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***“Strong myths never die.”***

The rewriting of the Penelope myth in Margaret  
Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*.

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## 1. Acknowledgements.

I have always been fascinated by Classical antiquity, especially with classical mythology. And even though my Greek was everything but fluent, I refused to give up, and in the fifth year my patience was rewarded. We started reading Homer, one of the greatest authors in history. When we started with his *Odyssey*, I was mesmerized by the story. A man is reunited with his wife, after twenty long years. Both have suffered, Odysseus lost all his men at sea, Penelope had to endure the scorn of the suitors, and in the end, even her own son started to turn against her. But the story ends well, with a happy reunion. I remember admiring Penelope for her courage and her faithfulness, but even then, I wondered how she managed to hold on. I have to admit that, even though I love both English and Latin, I wondered how things would have been had I studied Greek. When somebody mentioned Professor Doctor Decreus' course on classical mythology I immediately knew I had to take it.

When I asked Professor Dr. Hilde Staels if I could write about Margaret Atwood, she told me the novel of my choice had been studied quite intensively, and proposed to write about another of her works. And since I showed an interest in classical mythology, why not write about one of the most famous women from Greek antiquity? Atwood's *The Penelopiad* sketches quite a different portrait of one of my favourite characters, and I have enjoyed the research I had to do.

This dissertation would not have been written without the help of some whom I really want to thank. I want to thank Professor Staels for providing me with this topic, for her copy of her article on *The Penelopiad* and for her continuous support.

I want to thank Professor Decreus whose work on classical mythology proved to be a good starting point for my dissertation. His classes also taught me that there is more about these myths than meets the eye.

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## 2. Table of contents.

1. Acknowledgements.	I
2. Table of contents.	III
3. Introduction.	1
4. Background Information.	5
4.1. Homer's the <i>Odyssey</i> .	5
4.1.1.Synopsis.	5
4.1.2.Penelope.	7
4.1.2.1.    Marilyn Katz on Penelope's portrayal in the <i>Odyssey</i> .	7
4.1.2.2.    Chris Emlyn-Jones on the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.	12
4.1.2.3.    Helene P. Foley on reverse similes and sex roles.	16
4.1.3.The Maids.	19
4.2. Margaret Atwood's <i>The Penelopiad</i> .	25
4.2.1.Other rewritings of the Penelope myth.	25
5. Theoretical Framework.	25
5.1. Mikhail Bakhtin's "Epic and Novel".	26
5.1.1.Introduction.	26
5.1.2.Novelization.	26
5.1.3.Defining the novel.	27
5.1.4.Epic and Novel: a brief comparison.	29
5.1.5.Conclusion.	32
5.2. Carl Gustav Jung on archetypes.	34
6. Textual Analysis.	36
6.1. <i>The Penelopiad</i> versus the <i>Odyssey</i> : a focus on Penelope and a voice for the maids.	36
6.2. Epic and Novel.	39
6.2.1.Language.	39
6.2.2.Hierarchy.	42

6.2.3.Events.	44
6.2.4.Characters.	45
6.2.5.Epic Distance.	47
6.2.6.Conclusion	48
6.3. Archetypal Imagery.	49
6.4. <i>The Penelopiad</i> versus other Rewritings of the Penelope Myth.	54
6.4.1.Inge Merkel: <i>Eine ganz gewöhnliche Ehe</i> .	54
6.4.2.Luigi Malerba: <i>Itaca per sempre</i> .	57
6.4.3.Clemence McLaren: <i>Waiting for Odysseus</i> .	61
6.4.4.Conclusion.	63
7. Conclusion.	65
8. Works Cited.	69
9. Images.	73

### 3. Introduction.

When dealing with the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*, one must realise that there is a difference between both works in terms of genre. While Homer's story is called an epic, Margaret Atwood's work of fiction is known to be a novella. These two genres come with particular differences.

Laurence Coupe provides us with the following description of the epic:

But perhaps the most important thing about them is that they were, and are, sophisticated works of literary invention, involving impressing use of received formulas. These could be set phrases, such as 'rosy-fingered dawn'. They could be typical scenes, such as the arming of a warrior prior to battle. They could even be recurrent plot structures, such as the withdrawal of the greatest warrior from combat . . ., with all its dire consequences for his comrades in arms, followed by his triumphant re-engagement. It was this material which was embellished orally over the years, until it attained the written form we know (Coupe 101).

In the *Odyssey*, a recurrent plot structure is Penelope's trick with the shroud (see *infra*), which reoccurs three times throughout the story, Agamemnon's song in the underworld (see *infra*), appearing twice, or the description of the break of dawn. The version of the *Odyssey* as it was handed over to us dates back to "the eight century BC" (Coupe 101) but needs to be seen as the end of a long oral tradition. Singers would travel around and sing their version of the story. The formula mentioned above helped the singer to remember the structure of the story; therefore the content was always the same, but the story would be slightly different from another singer's version.

The story of Odysseus however, does not only belong to the world of the epic, but also to the world of Greek mythology. Therefore, before starting my dissertation, I want to shed some light on the meaning of the word myth. In his *Myth* (1997), Laurence Coupe uses the (lengthy) definition of Cupitt:

So we may say that myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demi-gods,

heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological [i.e. last, ultimate] time or in the supernatural world, or may deal with comings and goings between the supernatural world of human history (Cupitt qtd. in Coupe 5).

Cupitt continues to state that the “the superhuman beings are imagined in anthropomorphic [i.e. humanly formed] ways” (Ibidem 5-6), they are portrayed resembling humans. The story often is not ordered logically, but follows a patten Cupitt finds resembling the “logic of dreams” (Ibidem 6). The reason why a community comes up with this complex set of myths would be “to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate” (). Creating myths is used to present and explain the cosmic or social order, to explain “the meaning of the individual’s life” (Ibidem)

Coupe emphasises that “not all myths are linked with a ritual; (...) are about gods; (...) concern a time outside historical time” (Coupe 6). When we apply this definition on the story of Odysseus, or on Greek mythology in general, we can say the explanation is satisfactory. Odysseus’ story was indeed originally told in the Greek community; Odysseus himself can be called a hero and during his journey, he is aided and attacked by (demi-)gods. The gods of the Greek are portrayed in a human-like way and the story can be seen as the story of a man in search of himself. Greek mythology as a whole tries to explain not only the ways of the world and the earth, but also the problems and experiences of humankind. When we look at Penelope, we can say that the idea of ‘the Penelope myth’ can explain a woman’s troubles while waiting for her husband to come back, or maybe even explain the story as a woman in search of herself.

The novel has only been around for a short time. The novel as we know it today only came into being around “in the course of the eighteenth century even though it (or something very much like it) had been around since at least the Renaissance of more than a century before [...]” (Buelens & Eeckhout 11). And just like the other genres, it has its own set of characteristics. I leave will leave this topic for now as I will dedicate a part of my dissertation to the rise of the novel and its differences with the epic. However I do want to add a small description of what a novel really is. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English gives the following definition: “a long written story

in which the characters and events are usually imaginary” (“Novel”). The novella is described as “a story that is shorter than a novel, but longer than a short story” (Novella”). We can safely call Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* a novella, as it is quite short. The story was first published in 2005 as part of Cannongate’s ‘*The Myths series*’. In *The Myths series*, Cannongate wishes to rewrite myths from all over the world in order to make sure that they should be preserved for future generations. In the blurb of the 2006 edition of *The Penelopiad* Cannongate mentions that myths “are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives”. Other authors participating in the myths series are, apart from Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, whose novel *Weight* (2005) is a rewriting of the story of Atlas and Heracles and well-known British author Ali Smith whose *Girl meets Boy* (2007) is an actualisation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (Cannongate website). In *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood rewrites the Penelope myth. She lets Penelope address the contemporary reader from the underworld, and the story she shares with us is quite different from the traditional one. Penelope talks about the difficult childhood she experienced, about her arranged marriage with Odysseus, about the cruelty of her cousin, Helen of Troy and about her son Telemachus. A new image of Penelope is thus created. But, more importantly, Atwood also allows the twelve maids, who were killed by Odysseus for helping the suitors, to voice their anger at their unjust treatment, something that has not happened before.

In this dissertation I will look at the figure of Penelope both in the *Odyssey*, since there are few other sources that report about her, and in *The Penelopiad*. First of all, we will look at Penelope’s portrayal in the *Odyssey*, paying special attention to the description of her character, the reunion between herself and Odysseus and the gender role she embodies. Secondly, we will explore the portrayal of the maids in Homer’s work. In the textual analysis, Penelope as she is presented to us by Margaret Atwood will be our main topic of discussion. Are there important differences with regards to Penelope or the people around her? I also wanted to compare Homer’s description of the maids to that of Atwood, since the latter gives them a voice in her novella and this is, in my opinion, one of the novella’s strengths. How do the maids react to their murder? Who is culpable in their eyes? Why exactly did Odysseus kill them?

For the theoretical part of my dissertation I relied on Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel" add year, in order to understand Atwood's rewriting of Penelope as good as I possibly could, since the adaptation of epic material to the genre of the novel has its consequences. I also studied Jung's notion of the archetypes since Atwood regularly uses them in her works of fiction. Why are these archetypes used? What archetypes exist? Are they of all times and cultures? Which characters represent them? And how are they relevant to Penelope and the maids?

I finally wanted to compare Atwood's *The Penelopiad* to other rewritings of the Penelope myth. Is Atwood's work fundamentally different from the others or is she following a trend in literature? And where lies the emphasis in the works of the other authors? I therefore decided to compare the following novels: Inge Merkel's *Eine ganz gewöhnliche Ehe. Odysseus und Penelope* (1987), Luigi Malerba's *Itaca per sempre* (1997) and Clemence McLaren's *Waiting for Odysseus* (2000).

## 4. Background Information.

### 4.1. Homer's *Odyssey*

#### 4.1.1. Synopsis

In order to avoid confusion when comparing Homer's version of Penelope to that of Atwood, I will now sketch her portrayal in Homer's *Odyssey*. I will start by explaining the story of Odysseus and Penelope, before focussing on Penelope in particular, her myth and her representation in the *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey* tells us what happened to Odysseus after his departure from Troy. The Greeks had defeated the Trojans after a ten year battle, caused by Helen of Sparta, later known as Helen of Troy, when she was abducted by Paris, one of the (many) Trojan Princes, son of Priam. The war only ended when Odysseus, aided by Pallas Athena, told the Greek warriors to build a large wooden horse. This horse was left on the shore as a gift for the gods. The Trojans brought the horse to Troy, but in the horse's belly, a Greek army was hidden. At night, they emerged, Troy was destroyed and Helen was returned to her husband, Menelaos. Odysseus presence was needed in Troy for it was said that the war could not be won without him, nor Achilles. But while the other Greek kings had sworn an oath to come to the aid of Helen's husband, should she be taken, Odysseus had not. And he was not very eager to leave his kingdom and his family, since the oracle, very popular in those days, had predicted a long absence, should he leave his home. He faked madness, and started ploughing the field, an ox and a donkey attached to the plough.<sup>1</sup> However, Palamedes, a member of the fellowship, was not deceived and placed Telemachos, Odysseus' son, in front of the plough. Odysseus avoided the infant, and thus could not be mad. He then had to leave and would not return for twenty years. The first ten years were spent at Troy, or rather in front of the city's large walls. The battle seemed lost, since the Greeks did not manage to overcome the cities' walls. That is, until Odysseus managed to deceive the Trojans, using the wooden horse (see supra). The surviving Greek warriors then

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<sup>1</sup> Many different versions of Odysseus trick coexist: It is said that he feigned madness and attached a donkey and an ox to the plough. Palamedes was not deceived and places Odysseus' son in front of the plough. Odysseus immediately stopped ploughing and had to leave for Troy (Graves 160f). Another version claims that Palamedes "drew his sword as if to kill him [Telemachus]" (Apollodorus E:3.7) so that Odysseus had no choice but to stop feigning madness.

returned home<sup>2</sup>, or at least tried to. Many of the heroes had already died at Troy<sup>3</sup>, and others died on their way home<sup>4</sup>, or were killed on their arrival<sup>5</sup>. Odysseus was lost at sea for ten years, having angered Poseidon, god of the seas. He lost all his ships, and all his men, and was surrendered to terrible peril. . He faced the sirens (in book 12), the lotus eaters (in book 9), sea monsters (in book 12) and the witches Circe and Calypso (book 10 and 5). But twenty years after having set sail for Troy, he finally reached his dear Ithaca.

On Ithaca many things had changed. During Odysseus absence, Penelope had tried to rule the kingdom herself, since Telemachos was too young. But when rumours arose, claiming that Odysseus was lost at sea or that he had found another woman, suitors started to gather in the palace, asking for Penelope's hand in marriage. Penelope was faithful to her husband, and in order to postpone a possible remarriage she invented a trick of her own. She would not choose a new husband, she told the suitors, until she had finished the shroud for her father-in-law Laërtes. Every day she would retreat to her quarters to weave, but at night, she destroyed what she had woven that day, thus delaying a possible choice. She managed to deceive the suitors for three years, until her maids revealed her trickery. Angry, the suitors demanded that she would choose a husband right that instant and they would not allow further postponing. By that time, Odysseus had returned and he managed to enter the castle, disguised as a beggar. During a conversation between husband and wife, a disguised Odysseus told her to let a bow-shooting contest decide who she would wed. Penelope agreed and claimed she would marry the person that managed to handle Odysseus' bow. None of the suitors succeeded, and after some discussion, Odysseus himself was given a chance to shoot. He of course managed to handle the heavy weapon. He then took revenge on the suitors by killing them

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<sup>2</sup> Nestor of Pylos managed to reach his home without much delay, since he had not angered the gods (Apollodorus E:6.1).

<sup>3 3</sup> For example, Achilles, who was shot in the heel (Apollodorus E:5.3), or Patroclus who was killed by Hector (Ibidem E: 4.6).

<sup>4</sup> Ajax the lesser drowned after clinging to a rock when his ship was destroyed by Athena. (Apollodorus E:6.6).

<sup>5</sup> The most famous example would be Agamemnon, brother of Menelaos and King of Mycenae, who was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus the moment he set foot in his castle (Homer 1956, 4:715-741).

and asked Eurycleia to tell Penelope about the return of her husband and the suitors' demise.

Penelope refused to believe the nursemaid at first, and decided to test her so called husband. She asked the maid to bring out their bed. Odysseus was furious to hear this, thinking that someone had cut the bed out of the tree it was made in. Only then was Penelope convinced that her husband had indeed returned.

#### 4.1.2. Penelope

When it comes to the *Odyssey*, there were two elements that I thought were important for the comparison between Penelope in the epic and Penelope in Margaret Atwood's adaptation. First and foremost, how was Penelope originally portrayed in the *Odyssey*? Secondly, why did Odysseus postpone the reunion with Penelope?

##### 4.1.2.1. Marilyn A. Katz on Penelope's portrayal in the *Odyssey*.

Let us first look at the figure of Penelope as she comes to us in the *Odyssey*, and how she is seen by different scholars.

Penelope is the daughter of king Icarius and the sea goddess Periboea (Graves 160d). Originally, she was named Arnaia, or Arnakia, but was thrown into the sea by her parents at an early age; A flock of purple-striped ducks saved her and her parents renamed her Penelope (Ibidem). Throughout the ages, many scholars have discussed the origins of her name. Many of them tried to link her name either to her fidelity, her being saved by the flock of ducks, or to her famous trick with the weaving of the shroud. Precisely this deceit with the shroud is an important part of Penelope's personality, a part that is often overlooked.

The figure of Penelope has always been identified with faithfulness. In fact, If one was asked to describe Penelope in a couple of words, 'faithful' or 'loyal' would probably be the first words used. Much to the dismay of Marilyn Katz, who thinks that "the understanding of Penelope's κλέος

(virtue) is characteristically restricted to what we might call the simple or denotative meaning, [...] at which it is identical with her capacity for endurance and her faithfulness to Odysseus.” (Katz 5) Her critique is that Penelope is much more than a loyal wife. Therefore, “Penelope’s *kleos* [...] must include everything reported about her in the *Odyssey*.” (Katz 6) Katz refers to the original meaning of *kleos* which means “that which is heard” (Ibidem). One of the most important things mentioned about Penelope apart from her faithfulness is then her craftiness, reflected in the trick with the shroud and the bow string contest. Her craftiness, referred to in Katz’ work with the Greek term *mētis* should also be considered part of her reputation, since “when *kleos* is first attributed to Penelope in the poem, it is in connection with this device” (Katz 4). When Antinous praises Penelope he describes not only her “traditional female virtues” such as “her knowledge of weaving” and her “noble thoughts”, but also her “crafty contrivances” (Ibidem). To Antinous, it’s exactly this craftiness which distinguishes her from the other Greek heroines (Ibidem).

However, when we take a closer look at Penelope’s *kleos*, we must realise that things may not be as they seem. Penelope’s trickery is mentioned multiple times in the *Odyssey*. Her trick with the shroud is first mentioned in book 2, when Antinous complains about Penelope who gives hope to everyone, yet always tries to delay her decision:

Telemachus [...] I tell thee, it is not the Achaean wooers who are anywise at fault, but thine own mother, for she is crafty above all women. For it is now the third year and the fourth will soon pass, since she has been deceiving the hearts of the Achaeans in their breasts. To all she offers hopes, and has promises for each man, sending them messages, but her mind is set on other things. And she devised in her heart this guileful thing also: she set up in her halls a great web, and fell to weaving— fine of thread was the web and very wide; and straightway she spoke among us: “Young men, my wooers, since goodly Odysseus is dead, be patient, though eager for my marriage, until I finish this robe—I would not that my spinning should come to naught—a shroud for the lord Laertes, against the time when the fell fate of grievous death shall strike him down; lest any of the Achaean women in the land should be wroth with me, if he, who had won great possessions, were to lie without a

shroud.’ “So she spoke, and our proud hearts consented. Then day by day she would weave at the great web, but by night would unravel it, when she had let place torches by her. Thus for three years she by her craft kept the Achaeans from knowing, and beguiled them; but when the fourth year came as the seasons rolled on, even then one of her women who knew all told us, and we caught her unravelling the splendid web. So she finished it against her will, perforce (Homer 1919, 2:85-110).

In book 19, Penelope herself recounts a disguised Odysseus how she managed to deceive the suitors and how the deceit was revealed by one of the maids and in book 24, the arrival of the suitors in the underworld makes Agamemnon demand them an explanation for their violent deaths. But whereas Penelope herself sees the trick of the shroud as good, the suitors voice their anger in the lines mentioned above. And while Agamemnon’s song that follows Amphimedon’s recount of the trick of the shroud and their subsequent murder may seem one of praise, recent critics are not at all convinced that Agamemnon’s song is meant to praise Odysseus wife.

As is mentioned above, it is Amphimedon who explains Penelope’s deceit to Agamemnon in the underworld. And when Amphimedon has finished his story, Agamemnon starts a song in which he praises Penelope for her excellence. Nothing out of the ordinary one would think, Penelope has indeed shown impeccable behaviour. Yet, when we investigate the whole of the *Odyssey*, Agamemnon’s song of praise reveals more than is thought at first. Book 24 is the second book where part of the story is told by the dead in the underworld. A similar episode took place in book 11, where Agamemnon describes how he was killed by his wife.<sup>6</sup> Clytemnestra’s reasons for the murder were her new lover Aegisthus and the fact that Agamemnon had sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in

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<sup>6</sup> “So I [Odysseus]spoke and he [Agamemnon]straightway made answer and said: `[. . .] Aegisthus wrought for me death and fate, and slew me with the aid of my accursed wife, [. . .]So I died by a most pitiful death, and round about me the rest of my comrades were slain [. . .] But the most piteous cry that I heard was that of the daughter of Priam, Cassandra, whom guileful Clytemnestra slew by my side. [. . .]But she, the shameless one, turned her back upon me, and even though I was going to the house of Hades deigned neither to draw down my eyelids with her fingers nor to close my mouth. So true is it that there is nothing more dread or more shameless than a woman who puts into her heart such deeds [. . .]but she, with her heart set on utter wickedness, has shed shame on herself and on women yet to be, even upon her that doeth uprightly’ ” (Homer 1919 11: 404-434).

order to evoke winds that would bring the Greek fleet to Troy.<sup>7</sup> To Agamemnon, his gruesome death has lessened the glory he received in his life. Agamemnon thus confirms A.T. Edward's opinion that "just as a hero's death can enhance and preserve κλέος, so a wretched, unworthy death can destroy it" (A.T. Edwards qtd. In Katz 22). Agamemnon's anger at his diminished fame is notably present in his recount of the event in book 11 and seems to linger on in book 24, when he praises Penelope in a song that runs parallel to that of book 11 (Katz 27). Therefore, if we look at the scene in that way, it is no longer Penelope who is highlighted in book 24, but her cousin Clytemnestra. Penelope's loyalty is in stark contrast with Clytemnestra's cruel act upon her husband's arrival and strongly emphasises the latter's unforgivable crime. Katz takes things even further when she claims that "the example of Clytemnestra is advanced as the general type, and displaces that of Penelope in the end" (Katz 28). Penelope now represents a rare type of women, the faithful wife. Sheila Murnaghan seems to agree with Katz when she states:

While the *Odyssey's* portrait of Penelope is one of the most sympathetic treatments of a female character in Greek literature, that portrait is also placed in a wider context of misogyny through the representation of Penelope as an exception to the general rule (Murnaghan qtd. In Katz 28; emphasis added).

It seems that Penelope's loyalty was considered to be exceptional, and that most women would follow Clytemnestra's example, at least according to the *Odyssey*. And by denying Penelope her role as the faithful wife, since Clytemnestra's crude betrayal overshadows it all, Agamemnon "[refuses] closure to one of the principal questions in the poem, that having to do with Penelope's faithfulness [. . .]" (Katz 28). The question of Penelope's faithfulness remains unanswered, and we are left with an uneasy feeling that Penelope might not have been as faithful as we thought her to be.

In prospect of the next part of my dissertation, another interesting remark can be made regarding the *kleos* of our heroine. The trickery that aids to Penelope's reputation as a good and loyal wife, is also

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<sup>7</sup> It is said that Agamemnon had killed a sacred doe. Artemis was furious when she heard about the death of the doe and demanded the sacrifice of Iphigineia. Agamemnon send word to Clytemnestra and pretended that Iphigineia was to marry Achilles. When Clytemnestra found out about the trick, she was furious and swore to have her revenge. However, Artemis pitied the girl, saved her and brought her to Aulis, where she was made high priestess (Apollodorus E:3.21-3.22).

part of Odysseus' virtue. His craftiness made him the hero of the Trojan war, since it brought about the victory of the Greek troops. This fact creates an intriguing parallel between husband and wife. Both personalities are defined not only by the traditional virtues that are acclaimed to men or women, but also by their *dolos* or *metis*, their craftiness. Penelope and Odysseus are thus placed on a more or less equal level, which will be further explored in my discussion of Helen P. Foley's article on reverse similes and sex roles in the *Odyssey*.

#### 4.1.2.2. Chris Emlyn-Jones on the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.

I have already expressed my bewilderment at the prolonged reunion of Penelope and Odysseus. I could not comprehend why Odysseus would elongate his wife's suffering when throughout the *Odyssey* he frequently expresses his grief for being absent from his wife for so long. In book 6 he even wishes Nausicaa to experience a marriage such as his. However, when he arrives on Ithaca, he disguises himself and refuses to reveal his identity. He arrives on Ithaca in book 17, yet, only in book 24 does Odysseus allow Eurycleia, the nursemaid, to inform Penelope of his return. Different explanations can be given, I will discuss four of them.

The first explanation for the postponed reunion of Odysseus and Penelope can be traced back to an older poem than the *Odyssey* itself (Emlyn-Jones: 210). In this poem, the recognition scene between husband and wife took place before Odysseus and Telemachus killed the suitors. In that poem, "the trial of the bow which precipitated the battle was the plan of Penelope and Odysseus acting in collusion" (Ibidem). A strange hypothesis, but the idea of the couple preparing the bow contest together was also present in Homer's text, as in book 24, the suitor Amphimedon explains the situation to Agamemnon with the following words: "He and Telemachus took all the fine weapons, piled them up in the storeroom and bolted the door. Then he cunningly told his wife to place his bow and the iron-ringed axes in front of the Suitors, and set a test for us ill-fated youths, that led to our death" (Homer: 24.167-169, qtd; in Emlyn-Jones 210). However, this explanation is not very satisfactory, since it cannot explain why our author then decided "to expand in this way" (Emlyn-Jones 210).

In the second explanation Odysseus does not immediately inform Penelope of his return fearing his life would be in danger if he did. A decision we cannot disrespect, since the suitors would probably kill him if they were given the chance. He might also distrust Penelope, since he had been absent for twenty years. During that time he had seen Troy's destruction because of a woman, the cousin of his wife, he had met nymphs and goddesses who tried to keep him away from home (Circe

and Calypso), he had seen monstrous women (the sirens) who lured men into their deaths. And, above all, his brother in arms, Agamemnon, king of Mycens, had been killed on his arrival at the palace by his wife Clytemnestra and her suitor Aegisthos. Clytemnestra was Helen's sister and Penelope's cousin. Nestor recounts this cruel murder to Telemachus in book 3, and throughout the *Odyssey*, the cruel fate of Agamemnon is often retold. Odysseus is thus confronted with unfaithfulness and, since he has been absent for 10 more years than Agamemnon, his fear of an unfaithful Penelope seems very logical. Agamemnon himself warns Odysseus and tells him "to return home secretly" (Emlyn-Jones 208) since "women are no longer to be trusted." (Homer 11.456 qtd. In Emlyn-Jones 208) However, various sources have given him information confirming Penelope's faithfulness and Agamemnon himself claims "not that your wife, Odysseus, will ever murder you" (11:444, Ibidem). Moreover, Odysseus mother reassures him when he informs about his wife's well-being that "she remains steadfast in her grief." (Emlyn-Jones 209) Even Athena confirms Penelope's loyalty, claiming that even though she accepts the gifts from the suitors "her mind has other desires" (IbidemIbidem). Even though this explanation might seem satisfactory, it has not managed to completely convince me of its righteousness.

A third explanation is that the reunion between the two is a "gradual process, carried on at a largely subconscious, or intuitive level" (Emlyn-Jones 210). Scholars defending this hypothesis claim that Penelope immediately recognizes the beggar as being Odysseus in disguise, but that her fear of disappointment causes her to look for hidden signals to confirm his true identity. As Emlyn-Jones correctly notes, Penelope starts to develop feelings for the stranger, since he resembles her absent husband and talks about his return. Anne Amory claims that the conversations of Penelope with the beggar confirm that he is indeed Odysseus, but her "fear of making a mistake in just this situation" causes her recognition to remain "largely unconscious" (Amory qtd. In Emlyn-Jones: 210-11). Penelope's decision of holding a bow contest can then be seen as an externalization of her hopes. After telling her dream of the eagle descending into the palace grounds and killing the twelve geese to the beggar, he tells her that the eagle was Odysseus who would return soon to kill the

suitors. Penelope thus saw confirmed that Odysseus had already returned, or would return in time (Emlyn-Jones: 211).

The fourth and final explanation places the *Odyssey* back in its oral tradition, claiming that the elongated recognition scene is a feature of oral poetry. As Emlyn -Jones notes: “Homeric poems have their origin in a tradition of oral poetry which, in terms of both detailed composition and more general thematic structure, has a great deal in common with traditional poetry of other cultures” (216). One of these common features is the motif of recognition. This motif consists of a series of elements. Emlyn-Jones lays bare the necessary elements of the motif. The motif starts with a disguised Odysseus who meets people demanding him to reveal his identity. He constructs a fake identity but emphasizes that he has met Odysseus once. Odysseus then continues and tests the loyalty of the character addressing him. The character can pass the test, in the case of Eumaeus, the swine herd, or they can fail, as is the case with the suitors. Odysseus then reveals his true identity, and when his claim is doubted, he offers “sign as a proof of identity” (217) “Recognition” (IbidemIbidem) then occurs, tears are shed, and the characters then go “on to business” (IbidemIbidem). We are confronted with this sequence on various occasions in the *Odyssey*. For example, in book 16, Telemachus visits the swine herd Eumaeus. Odysseus, disguised as a beggar had previously found lodgings there, and the three of them sit together and talk about Telemachus’ adventures and the situation on Ithaca during his absence. Eumaeus is then sent to the castle. Athena allows Odysseus to reveal himself to his son, and touches him with her wand, making him younger again. However, when Odysseus reveals himself to his son, the latter refuses to believe him. Odysseus tells how Athena disguised him at first, and since Athena is Odysseus protector, Telemachus believes him, and rejoices at his father’s return. Together they then start making plans to kill the suitors. An example of someone who fails to pass the test of loyalty is Melanthe, one of the twelve maids. In book 18 she taunts him mercilessly when Odysseus tells her to go to Penelope to try and lighten her mood. She scorns him, and claims he is not worthy of sitting in the palace between the rich men, but should be sleeping in the stables. By scorning her master, she makes a grave mistake, a mistake she will pay with her life.

This motif is also present in what Emlyn-Jones calls the “ ‘Return of the long-absent husband’ theme” (217). Some of the characteristics of this theme is a very cruel husband, who refuses to reveal his identity to his grieving wife, and test her by advising her to marry the stranger (217). Another important feature of this theme is the presence of different *σήμαδια* or signs “the disbelieving wife demands from the husband” (ibid.) when he announces his return. These signs become “progressively more intimate” (ibid.) until the recognition is finally succeeded, and the happy couple can rejoice at their reunion. We can claim that this recognition scheme is used in the *Odyssey* as well, albeit slightly altered, since Odysseus is not cruel, yet he wishes to provoke his wife (218). However, Homer plays with the conventions of return theme, since he deliberately postpones the reunion of the two lovers. In book 19, the audience expects that the long conversation between disguised Odysseus and his grieving wife will lead to the former revealing himself. Penelope has already enquired him about his country of origin, and Odysseus has told her about his journey during which he met Odysseus. When he starts to describe the robes Odysseus was wearing Penelope starts to cry, remembering her husband as he departed for Troy. The most logical step now would be Odysseus revealing himself, since it would be “dramatically the obvious thing to do,” (ibid.) and because “it follows the traditional sequence ending” (Ibidem). However, even though Penelope’s emotional outburst (she dissolves into tears at the memory of her husband) and the simile used by the author, comparing her tears to snow, melted by the East wind (218) seem typical of the final stage of the return scheme, a true recognition has not taken place. Emlyn-Jones calls this scene “a spoof-recognition” (219), since, although this scene reminds us of a true recognition, we must remember scenes four until seven have not yet taken place. According to Emlyn-Jones:

[S]tages 4-7 have not yet taken place: at the beginning of book 23 Odysseus has not yet revealed himself, Penelope has not yet expressed disbelief and demanded her *sēma*. To have Penelope fly straight into Odysseus’ arms would be not only far less effective; it would be antitraditional in a manner unthinkable for the Homeric poet, who exploited tradition but did not ignore it (220).

Book 23 brings the solution. When Eurycleia reveals to Penelope that the beggar is indeed Odysseus, Penelope refuses to believe this and, by angering Odysseus when she mentions the bed, she tricks him into providing her with a sign. After this sign has proven the beggar's true identity, the couple can rejoice at their reunion, before restoring the order in the kingdom once more.

We can conclude rather briefly. As is so often the case with famous works, even a small segment of such a work can be given different interpretations. As Emlyn-Jones stated herself, the idea that the postponement of the reunion can be traced back to an older poem where the recognition took place before the suitors were killed is not very satisfactory, since it does not explain why Homer would have altered the story so drastically. Explaining the postponement of the reunion as a form of self-protection seems more plausible, yet at the same time it fails to do justice to Penelope's image of the faithful wife, or to Odysseus' love for his wife. The final opinion, including the *Odyssey* in an old tradition where certain conditions need to be fulfilled in order for a true recognition to take place seems the most satisfactory.

#### 4.1.2.3. Helene P. Foley on reverse similes and sex roles.

Helene P. Foley reflects on Penelope's depiction in the *Odyssey*. In her essay "Reverse Similes and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*", she notes that Penelope and Odysseus are equated (189) by two similes. One of those compares Penelope's reputation to that of "a king whose land and people prosper under him" (189). Penelope is represented as a king, and therefore, this comparison evokes "an inversion of social role [. . .] with an equivalent difference of focus or point-of-view" since a woman now practices a function generally associated with men. These "reverse similes" (190) as Foley names them establish "a sense of identity between people in different social or sex roles" and a "loss of stability" (190). This inversion of the sexes was also present in Comedy, and we can see this inversion reflected in Shakespeare's *Rosalind*, who disguises herself as a man, or in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. The absence of Odysseus makes Penelope an extremely powerful woman, queen of her island. But regardless of the long absence of her husband, Penelope never abuses the power given to her, on the contrary, she tries to maintain order on Ithaca (191). This proved to be a meticulous task.

The *Odyssey* opens with “Ithaca in disarray.” Young men spend their best years trying to woo Penelope, hoping to become the new king. Also “the assembly [has not] met in years” (193) and the inhabitants of Ithaca no longer show a strong loyalty to the monarchy. Telemachus starts to develop hostile feelings towards his mother, because of the suitors’ gluttony and their hostile behaviour towards him. Odysseus’ mother commits suicide, unable to bear her son’s absence any longer, and his father leaves the castle. It seems that Penelope is the only person on the island who desperately tries to “maintain the cultural norm” (193). She tries to enlarge Odysseus’ wealth by demanding a dowry from the suitors, she continuously defends her husband and tries to keep Odysseus’ disrupted family together (193).

A second simile with important consequences is the one where Penelope is compared to a lion, in Book 4. Not a lioness, but a beleaguered lion. Lion imagery is normally solely used for men, think of other similes in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus is compared to a lion, or to Richard the Lionheart etc. These two similes show that “Penelope comes very close to enacting the role of a man” (193). However, in order to maintain her leading role she uses a woman’s weapons: her weaving skills to post-pone her decision regarding the suitors, her “Athena like intelligence” (193), with which she manages to outsmart the suitors and which she uses to test the beggar who turns out to be Odysseus (193) and last but not least her power as a woman to maintain the household. (194) What Penelope has achieved, according to Foley, is stopping change on Ithaca (194). By allowing the suitors to woo her for a long time, she prevented them from growing up. They did not get married, nor did they practice to become strong warriors who might have had a chance to defeat Odysseus or Telemachus. Also, her grieving delays a possible remarriage, thus “safeguarding” (194) Odysseus position. Yet, no matter how much she wishes to stop change completely, this cannot be done. Telemachus is growing up and this leads to growing tensions between mother and son, since he no longer can tolerate the suitors’ rude behaviour. And, despite Penelope’s leadership, Ithaca does not experience “full social growth” (195).

When Odysseus finally returns, we can see that the original hierarchy and social relations are restored, albeit only after Penelope has given him her complete trust, and has acknowledged his

return. Penelope steps aside and lets Odysseus take his place as Ithaca's king (194). Before their reunion, when Odysseus is still in disguise, he praises Penelope for her firm rule, and compares her to a just king, who brings prosperity to his land. And although Penelope must like to hear these words, she claims that because of her loyalty to her missing husband she managed to succeed in doing so. She however takes pride in her "manly" (196) treatment of guests and strangers. Yet at the same time she admits she cannot offer "full hospitality without her husband by her side" (Ibidem). The similarities between Penelope and Odysseus show that Homer in this story, was ahead of his time. A woman is compared to a lion, the symbol of male power, she rules a nation without a king by her side, and is just as witty as her husband.

### 4.1.3. The Maids

Margaret Atwood dedicates a large part of her novella to the maids. When I looked through the *Odyssey* to see how the maids are presented there, I noticed that, even though they make several quick appearances throughout the *Odyssey*, we know practically nothing about them. We can see them accompanying Penelope<sup>8</sup> and they grieve with their mistress when Medon informs her of a conspiracy against her son<sup>9</sup>. It is their chatter that causes Penelope to wake up after Athena has visited in her sleep<sup>10</sup> and the maids are the ones to carry the gifts upstairs, gifts Penelope had received from the suitors, in the hope of winning her over<sup>11</sup>. Three of the maids are discussed in more detail: Eurycleia, the nursemaid, Eurynome, the house-keeper and Melantho.

The tale of Eurycleia, nursemaid of both Odysseus and Telemachus, is told in book 1<sup>12</sup>. She has raised both Odysseus and Telemachus, and both men are very fond of her. She is even given the keys

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<sup>8</sup> "And from her upper chamber the daughter of Icarus, wise Penelope, heard his wondrous song, and she went down the high stairway from her chamber, not alone, for two handmaids attended her. Now when the fair lady had come to the wooers, she stood by the door-post of the well-built hall, holding before her face her shining veil; and a faithful handmaid stood on either side of her" (1:329-335)

<sup>9</sup> "So he spoke, and departed through the house of Odysseus, and on her fell a cloud of soul-consuming grief, and she had no more the heart to sit upon one of the many seats that were in the room, but down upon the threshold of her fair-wrought chamber she sank, moaning piteously, and round about her wailed her handmaids, even all that were in the house, both young and old. Among these with sobs of lamentation spoke Penelope [...]" (4:715-721).

<sup>10</sup> "[...] and she [Athena] made her [Penelope] taller, too, and statelier to behold, and made her whiter than new-sawn ivory. Now when she had done this the fair goddess departed, and the white-armed handmaids came forth from the chamber and drew near with sound of talking. Then sweet sleep released Penelope [...]" (18:195-199).

<sup>11</sup> "his squire brought a necklace, a jewel exceeding fair. So of the Achaeans one brought one fair gift and one another. But she thereafter, the fair lady, went up to her upper chamber, and her handmaids bare for her the beautiful gifts" (18:300-304).

<sup>12</sup> "Her long ago Laertes had bought with his wealth, when she was in her first youth, and gave for her the price of twenty oxen; and he honored her even as he honored his faithful wife in his halls, but he never lay with her in love, for he shunned the wrath of his wife. She it was who bore for Telemachus the blazing torches" (1:430-434).

to the storerooms<sup>13</sup>. In book 19, she is the first to recognise her master (instead of Penelope) when she recognises the scar on his thigh<sup>14</sup> while she is washing his feet:

But Odysseus sat him down away from the hearth and straightway turned himself toward the darkness, for he at once had a foreboding at heart that, as she touched him, she might note a scar, and the truth be made manifest. So she drew near and began to wash her lord, and straightway knew the scar of the wound which long ago a boar had dealt him with his white tusk, when Odysseus had gone to Parnassus to visit Autolycus and the sons of Autolycus, his mother's noble father, who excelled all men in thievery and in oaths (19:389-395).

She is overjoyed, and drops the basin of water. Odysseus makes her promise not to tell Penelope of his return. She is informed about the ambush Odysseus and Telemachus are planning for the suitors and will later provide the names of the unfaithful maids.

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<sup>13</sup>Shut were the double doors, close-fitted; and there both night and day a stewardess abode, who guarded all in wisdom of mind, Eurycleia, daughter of Ops, son of Peisenor. To her now Telemachus, when he had called her to the treasure-chamber, spoke, and said [...] (2:344-349).

<sup>14</sup> “[...] how, while he was hunting, a boar had struck him with his white tusk when he had gone to Parnassus with the sons of Autolycus. This scar the old dame, when she had taken the limb in the flat of her hands, knew by the touch, and she let fall the foot. Into the basin the leg fell, and the brazen vessel rang” (19: 465-470).

Eurynome is Penelope's housekeeper. She sits with her mistress when Penelope meets the disguised Odysseus<sup>15</sup>, and curses the suitors for their outrageous behaviour. She agrees with Penelope that she should talk to Telemachus and advises her mistress to refresh herself before she goes to the suitors. Penelope however asks Eurynome not to tempt her, since she does not wish to flatter the suitors.<sup>16</sup>

Melantho is the only one of the three who chooses sides with the suitors. In book 18, a fragment of text is awarded to her, in which she is described as ungrateful and mean:

So he spoke, and the maids broke into a laugh, and glanced at one another. And fair-cheeked Melantho rated him shamefully, Melantho, whom Dolius begot, but whom Penelope had reared and cherished as her own child, and gave her playthings to her heart's desire. Yet even so she had at heart no sorrow for Penelope, but she loved Eurymachus and was wont to lie with him (Homer 1919, 18:320-325).

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<sup>15</sup> "So she spoke, and Eurynome speedily brought a polished chair and set it in place, and on it cast a fleece" (Homer 1919, 19: 100-101).

<sup>16</sup> "Then the housewife, Eurynome, spoke to her and said: "Aye, verily, child, all this hast thou spoken aright. Go, then, reveal thy word to thy son and hide it not; but first wash thy body and anoint thy face, and go not as thou art with both cheeks stained with tears. Go, for it is ill to grieve ever without ceasing. For now, behold, thy son is of such an age, and it has been thy dearest prayer to the immortals to see him a bearded man." Then wise Penelope answered her again: "Eurynome, beguile me not thus in thy love to wash my body and anoint me with oil. All beauty of mine have the gods, that hold Olympus, destroyed since the day when my lord departed in the hollow ships. But bid Autonoe and Hippodameia come to me, that they may stand by my side in the hall. Alone I will not go among men, for I am ashamed" (18:169-184).

Melantho was raised by Penelope as if she were her own, as becomes clear in the text. Yet in the following excerpt she scorns her master mercilessly. She also starts a relationship with Eurymachus<sup>17</sup>, one of the suitors. Of course, in her defence it is highly probable that she did not recognise the beggar sitting in front of her. He had been absent for twenty years and there is a possibility that Melantho was only born after Odysseus' departure.

In book 18, her words are the following:

She [Melantho] then rated Odysseus with reviling words: "Wretched stranger, thou art but a crack-brained fellow, unwilling to go to a smithy to sleep, or to a common lodge, but pratest here continually, unabashed in the company of many lords, and hast no fear at heart. Surely wine has mastered thy wits, or else thy mind is ever thus, that thou dost babble idly. Art thou beside thyself because thou hast beaten that vagrant Irus? Beware, lest presently another better than Irus shall rise up against thee to beat thee about the head with heavy hands, and befoul thee with streams of blood, and send thee forth from the house." (Homer 1919, 18: 326-336)

After these harsh words, Odysseus warns the maids that their jesting words will cause their deaths, should he tell Telemachus how his guest is treated. And a description of their punishment causes the girls to run away frightened<sup>18</sup>. However, Melantho has not yet learned her lesson, for in book 19 she mocks her disguised master once more:

But Melantho began again a second time to rate Odysseus, saying: "Stranger, wilt thou even now still be a plague to us through the night, roaming through the house, and wilt thou spy

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<sup>17</sup> Eurymachus was the leader of the suitors, together with Antinous. According to Icarius, Penelope's father, and her brothers, he was the best possible marriage partner, since he provided the best gifts (Homer 1919, 15:16-19). Telemachus calls him the best of the suitors (15:519-522) but his taunting of Odysseus in book 18 causes his death in book 23.

<sup>18</sup> "Then with an angry glance from beneath his brows Odysseus of many wiles answered her: 'Presently shall I go yonder, thou shameless thing, and tell Telemachus, since thou speakest thus, that on the spot he may cut thee limb from limb.' So he spoke, and with his words scattered the women, who fled through the hall, and the limbs of each were loosened beneath her in terror, for they thought that he spoke truth. But Odysseus took his stand by the burning braziers to give light, and looked upon all the men" (18: 337-344).

upon the women? Nay, get thee forth, thou wretch, and be content with thy supper, or straightway shalt thou even be smitten with a torch, and so go forth (19: 65-69).

The rude behaviour of Melantho and eleven others results in their deaths in book 22. It is the nursemaid, Eurycleia, who gives Odysseus the names of the fickle ones:

‘But come, name thou over to me the women in the halls, which ones dishonor me and which are guiltless.’ Then the dear nurse Eurycleia answered him: ‘ Then verily, my child, will I tell thee all the truth. Fifty women servants hast thou in the halls, women that we have taught to do their work, to card the wool and bear the lot of slaves. Of these twelve in all have set their feet in the way of shamelessness, and regard not me nor Penelope herself’ (22: 417-425).

Their punishment is severe. Before they die, they are forced to remove the bodies from the suitors and they have to clean the hall where the battle took place:

Then Odysseus of many wiles answered her, and said: ‘Wake her not yet, but do thou bid come hither the women, who in time past have contrived shameful deeds.’ [...] ‘Begin now to bear forth the dead bodies and bid the women help you, and thereafter cleanse the beautiful chairs and the tables with water and porous sponges. But when you have set all the house in order, lead the women forth from the well-built hall to a place between the dome<sup>1</sup> and the goodly fence of the court, and there strike them down with your long swords, until you take away the life from them all, and they forget the love which they had at the bidding of the wooers, when they lay with them in secret.’ So he spoke, and the women came all in a throng, wailing terribly and shedding big tears (22: 430-448).

It is Telemachus who hangs the women, a sight that Homer describes in great detail, comparing the maids to doves:

First they bore forth the bodies of the slain and set them down beneath the portico  
[...]Then wise Telemachus was the first to speak to the others, saying: ‘Let it be by

no clean death that I take the lives of these women, who on my own head have poured reproaches and on my mother, and were wont to lie with the wooers.' So he spoke, and tied the cable of a dark-prowed ship to a great pillar and flung it round the dome, stretching it on high that none might reach the ground with her feet. And as when long-winged thrushes or doves fall into a snare that is set in a thicket, as they seek to reach their resting-place, and hateful is the bed that gives them welcome, even so the women held their heads in a row, and round the necks of all nooses were laid, that they might die most piteously. And they writhed a little while with their feet, but not long (22: 449-473).

We can conclude that in the *Odyssey*, the maids get no voice of their own. Apart from Eurycleia and Melanthe we know nothing about the women's personalities, and even though Eurynome appears multiple times in the text, we know nothing of her parentage or family. It can be argued that the maids serve as an example to show how infidelity is punished and only centuries (millennia even) later will these women get a voice in Margaret Atwood's novella.

## 4.2. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.

### 4.2.1. Other Rewritings

The *Penelopiad* is not the first rewriting of Penelope's story. Throughout the ages, adaptations of the story appeared, in literature and the visual arts, but the twentieth century in particular provided us with new outlooks on the story. In *Griekse mythen, vroeger en nu*, Freddy Decreus dedicates a chapter to the rewriting of the myths of Penelope, Iocaste and Cassandra. However, Penelope's role or character was only drastically rewritten during the twentieth century, (235)<sup>19</sup>, in the previous centuries, the traditional story of Penelope was preserved. Painters such as John William Waterhouse (1849 - 1917), depicted her waiting for her husband, weaving the shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. The suitors are lurking through the window, impatient for her to finish the cloth (cf. fig. 2). By emphasising Penelope's faithfulness, Waterhouse stuck to the original story, and could fit in with the Victorian moral, present at the time, where faithfulness was very highly valued (Decreus: 235). David Ligare, on the other hand, depicted Penelope with her head turned away from the sea (cf. fig. 1). She is no longer waiting for her husband, maybe she just stopped caring about him (Decreus: 235).

As Decreus notes, movements such as poststructuralism and postmodernism caused people to look at literature differently (247). Much attention is given to "the self-reflexivity of a text" (247)<sup>20</sup>. The image of good, faithful Penelope is no longer taken for granted (247)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> "Daarenboven heeft de herschrijving van haar rol eigenlijk moeten wachten tot het einde van de twintigste eeuw" (Decreus: 235)

<sup>20</sup> "In het verlengde van het poststructuralisme en postmodernisme die eerder de voorwaarden tot vertellen bestuderen dan het traditioneel vertelde, een uitgesproken aandacht betonen voor de wijze van zelfreflectie die in een tekst aanwezig is [. . .]".

<sup>21</sup> "[. . .] die[. . .] het eenduidig en braaf beeld van de thuiszittende Penelope niet zomaar aanvaarden".

## 5. Theoretical Framework

### 5.1. Mikhail Bakhtin

#### 5.1.1. Introduction.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin is a name no literary critic can deny. His works were nearly lost to the West, due to the Cold War. Only during the nineteen seventies, his essays were translated, and his ideas were introduced in the West, where they had an enormous influence on the literary field. In *the Dialogic Imagination* (1981), four of Bakhtin's essays are collected, in which Bakhtin explains his theory of the novel. In his "Epic and Novel" (written around 1930), Bakhtin discusses this relatively new genre by comparing it with the epic and other so called high genres. He tries to locate the genre's roots and some of its characteristics, although the latter proves to be a horrendous task.

#### 5.1.2. Novelization.

What we must realize, is that the novel is a genre that is younger than the others, as it started to develop in a period where a written language already existed. Other genres, such as the epic, have a long oral tradition preceding written witnesses such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* (Bakhtin 3). The development of these genres has already been completed, causing these genres to come across as "antiquated" (4), while the novel is still developing, has no stable form and is therefore more strongly influenced by contemporary reality than the other genres. The other genres however, complement each other, or as Bakhtin says "harmoniously reinforce each other" (4). The novel, as a much younger genre is left out and stands on its own.

The novel tends to "parody other genres", laying bare their conventions of language and form. At the same time, by incorporating these genres in the novelistic structure, these genres are "reformulated" and "re-accentuated", reinvented as it were (5).

In periods where the novel is the dominant genre, we can see that other genres are novelized. The novel took a leading role in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but also long before that during

the Hellenistic period. This novelization of other genres causes these genres to “begin to sound in different ways” (6). As a result, traditional genres who try to preserve their “old canonic nature”(Ibidem), their characteristics, now are perceived as “stylized” (Ibidem) i.e. artificial. This “parodic” adaptation of other genres is of great importance to the novel. Moreover, these parodies are seen as predecessors of the novel as we know it. Yet none of these earlier forms managed to stabilize itself and instability is a trait that would become characteristic for the novel (6).

The consequences this so-called novelization implies are that genres lose their set of standard characteristics and become more flexible. A second characteristic is that the language “renews itself”(7) since new input finds its way in these old genres. Thirdly, elements of “laughter, humour and self-parody” (7) now find their way into the high genres, when before these elements were associated with low culture, and with what Bakhtin calls “the carnivalesque.” Fourthly, the novel, with its focus on “contemporary reality” (7) inserts a certain “openendedness” (7) that had not been there before since the higher genres mainly focussed on the “the absolute past” (13) a term Bakhtin found in the works of Goethe and Schiller.

The question still is, what caused this novelization? Why were these genres changed? Two reasons for this can be given. Firstly as mentioned above, the dominant position of the novel in certain periods causes other genres to adapt to the popular one (7), one would almost compare it with fashion trends. We must, however, realise that the changes in reality itself also caused this change. (7) But the novel, still a flexible genre when these changes in society occurred, was the only genre fast/ flexible enough to incorporate those changes, and, according to Bakhtin did this genre manage to foresee “the future development of literature” (7) and “sparks the renovation of other genres” (7).

### 5.1.3. Defining the Novel.

However, a problem arises when we want to look at the characteristics of the novel, because “the novel cannot be defined as a whole” (8). While questions about various subtypes of the novel can be given a plausible and satisfactory answer, questions about the genre as a whole cannot be solved. In the essay, a threefold structure discusses some of the attempts at defining the novel. The attempts of

literary historians, of early novel writers, and of the novel writers of the eighteenth century, whose theory was collected by Georg Hegel. First of all, Bakhtin claims that “mere cataloging” (8) is done by literary historians and that this does not lead to a solution:

The results of these descriptions never succeed in giving us as much as a hint of comprehensive formula for the novel as a genre. In addition, the experts have not managed to isolate a single definite, stable characteristic of the novel – without adding a reservation, which immediately disqualifies it altogether as a generic characteristic (8).

Examples of such “characteristics with reservations” (8) are the idea that “the novel is a complicated genre” (8-9) while it is one of the most mass-produced genres, or that “the novel is a prose genre” while we can also find “novels in verse” (9).

Novelist writers themselves also tried to define the genre they used, but most of the times, they show us “the novel’s struggle with other genres and with itself (with other dominant and fashionable variants of the novel)” (9). While they do give us insight in the peculiar position of the novel, they too cannot give us a satisfactory definition.

The final attempt at defining the novel came from the eighteenth century, where a new type of novel was created. This type of novel was preceded by a “series of statements” (9) such as Henry Fielding’s musings on his hero Tom Jones, the protagonist in his *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749). These musings on the novel’s possible characteristics that Fielding and others published in their novels resulted in “the theory of the novel later formulated by Hegel” (10). This definition has four main conditions. Firstly, the novel should not be poetic, since the poetic is found in “other genres of imaginative literature” (Ibidem). Secondly, the hero of the novel is different from the epic or tragic hero, since those heroes are either “too positively” or “negatively” portrayed (10). A novelistic person has both positive and negative features (Ibidem). The third characteristic of the novel is that the hero of the novel evolves throughout the story, whereas the epic hero is completed when the story has only just begun. Finally, the novel ought to become for the contemporary world, what the epic meant to the past (Ibidem). This theory clearly criticises the other genres, and the relation of those genres and reality (Ibidem). Compared to the real world, these genres are too

abstract, and their heroes do not appeal to us. Bakhtin finishes this part of the essay by adding three characteristics of which he thinks they “distinguish the novel from other genres.” (11) First of all, the novel implies “a stylistic three-dimensionality.” (11) Secondly, there is a “temporal change” (11) in the novel, a genre using the present, where other genres focussed on the past. Thirdly, the novel offers a “new zone for structuring literary images”, that zone being the present. (11) These three traits are interrelated and were all strongly affected by one of the biggest changes in European history, polyglossia. Polyglossia is explained as the “coexistence of two or more language, or distinct varieties of the same language, within a speech community” (Oxford Dictionary Online). Polyglossia is not new, Bakhtin adds this phenomenon already existed in ancient Greece, where different dialects were spoken, but notes that “writing was realised in pure languages” (Bakhtin 12). In the new, polyglot world, the different languages help to understand one another, and a new relationship between language and object is the result of this change. The “relationship between language and [...] the real world” (Ibidem) changed completely. The other genres had developed in an era of monoglossia, a time when the relationship between language and world was not what it had become now, whereas the novel was still developing when polyglossia arose which made it easier for this genre to adept. This caused the novel to obtain “leadership in the process of developing and renewing literature in its linguistic and stylistic dimension”(Ibidem). The novel thus provides us with a new outlook on the world, and on literature itself.

#### 5.1.4. Epic and Novel: a brief comparison.

Bakhtin also discusses three basic characteristics of the epic (13). First and foremost, the epic always handles about the national past (Ibidem), a past of heroes, and of “firsts”(Ibidem) and “bests” (Ibidem). The epic has always been about the past, even before the stories were written down. As a result, the epic deals with an “inaccessible past” (Ibidem) and this is reflected in the genre’s discourse, tone and manner, which are all very different from contemporary language use(Ibidem). The epic leaves no room for “openendedness” (15), it comes to us as a genre that is finished. The

epic also deals with “valorised temporal categories” (Ibidem), all was good in this period when a nation’s history was written (Ibidem). The past is “sacred” (Ibidem) and when dealing with it, one uses memory instead of knowledge, used to deal with the novel. During the Hellenistic period, a closer bond with the Trojan story cycle was felt, which reflected in the genre used to discuss the story material, the novel (Ibidem).

Secondly, the epic deals with the national tradition. As Bakhtin claims that “the epic past [...] is preserved and revealed only in the form of national tradition” (Ibidem) and “epic discourse is discourse handed down by tradition” (Ibidem) The epic’s main concerns are “impersonality”, “sacrosanct tradition”, a “commonly held point of view” and a certain “piety for the subject described” (16) As a result, no personal input can be given. One might alter the words of the epic, but never its content or outcome.

Thirdly, there is always an “epic distance from contemporary reality” (13). This distance concerns the events and heroes portrayed (17) as well as the point of view and evaluation that the epic provides us with. The epic change makes changes in the story impossible and shows the epic world as complete (Ibidem).

Although the discussion above handles about the epic alone, these characteristics can be applied to the other high genres (tragedy, lyric) as well. At the base of those genres lies the same evaluation of time, there is an equal amount of attention for tradition and a similar hierarchical distance. (18) Since the past is a closed category, there is no room for innovation, contemporaneity is something the high genres do not wish to use.(19) But precisely this contemporaneity is what made the novel so important. The novel and other low genres are associated with present times, with “living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought” (20) whereas the dead “are removed from this sphere of contact” (Ibidem).

When discussing the roots of the novel, Bakhtin thinks these can be found in the “culture of laughter” (21) where high genres were parodied, mocking heroes, demi-gods and many others. This “culture” in classical times consisted of a wide range of genres, such as “bucolic poems”, “fables” and “Roman satire” (Ibidem). Their novelistic spirit is reflected in the lack of distance between the

contemporary world and the events described. (22) In these genres, the memory that the epic so highly valued is of no importance, since one “ridicules [...] to forget” (23). The object once in the past, is now removed from this “distanced plane” (Ibidem) and placed in the present. The most important genre to Bakhtin is the “Menippean satire” (21). In this genre, a prominent place is given to the role of laughter, the “world is turned upside down” (26). Here, the heroic past is mixed with the contemporary world, and the result is a “dialogic” and “multi-styled” work, filled with “parodies and travesties” (26).

The novel comes into contact with the spontaneous, inconclusive present, and uses this. The novelist himself is drawn to what is not completed. In the novel, the language of the hero and the author are on the same level, the level of the present, whereas before the hero was located in the past, and no metaphorical bridge could be built between past and present. Now, both are located in the present, and therefore the language of author and hero can intermingle.

Yet this focus on the present has certain consequences. For one, we are now faced with a world that is not yet complete. The world of the novel “unfolds as the story continues” (30). The novel thus can be seen as an “uncompleted process” (Ibidem) the “immutability” (Ibidem) of the epic has disappeared.

One can of course say that the epic is incomplete as well. The *Illiad* for example ends with Hector’s burial (32). Nothing about the outcome of the war is said, Achilles does not die, Troy is not destroyed. However, since the story about the Trojan war was (and to a large extent still is) common knowledge, the author could start and end wherever in the story he wanted, his audience knew the complete story behind it. (31) However, the novel is different. New novels come with new storylines, and we do not know what will happen. Also, the author of the novel has a “surpluz knowledge” (32) about the hero of the story. Figures such as Achilles were “common property”, everyone knew what happened to him. In the novel, only the author knows what will happen.

We can easily relate to characters of the novel, some of the novels provide an interesting alternative to our lives, something the epic did not manage to do (Ibidem).

Lastly, Bakhtin compares the presentation of characters in epic and novel. Very interesting differences can be noted. In the high genres, such as the epic, our character is a figure of the (absolute) past. He is finished, he “has already become everything he wanted to become” (34). Also, the character is “completely externalized” (Ibidem) meaning that the opinion of others (author, audience or the community) about himself coincides with how he sees himself. (34) Also, a single, unified world view is presented in these genres(Ibidem).

In the novel, our hero is still developing himself. Therefore, he needs a future, which is something high heroes did not need, since they were, as we saw, completed. The reality the hero lives in is not fixed, but is “one of the possible realities” (35). And, contrary to the high genres, the novel presents a tension between the internalized hero (his thoughts about himself) and the externalized hero (how the community sees him.)

#### 5.1.5. Conclusion.

Finally, A brief summary of Bakhtin’s ideas might be in place. To begin with, the novel’s concern with the present is “revolutionary” (38) and clearly distinguishes this genre from the elder, ‘high’ genres. The roots of the genre can be found in folklore, in laughter, in genres such as the (Menippean) satire and Socratic dialogues. Its concern with the present provides a more personal point of view, and allows us to identify with the characters in the story. And since the novel is a genre still developing, we can only guess what its future holds.

Margaret Atwood tries to rewrite Penelope’s story, rooted in the epic tradition. She tries to revive a woman, who might have never existed, who died long before these poems were written down, long before writing became of importance. She tries to adept epic content to a new form. Penelope speaks to us from the underworld, a woman shedding her light on the events. Her language is far from epic, sometimes even plain and vulgar. Her actions are not epic either, because she lies, she doubts, she regrets. The form used to tell her story again is far from epic, different genres are used throughout the story and different voices give their opinion on certain events or people. No longer is the singer

or poet the sole narrator of these tales. Penelope adapts to the present day situation, but can people accept her change?

## 5.2. Carl Gustav Jung on archetypes.

In this part of the dissertation we will have a closer look at the study of the archetypes. Myths are fascinating and many critics have argued that there is more to them than meets the eye. Carl Gustav Jung's notion of the archetypes is one of the many explanations on how myths should be interpreted. We will look at what archetypes really are and at the different archetypes that are of importance with regards to Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. In his theory, Jung focuses on the unconscious. According to Jung, the unconscious is further subdivided into a personal unconscious and a collective unconscious. To Jung, the collective unconscious is the deepest of the two. It is "inborn" (Jung 4) meaning that its contents are practically identical for every human being, regardless of ethnicity or background (4). It is precisely there that archetypes can be found, a series of ideas that are present in the minds of everyone. However, we must realise that there is a clear difference between archetypes as they appear in the unconscious, for example in dreams, and archetypes as they are contested in myths or fairy tales. While the archetypes in a dreams are more personal and may even seem incomprehensible, the archetypes appearing in myths etc. are generally simplified. Most of the archetypes are connected with family life and take a more or less human form (Decreus 149). Jung believes that myths and fairy tales are stories explaining the archetypes, externalizing them (Decreus 155). In these stories, the main characters discover themselves, and parts of themselves they had repressed. The search for oneself is often depicted as a journey, a search for a valuable object, a descend into the underworld (155-156). The archetypes we will be discussing are the mother archetype, the trickster and the hero. However, we will not go into great detail in this part of the dissertation, as the explanation of the archetypes will be illustrated with examples from the book in section 4.2. (cf. infra).

One of the best known archetypes is the mother archetype. It is a very ambiguous element to work with since it "appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects" (Jung 81) such as "[...] the personal mother and grandmother [...] then any woman with whom a relationship exists – for example, a nurse or governess or perhaps a remote ancestress. Then there are what might be termed mothers in a figurative sense. To this category belongs the goddess, and especially the Mother of

God, The Virgin and Sophia” (IbidemIbidem). According to Decreus, the “Magna Mater” (Decreus 152) or the Great Goddess is “the most primitive element”(Ibidem) of the mother archetype. Another element of the mother archetype is the “fertile mother”<sup>22</sup> (IbidemIbidem) and in this context, Artemis is mentioned as a symbol of “chastity and fertility” (Ibidem) Pallas Athena is mentioned as well, as “the wise mother”<sup>23</sup> (153). Finally, the mother archetype is also used as a symbol of regeneration and rebirth (Ibidem). Jung mentions some of the symbols that accompany the mother archetype: “The archetype is often associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness: the cornucopia (i.e. the horn of plenty), a ploughed field, a garden” (Jung 81) and “All these symbols can have a positive, favourable meaning or a negative, evil meaning” (Ibidem).

Let us now look at the trickster archetype. One can recognise a trickster by its wit. The image of the trickster can be found in many cultures (Hyde 6), Lewis Hyde explains in his essay “Trickster makes this World”. The trickster can “move between heaven and earth, and between the living and the death” (6). He can be “the messenger of the gods and sometimes the guide of souls” (6) The Greek deity Hermes is an example of a trickster figure, if we follow Hyde’s description. Hermes is the messenger of the gods, and can carry messages from the gods to the humans, from the upper world to the underworld. It is Hermes who is told to warn Odysseus for Circe’s sorcery when he arrives on her island in book 10. Hermes then gives Odysseus a magical plant which makes him immune to Circe’s magic. Throughout the ages Odysseus himself is seen as an archetypal trickster figure, since he is known for his wit. He fooled the Trojans with the wooden horse, causing their demise. By referring to himself as nobody he deceived the Cyclops, and on his arrival at Ithaca, he deceived everyone by pretending to be a beggar, before he made himself known. As a trickster, Odysseus manages to cross the boundaries between the world of the dead and the living when he goes to visit the underworld to see Teiresias, a famous seer. However, in *The Penelopiad* we see that both Penelope and the maids can embody the trickster archetype (cf. infra).

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<sup>22</sup> “De alleen maar vruchtbare moeder, type Isis [...] Later werd Artemis in Griekenland het symbool van de kuisheid en vruchtbaarheid.” (Decreus: 152)

<sup>23</sup> “De wijze moeder[...] Type: Pallas Athena, [...]”

## 6. Textual Analysis:

When reading *The Penelopiad* the differences with the *Odyssey* are quite remarkable. I want to see if there are remarkable differences concerning the content of both works before looking if Bakhtin's ideas expressed in his essay "Epic and Novel" can be found in the 'novelization' of the *Odyssey*. I also dedicated a part of the analysis to archetypal imagery and to other rewritings of the Penelope myth.

### 6.1. The Penelopiad versus the Odyssey: a focus on Penelope and a voice for the maids.

It is not my intention to go into great detail about the various differences between Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Homer's the *Odyssey*, but I do want to point out some differences that have serious implications for the story.

Margaret Atwood writes in her introduction to *The Penelopiad*: "The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (Atwood introduction xxi). The story of the maids then explores two main questions: "What led to the hanging of the maids and what was Penelope really up to" (Ibidem)? The choruses of the maids are unique. Although Inge Merkel also dedicates a chorus to the maids in her *Odysseus und Penelope: Ein ganz gewöhnliche Ehe*, it has never been done on such a large scale. Before moving on to the content of the chorus lines, I want to compare the portrayal of the maids in *The Penelopiad* to that of the *Odyssey*.

While in the *Odyssey*, the maids are portrayed as treacherous, Penelope provides us with another version of the story. The maids had to spy on the suitors, so Penelope could make sure that neither Telemachus or herself would be in any kind of danger:

I told my twelve young maids – the loveliest, the most beguiling - to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent. No one knew of my instructions but myself and the maids in question; I chose not to share the secret with Eurycleia – in hindsight, a grave mistake. This plan came to grief. Several of the girls were

unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist (115).

If the maids were only doing what Penelope had ordered them, Melanthe's scolding of her master in the *Odyssey* should not be seen as betrayal. Penelope herself says the following:

I even instructed them to say rude and disrespectful things about me and Telemachus, and about Odysseus as well, in order to further the illusion. They threw themselves into this project with a will: Melanthe of the Pretty Cheeks was particularly adept at it, and had lots of fun thinking up snide remarks. There is indeed something delightful about being able to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act (117).

However, Penelope tells us that the maids were not entirely innocent since "several of them did fall in love with the men who had used them so badly [...] I knew it perfectly well. I forgave them, however" (117-118). Yet, for the first time, the maids are presented to us as loyal, and their deaths are not the result of their improper behaviour but of a disastrous case of miscommunication.

Euryclia is also presented in a different way. Whereas in the *Odyssey* she is described as the loyal nursemaid, Penelope shows that she had difficulties with Euryclia at first, since "she left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried ... she would be right there to tell me that wasn't how Odysseus like things done" (63). However, when Euryclia tells Odysseus about the unfaithful maids, Penelope gives two explanations for the event: "It was my fault! I hadn't told her about the scheme [...] There could be a more sinister explanation. What if Euryclia was aware of my agreement with the maids [...] What if she singled them out and had them killed out of resentment at being excluded and the desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus" (160-161)?

The maids claim that Penelope had been unfaithful to Odysseus, and that, together with Euryclia, she decided to make sure the girls were dead, so they could not tell Odysseus about her betrayal: "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” (150). The idea of Penelope as being unfaithful is not new, since Apollodorus claimed in his *Bibliotheka*:

But some say that Penelope was seduced by Antinoos and was sent away by Odysseus to her father, Icarius, and that when she arrived in Mantinea in Arcadia she gave birth to Pan by Hermes. Others, however, say that she died at the hands of Odysseus himself because of Amphinomos, for they say she had been seduced by this man (Apollodorus 7: 39-39).

However, this is the first time that the maids claim that they were not punished for their affairs with the suitors, but because of the affairs of their mistress. Penelope contradicts this, claiming she had not been unfaithful. Therefore, the reader still is not given a satisfactory answer, something the maids playfully refer to when they sing “and we leave you not any the wiser” (93) when they are talking about Odysseus adventures in chapter 13.

The fact that Penelope orders the maids to spy on the suitors but refuses to tell Eurycleia about this plan is of course one of the most dramatic changes of Homer’s story. Before, one could argue that the maids were only rightly punished for betraying their master and mistress. But when Penelope tells the readers that she asked the maids “to hang around the Suitors and spy on them” (115) and that she “chose not to share the secret with Eurycleia” (Ibidem), the ‘punishment’ of the maids becomes downright murder. And Penelope’s promise that Odysseus would be “very pleased” (117) with the maids when he would return home comes across as very painful and ironic.

Another difference with the *Odyssey*, can be found in the maids’ chorus where they doubt their mistress’ faithfulness. Even though Homer’ work does not explicitly states that Penelope was indeed loyal, the maids blatantly provides us with the name of her lover and claim that Penelope killed them to save her skin (147-152). However, since Penelope keeps telling us she remained faithful, we can only wonder who is telling the truth (if there is such a thing).

## 6.2. Epic and Novel.

In the following part of my thesis, I will use the ideas Mikhail Bakhtin discussed in his essay “Epic and Novel”, studying the change the epic undergoes when it is adapted to the form of the novel(la). I will discuss the language use of the characters, the characters themselves, the (lack of) hierarchy and the events as they appear in *The Penelopiad*.

### 6.2.1. Language.

The Homeric epic, and the epic in general, together with the other “high” genres as they are called, has always been associated with a heightened, formal and distant language. The formulae used to address people, and the descriptions of various events, people and so on, are very different from everyday, “colloquial” speech. Let us for example compare the opening sequence of the *Odyssey* with Penelope’s opening of *The Penelopiad*.

The *Odyssey* starts with a plea from the author, Homer, to the muses so they would help him with the composing of this “song” or story. The following is said:

Tell me, Muse, of that man of many resources, who wandered far and wide, after sacking the, holy citadel of Troy. Many the men whose cities he saw, whose ways he learned. Many the sorrows he suffered at sea, while trying to bring himself and his friends back alive. Yet despite his wishes he failed to save them, because of their own un-wisdom, foolishly eating the cattle of Helios, the Sun, so the god denied them their return. Tell us of these things, beginning where you will, Goddess, Daughter of Zeus (Homer 2004, 1:1-10).

As we can see, this short fragment contains many references to deities, a typical trait of the epic, where gods and fate played an important role. Homer relies on the muses to provide him with inspiration and story material. Apart from that, the language used in this fragment does not resemble our daily language. Because it is more formal, it comes across as impersonal, distant.

Penelope herself, on the other hand, uses a different discourse when she wonders where to begin her story:

Where shall I begin? There are only two choices: at the beginning or not at the beginning.

The real beginning would be the beginning of the world, after which one thing has led to another; but since there are differences of opinion about that, I'll begin with my own birth.

My father was Kin Icarius of Sparta. My mother was a Naiad. Daughters of naiads were a dime in a dozen in those days; the place was crawling with them. (Atwood 7)

Penelope's discourse here is very colloquial. She also refuses to start her story with the traditional beginning of the world, and shows that she does not think highly of gods, demi-gods or nymphs, referring to Naiads as "a dime in a dozen" (7). Her approach is very different from Homer's. But precisely because her speech is colloquial and because she is not using high formulae to describe the gods, the readers can identify themselves with Penelope. The idea that one should be able to identify with the characters of a work of fiction was used in the novel, the epic on the other hand wanted and managed to establish a distance between the audience and the heroes of the stories told.

In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope tries to deal with the people whom she thinks made her life miserable. The two main causes of her misery are, according to herself, the suitors, with Antinous as their leader, and cousin Helen, the cause of the Trojan war, and therefore, the cause of Odysseus' departure.

When Penelope mentions her cousin Helen, whom she truly hates, she cannot hide her true feelings about her and this strong dislike is reflected in her language use. For example, in the chapter "Helen ruins my life", she asks her readers the following:

I've often wondered whether, if Helen hadn't been so puffed up with vanity, we might all have been spared the sufferings and sorrows she brought down on our heads by her selfishness and her deranged lust (Atwood 7; emphasis added).

This Penelope is very different from her depiction in the *Odyssey*, where she is modest and forgiving. After all, she forgave her husband an absence of twenty years. During a “face-to-face” conversation with “cousin Helen”, Penelope uses some words that even we, contemporary readers would find rather harsh when she sneers at Helen “My wittiness, or your bare-naked tits-and-ass bath treat for the dead?” (Atwood 155) Even Helen herself remarks “You’re such a cynic [. . .] and so vulgar” (Atwood 15)! In the chapter “News of Helen”, we can also find a snide remark at Helen’s address with the words “Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes” (Atwood 131; emphasis added). Here Penelope juxtaposes the epic description of Helen, the most beautiful woman on earth with her own opinion about her cousin, the source of her misery.

Antinous, self-proclaimed leader of the suitors, also gets a snide remark at his address in the chapter “The suitors stuff their faces”. In this chapter Penelope finally dares to ask Antinous why the suitors were really interested in her since, “it was hardly my [Penelope’s] divine beauty” (Atwood 101). When Antinous then confesses that it was indeed her wealth that attracted them, and he tells her this in a rather crude way, Penelope answers the following: “You can put the arrow back now. To tell you the truth, I feel a surge of joy, every time I see it sticking through your lying, gluttonous neck” (Atwood 103).

As a consequence, since Penelope uses colloquial language, her character loses its epic *grandeur* and she becomes a more realistic, more human character, with real emotions, whereas the epic heroes were more or less static. And since the epic heroes were “externalized” (Bakhtin 34) their opinion about themselves coincided with what the audience and the community thought about him/her. In *The Penelopiad* Penelope’s opinion about herself does not seem to coincide with that of her maids, or her cousin Helen. Several versions of Penelope start to exist next to another, and the reader is left to choose which one he/she wishes to believe.

The maids’ use of colloquial language seems more logical, since they belong to the lower classes. However, what is remarkable is that, apart from using colloquial speech when discussing epic events, they also contrast their lives to that of Penelope, and by using vulgarities when

concerning their own lives, they manage to create a harsh contrast between high and low lives. For example, when discussing the birth of Telemachus in the chorus line “The birth of Telemachus: An Idyll” the maids first describe the birth in an epic way: “Nine months he sailed the wine-read seas of his mother’s blood/ Out of the cave of dreaded Night, of sleep,/ Of troubling dreams he sailed/ In his frail dark boat, the boat of himself/ ... “ (66), but later use a more colloquial style to contrast the births and lives of themselves to that of Telemachus. For example, Penelope “presented a princeling” (67), while their mothers simply “spawned [ . . . ] hatched out their clutch” (Ibidem). The mothers of the maids are presented as “sore-footed ... Bought, traded, captured, kidnapped from serfs and strangers”, Penelope is one of the “royal queens” (Ibidem). In the chorus line “Dreamboats, a ballad”, the maids tell us they are only at peace when they are asleep since “when the morning wakes us up: / Once more we toil and slave,/ And hoist our skirts at their commands / For every prick and knave” (Atwood 126; emphasis added).

We can thus conclude that the high, epic language is lost in *The Penelopiad*, and causes the reader to identify and sympathize with the characters. This coincides with Bakhtin’s ideas when he claims that the novel with its focus on the present caused a more personal relationship with the characters to be established.

### 6.2.2. Hierarchy.

The epic is concerned with respecting the traditional hierarchy. Gods are at the top of this pyramid structure, followed by demi-gods, heroes and humans. Atwood erases this hierarchy. Penelope leaves the high discourse, choosing for a more colloquial language use, which places her on the same level as the maids instead of above them. The idea that Penelope sees her maids as her equals is reflected in *The Penelopiad*, when Penelope tells us about the twelve maids she entrusted a special mission to. She asks them to “pretend to be in love with” (Atwood 117) the suitors and they help her to destroy the shroud at night (Atwood 114). Penelope starts to see them as her children (especially Melantho) and her friends. As she claims in the chapter “The shroud”: “They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace ... we told stories as we worked ... we shared riddles; we made jokes ... we were almost like sisters”(Atwood: 114).

Apart from the crumbling hierarchy between Penelope and the maids, the respect for the gods, heroes and other mythical creatures that is immense in the epic, is lost in *The Penelopiad*. We can already notice that, when describing her youth, Penelope mentions her mother: “My mother was a Naiad. Daughters of Naiads were a dime a dozen in those days ... Nevertheless, it never hurts to be of semi-divine birth. Or it never hurts immediately”(Atwood 7). In these lines, Penelope does not think highly of her semi-divine status. In the epic however, a character was often traced back to a god, or semi-god, and epic heroes were used by later generations who claimed their founding family member had been of semi-divine birth. However, they rarely told how their founding father was conceived. Penelope sarcastically remarks that most of these semi-gods are the result of a rape:

All the rest was just copulation of various kinds- rapes or seductions, love affairs or one-night stands, with gods who said they were shepherds or shepherds who said they were gods.

Occasionally a goddess might get mixed up in it too, [. . .] but the reward for the man as a shortened life and often a violent death (23).

Penelope also claims that the gods love to make people suffer. During Odysseus absence, Penelope claims her sister came to her in a dream, ordered by Pallas Athena, who favoured Odysseus for his wit. Iphtime, Penelope’s sister, tells her not to worry, that Telemachus would return safely and that she has been sent by the goddess because she did not want to see her suffer. But when she asks about Odysseus, she receives no answer on which Penelope remarks:

So much for the gods not wanting me to suffer. They all tease. I might as well been a stray dog, pelted with stones or with its tail set alight for their amusement. Not the fat and bones of animals, but our suffering, is what they love to savour (124).

In this brief excerpt, Penelope discharges the idea that the gods are worried about our wellbeing, since humans only serve to entertain the gods, and they treat us the way some would treat animals, teasing us. The “fat and bones” mentioned in the fragment refer to the sacrifices that were done in ancient Greece. To Penelope, these are futile, since the gods prefer our suffering above these

sacrifices. Penelope goes as far as denying that the gods would help mortals since “the gods aren’t listening anyway. As far as I can tell they’ve gone to sleep” (24). In that same paragraph Penelope also mocks the epic idea of the gods visiting people in their dreams since, in the contemporary world “you don’t get visitations from the gods the way people used to unless you’re on drugs” (Ibidem). Moreover, Penelope is not impressed with the idea of Zeus as all knowing: “only an idiot would have been deceived by a bag of bad cow parts disguised as good ones, and Zeus was deceived; which goes to show that the gods were not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe” (39-40). Others criticise the gods as well. The maids in their chorus lines are angry that people from semi divine birth receive more attention in the epic when they mention their parents: “these parents were not gods, they were not demi-gods, [...] not nymphs or Naiads” ( 13).

### 6.2.3. Events.

In the *Odyssey*, we find Odysseus being confronted with some very peculiar creatures. He meets nymphs and goddesses, sea-monsters, sirens and cannibals. He is forced to spend more time at sea because he angers Poseidon, when he blinds Polyphemus the Cyclops, one of sea god’s sons.

In *The Penelopiad* however, these events are presented to us in a different way. The mythical, “high” character of the events is lost when Penelope tells us that various versions of these adventures exist, and she provides us with alternative versions. In the chapter “Waiting” she talks about the rumours about Odysseus’ adventures that reach Ithaca:

Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of call and the men had mutinied said some; no, said others, they’d eaten a magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus had saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships” (83).

The event told in this excerpt is known in the epic as their stay on the island of the lotus eaters. When his men ate this plant, they refused to go home, so Odysseus had to force them. However, the version of the mutiny would of course be very plausible, it just does not fit into the epic genre.

Odysseus' visit to the underworld is reduced to him spending "the night in a gloomy cave full of bats" (91) and the sirens, mythical creatures who uses their beautiful voices to lures innocent sailors, are depicted as "courtesans" (Ibidem) who "were known for their musical talents and their fancy feathered outfits" (Ibidem). The bloodshed on the island of the Laestrygonians, cannibals is reduced to being "a brawl of the usual kind ... with ear-bitings and nosebleeds and stabbings and eviscerations" (83)

By reducing the epic events to small incidents with normal people instead of gods, the epic characteristics are more or less destroyed. The heroes are now normal people experiencing incidents that can happen in everyday life. They are not so different from other people as we thought they were, or as the epic wanted us to believe.

#### 6.2.4. Characters.

In the epic, the characters are treated with the utmost respect and most of the times, they are depicted as flawless. However, when they make a mistake because they have become too self-confident, the gods are quick to punish them, claiming the characters committed *hubris*, "excessive self confidence" ("hubris").

In *The Penelopiad*, the epic characters are degraded. Penelope's anger with Helen results in the creation of a different portrait of a character known as the most beautiful woman in the world. She is still beautiful, but Penelope presents her to us with an evil side. Penelope herself asks: "Why is it that really beautiful people think everyone else in the world exists merely for their amusement" (33-34)? Helen is also described as someone who "wants all the attention for herself" (33). Moreover, Helen is quite content that so many people died during the Athenian war. This war occurred when Helen was abducted by Theseus and Peirithous. The two of them wanted to marry her, but her brothers Castor and Pollux, started a war against Athens, where Theseus lived to get her back. During that war, many died and Penelope claims that Helen loved that part "the most" (75) since "she took their deaths as a tribute to herself" (Ibidem).

Of course, Helen is not the only one who receives a sneer from our main character. In the epic, a series of lofty adjectives describing heroes and gods usually accompany the name of the character. This is called an epithet. Penelope also acclaims some qualities to the people she describes, but they often confront those people with their flaws, instead of their qualities. When describing Telemachus heritage she says the following: “Not for nothing was he the great-grandson of Autolycus, friend of Hermes, the arch-cheat, and the son of Wily Odysseus of the soothing voice, fruitful in false invention, persuader of men and deluder of women” (133; emphasis added).

We must of course not forget how Penelope herself comes to us. Throughout the ages she was the perfect example of the waiting, faithful, grieving woman. Yet the maids show a different Penelope in their chorus line “The Perils of Penelope, a Drama.” (147) They accuse her of having been unfaithful, since “with Amphinomus she was sleeping” (147). When Odysseus returned, Penelope realised the maids had to be murdered to avoid her secret from being discovered. She asked Eurycleia to tell Odysseus that the twelve maids who knew about her affair were in fact “feckless and disloyal”(150). Helen on the other hand says that Penelope “likes the quiet life” (33) and refers to her “legendary modesty” (154), by which she seems to confirm Penelope’s description of herself.

Another interesting element in the story is that Penelope refers to herself as real. She tells us she once was a real person, not the mythical character she is perceived to be. In the chapter “Asphodel”, Penelope recounts how she sometimes wants to visit “the really deep levels” (17) to help her “remember what it was like to have real hunger ... real fatigue” (Ibidem). She also mentions how she “had a whole run of dreams ... that have never been recorded, for I never told them to a living soul” (124). The maids echo this idea in their “Anthropology Lecture”, where they say that “you don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice” (168) since “that might be too upsetting” (Ibidem).

### 6.2.5. Epic Distance.

An important characteristic of the epic, in fact, a characteristic of all high genres in general, is their concern with distance. Of course, all the elements discussed above are in fact related with this characteristic, but it might be useful to explore it further. The events described in these genres all happened long ago, in a past that was never accessible to anyone of us, not even to the composer of the poem, or to the bards who sung about it before it the stories were written down.

In *The Penelopiad*, however, the clean break between past and present is blurred. Penelope talks about her life as if she is standing in front of us. She no longer is speaking from the past. We, the audience, are addressed, and are even asked questions. Elements from present life also find their way into the novel, emphasizing how contemporary elements are added to an ancient story. For example, Penelope mentions the internet in the chapter “Asphodel” with the following words: “More recently, some of us have been able to infiltrate the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe, and to travel around that way, looking out at the world through the flat, illuminated surfaces that serve as domestic shrines” (19). In that same chapter she also expresses her fascination for “the invention of the light bulb” (Ibidem). Penelope also mentions that she “could hardly count on family support”(11) , when talking about the difficult relationship between herself and her parents. This anachronism again emphasizes how the novel is situated in the present, while the epic was always about the past.

Of course, the most direct introduction of the present day world in the epic, is when the maids present the trial of Odysseus “as videotaped by the maids” (175). After centuries, the maids want justice, since their violent deaths were not what they deserved. However, when the furies are called as witnesses, and “grey-eyed Pallas Athena”(184) the situation starts to resemble a comedy more than a serious trial, especially when the judge wishes to “dismiss the case” (182) since he does not want to be found “guilty of an anachronism” (182).

Another element of distance in the epic, concerns the characters. In high genres, these characters are completely externalized, as Bakhtin notes, the opinion of the community, the audience

and the author about a character completely coincides with how that character sees himself. The character is “fully finished” Bakhtin claims, (Bakhtin 34) he has become all he had wanted to become. This is not true in the novel. In the novel, the character always has a part of him that is hidden to the outer world, his emotions, doubts or fears are not all shared with the others. He still needs to develop himself, something we see reflected in Odysseus’ frequent rebirths: “off he goes again, making a beeline for the River Lethe to be born again” (189). Odysseus has not yet come to terms with himself, he is not who he wants to be, therefore he has “another try at life” (186). Also, when reading a novel for the first time, we cannot be sure what the outcome will be, whereas everyone knew the story told in the epics.

#### 6.2.6. Conclusion.

We can conclude by saying that the epic material undergoes an important change when it is converted to the form of the novel(la). The distance between the past of the story and the present of the audience is blurred when Penelope addresses us, the reader, from the underworld where she is currently staying. The story of Odysseus and Penelope is actualised by adding the scene in the courtroom, by various references to present day elements such as internet, the light bulb and so forth. The character come across as more human. Penelope displays various emotions, from jealousy to regret. Her language is no longer the high language of the epic but a more colloquial, sometimes even vulgar variant. The gods are no longer treated with the respect they earned in Homer’s work of art, they are criticised, Penelope even doubts their existence. The events of the epic are sometimes degraded, and become rather comical, for example when the sirens are nothing more than courtesans, and the Cyclops is reduced to an innkeeper. The boundary that existed between the high genres and the lower genres now seems to have blurred.

### 6.3. Archetypal Imagery.

In this part of the dissertation we will look at the various archetypes mentioned in the theoretical framework of this dissertation. Atwood has used the trickster figure, the hero and the great goddess, but she also altered the existing characteristics.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood uses the image of the “Great Mother” (Staels 108) as Staels notes in her essay “*The Penelopiad and Weight: Contemporary Parodic and Burlesque transformations of Classical Myths.*” This archetype refers to “the lost matriarchal culture, the female-centred religion, that is generally associated with the Mycenaean-Minoan culture” (Ibidem). The Great Mother archetype has many different aspects, such as fertility, love, wisdom and rebirth and is known to create as well as destroy. (Decreus 152) In Greek culture the goddess most commonly associated with the Great Mother or Great Goddess archetype was Artemis, who became “a symbol of chastity and fertility” (Ibidem).

In the chapter “An Anthropology Lecture”, the maids compare Penelope to Artemis, the moon goddess, and call themselves her followers: “For we were not simply maids. We were not mere slaves and drudges. Oh no!... Could it be that we were not the twelve maids, but the twelve maidens? The twelve moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal but deadly goddess of the moon?” (Atwood 163-164). Artemis indeed was always accompanied by a group of nymphs (Decreus 171). She was also a vengeful person. She punished several people, including Actaeon when he spied on her while she was bathing. This story is mentioned in the lecture as well: “Artemis renewed hers [her virginity] by bating in a spring dyed with the blood of Actaeon” (Atwood 164). The maids also refer to the fact that “the Olympian religion ... superseded and suppressed” (Robins qtd. In Decreus 93) this “earlier Aegean religion, dominated by the figure of a Mother Goddess” (Ibidem) by remarking that “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” (Atwood 165). When the maids are jesting the idea that their hanging could be seen as part of a fertility rite, they are referring to the work of Sir James Frazer. His book *The Golden Bough*

appeared in twelve volumes between 1890 and 1915 (Coupe 21). It is “organised like a detective novel” (Ibidem) and investigates the murder of the priest king of Nemi. In Nemi, there was a shrine in honour of Diana and Virbius. Any man could become the new priest king of the shrine, providing that he killed the previous leader and plucked a branch from a sacred tree in the forest. What Frazer wanted to know was why killing the previous leader was necessary. Using what Coupe calls the “comparative method” (23), Frazer compared small aspects of the customs at Nemi with customs found in other cultures and came up with the following answer: “The god or impersonator has to die precisely because his business is fertility. The community depends on him, or so it believes, for its own survival. If the god does not die he cannot be reborn to fertilise the goddess, and so there will be no new crops”(24). In that way, we could interpret the killing of the maids as Odysseus claiming leadership on the house. Yet Atwood’s maids state that they were killed to serve as a substitute for Odysseus himself. In that case, Odysseus’ murder of the maids would cause the land to grow infertile. Atwood thus counteracts Frazer's opinion and by doing so emphasises that there is no valid reason for the killing of the maids.

Let us now look at the trickster figure. Odysseus himself can be seen as a trickster figure. As mentioned before (cf. 4.2.) the trickster figure can move between past and present, between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Odysseus himself visits the underworld to speak to Teiresias, a trip mentioned in “The Wily Captain, a Sea Shanty” where the maids sing: “To the isle of the dead then he next took his way,/ Filled a trent up with blood, held the spirits at bay,/ Till he learned what Teiresias, the seer, had to say,/ Odysseus the artfullest dodger!” (Atwood 96). When he visits his wife in the underworld, he again crosses the boundary between the dead and the living. Moreover, Odysseus is associated with other famous trickster figures such as Hermes: “ ‘Don’t gamble with Odysseus, the friend of Hermes,’ they said. ‘You’ll never win’”(31). His grandfather, Autolycus, was also known for his tricks: “This was like saying he was a cheat and a thief. His grandfather Autolycus was well known for these very qualities, and was reputed never to have won anything fairly in his life” (Ibidem).

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood preserves the trickster characteristics Penelope already had in the *Odyssey*. Penelope refers to the trick of the shroud: “I set up a large piece of weaving on my loom and said it was a shroud for my father-in-law, Laertes [...]” (Atwood 112) and to the trick with the bed: “I couldn’t resist teasing him one last time. I ordered Eurycleia to move the bed [...] Assuming that someone had cut through his cherished bedpost, Odysseus lost his temper at once [...] I [...] claimed that he’d passed the bedpost test [...]” (171). Yet Atwood gives her some extra trickster characteristics. In the novella, Penelope crosses the boundaries between the living and the dead, since she is addressing us from the underworld, referring to her location as “down here” (1). However, a tragic characteristic of the trickster is that he/she often gets deceived him/herself: “Penelope however shares the trickster’s ambiguous status, for she is also a fool in Atwood’s revisionary story” (Staels 109). Penelope orders the maids to spy on the suitors. As a result they are “unfortunately raped” (Atwood 115). Above that, she also chooses not to inform Eurycleia about her plan, “in hindsight, a grave mistake” (Ibidem). The result is that the nursemaid tell Odysseus the twelve maids were disloyal, for which they are punished by Odysseus. A trickster figure is also commonly associated with both creation and destruction, anthropologist Paul Radin tells us that the “trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer [...]” (Radin qtd. in Hyde 10) When we apply this idea to Atwood’s Penelope, her weaving and destroying of the shroud seems to reflect it perfectly: “All day I would work away at my loom, weaving diligently ... But at night I would undo what I had accomplished, so the shroud never got any bigger” (Atwood 113)

The maids too can be seen as trickster figures. They mislead the suitors, flirting with them only to report their findings to their mistress at night. They too now speak to us from the underworld, crossing the boundary between life and death. They are fooled when their flirting causes some of them to be sexually abused, eventually leading to their death when Odysseus returns home. Yet their most important element is that the maids as tricksters “help others to achieve deeper knowledge about themselves” (Staels 109). The maids force Odysseus to see that his hanging of the maids served as a cover-up operation since he could not deal with his adultery on his way home: “it was an act of grudging, it was an act of spite, it was an honour killing” (Atwood 193), the maids sing, “How

virtuous you felt, how righteous, how purified, now that you'd got rid of the plump young dirty dirt-girls inside your head" (192). Unhappy with their treatment, the maids tell Odysseus how "you can't get rid of us, wherever you go [...] we can see through all your disguises . . . we're right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke [...]" (Ibidem)

But the trickster figure can also refer to the author him/herself. Atwood as a trickster cleverly rewrites classical myths. (Staels: 109), placing the old stories in a new context, by adding new voices in the form of cousin Helen and, most importantly, the maids. She travels between the heydays of the epic and the present where the novel is very prominently present, adapting old materials to a new form, adapting both the characteristics of the epic as the archetypes.

The traditional features of the hero are present in Atwood's work. Odysseus heroically slays the suitors and is said to have visited the underworld to see Teireisias. Yet Atwood actualises this archetype when Penelope tells us that Odysseus "'s been a French general, he's been a Mongolian invader, [...] an inventor, an advertising man" (Atwood 189-190). However, Atwood adds a little twist, since none of his lives end happily: "It's always ended badly, with a suicide or an accident or a death in battle or an assassination, and then he's back here again" 190). This reflects Deceus' idea that the quest of the hero equals a deeper quest for personal knowledge, deeper insight; since Odysseus cannot acknowledge that he struggles to overcome his past experiences, he cannot find the deeper insights he needs and therefore he keeps on searching.

To conclude: in her novella, Atwood uses archetypes that were already present in the *Odyssey*, such as the trickster and the hero but on the other hand she creates new archetypes. Moreover, she alters the traditional archetypes when the hero archetype does not seem to reach the end of his journey (Odysseus many lives never end happily) or when her trickster figures are female,

while Hyde claimed that female tricksters are rare. Atwood thus both saves the traditional myth and innovates, acting like a trickster figure herself.

#### 6.4. The Penelopiad versus other rewritings of the Penelope myth.

When I started my research, I quickly discovered that other authors apart from Atwood had written about Penelope. Inge Merkel, Luigi Malerba and Clemence McLaren too wrote a novel about Odysseus' wife. In the following section, I will discuss these rewritings, giving special attention to their similarities with Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and the information the authors gathered from Homer's *Odyssey*.

##### 6.4.1. Inge Merkel: *Eine ganz gewöhnliche Ehe*.

Inge Merkel only started writing after she had finished a successful career as Latin and Greek teacher. In her novel *Eine Ganz gewöhnliche Ehe*, Merkel uses her knowledge of Greek antiquity to rewrite the myth of Odysseus and Penelope. This work, published in 1987, precedes the other rewritings by a decade, but already proved to be very innovative. Before I compare the novel to Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, I quickly want to point out some interesting differences with the *Odyssey*.

Contrary to the *Odyssey*, that starts with Odysseus' arrival on the island of Nausicäa, Merkel starts her narrative earlier, depicting the arrival of the suitors at Sparta, trying to win Helen's hand in marriage. Merkel finishes her novel with Odysseus' death, another remarkable difference. Especially because his death is rather tragic. When trying to defend a group of young women from being abducted, he is fatally wounded. (Merkel 362) Merkel also adds a chapter "Strange Gods" in which Odysseus talks about different religions. He mentions the Egyptian pyramids and their belief in an afterlife (Merkel 316-319) and Hinduism (320-323).

Let us now compare Merkel's work to that of Atwood. One element that immediately got my attention, was the use of a chorus. Just like Atwood, Merkel uses a chorus line in which a group of people express their feelings about the events that were told in the previous pages. The difference is that, while Atwood dedicates these chorus lines solely to the maids, in Merkel's work the chorus lines reflect the feelings of many people who were not heard in the *Odyssey*, such as the Trojan

survivors (Merkel 307-309), nymphs (175-176) and Naiads (107-108). Especially the chorus of the widows of Odysseus' men (66-67) and of the mothers of Telemachus' men (164-166), struck me, since Merkel for the first time moves the attention from the heroes to the other people involved. And rightly so, because did anyone ever talk about the lives of Ithaca's widows? Did anyone care what happened to those who survived the destruction of Troy?

Merkel's Penelope is quite different from Atwood's Penelope. Atwood's Penelope clearly states that the marriage was arranged: "Thus it went without saying that a marriage would be arranged for me when the time came" (Atwood 25), repeated when Penelope states: "... since it wasn't up to me to choose my husband..." (30). Odysseus was not even seen as an option: He[Odysseus] was not considered – by the maids at least - to be a serious candidate for my hand (...); he had the manners of a small town big shot" (31). Merkel's Penelope on the other hand actively engages in the choice of her future husband: "She needed something different, and was looking for it"<sup>24</sup> (Merkel 20) And when Penelope thinks Odysseus is what she wants Merkel says: "It was Penelope of course, the woman, who now took matters in her own hands ..." (23). Merkel also provides us with a hard working Penelope: "No chore scared her of, she helped wherever she could and soon received the respect from even the most scornful and stubborn maids"<sup>25</sup> (32). A stark contrast with Atwood's Penelope: "Now I was running the vast estates of Odysseus by myself. In no way had I been prepared for such a task, during my early life at Sparta. I was a princess, after all, and work was what other people did ... So in the palace of Ithaca I had to learn from scratch" (Atwood 85; 86).

The relationship between Penelope and Eurycleia however, is in both cases a sensitive spot. In *The Penelopiad*, Eurycleia is introduced with the following words:

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<sup>24</sup> "Ze had behoefte aan iets anders en zocht er ook naar."

<sup>25</sup> "Reeds in de eerste weken zag zij hoe bedreven Penelope zich in huis gedroeg, hoe ze op akkers en weiden rondkeek en in kooien en stalen een ervaring toonde waartoe men een koningsdochter uit Sparta niet in staat achtte. Ze schrok voor geen karwei terug, hielp overal kundig mee en dwong doordoor ook bij de altijd tot spot en weerspanningheid geneigde maagden al snel respect en gehoorzaamheid af."

The woman who gave me the most trouble at first was Odysseus' former nurse, Eurycleia[...] Eurycleia made a point of taking me under her wing, leading me about the palace to show me where everything was, and, as she kept saying, 'how we do things here' [...] She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn't how Odysseus liked things done (Atwood 60;61;63)

However, Penelope must admit that "She did make herself invaluable when Telemachus was born. I am honour bound to record that" (63). Merkel's Penelope experiences a similar problem: "It would depend on her [Eurycleia] how her life in the house of Laertes would be" (Merkel 31) And it is again Eurycleia who helps her during childbirth (42-47). In both stories Anticleia, Laertes' wife and Odysseus mother is portrayed as a passive character. Compare for example "Penelope knew from the start that Anticleia, the mother, barely counted<sup>26</sup>" (Merkel 30) with "[m]y mother-in-law was a circumspect. She was a prune-mouthed woman, and though she gave me a formal welcome I could tell she didn't approve of me." (Atwood 60)

Another similarity is found in the recognition of Odysseus. Both Penelopes immediately recognised their husband. And where Atwood's Penelope does not want to hurt her husband's sense of pride (cf. discussion on Malerba infra), Merkel's Penelope wants to make him suffer because of Calypso<sup>27</sup>. Remarkable is Merkel's concern for the 'sign' (cf. discussion supra) When Telemachus utters "Mother, cruel mother, is your heart made of stone?<sup>28</sup>" because Penelope seemingly refuses to acknowledge her husband's return, Penelope's only answer is "If it is truly Odysseus, [...], we will recognise one another. We have a sign<sup>29</sup>" (Merkel 208). When the secret of the bed is then told,

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<sup>26</sup> "Van haar zou het afhangen hoe haar toekomstige leven in het huis van Laërtes vorm zou krijgen."

<sup>27</sup> Odysseus spent seven years on Calypso's island. (Hyginus 125: 16;17)

<sup>28</sup> Remark how strongly this sentence echoes the *Odyssey*: "Mother, ungentle Mother! Tyrannous! ... No Flint so hard is as a woman's hart (sic)" (Homer 1956, 23: 151;159)

<sup>29</sup> "Zou het werkelijk Odysseus zijn, [...] dan zullen we elkaar wel herkennen,wij beiden. Wij hebben immers een teken."

Penelope welcomes her long lost husband with open arms, although she cannot help but utter “Do I have to put up with everything you do? I recognised you straight away<sup>30</sup>”

To conclude, Merkel clearly introduces new elements in her version of the *Odyssey* and this eighteen years before Atwood would publish her version of the Penelope myth. She adds a chorus line in which she gives a voice to those who were not heard in Homer’s *Odyssey*, nor in Apollodorus’ *Bibliotheka*. She depicts Penelope as a smart, independent woman who recognises her husband after those long years, and punishes him for his affair with Calypso by pretending to doubt his identity but also emphasises how the couple chose each other as partner.

#### 6.4.2. Luigi Malerba: *Itaca per sempre*.

In this novel, published in 1997, the focus mainly lies on the conflicting emotions of the two protagonists . When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he does not inform his wife of his presence, since he fears she might be loyal to the suitors, and would betray him for their welfare. He is also scared that, should Penelope recognise him, the suitors would kill them both, to save their own life. Penelope, however, recognises him right away<sup>31</sup>, and feels rejected by Odysseus’ deceit. She also struggles with Odysseus’ adultery, since many a story has reached her about beautiful Calypso, deceitful Circe, or wise Nausicäa.

Just like Atwood’s Penelope, Malerba’s Penelope recognises Odysseus right away: “As soon as I heard the beggar’s voice, and had looked him in the eyes, I knew.” (Malerba 57)<sup>32</sup> But Penelope here is angry that her husband chooses to hide his identity from her, whereas in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope keeps silent in order not to hurt his feelings:

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<sup>30</sup>“Moet ik alles van jou door de vingers zien? Op het eerste gezicht heb ik je herkend.”

<sup>31</sup> An interesting sidenote: it was Malerba’s wife Anna, who claimed that Penelope had recognised her husband right away (Malerba: 184). But she wanted to make him suffer for the adultery he had committed, and for not trusting her when he arrived on Ithaca (Ibidem).

<sup>32</sup> “Zodra ik de stem van deze landloper hoorde en hem één moment in de ogen had gekeken, wist ik het”

[...] as soon as I saw that barrel chest and those short legs I had a deep suspicion, which became a certainty when I heard he'd broken the neck of a belligerent fellow panhandler [...] I didn't let on I knew. It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognise him (Atwood 136-137).

And when Odysseus expresses his understanding of Penelope's supposed betrayal with the following words: "Let us be honest: what kind of woman wouldn't be flattered when she is surrounded by so many noble, young suitors<sup>33</sup>" (Malerba 60), the sentence reminds us of Penelope's confession in *The Penelopiad*, where she says: "I can't pretend I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this [the suitor's wooing]. Everyone does; we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don't believe them" (Atwood 104).

Another theme Malerba touches upon is Odysseus adultery. In the novel, Odysseus is terrified that Penelope might have cheated on him (Malerba 71), he is worried when he sees Penelope wearing a garment or a piece of jewellery that he does not recognise (Malerba 76), thinking about it even robs him of his sleep (Malerba 89). Yet Penelope is angered at her husband's thoughts since he had affairs with Circe and Calypso. She does not understand why a man can cheat on his wife, while she herself may not: "Hasn't he been repeatedly unfaithful to me during his adventures? Is it less painful for a woman to be cheated upon by her husband than for a man to be betrayed by his wife<sup>34</sup>" (153)?

A second interesting element is the portrayal of the maids. Malerba respects the representation of the maids in the *Odyssey*, since both Odysseus and Penelope call them evil, and Melantho is called "the most evil of all female slaves."<sup>35</sup> (Malerba 49), a description that echoes the one in the *Odyssey* (cf. Supra) She scorns Odysseus when he is still disguised (Malerba 48), and even tries to steal her mistress' jewellery (Malerba 49). In the novel, Penelope also accuses her of being

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<sup>33</sup> "Maar laten we eerlijk zijn: welke vrouw ter wereld zou zich niet geveleid voelen wanneer zij zich omringd weet door zoveel nobele, jonge pretendentes?"

<sup>34</sup> "Heeft hij mij dan niet herhaaldelijk bedrogen tijdens zijn reizen? Is het voor een vrouw soms minder pijnlijk om bedrogen te worden door haar man, dan voor een man om bedrogen te worden door zijn vrouw?"

<sup>35</sup> "Bij deze woorden boog de slechtste van alle slavinnen ontsteld haar hoofd en liep ze zwiingend weg."

involved with Antinous, the leader of the suitors: “It seems that Melantho often spends the night in Antinous’s bed”<sup>36</sup> (Ibidem). This description matches the one in the *Odyssey*, but is fundamentally different from Atwood’s account of the story, where Melantho might be the cheekiest, but only flatters the suitors because Penelope told her to. And while Malerba speaks about deceit, Atwood’s Penelope is ‘sure it was an accident: the young are careless, and she must have let slip a hint or a word’ (Atwood 115). Also, Penelope is not sure who told the suitors: “I still don’t know which one[...]” (Ibidem).

Thirdly, and this is new, Malerba links Odysseus’ absence and Penelope’s grief to the decay of the kingdom. When Odysseus has just arrived in the island, he looks up to the sky and sees a flock of falcons. This surprises him, since they were rarely spotted before he set sail for Troy. Odysseus wonders if the presence of the falcons might indicate that the fertile grounds are now neglected. The city is in disarray and Odysseus is shocked to find his kingdom in such horrible condition: “Ithaca has changed tremendously. I never thought my city would have ended up in such a poor state”<sup>37</sup> (Malerba 35).

What also struck me, is the fact that Malerba strongly doubts the ‘signs’ that were so important for Odysseus’ recognition. Atwood’s Penelope decides to play along with her husband so his pride would not be offended. But Malerba’s Penelope rejects every sign Odysseus offers her. The sign that is used in the *Odyssey*, is the secret of their bed. The bed was carved in an olive tree, and could not be moved. Homer states that no one knew about it, save for Odysseus and Penelope. Malerba’s Penelope rejects this : “I am sure that Odysseus told everyone about this piece of art of his and that he also told his comrades during the long nights”<sup>38</sup> (Malerba 139). According to Penelope, Odysseus would have never told his comrades that he actually feigned madness, to avoid his departure (Malerba 140), afraid that it would hurt his reputation. And since the stranger has not

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<sup>36</sup> “Het schijnt dat Melantho dikwijls the nacht doorbrengt in het bed van Antinoös.”

<sup>37</sup> “Ithaka is onherkendbaar veranderd. Ik had nooit gedacht dat mijn stad in zo’n staat van verval was geraakt.”

<sup>38</sup> “Ik weet zeker dat Odysseus tegenover iedereen heeft opgescheept over dat kunstwerk van hem en dat hij er ook tegen zijn kameraden over heeft gesproken tijdens de lange nachten in beleg.”

mentioned it, he cannot be Odysseus, who would have told this story, knowing that he is one of the only people who knows about it (Ibidem). Odysseus tries to justify his actions by telling that he is too ashamed of this episode to mention it, on which Penelope answers that Odysseus himself would never be ashamed of his actions (141). By denying these signs, Penelope denies her husband a proper recognition, there can be no 'real' reunion as mentioned in the scheme by Emlyn-Jones, since the 'signs' no longer count as a valuable element of recognition.

When it comes to Penelope's portrayal: she still is the loyal wife Homer described her to be. However, Malerba took her to a next level, by making her more human. Her emotions are vividly described, thus making it possible for the reader to relate to her more easily than was the case in the epic where an understanding of Penelope's attitude was more difficult to achieve. Her grief at her husband's distrust, her anger at his betrayal, her longing for affection and her fear for her son's life make her more intriguing. Malerba has managed to portray Penelope in a different light, and his *Itaca per sempre* is a beautiful work.

To conclude we can state that Malerba respects the events as they are portrayed in the *Odyssey*. The maids are still fickle, and are not awarded a voice of their own. He only alters Penelope's reaction on Odysseus' return, resulting in a hero who becomes sick with worry about his wife's possible adultery, and presenting Penelope as a bright woman who wants to show her husband what she went through and shows that these two persons love(d) each other deeply. Compared to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Malerba has followed the *Odyssey* more closely, but still managed to create a new story out of the old material.

### 6.4.3. Clemence McLaren: *Waiting for Odysseus*.

In Clemence McLaren's *Waiting for Odysseus* (2000), four women each recount an episode from Odysseus' life and travels. Penelope describes their years together before Odysseus sets sail for Troy, Circe describes Odysseus' stay on her island, Athena then tells the rest of the journey while Eurycleia describes his homecoming. In general, the novel can be seen as a retelling of the *Odyssey* on a child's level (my version of the novel is published by Atheneneum Books for Young Readers); Apart from one remarkable difference, the novel is a modern day adaptation of the myth, with few things changed. Yet McLaren's Penelope story is different from Atwood's, which I will show in the following lines.

Penelope opens her narrative with the following sentence: "I loved him in that first moment" (McLaren 3). McLaren here follows Merkel and Malerba, who claim that Penelope truly loved her husband, but differs from Atwood where Penelope says: "I myself had developed friendly feelings towards him – more than that, loving and passionate ones – and he behaved as if he reciprocated them. Which is not quite the same thing" (Atwood 48). Yet when Odysseus makes his appearance, he is depicted as: "[k]ing of a small, barren island, he had no gold armor (sic), no grand palace, no legitimate claim to such brazen confidence" (McLaren 3), reflecting Atwood's tale where Ithaca is depicted "rustic" (Atwood 31) and Odysseus as having "the manners of a small-town big shot" (Ibidem). But while Atwood's novella states that "Odysseus had been among the suitors for her [Helen's] hand, and like every other man on earth he'd desperately wanted to win her" (Atwood 35), McLaren's Odysseus states: "I have no expectations for myself ... And I don't begrudge Menelaus his prize. Helen's even more empty headed than I expected her to be" (McLaren 10). Odysseus does not even participate in the games organised to win Helen but reaches an agreement with Tyndareus instead, Helen's father and Penelope's uncle. Before Helen is awarded to the best of the suitors, an oath should be sworn, in which all the suitors promise to unite against anyone who threatens Helen and her husband. Odysseus then is awarded Penelope for his inventiveness (McLaren 15) (and since

he is not a suitor, he does not have to pledge his loyalty to Helen's future husband) while in Atwood's novella we find: " 'I swore the oath,' said Odysseus" (79). These examples show that the couple's relationship in *The Penelopiad* is very different from the relationship described in *Waiting for Odysseus*.

In *Waiting for Odysseus*, Penelope's relationship with Helen is very different from her depiction in Atwood's work, as well as the description of Helen's character. The sentence "She had no use for directing servants or taking inventory of food stocks , and little interest in her glorious destiny" (McLaren 4) contrasts Atwood's Helen who "wanted all the attention for herself" (Atwood 33) and who was "puffed up with vanity[...] ( 76). McLaren's Penelope also clearly states that she loved Helen dearly calling her "my sweet companion, dearer than any sister" (McLaren 7) but that she "never forgave her" (16) that Helen's relationship with Paris caused Odysseus to be leave for twenty years. Yet McLaren claims that it is "the sweet sting of love's arrow" (McLaren 16) that caused Helen to run away, while Atwood is convinced it was "deranged lust" (Atwood 76)

In McLaren's novel, it is Penelope who comes up with the trick of the plough: "I know a way to trick them[...] Hear my plan [...]" (McLaren23) while in Atwood it is Odysseus who plans to play the madman: "He'd spread the story around that he'd gone mad, and to back it up he'd put on a ridiculous peasant's hat and was ploughing with an ox and a donkey and sowing the furrows with salt" (79).

Of course, the greatest difference between McLaren and Atwood, or between McLaren and the other rewritings in general, is the fact that three other women also have their say. Circe mentions how "Odysseus was the only Greek kind who took no concubine, who wanted none of the Trojan princesses for his prize" (McLaren 42). Circe wonders why that is, and finds out that Penelope "was woven into all his dreams of home" (46) and dislikes her for it: "Penelope again! I savoured (sic) an image of Odysseus returning home to find her locked in the arms of a youthful suitor" (49).

The biggest innovation in *Waiting for Odysseus*, is Eurycleia's recount of the disloyal maids. Not twelve but four maids were loyal to the suitors: " 'Nanny, how many of our maids have

been disloyal?’ ‘Fifty women, you have, trained by me and my lady. Do their duties well, My Lord. Only four been traipsing off after the suitors’ [...]’” (McLaren 133). Melantho however, still is told to be the most evil of them:

Odysseus came over to the maid called Melantho. All day he’d been watching her making love eyes at Eurymachus. Everyone knew they were lovers. Shameless hussy, the girl showed not the slightest loyalty to the queen. This after my lady raised her like her own child. A green-eyed, curly-haired imp she was. With no daughter of her own, Mistress gave her pretty clothes and kept her away from all the heavy work (McLaren 114).

And again it is Melantho who supposedly warned the suitors: “ ‘Melantho, she was the one told the suitors,’ I said, ‘the girl that went off with Eurymachus.’” (118) But just as Atwood’s Penelope tells us she still cannot tell who told the suitors (Atwood 115), McLaren’s Penelope remarks: “We don’t know for sure, Nanny” (McLaren 118), although she later adds: “I suppose it was Melantho. She’s changed so, I can hardly believe it” (119).

McLaren’s rewriting of the *Odyssey* follows Homer’s epic except when it comes to the maids, where she changes the amount of disloyal servants. When comparing the novel to *The Penelopiad* we find some differences: the relationship between Odysseus and Penelope is seen as true love, Melantho is still the most evil of all maids and Helen is here seen in a completely different light, being described as kind and a bit naive.

#### 6.4.4. Conclusion.

Before I start my final conclusion, I want to end this chapter by briefly mentioning the main parallels or differences between the three novels mentioned above and Margaret Atwood’s novella.

One of the main differences when discussing the content, is the fact that both Merkel, Malerba and McLaren’s Penelopes claim to have truly loved Odysseus. The marriage is never arranged, as is the case in Atwood’s story. In *Waiting for Odysseus* and *Ein ganz gewöhnliche Ehe*, Penelope actively courts Odysseus, and even though Malerba does not mention the start of their

relationship explicitly, it is true love from both sides that causes the pain Malerba so vividly describes.

The second striking difference is the role of the twelve maids. Atwood is the only author who provides these girls with a voice of their own. And they are more than happy to voice their anger at the injustice that has been done to them. The other authors seem to avoid the story of the maids. When they are mentioned it is in a negative way. Malerba clearly mentions the wickedness of Melantho (see *supra*), but McLaren does not even mention them.

## 7. Conclusion

I want to conclude this dissertation with the following remarks. Penelope is a very special character. And she always has been, even in Homer's *Odyssey*. And even though the description of her character was often reduced to the image of the ever-waiting, faithful wife, Penelope is much more than that. Her trickery or *mētis* also shapes her, a characteristic that scholars too often overlooked, as Marilyn Katz states.

The questioning of Penelope's faithfulness is already present in the *Odyssey*, albeit hidden. Agamemnon's song of praise to her, resembles his song about Clytemnestra's betrayal, implicating that Penelope herself also was guilty of crime. The fact that Agamemnon later argues that Clytemnestra's crime has cast a shadow on all women seems to confirm this idea, but a clear answer is never given.

The portrayal of the maids in Homer's work is very different from Atwood's. The maids have no voice of their own, and are portrayed as disloyal, their punishment is the only logical consequence of their deeds. Melanthe is always called the most evil of female slaves, and scorns Odysseus on two occasions. Eurycleia on the other hand, is the faithful nursemaid, together with housekeeper Eurynome. The latter is not mentioned in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.

Mikhail Bakhtin claims that there are many differences between the epic and the novel. His essay "Epic and Novel" serves to illustrate this idea. He claims that in the epic, there is always a gap between the past of the story and the audience. The world as described in the epic never was, is or will be accessible to us. Compare this to the setting of many novels, the present, and we immediately find an important difference between the two genres. Apart from that, the characters are also very different. They are fully developed, and we perceive them exactly as they perceive themselves to be. The characters have no secrets and their beliefs coincide with the opinion of the community. In the novel we can find different voices, different opinions about an event or person can circulate. (look this up). And while the characters in the novel mostly develop themselves throughout the story, epic

characters are mostly fully developed when the story starts. Another difference is that, when reading/listening to an epic, the outcome of the story was already known. The story material covered in the epic was widely spread and widely known, whereas when reading a novel, we do not know what the outcome of the story will be, nor do we know anything about the characters involved. If we look at these difference we can only agree that when epic material, such as the Penelope myth for example, since she was mainly (if at first, not exclusively) known through the *Odyssey*, is also influenced by the change of genres.

That this is indeed the case becomes clear when we look at Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Penelope addresses us from the underworld, crossing the boundary between inaccessible past and present. She also evolves from a stock-character to a real person, displaying real emotions: she is angry with the suitors, for their rude behaviour, jealous of Helen, who was always the beautiful one. She grieves for her twelve maids and feels guilty since she could have prevented the crime, had she informed Eurycleia of the assignment she gave the maids. We also find different opinions circulating about Penelope. The maids claim she had been unfaithful and that their deaths had to silence the only persons who would warn their master about the betrayal. Helen thinks Penelope is boring and vulgar, Anticleia, Penelope's mother-in-law dislikes her. Penelope herself keeps telling her listeners that she never betrayed Odysseus' trust. Because of the different voices, the reader is no longer sure of what to think or who to believe. A novel therefore often leaves us with an open ending. We do not know what happens with the characters after the story is finished (or how the author saw their lives), we do not know what happened with them before the story starts, unless we find out about it in the course of the novel and very often, we do not know which version of the facts is right, or how a character really is.

Atwood's use of archetypes is also very interesting. She uses the old archetypes of the hero, the Great Goddess and the trickster and inscribes new ones, such as the vamp: "Who is this 'Marilyn'" (Atwood 186) and pure evil: "Who is this 'Adolf'" (Ibidem). She uses the archetype of the Great Goddess when discussing Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, turning the murder of the maids into a fertility rite. She cleverly uses the trickster archetype, using it on Odysseus, Penelope

and the maids. Odysseus with his clever tricks, Penelope who tricks but also gets deceived and the maids who try to show Odysseus that he killed them because they reminded him of his adulterous relationships. Atwood herself of course also counts as a trickster figure, since she rewrites old myths, destroying the old ideas about the characters and adding new features to them, ensuring the myth to survive.

The other rewritings of the Penelope myth give us a clearer picture on how the myth is perceived. The maids are given a voice, albeit a small one, in Inge Merkel's *Eine ganz gewöhnliche Ehe: Odysseus und Penelope*. Her chorus lines are used by various groups of people, nymphs and even insects to voice their opinion on the matter. Merkel also interestingly portrays a Penelope who was about to surrender to her feelings for one of the suitors when her love for her husband prevented her from doing so. Luigi Malerba's *Itaca per sempre* focuses on the psychological effects of Odysseus' departure and return. Penelope is deeply hurt by her husband's distrust and when she tries to punish him for it, Odysseus is hurt when his wife 'fails' to recognise him and wonders if she still loves him. Clemence McLaren on the other hand, transforms the story so that young adults would be able to understand it better. Yet in her novel *Waiting for Odysseus* she also changes the relationship between Odysseus and Penelope. Odysseus is never interested in Helen, who is portrayed as naive and not at all pleased by the attention she is receiving (a sharp contrast with Atwood's Helen who loves the attention and the bloodshed), but wants to marry Penelope. Penelope herself actively tries to court Odysseus. She also dedicates a part of her novel to the voices of Eurycleia, Athena and Circe, each of them explaining different stages of Odysseus' journey, and lets them tell how they feel about the hero. When we compare the three novels to Atwood's novella, we can conclude that Atwood's provides us with the most radical rewriting of the Penelope myth, implicating that Penelope was not the faithful wife she made herself perceive to be. Also, while the other novels claim that true love was the basis of this relation, Atwood's Penelope claims the couple had become "friends" (Atwood 48), Penelope loving him and Odysseus behaving "as if he reciprocated them" (Ibidem).

I hope that this dissertation has shed some light on Margaret Atwood's adaptation of the Penelope myth and of the *Odyssey*, showing the transformation the epic material undergoes when becoming

novelistic material. I also hope that it has helped the study of rewritings of the Penelope figure in general. Further research on the topic is necessary, as there are still other rewritings of the Penelope myth that can be analysed, and of course, the last word on *The Penelopiad* and the other works has not yet been said. I thank you for your attention.

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9. Images.

Fig.1. Penelope – David Ligare



Fig.2. Penelope and the Suitors – John William Waterhouse