrite of Penelope’s story, and is named after her, the story of the maids, and their brutal massacre is what haunts not only Atwood, but also Penelope herself in Atwood’s text. In the last two chapters of the *The Penelopiad*, the maids also come to haunt Odysseus: “and now we follow/you, we find you” (195). The twelve maids are given the final word, or verdict in *The Penelopiad* “since they recite the envoi proclaiming their decision to haunt both Penelope and Odysseus for eternity” (Bottez 55). As such, haunting emerges as a pivotal theme in *The Penelopiad*, and the driving force behind writing the text. Though Penelope too is a ghost who inhabits the underworld and who starts her narrative with “*Now that I’m dead I know everything*” (1), the paper will focus only on the transgenerational haunting of the maids, which, as Atwood clearly mentions, is her main concern. The latter will be examined through exploring the way the maids have come to haunt Atwood’s text in a postmodern way after centuries of their massacre.

Haunting as Transgenerational Communication:

In “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology”, Nicolas Abraham asserts that “all the departed may return, but some are predestined to haunt: the dead who have been shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave” (171). In *The Penelopiad*, the dead maids, who were “shamed during their lifetime” and who were brutally hanged, return to disclose their secrets which were interred with them. Abraham adds:

It is a fact that the "phantom," whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one's life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others. (171)

According to Abraham, the dead maids are “an invention of the living”, in this case, they are an invention of Atwood’s imagination, who willingly summons them from the dead to fill the “gap” produced by the concealment of the secret behind their murder, for they were silenced and never allowed to speak their minds, or express themselves. Colin Davis explains that this kind of transgenerational communication, psychologically formulated by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, happens when “the undisclosed traumas of previous generations might disturb the lives of their descendants even and especially if they know nothing about their distant causes” (374). The cause presented for the killing of the maids in *The Odyssey*, according to Atwood, “doesn’t hold water: there are too many inconsistencies” (“Introduction” xxi). Thus, she restores the maids to life in her text and allows them to vent. The phantom is not a personal fear interred in one’s psyche, but an empathy with the traumas of one’s ancestors. Explaining the difference between the return of the repressed and the return of the phantom, Torok says:

the “phantom” is a formation in the dynamic unconscious that is found there not because of the subject’s own repression but on account of a direct empathy with the unconscious or the rejected psychic matter of a parental object. Consequently, the phantom is not at all the product of the subject’s self-creation by means of the interplay between repressions and introjections. The phantom is alien to the subjects who harbor it. (181)

In his *Specters of Marx*, Derrida introduces his concept of hauntology. The title of the book is inspired, as Derrida explains, by the opening line of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism” (Derrida 4). Derrida argues that the specter of communism haunts Europe as much as the ghost haunted Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* right from the opening scene. Derrida coins a word for this state of haunting: hauntology. He says: “Let us call it a hauntology” (10); since both “hauntology” and “ontology” are pronounced in the same manner in French, Derrida practises his favourite game of confounding the two, and of demonstrating how the slipperiness of language makes both words feed into each other (10). Thus, haunting, according to Derrida, flows into the nature of being and its metaphysics. Additionally, Derrida’s specters come from the past, visit the present and tap into the future: “what stands in front of it must also precede it like its origin: before it. Even if the future is its provenance, it must be, like any provenance, absolutely and irreversibly past” (xix). Again for Derrida, the visitations emanating from the past are interlocked with the future, hence the fluidity of their being; their presence relies on flowing from one state to the other and is “possible only on the basis of the movement of some disjuncting, disjunction, or disproportion: in the inadequation to self” (xix).

The reason for the visitations of those ghosts from the past is always related to knowledge. Abraham and Torok believe that they come to lie to us: “the dead do not return to reunite the living with their loved ones but rather to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences” (Abraham 171). Speaking of the consequences of the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Abraham says: “As the curtain falls, only corpses and riddles are left, silent like the night of Elsinore. Having lost all hope of seeing the mystery unraveled, the spectator remains bewildered” (187). According to Abraham, the reason behind the riddles, silence, mystery and bewilderment is that a “ghost returns to haunt with the intent of lying: its would-be “revelations” are false by nature (188) ... a subterfuge” (189). The hope of attaining any knowledge from the phantom is totally dismissed by Abraham. In fact, it returns only to confound and baffle the living; “the phantom is a liar; its effects are designed to mislead the haunted subject and to ensure that its secret remains shrouded in mystery” (Davis 374). Its return results in more confusion, and distortion, since whatever is delivered to the haunted one is mistaken and misleading; instead of attaining knowledge, the haunted one only gets more misinformation. Derrida, on the other hand, finds that specters open up a slippery space where exchanges between the past and the future yield unending answers and possibilities. While Abraham and Torok find that attaining solid knowledge about the past from the phantom will only result in disappointment, Derrida, being the deconstructionist he is, is aware that absolute knowledge is unattainable:

Phantoms lie about the past whilst spectres gesture towards a still unformulated future. The difference between them poses in a new form the tension between the desire to understand and the openness to what exceeds knowledge; and

the resulting critical practices vary between the endeavour to attend patiently to particular texts and exhilarating speculation (Davis 379). Deconstructuion allows for uncertainty, hesitation, blurriness, and vagueness, since the vehicle for delivering knowledge is language, which by definition is slippery, elusive and open to different interpretations.

The Maids in Homer's *Odyssey*

The research uses the Penguin Classics edition of Homer's *Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu, as Atwood specifies in the *Notes* that it is the "the main source for *The Penelopiad*" (197). In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus's return to his homeland Ithaca, after the Trojan war, constitutes the main plot line, and Odysseus is unarguably the hero of the epic. His return ultimately turns into a journey of suffering and pain, and his tumultuous ventures into the land of the Lotus eaters, the land of the Cyclopes, the land of Laestrygones, the island of the goddess Circe, the underworld, the island of the Sirens, the island of the nymph Calypso, and the hazards of the Scylla and Charybdis represent one obstacle after the other which he overcomes with wit, patience and resilience.

In Homer's narrative, the maids are totally silenced and their side of the story is concealed. The little information available about them is delivered from the omniscient point of view of Homer, the narrator, who relates this episode fleetingly and without much heed to their suffering. Homer presents the reason why they are to be hanged in the exchange between Odysseus and his maid Eurycleia as follows:

'But what of the women-servants in the house? Tell me which have been disloyal to me and which are innocent.' 'My child,' his fond old nurse Eurycleia replied, 'I'll tell you the truth. You have fifty women serving in your palace, whom we have trained in household duties like carding wool and to be willing servants. Of these there are twelve all told who behaved shamelessly and snapped their fingers at me and Penelope herself. Telemachus has only just grown up and his mother would not allow him to order the maids about. (215)

To this Odysseus replies: 'But tell the women who have behaved disgracefully to come here' (215). Eurycleia's account is readily believed, and Odysseus's verdict is final. This is immediately followed by the hanging of the maids, which is carried out by Telemachus in cold blood and is related by Homer in a matter-of-fact tone, with no lament for their fate whatsoever. The maids are treated as property and playthings both by the suitors and by Odysseus, and are not given a voice to relate their side of the story; they are only heard "wailing bitterly, with the tears streaming down their cheeks" (215). In the Homeric epic, they are mercilessly driven to meet their end for a crime which they should not have been held accountable for in the first place, since they were powerless and could not check the advances of the strong, lecherous suitors, who were physically and socially their superiors.

Postmodern Techniques in *The Penelopiad*

In defining intertextuality, Julia Kristeva, who coined the term, asserts that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). If that applies to "any text", then *The Penelopiad*, which is a rewrite of *The Odyssey*, is an intertext par excellence; "meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the

other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext” (Allen 1).

In her rewrite of *The Odyssey*, the narrative is retold by a different narrator, and thus yields a different perspective. For centuries, the Homeric version of the tale has been canonized, to the exclusion of female voices. In *The Penelopiad*, not only is Penelope given a voice, but her maids too are given a voice to tell their own story. Penelope is the main narrator; she gets more chapters for her narrative, but the maids, who represent the chorus, keep intervening in the action, commenting, responding, blaming, lecturing and demanding a new trial. Their presence controls Penelope’s narrative, as she might have attempted to present a different version of the narrative and to whitewash disturbing details of her life at the expense of the maids. Their intervention counterbalances the narrative and forces Penelope to reveal some secrets which she would have preferred to conceal had they been absent: “[w]riting against this erasure, Atwood uses her novelistic imagination to expand Homer’s text, giving voice to this group of powerless silenced women. Not surprisingly, their stories are very subversive” (Howells 6). Not only are their stories subversive in content, but they are equally subversive in form.

First, in a postmodern streak, *The Penelopiad* parodies the epic form; it playfully emulates it to make fun of it; “Atwood is deconstructing some conventions inherent to the epic form such as the grandiloquence of tone, the portrayal of a male hero and the *in media res* narrative” (Nunes 231). The tone is more down-to-earth, the hero is now replaced by a heroine and her servants, and the narrative traces Penelope’s life since her birth. Second, Atwood uses another postmodern technique, that of blending different genres; the chapters recited by the maids are an assortment of different genres and moulds: a rope-jumping rhyme, a lament, a popular tune, an idyll, a shanty, a ballad, a play, a lecture, a trial, a love song and an envoi. The hybridity created by this collage is definitely postmodern in nature.

Postmodern literature’s “juxtaposition of styles and codes, of different and sometimes apparently incompatible forms of representation, serves to question, disturb and even subvert the dominance of those established forms” (Allen 190). Thus, Atwood resorts to collage, and juxtaposes all of those different styles, and genres to disrupt the grand narrative of Odysseus, and the epic form through which it was delivered. In so doing, the narrative of the maids is allowed to surface and to present itself in defiance of the established and canonized structures. In allowing them to haunt her text, Atwood frees herself of all preconceptions about writing and representation.

Additionally, metafiction is another feature of the novella. It can be readily labelled metatheatrical too for the presence of the chorus, which happens to be one of the main features of Greek drama, gives this novella a theatrical dimension. It comes as no surprise that the novella was repeatedly presented on stage. The chorus directly addresses the readers in many instances, engaging them in the action, and also making them aware of the artifice of what is presented. Instances of parabasis in the novella can be easily considered metafictional. The parabasis is “derived from the verb *parabainein* (“to step forward”)...to describe the action of the chorus in turning around to face the audience instead of the stage” (Hubbard 17). In directly addressing the audience, the chorus disrupts the “mimetic structure of the dramatic event”

(Hubbard 28) and allows the audience “to connect the worlds of drama and reality” (Hubbard 28).

An Analysis of the Chapters Presented by the Maids in *The Penelopiad*

In *The Penelopiad*, Odysseus is sidelined, and the voices of Penelope and the maids are foregrounded. The hanged maids now have eleven chapters where they present their point of view regarding what came to pass. They present a parody of the classical Greek chorus as the chorus now is made up of female rather than male singers, who give a different version of the events than what would have been typically delivered by a male choir. This is also done in a playful manner as Atwood chooses to deliver each chapter in a different mould: a rhyme, a lament, a tune, an idyll, a ballad, a lecture, and so on. All the different moulds persistently present the point of view of the maids, which has been wiped from history for centuries. The playfulness, triggered by the use of different genres and moulds, contrasts with the grand epic style of *The Odyssey*, and befits the little narrative of the maids who finally get back at the grand narrative which has been canonized and stabilized for centuries.

Though Chapter ii titled “The Chorus Line; A Rope-Jumping Rhyme” would initially give the impression that what follows is funny and light-hearted as befits a rope-jumping rhyme, it turns out to be quite grim and bitter:

We are the maids
 The ones you killed
 The ones you failed
 [...]
 We did much less
 Than what you did
 You judged us bad
 You had the spear
 You had the word
 At your command (7)

Addressed to Odysseus, their words clearly show that they are so bitter at the fact that such an undeserved fate was thrust upon them simply because they did not have the power to control their lives. They also pinpoint Odysseus’s double standards for he indulged in extra-marital relationships with Circe and Calypso during his travels, but ironically decided to kill them on account of their behavior with the suitors, thus highlighting the power imbalance triggered by their gender and augmented by their slavery. The maids here parody a particular genre, only to subvert it; instead of a light-hearted rhyme, the reader gets an embittered retort.

Chapter iv “The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids” is as the title suggests a lament, and comes as a response to the preceding chapter, which is narrated from Penelope’s point of view about her own childhood, titled “My Childhood”. The chapter starts with a statement about their lowly origins as they were born to “poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who

sold us, parents from whom we were stolen” (13), thus, immediately drawing the attention of the reader to the root of their misery. The chapter goes on to enumerate one misery after the other in a mournful tone befitting a lament. One point they purposefully raise is: “We were the dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the (13) sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse” (14). The reason why this point is particularly important is that they are finally given the right to justify their behavior with the suitors; powerless and helpless as they were, they did not have the right to reject the sexual advances of the suitors. Not only were they raped, but they were also punished for being raped. That is why they haunted Atwood as per her words, and eventually haunted her text to vent. Placing this lament next to other genres and literary forms in the novella creates a jumbled assortment to deliberately destabilize old narratives. Perforating the fabric of the narrative with different genres, not only shakes the foundations of traditional storytelling, but also playfully mocks all the ideological convictions they relay.

Chapter viii “The Chorus Line: If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune” is delivered in the form of a popular tune with the accompaniment of a fiddle, an accordion and a penny whistle, and it bespeaks their misery and yearning for a different life; the first maid wishes she was a princess loved by a hero, while the second maid says:

I fetch and I carry, I hear and obey,
 It’s Yes sir and No ma’am and the whole bleed
 ing day;
 I smile and I nod with a tear in my eye,
 I make the soft beds in which others lie. (52)

The third maid wishes the gods would change her life. Their song clearly underlines their oppression and helplessness as all they are capable of is to wish for a different life. The maids spare no effort, in Atwood’s text, to persistently express their misery using different genres playfully placed next to one another.

Though Chapter x “The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll” is presented as an idyll, the vibes are far from idyllic. The maids contrast their birth with that of Telemachus, as they were almost born at the same time but to different circumstances. They played together as children and were unaware that he would become their murderer one day. This is when the idyll becomes a vent for the envy and ill-feelings they harbor for Telemachus:

We did not know as we played with him
 there in the sand
 On the beach of our rocky goat-island, close
 by the harbor,
 That he was foredoomed to swell to our
 cold-eyed teenaged killer.
 If we had known that, would we have

drowned him back then? (68)

Far from being happy, serene and peaceful, the idyll is unexpectedly drenched in sadness; the maids continue to mockingly use different genres to relate their grievances, and disrupt the peace and quiet of the Homeric grand epic. The same applies to the following chapter, chapter xiii “The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty”, where the maids cast off their identities and perform the shanty in sailor costumes, playing the role of Odysseus’s sailors as they sing about his numerous adventures on his way back home to Ithaca after the Trojan war, while persistently pointing to “his lies and his tricks and his thieving” (93).

In chapter xvii “The Chorus Line: Dreamboats, A Ballad”, the maids haunt the ballad to pinpoint their suffering and oppression once more:

Sleep is the only rest we get;

It’s then we are at peace:

We do not have to mop the floor

And wipe away the grease

We are not chased around the hall

And tumbled in the dirt

By every dimwit nobleman

Who wants a slice of skirt. (125)

Here the maids use the ballad form to express their helplessness; sleep becomes their escape from the harshness of life, for when they are awake they have to put up with endless chores and the harassment of the suitors. Sleep, however, gives them the opportunity to dream of all their unfulfilled wishes.

Chapter xxi “The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama” is a play presented by the maids, which suggests right from the beginning that what will ensue is fictional, and not real. Though in *The Odyssey* Penelope has been depicted as a chaste and loyal wife who awaited the return of her husband for twenty years, the play performed by the maids questions the fidelity of Penelope and casts doubt on this long-established truth. The play is preceded by a prologue presented by the maid Melantho wherein she enumerates all the rumours that circulated about Penelope’s promiscuity with the suitors. Interestingly, Melantho, in a metafictional move, (or rather a metatheatrical one, since what is presented here is a play) directly addresses the readers/audience, hence breaking the illusion of the performance: “The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain/ But let us take a peek behind the curtain” (148). This is followed by a play where a maid plays the role of Penelope and another plays the role of Eurcleyia, and in which we see both of them conspiring, upon the return of Odysseus, to conceal Penelope’s infidelity by planning to get rid of the twelve maids who knew about it:

Penelope:

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 sting them up as grubby wicked
 ladies! (150-151)

The play ends with the maids forming a chorus and repeatedly singing the refrain “Blame it on the maids”. Though nothing is presented with certainty in this chapter as it all takes the form of a play, doubts about Penelope’s behavior and her use of the maids as scapegoats to evade Odysseus’s anger are raised. Just like any rumour that cannot be proven true or false, yet still causes turbulence, this chapter casts doubt on Penelope’s fidelity. In fact this is the crux of *The Penelopiad*; in the “Introduction” to the novella, Atwood clearly states the questions that drove her to rewrite *The Odyssey* after many centuries: “what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? (xxi). It is for these reasons that Atwood has always been haunted by the maids, as she states.

The hypocrisy and double standards of patriarchal societies are pointed out by Penelope who complains to Eurycleia about it:

While he was pleasuring every nymph and
 beauty,
 Did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?
 While every girl and goddess he was prais-
 ing,
 Did he assume I'd dry up like a raisin? (149)

The oppressive practices of patriarchy also set women against one another; instead of bonding together, Penelope sacrifices the maids to save herself. Malaise such as deceit, lying, jealousy, envy, insecurity and competition among women are shown to be the typical offshoots of women’s weakness and frailty in male-centered societies. Using the form of a play, the maids once more shake the foundations of settled truths, and by directly addressing the audience in the prologue, Melanthe breaks the illusion of this mimetic form and reminds the audience that what is to be presented is yet another fiction to be added to preexisting fictions.

Chapter xxiv “The Chrous line: An Anthropology Lecture” gives a feminist reading of the calamity of the maids from an anthropological point of view, a discipline that has come to be known as feminist anthropology. Interestingly, it is provided by the maids themselves. Rodriguez Salas argues that “[w]ith this chapter devised as a lecture, Atwood introduces academic discourse and complements female genres with a masculine realm that has been progressively appropriated by women, hence the direct insertion of a feminist discourse in the novel” (30).

Feminist anthropology is a subfield of anthropology, which became largely recognized in the 1970s, a time which saw the rise and consolidation of feminism, particularly “the second wave of feminism that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s” (Silverstein & Lewin 9) and which along with “the civil rights movement, opposition to the Vietnam War” inspired the general intellectual upheaval of the time (Silverstein & Lewin 8). It tries to redress the long history of inequality between the sexes in the field of anthropology and to break the vicious circle of ethnography which has been dominated by androcentric attitudes and views. The problem with traditional anthropology is that anthropologists worked “within male-centred models of social organization and culture” and relied “on male informants during fieldwork, and therefore replicate[d] the indigenous male view” (Barnard & Spencer 386). By contrast, most of the work published in the 1970s by female anthropologists gave voice to silenced women and helped “formerly invisible women across the world’s cultures be recognized and allowed to speak” (Lewin 13). The result was that “placing women at the heart of analysis yielded results very different from what one would find in a traditional, male-centered ethnography” (Lewin 13).

In this chapter, the maids, in another metafictional move, directly address the reader. They start with questions about the significance of the number twelve, since they are twelve in number, and in order to illicit answers from the readers/spectators, they yell: “Yes? You, Sir, in the back, Correct!” (163). One important point which the maids bring up in this chapter, and which takes feminist anthropology as its springboard, is the result of the overthrow of matrilineality by patrilineality. Regarding this point, the chorus says:

Thus possibly our rape and subsequent hanging represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians. The chief of them, notably Odysseus, would then claim kingship (p.165) by marrying the High Priestess of our cult, namely Penelope. No, Sir, we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap. We can understand your reluctance to have such things brought out into the open- rapes and murders are not pleasant subjects- but such overthrows most certainly took place all around the Mediterranean Sea, as excavations at prehistoric sites have demonstrated over and over. (166)

Here the maids analyse their miserable fate, that is their rape at the hands of the suitors and then their subsequent hanging by Telemachus, from a feminist anthropological perspective. They attribute the reason why they were treated as such to the fact that matrilineal rule was overtaken by patriarchy, and support this anthropological theory with archaeological evidence as excavations in prehistoric sites revealed what seems to have been a repeated pattern where old matriarchal cults were replaced by patriarchal ones. The chorus argues that this is not “feminist claptrap”, and that there are excavations all around the Mediterranean which prove

that, in prehistoric times, women had the upper hand until the advent of patriarchy with “father-worshipping barbarians”.

The chorus adds that “[i]n the pre-patriarchal scheme of things, there may well have been a bow-shooting contest, but it would have been properly conducted. He who won it would be declared ritual king for a year, and would then be hanged” (Atwood 167). What they are referring to here is the fact that the shooting contest, which Penelope held to choose one of the suitors as husband, must have had its origins in an old matriarchal rite, related to enhancing the fertility of the land. Since matriarchy was essentially rural in nature, queens and priestesses presided over fertility rituals carried out in the fields, and the rites usually entailed sacrificing a male, which is similar to hanging the ritual king. Unlike the previous chapters, the maids here resort to a scholarly and academic mould to express their views. This lecture is placed alongside a song, a ballad, a shanty, etc. creating an admixture of different genres which sneeringly disrupts the epic form. The epic emerges as a dated literary form which is rewritten as a novella that features different genres within. Moreover, to stress the fictionality of what is presented, the chorus engages the reader with questions at the outset of the chapter.

Following the above chapter which is modelled along the lines of an anthropology lecture, Chapter xxvi “The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids” is, as the title indicates, a trial set up for Odysseus in the twenty-first century. Strangely, Odysseus is acquitted again, for killing both the suitors and the maids, which indicates that the rules have not changed over the centuries. One important point is that the maids had to bring the attention of the judge to their case, as he had totally forgotten about it, which proves that the atrocity of their massacre had fallen out of mind; it did not cause any alarm back then, and continues to go unnoticed up until the present day. Odysseus’s attorney responds by saying: “He was acting within his rights, Your Honour. These were his slaves” (178). Though the judge responds by saying: “Even slaves ought not to be killed at whim” (178), and though he consults *The Odyssey* during the tribunal as, according to him, “it is the main authority on the subject”, to find that it states that the maids were raped by the suitors, he eventually dismisses the case as Odysseus’s “times were not our times” (182). He goes on to say that “[i]t would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career” (182), as if the murder of twelve innocent souls is just a stain which ought not defile Odysseus’s outstanding career. Their massacre was not taken into account in ancient Greece, and when the maids insist on reopening the case in the twenty-first century, it is dismissed once more as “minor” and irrelevant. This chapter, which is presented as a trial, questions justice practised by male judges and attorneys within a patriarchal system which regards women as inferior and second-rate.

Chapter xxviii “The Chorus Line: We’re Walking Behind You, A Love Song” is a parody of a love song, but is actually all about hate, and revenge. The twelve maids haunt Odysseus, and pursue him wherever he goes to remind him of his unjustified act: “Here we are, walking behind you, close, close by, close as a kiss, close as your own skin” (193), and it seems he is doomed to be haunted by them, as they tell him “you can’t get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives” (192). The following and final chapter, Chapter xxix “Envoi” is the conclusion to the preceding one, for the maids follow Odysseus seeking revenge

as justice has not been served because the judicial system functions within the confines of patriarchy.

Presented as a *mélange* of different genres, the chapters of the maids “undermine any kind of cohesive narrative” (Niemann 44). Their ironic, parodic and playful approach leaves the reader with a feeling of “lightness and evanescence” (Hassan xvi). Truth is no longer the prerogative of a particular gender or class. Not only do the maids offer a different view of the whole story, but they also do it in a way that mocks all the traditional ways of storytelling. As Linda Hutcheon argues, “postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations” (94).

The parabases in these chapters, where the chorus directly addresses the readers, break the suspense of disbelief and constantly remind the readers that they are reading a novella. The chorus’s addressing of the readers initiates a state of metafiction, as they keep stepping in and out of the world of the novella. But metafiction, like metatheatre, is also “subsumed into the category of parody” (Slater 3). In mockingly parodying different genres, the chorus constantly reminds the readers of the artifice of what they are reading, and makes them aware of the illusion created and sustained by these different genres.

The Penelopiad is, by definition, intertextual for it depends on the readers’ prior knowledge of *The Odyssey* for its full realization of meaning. Written as an answer to *The Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad* cannot be understood except in light of the former. Their intertextual relationships require not only moving back and forth between the two texts to realize the web of textual relations, but also reading them as part of a larger mosaic of social, political and ideological contexts.

Haunting to Lie or to Raise Questions?

But what do the maids deliver through those hybrid collages? Do their phantoms, as Abraham and Torok argue, haunt the text to mislead us? Or do their specters, as Derrida proposes, provide yet another uncertainty? Knowing that what is presented in *The Penelopiad* is fictive in the first place, the reader does not expect any kind of final statement, particularly since it is all presented in a playful postmodern manner. Thus, Derrida’s view is more in keeping with Atwood’s narrative where “readers end up with contradictory versions of events and characters as they can never know the truth, being tied up in an utterly puzzling indeterminacy of meaning (Bottez 55).

In “The Introduction”, Atwood says that the chanting chorus of the maids is to address two main questions: “what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?” (xxi). Far from providing answers, the chanting chorus raises more doubts and uncertainties. The important thing is that they are made to haunt our imagination after centuries of oblivion and neglect. Giving the maids a voice is what matters: “Atwood’s haunted adaptations reopen questions of the past as a settled topic” (Niemann 46). Destablising the singular, monophonic, androcratic narratives of the past and “dislodging the myth of Penelope” (Akgun 36) is what matters. Those myths were initially designed for “the patriarchal setting down of behavioural norms for women” (Mathews Mulloor 135). By disrupting this old order, shaking its

foundations, and deconstructing its arguments, Atwood is paying homage to the maids who have haunted her ever since she read their story.

Conclusion

Coming from the underworld, Penelope tells her story with hindsight in the voice of the first-person narrator; the narratee is presented with a narrative which ultimately deconstructs the Homeric grand narrative. The maids, however, not only deconstruct the Homeric narrative, but disrupt Penelope's narrative too. Assuming the role of the Greek chorus, they keep interrupting, commenting, reminiscing, juxtaposing, questioning, and challenging both Homer's and Penelope's narratives. They even go as far as lecturing male academics in the chapter that takes the form of an anthropology lecture and indicting male judges in the chapter that takes the form of a trial. Thus, the twelve maids not only haunt Atwood, as per her words in the "Introduction", but haunt Penelope too, and by the end of the novella, they haunt Odysseus as well. In this spectral world evoked by Atwood, the aim is not to provide answers, but to raise questions and doubts; to deconstruct in a Derridean fashion. In keeping with the content of this subversive text, Atwood resorts to a number of postmodern techniques to subvert the narrative of the Homeric epic. Modelled on the way Classical epics were titled: *The Penelopiad* becomes Penelope's epic, just as *The Iliad* was Ilium's epic. Atwood, however, playfully and mockingly parodies the epic form. The male hero is replaced by a female hero along with her maids. The epic does not start in medias res, but traces the life of both Penelope and the maids ab ovo. Atwood resorts to collage by juxtaposing different genres and moulds to present a subversive parody. Metafiction is yet another postmodern feature of *The Penelopiad*: to remind the readers of the artifice of all fictional narratives, including the narrative at hand, she allows the chorus to directly address the readers, hence drawing their attention to the fictional nature of the text. The parabasis, which is originally a theatrical device, is subsumed into this novella, hence jumbling metatheatre with metafiction. The chorus itself, which is one of the prominent elements of Classical drama, is appropriated into the fabric of the novella. Using all of those postmodern devices, Atwood's *Penelopiad* qualifies as a highly subversive intertext.

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