

## The Suitors' Treasure Trove: Un-/Re-inscribing of Homer's Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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### Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) has attempted to reinscribe the stereotypical character of Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey* (circa 800 BC). Her character has been presented as a prototype of faithful wife for the women of her times and, later on, throughout several generations, and across many boundaries and cultures in contrast with her heroic and legendary husband who was never questioned for his failure to fulfill the responsibilities of a husband and a father. This study focuses on how Penelope confronts Homer's "nobler" version of her character that has glossed over the seamy side of her troubled life contextualized by her experiences with her father in Sparta, and with her husband and son in Ithaca. The retelling asserts how the "divine" queen has been ostracized right from her childhood. She was a plain girl and a woman conforming to the patriarchal standards but her wealth turned her into a prize for her husband and treasure trove for the suitors who besieged her day to day life. Her post-body narration from the Hades, as her soul is now free from the earthly limitations and obligations, provides her free space for the expression of her concerns. By suspending readers' *disbelief*, the narrative challenges the preconceived notions and images of *The Odyssey*. Her weaving of the King Laertes', Odysseus' father, shroud has been considered as a web of deception and commended as a trick to save her grace, secure her son's vulnerability and defend her husband's estate. Where *The Odyssey* is in praise of Odysseus and his adventures, *The Penelopiad* is all about Penelope and her real self.

**Key Words:** *canon, rewriting/retelling, patriarchy, absences*

### Introduction

This essay is based on my unpublished doctoral research in which I have studied the purpose of rewritings as "re-righting" of the absences found in the Western classic texts that have been taken as prototype for patriarchal and colonial discourse and where the voice, identity and representation of the marginalized are absent. The absences have been presented as "others" lacking any tangible human identity. Their images have been standardized in accordance with the colonial and patriarchal norms. These normative misrepresentations are through the gaze of the

domineering Other who attaches a fabricated image to the subservient other (Baig, 2012).

Penelope's character in *The Penelopiad* is a unique experiment in the narration of rewriting. Here, she is not a living body but is talking to the readers from the world across. She is a soul and claims to be more knowledgeable. Penelope distances herself from her traditional representation and self by exciting readers' "willing suspension of disbelief," (Coleridge, 1834, p. 174) and becomes a voice of a soul freeing her from the woes, oppression and suppression of earthly life and patriarchy. Talking as a soul seriously questions the patriarchal order which does not give space to the living women to speak up.

*The Penelopiad* is a revision of particularly Penelope's character. Her father was King Icarius of Sparta, but her mother was a Naiad. She was not royal in blood from her mother's side. She became an unwanted child when an oracle told her father that she might be harmful for his rule. She was thrown into water at her father's orders, but she miraculously survived the water when ducks pushed her to the shore. As a wife to Odysseus in his kingdom Ithaca, she could not find her voice to share her concerns with the reader. In this rewriting, she returns as a soul breaking the limits set by the physical and earthly life to give her point of view on the canonical representation of her and the events in Homer's *Odyssey*. She specifically is in binary opposition to the character of her husband Odysseus. She tries to absolve herself of her husband's committed sins, and reminds conscientious readers that she has not been party to the circumstantial excesses of mass murder carried out by her husband, Odysseus and son Telemachus.

In the absence of her husband, she remains true to her husband and invents new ways to keep suitors at bay with false promises of marriage to save the dwindling Odysseus' estate. She Weaves the shroud of King Laertes, her father-in-law and Odysseus' father, during the day time and unravels it at night in order to buy time from the suitors and ensure Odysseus' return. In addition to the suitors and the absentee husband, her problems are aggravated by her teenage son, Telemachus, who is too sure of himself. He asserts himself against her in the absence of his father.

### **Canonical Representation of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey***

Jones (1991) makes a thought-provoking comment, about Penelope in his "Introduction" to Homer's *Odyssey* noting:

Penelope is a woman in conflict: with herself — should she stay or remarry?; with Telemachus — who is the master of

this house?; with her servants, and with the suitors. The constant pressure under which she lives has the effect of turning her into a woman who hangs grimly on to the past. She finds solace and comfort only in the world of sleep and dreams, though even these can be painful to her. She clutches at every straw of hope and fluctuates between hope that Odysseus will return and absolute certainty that he will not. But her intelligence and beauty are never in doubt, as the suitors acknowledge, and her loyalty to Odysseus remains constant, even up to the moment when she agrees to remarry. The trick involving Laertes' shroud which keeps the suitors at bay for a while—and did she hope that the bow trial might do likewise? — shows that she is by no means helpless, and her trick to discover whether the beggar really is Odysseus is worthy of Odysseus himself. (p. xxv)

In Jones' understanding of Penelope's character in *The Odyssey*, she is a woman all for "conflicts." She is not "helpless," and always in control of the situation in Odysseus' absence. The challenges which she has to face include her son as well. Penelope, wife of Odysseus, argues with her son, Telemachus who grows stronger, bolder and more audacious in the absence of his father and her husband. He is filling up the space of his father, the master of the house by exerting himself as a patriarch over the woman, Penelope. He clearly orders his mother without remorse, "Go to your quarters now and attend to your own work, the loom and the spindle and tell the servants to get on with theirs. Talking must be the men's concern, and mine in particular; for I am master in this house" (Homer, 1991, p. 13). In comparison with Jones' claim, she does not defy her son and "men's concern." Telemachus confines her life to "the loom and the spindle," and positions himself in the driving seat in the house.

Where Jones appreciates that "her loyalty to Odysseus remains constant," he shows no interest in exploring the causes of her sufferings and the cost she had to pay for keeping up this loyalty in Homer's *Odyssey*. She takes her bed as "bed of sorrows (without her husband) watered by my tears" (p. 257). In the absence of her husband, she is vulnerable to the suitors and is further weakened by her arrogant son. She has hardly a relationship to fall back upon or trust. Her "bed of sorrows" has been presented as a metaphor for women who have lost their husbands. This metaphor conventionalizes that, in the absence of a husband, a woman can do nothing but weep and suffer.

Penelope is presented as wailing and crying and not taking a ship off the shore like her son as it has never been permissible to a woman. Her

forte is perseverance, loyalty to her husband and steadfastness. She is shown repeatedly weeping bitterly for her husband, and also as a result of her son's arrogance and hot headedness. Her son proves intractable for her. Telemachus recalls for his father that "her eyes are never free from tears as the slow nights and days pass sorrowfully by" (p. 241). Tired of waiting, she is shown yearning for death: "wish holy Artemis would grant me a death . . . and save me from wasting my life in anguish and longing for my dear husband" (p. 279). Her absent husband is made so indispensable for her life that she cannot imagine her sustenance without him. However, she is conscious of "wasting" her life in the web of "anguish and longing" set by patriarchy around her person. Worn out by waiting, she finally decides to remarry though she takes the option of remarrying as, "a detestable union." It shows how a woman has internalized patriarchal injunctions of loyalty at the cost of suffering, sacrifice and not remarrying. She feels horrified at the idea of expected remarriage, "It will be the end of me; Zeus has destroyed my happiness" (p. 281). At another place, she says, "Gods of Olympus, annihilate me like that; or strike me dead, Artemis of the beautiful hair, so that I may sink underneath the hateful earth with Odysseus' image in my heart, rather than delight the heart of a lesser man" (p. 306). A strong patriarchy has ideologically discouraged a woman to remarry but, here, the same patriarchy, in the form of the suitors, becomes prime cause of her expected and forceful marriage. It is parochial understanding of remarrying which has made the idea "distasteful" (p. 358). She has associated the idea of "hate" traditionally attached to remarrying with earth instead of the men. She is required to die and "sink underneath the hateful earth with Odysseus' image in my heart" as determined by patriarchy when her husband has been having extra-matrimonial relationship with goddesses. Her loyalty to Odysseus remains constant even up to the moment when she agrees to remarry.

Her handling of the suitors has been much praised by patriarchy. Later, she reveals to the disguised Odysseus how she has delayed the possibility of "forced" and imposed marriage by employing her trick of weaving Lord Laertes' shroud:

So by day I used to weave the great web, but every night I had torches set beside it and undid the work. For three years I took them in by this stratagem. A fourth began and the seasons were slipping by, when through the connivance of my shameless and irresponsible maids they caught me at my task. They reproached me angrily, and I was forced reluctantly to finish the work . . . My parents

are pressing me to marry and my son is exasperated at the drain on our estate. (p. 290)

She challenges the oppressive patriarchy by her project of weaving the “great web.” She “undid” at night what she was made to do in broad daylight. Her weaving and unweaving is a covert tool to resist the suitors. It was not an act of deception but rather an act of passive resistance. To choose from the suitors is not a choice; it is, rather, a compulsion enforced by patriarchy on her. When Penelope decides to select a suitor for remarriage, she proposes a test to all the contestants: “Whoever proves the handiest at stringing the bow and shoots an arrow through each of the twelve axes, with that man I will go” (p. 302). Even when she has to make a choice, she puts them to the test which only her husband can qualify. It is to be kept in mind that it is the patriarchal interpretation of Penelope that is misrepresented in *The Odyssey*.

She is an “incomparable” wife (p. 204). Her “loyalty” to her husband’s bed has been exemplified. She is “wise” and “thoughtful.” She is a woman of high fame, “For of all the Achaean beauties of former times, there is not one, not Tyro, nor Alcmena, nor Mycene of the lovely diadem, who had at her command such wits as she” (p. 20). Odysseus disguised as a stranger tells Penelope: “your fame has reached broad heaven itself, like that of some illustrious ruling a populous and mighty country with the fear of the gods in his heart, and upholding justice” (p. 289). She is even praised by Agamemnon’s soul in Hades’ Halls as

Shrewd Odysseus! You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius’ daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope. (p. 360)

She is “flawless” and “faithful,” unlike Clytaemnestra who killed her own husband Agamemnon and, thus, “destroyed the reputation of her whole sex” (p. 360). Quite contrary, she is hardly appreciated by her son whose manliness requires him to defy the matriarchal order. Before Odysseus’ return, she has been given wrong news and communicated false hopes about him during the interim period. After twenty years of detachment, it was hard for her to reconcile with the idea of Odysseus’ return. She is accused as “hard-hearted, unmotherly mother” by Telemachus for not showing her readiness in accepting her husband because of her heart that is “harder than flint” (p. 346). On the one hand, patriarchy expects her to be chaste and loyal to her matrimonial bond and, on the other hand, it is

her heart that has been hardened after bearing pains of wait, incessant trials and long separation. Though her son informs her that Odysseus is home, she resists her husband to confirm his identity, and “know each other more certainly” (p. 347). Even when she recognizes her husband, she blames gods, and not him, for her unhappiness: “All our unhappiness is due to the gods, who couldn’t bear to see us share the joys of youth and reach the threshold of old age together” (p. 349). Gods have been tactically devised to take all the blame for wrong doings actually executed by patriarchy. Even when Odysseus returns and meets his wife undisguised, he redresses her for her controlled emotions and watchful behavior:

No other wife could have steeled herself to keep so long out of the arms of a husband she had just got back after nineteen years of misadventure. Well, nurse, make a bed for me to sleep alone in. For my wife’s heart is just about as hard as iron. (p. 348)

Where patriarchy’s pride and “high” morals demand from her to be faithful, Odysseus is pleased to know that she has been “exhorting gifts from her suitors and bewitching them by her persuasive words, while all the time her heart was set on something quite different” (p. 281). Here, patriarchy is all for material gains and losses.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

My reading is not only about the reversal of the binaries in the rewriting but also about the process of change, transformation and alternative reality which the rewriting process is to supposedly introduce and carry on. In case of my study, the other is in opposition to the patriarchal Other, where “the Other . . . the locus in which is constituted the I who is speaking with him who hears” (Lacan, 1993, p. 273) and tries to evade the fixed images. The process of othering not only arises out of the gender-polarity but there are chances that the same gender can also become a planted agent for othering. Truth (reality) and lies (fabricated reality) remain interchangeable in the narrative. Reality for the Other is a lie for the dominated other. In this way, my study moves out from the fixed reality into micro-realities and looks beyond institutionalized meanings.

The art of rewriting challenges the assumption that the classical text transcends individual experience, time, locations and cultures. The rewriting gives room to the diverse experiences of fractured identities at the hands of patriarchy and/or imperialism. They create space for the inscription of “lesser part” of the binary/humanity and challenge what Gayatri Spivak (1985) calls the “epistemic violence” (p. 251) carried out

against the marginal. The classic texts reinforce the patriarchal view of the world and work as ideological apparatus in different geographical locations and cultures. These texts “authenticate” and authorize the “law of father,” and validate the process and apparatus of colonization while erasing and silencing the colonized “other” in the structure of the narrative. As the Western classic texts give a normative point of representation, these make centre of the writing and present things in taken-for-granted mode. These texts erase the women and misrepresent them in “the ‘grandstand view’ of imperial history” (Bhabha, 2000, p. 318).

In my study, I explore absences with reference to the feminist theme of voice, identity, othering and representation in the rewriting. I take feminism as “emancipator” movement which talks of justice for the othered and provides ideological and theoretical basis for the study. The art of rewriting has questioned the fundamental “authority” of the canonical texts and their system of meaning making. Therefore, the rewritings is supposed to re-evaluate the “exclusive universality of the male subject” (Elam, 2001, p. 35) in his-story by re-evaluating the patriarchal discourse about the other who have been stereotyped into the subalterns.

My take on the left-out absences is that they are willful in the patriarchal writings. Patricia Oudek Laurence (1991) reads three types of silences in Virginia Woolf: the “‘unsaid,’ the ‘unspoken,’ and the ‘unsayable,’ ” (p. 1). My study mainly focuses on the unsaid in the text. Such a type of silence in the rewriting challenges its status as re-righting. John Marx (2004) identifies three types of relationships between the postcolonial writings and the canon: to “repudiate the canon,” to “revise canonical texts and concepts” and “the appropriation of the entire genres” (p. 83). I import Marx’s idea of canonical text and apply it to feminist rewritings. My study is about critiquing the revision of canonical character and its consequent effect on the subalterns, their identity and representation.

### **Penelope’s (Re) Telling**

The women do have a normal auditory and oral physiological system, but the deriding patriarchy has no regard for it and refuses to listen to them. When they find no space as a body, they find an alternative as a soul and lay claim to patriarchy for their right to speak and get their rightful image and justice. Penelope, here, is not confident of a woman’s art and so considers her retelling and defense as a “low art” in violation of the patriarchal standards. Patriarchy disregards a woman who questions its injustices. Her low-toned evaluation of her narrative shows anxiety of influence. Her resurrected self in the narration claims:

Now that I'm dead I know everything . . . I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before . . . Down here everyone arrives with a sack . . . full of words—words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you. . . . It was a specialty of his: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away. (Atwood, 2005, p. 1)

The life after death as a source of knowing “everything” has been overstated and devised by the writer to justify the reason and cause of narration and retelling. She draws these “factoids” from the other souls in the Hades, and from the “words that have been said” about her. “Down here” explains that she is in Hades. Her life as a soul is in binary opposition to the life as a body. In the standardized text, her body could not represent herself; in the rewriting, her soul takes on the task of self-representation and employs the medium of words to be heard and understood in the world of bodies. She represents her husband as deceitful, “making fools” of people with words and “getting away.” She categorizes “words” into three types, “spoken,” “heard” and “said.” In the world of bodies, the speaker or listener as “I” or “you” remains a participant in the speech. S/he is either active or passive in the dialogic interaction but when he or she is talked about as a third person in her/his absence, s/he becomes an erasure and a silence in the speech that is vulnerable to misrepresentation. In the world hereafter, according to Penelope, she gains knowledge of the “words” being said about her which, hitherto, were unknown. Thus, the “said” words about a person give him/her an additional edge while responding to the addressee.

Talking back to the world after death is a weird concept which is rarely practical. A “few factoids” make the readers expect this to be a revelatory narrative. These “factoids” create a difference between her stereotyped life in *The Odyssey* and her re-presentation of herself in *The Penelopiad*. In the rewriting, she explains her “spoken” words, responds to the “heard” words with an ease for being a soul, and defends her position by countering people’s “said” words against her. These “words” were the cause of disadvantage in the world of bodies if they remained unheard but, here in Hades, they are an added qualification. Penelope blames her husband that he made a fool of her. His “making fools” of the others has been appreciated in *The Odyssey* which helped the Greeks in winning over the war of Troy. Troy remained invincible: but for his treachery, it fell to the Greeks. It was not out of bravery but because of his deceit that the war was won. He beguiles his true identity by “getting away” with words. His “making fools” with words also requires that his recount of events needs to be questioned. One possible way is to interrupt his narration by an

interrogative narrative and not to let him get away. She is face to face with her husband's telling of the events. However, she faces the task to deconstruct "the official version" and "edifying legend" of her husband through her art of retelling. It is a "low art" in the world of men which idealizes a woman who does not "contradict," ask "awkward questions" and "dig deep." Talking against patriarchy makes a woman "lowly" in status. The narrative has connected Penelope's idealized fixture in the canonical text and her total resignation and submission to the patriarchal order and its version to her anxious retelling which changes her earlier stance from keeping silence on patriarchy to revealing what "official version" did not say and did not allow her to say as a living being. She reveals his true nature which is gambling with words:

Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one . . . And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? . . . Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his--how can I put this?--his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye . . . I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep. I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages. (p. 2)

In contrast with the telling of a woman ideologically taken as a "low" art and unofficial writing, the version of a male is "an edifying legend" and "official." The man made and concocted "legend," if questioned, makes women subject of patriarchal derision and slight. In comparison with other women, she has been edified as "considerate" and "trustworthy" only for the reason that she submitted to the official version—a product of "unscrupulousness," "foxiness," "wiliness," and "slipperiness." The only way to get the canonical "happy endings" in male-dominated societies is not to "contradict," but turn "a blind eye," keep "the right doors locked," and sleeping when there is chance of a conflict with patriarchy.

Her compulsive aversion and deflection from truth brings to the women all the more "suffering," as they are asked to live in a fabricated reality materialized by patriarchy through writing in the character of Penelope, stick with which leaves them with a life full of contradictions and conflicts. Her example is not a matter of solace but a "stick" to punish other women with, and commit them to a life of waiting, weeping and suffering. Sleeping on contradictory facts makes Penelope's life, a psychic and psychological torment, where she has to live a life of "double

consciousness" and duality. The only way to survive as "trustworthy," was to remain silent on patriarchal misrepresentation of the world. As Odysseus was a legendary patriarch, his version was "official" in the patriarchal culture and no need arose to test the veracity of his story. People had to believe what he said and no one like her had the capacity to counter his version. The classic story got its "happy" ending at the cost of Penelope's life of misery and trial. Later, as a soul, she questions the reliability and authenticity of her husband's recount of his experiences and gives her take on the cause of her silences in *The Odyssey*:

What can a woman do when scandalous gossip (about her) travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty . . . It's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to it: it's a low art, tale-telling . . . The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak. I can't make myself understood, not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues and fingers; and most of the time I have no listeners, not on your side of the river. Those of you who may catch the odd whisper, the odd squeak, so easily mistake my words for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats at twilight, for bad dreams. (p. 3)

In contrast with the "edifying legend" of a patriarch, a woman's version is "a little story-making" and "a low art." To defend "scandalous gossip" is not an act of exoneration in case of a woman; rather, it "sounds guilty." In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope has "no mouth." Her voice and its resultant speed coming across the river of eternity make no sense to the people living on earth, and hence, her voice is not audible to "the world of bodies." The human ear, simply, lacks the capacity to distinguish "the odd squeaks" from the sound of breezes, "bats" or of "bad dreams." Her voice and identity are "beyond" human audibility and visionary range. They do not have even the imaginary capacity to lend an imaginary ear to "the odd whisper" and envision that it can be a woman's cry.

Rewriting is Penelope's "my turn." Her narrative presents Penelope "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). She is no longer a pliable character as *The Odyssey* portrays her to be. Here, the word "defence" evades its commonly known and accepted meanings. "Defence" in legal proceeding means an argument established in the court of law and justice against blame or an imposed guilt or a crime but here "defence" against the charges levied in the patriarchal writing is an offence. Defence by Penelope is a public offence in the patriarchal culture which itself is the originator of this scandalous propaganda about her life. She knew the pitfalls of her husband's official version, but the internalized

value-laden ideology given by the patriarchal culture kept her silent. She refers to the world of men as an absolute world of patriarchs where women are absent and exist only as erasures. Her address to the patriarchal world is a high rank transgression from the “official” norms. The phrase “most of the time” qualifies Penelope as the one who gets rare listeners.

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope’s body is present but her voice is absent while in *The Penelopiad*, she “partially” recovers her voice but loses her body. She resorts to the written words when she could not establish an audio link between herself and the world she has left. The grave problem remains how to put an end to the “scandalous gossip” about her person in the world of canonicity. She is now an absence in the material world and lives in the world of spirits from where she cannot talk back. She has been misrepresented in the “official” version and now is misunderstood. Here, the “world of bodies, of tongues and fingers” is a binary to the “state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness” (p. 1). Absence of her mouth can be related to her scream which, when misunderstood, sounds “like an owl” (p. 2). In the material world, her voice could not find recognition; in the spiritual world, she is handicapped by the absence of a normal human auditory, oral system and channels of communication.

Penelope tells how souls are now summoned to inform men about the trivial matters like selling of a condominium, hearing about “stock-market prices and world politics and their own health problems and such stupidities” (p. 149). She has hardly been summoned by the magicians. Even when she is called, the occult listeners have never been interested in her story. They have their own worldly questions and patriarchal concerns to be addressed.

### **The Suitors’ Treasure Trove**

Penelope is curious to know about young suitors’ real motives behind enticing her when she was hardly a beauty. There was a remarkable difference between their ages. She was thirty-five years old; “past child-bearing age” (p. 81) and they were of her son, Telemachus’ age. Antinous, one of the suitors, as a spirit, shares later in the Hades with Penelope about their drives behind marrying her, “We wanted the treasure trove” (p. 81). She was not the target; rather, it was wealth which such a marriage entailed. They were in Sparta to make fortune and Penelope was an easy prey. They were trying to make a good bargain out of a woman of their mother’s age. Wooing Penelope for marriage was a career making attempt. They planned to bring her “resistance” down by the “threat of impoverishment” (p. 83). She personifies the greediness in the suitors and visualizes them as “vultures” scavenging at her, “the

carcass” (p. 82). In the rotten patriarchal culture which guaranteed no safeguards to a woman, a (would-be) widow is a “carcass” to be fed upon. Penelope expresses her lacking at openly challenging the suitors:

If I tried that, they’d turn really ugly and go on the rampage and snatch by force what they were attempting to win by persuasion. But I was the daughter of a Naiad; I remembered my mother’s advice to me. Behave like water, I told myself. Don’t try to oppose them. When they try to grasp you, slip through their fingers. Flow around them. (p. 86)

When she knows no other way to counter the suitors, she recalls her mother’s advice. She “flows around them” and does not openly stand up and “oppose” them. From water, she imports the idea and favors their tactic of “persuasion.” Taking “by force” was too dangerous for the equally ambitious suitors. They were not “ugly” for her for a while but the situation for the maids was quite contrary to it. They let her “slip through their fingers” when they took the maids in their arms “by force.”

Penelope counters the possibility of their application of “force” by her cleverness. She thinks that their strategy of “persuasion” should be encouraged otherwise they can take it “by force;” but the text nowhere supports this idea wholly. All the suitors had only one goal—Penelope—who stood for wealth. There was no chance and possibility of division or sharing. Taking “by force” was too dangerous for the suitors as well. If the suitors had tried it, it might have resulted into fighting and killings among them. She just feels that she was slipping and flowing around them; in reality, it only bought her time. If Odysseus had not returned and killed the suitors through treachery, there might have been a different end to her story. She here gives other reasons of not remarrying except modesty: “I certainly didn’t want to marry any of those mannerless young whelps” (p. 87). She “flows around” the suitors by her trick of weaving. She wrongly attributes her own idea of weaving to be that of Pallas Athene, goddess of weaving, as “crediting some god for one’s inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations . . .” (p. 89). She sublimates her idea by linking it to goddess to present it divine and acceptable to patriarchy. However, she objects to her weaving plan to be termed as Penelope’s web, “If the shroud was a web, then I was the spider . . . I’d merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself” (p. 94). She alienates the readers from the traditional understanding of the term “Penelope’s web.” She used to undo and unweave her web at night. It meant no harm to anyone. It was a harmless trick invented and adopted in self defense whereas there was no reversal in the “web” woven by patriarchy around her. These were the suitors who were the enticers and spiders ready to pounce on her.

## Distressed Childhood of a Semi-Divine Queen

Penelope is a displaced princess from Ithaca to Sparta and a besieged queen whose rights of control in the absence of her husband have been usurped by the suitors and further suspended by her growing up son, domineering Eurycleia and disapproving Anticleia. Since her birth, Penelope has been an outcast and an undesired child of low birth. Her childhood experiences have deep marks on her identity formation. Her parents denied her the love and care which parentage showers upon a child:

My father was King Icarius of Sparta. 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 . . . now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud . . . But he must have misheard, or else the oracle herself misheard--the gods often mumble.  
(p. 7)

She was “divine” in birth from the lineage of her father—a man of royal blood but, a progeny of a commoner from the blood line of her mother. Her “semi-divine” birth was a matter of shame for her father. Like the Greek tragedies, the misinterpreted oracle further distanced her father from her. As a “fate-bound,” child, she is to weave her father’s shroud. The oracle was partly right in its foretelling. The “misheard” part was only that it was the shroud of her father-in-law, (of King Laertes) not of the real father.

In her parentage, her father King Icarius of Sparta, a royal blood, is in contrast to a Naiad belonging to the clan of women who were historically “a dime a dozen.” Their low price explains that the women had a great supply in the market, and the patriarchal laws had not declared it inhuman and illegal. It also alludes to the rampant trade of women which had minimalized them as mere objects for sale. She is a child of “lesser blood” and, therefore symbolizes, impurity. As it was in vogue in Greek culture and drama, Margaret Atwood introduces the device of “oracle” in her rewriting to recreate an ancient world. She uses the same names and characters and this depends upon readers’ familiarity and previous knowledge. She associates the oracle with the “gods” and not goddesses. She defines the gender of oracle as that of a female who is subservient to the gods and, they express themselves through her — the oracle. In case of the oracle-god relationship, the woman bears the blame of “misheard” part. The problem is not in listening but in the gods’ voice which lacks clarity. The lack of clarity in the gods’ voice, the alleged poor audibility of oracle, and the coldness of her kingly father shaped her torturous and

tragic life. It was decreed by her father to throw her into the sea — an act which she tries to rationalize in her postbody life. She later attributes her “reserve” and “mistrust” (p. 9) to this particular incident:

It was stupid of Icarius to try to drown the daughter of a Naiad, however. Water is our element, it is our birthright . . . A flock of purple-striped ducks came to my rescue and towed me ashore. After an omen like that, what could my father do? He took me back, and renamed me--Duck was my new nickname. (p. 9)

The words “floating,” “birthright” and water as an essential “element” refer to the reproductive system of a woman and buoyancy which a baby enjoys in her mother’s womb. As the life of such nymphs is water bound, these images also connect to Naiad’s biological, mythical and cultural association with water. Being a daughter of a Naiad, she belongs to water. As “duck” swims in water, she was too driven off to a distant land after her marriage.

In this way, she is somehow linked with the ducks whose “flock” redeems her of the patriarchal aggression. Her father’s attempt to drown her has been countered by Nature, and she owes her life to the ducks. Her nickname “duck,” reduces her status from a human being to a swimming bird. The Naiads are nymphs who are found in various bodies of water:

The Naiads were daughters of the Greek river gods. Each Naiad . . . was worshiped for her ability to help and protect people with her water. The Naiads had the power of prophecy, to be able to see into the future . . . They were also the protectors of young girls as they became women. (Daly & Rengel, 2009, pp. 97-98)

The “ducks,” Penelope and her mother are Naiads who are flocked together by the hostile circumstances, and are united by the element of water. The ducks are actually the Naiads who “protected” the girl child Penelope as later she was to grow up into an edified woman. They watched over her as her “protector” when she needed them the most. A king, traditionally known for his wisdom and sharp perception, is presented as a “stupid” fellow owing to his misjudgment which proved too risky for his susceptible daughter. Here, a powerful king is shown as an opponent to his own feeble daughter. This act undermined the values of bravery and strength required of a king. His father ominously interprets that “renaming” can save his authority and life from the portentous danger of her presence. His act of “renaming” the “daughter of a Naiad” is an attempt to erase her identity as Penelope and bring her up as a humble and vulnerable “duck.” Though her father became fond of her later, she

felt unprotected and vulnerable to his decisions. This incident had deep effect on her behavioral make up and she committed herself to excessive weeping. Her mother too is a Naiad and is prophetic in her vision and in her advice to her daughter when the latter is to be married off. She tells her to be malleable and pliable like water in her dealings with stone-like patriarchy.

### **Arranged Marriages or Copulation**

Marriage in Penelope's times was a prerogative and a matter of high prestige. There were always well considered and planned motives behind the match making. The marriages defined alliances and forged new relationships. In case of daughters, their marriages promised a source of inheritance in the form of grandsons as source and continuation of power and phallic order. Blundell (1995) observes in this connection that women of ancient Greece were presented in "portions" in the classic writings. They are shown as "receivers of dowries, bearers of heirs, (and) possessor of wombs" (p. 11). Penelope's narrative does not create a much different world for the women. She also revives just their "portions" which are of immediate concern to her and her story. The women have only "partial" presence and mostly are absent like relatively unimportant women had to be a victim of rape, illegal relationship and seduction interchangeably by both disguised gods as hoax men and fraudulent men as masked gods:

My marriage was arranged . . . Under the old rules only important people had marriages, because only important people had inheritances. 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. (p. 19)

Maids and their mothers come under the category of "all the rest." Slave women, at first place, are denied the basic right to marriage. Even when they are given the right to copulate, the traditional narrative style makes it readable to patriarchy by evolving it into a sensational episode and plot of rape. Even in case of arranged marriages, we find "divine" interruptions to a woman's suffering and "rapes." The word "Shepherds" and "gods" are interchangeable, and both mean adulterers, rapists and seducers. They misuse and violate women without any permission or law.

Patriarchy has used "gods" as a ruse and excuse to their crimes. Patriarchy in the disguise of gods has been the violator. Arranged marriage has a special status and has been a mark of privilege according to the "old rules" which had not been renewed until Penelope's times. This knowledge of patriarchal tradition explains that the maids were not only adulteresses but also a victim of such unrecognized copulations. The

inherent structural fault and make-up of the society gave them no other option but to be engaged in illicit relationships with the men of their times. Even arranged marriages gave women no advantage as it was not a woman's choice. In case of Penelope, Odysseus was her father's pick. Schaps's study (1918) confirms Penelope's stand that, in ancient Greece, in comparison with arranged marriage as a privilege, it was not a "woman's prerogative" (p. 74) to choose a husband. It was the father who used to decide a husband.

Penelope's father's attachment to his daughter's marriage is transitory. He is not at all interested in her but in what she stands for now. Penelope refers here to the male-centric society, "you needed to get them (daughters) bred as soon as possible so you could have grandsons" (p. 20). A daughter was only for fostering sons. She is important with reference to either "wedding loot" or grandsons as "[u]nder the ancient customs, the huge pile of sparkling wedding loot stayed with the bride's family . . . where I was, there would be the treasure" (p. 22). However, if the bride moves away from her family to her husband's home, she takes it along as Schaps (1981) notes down that "the dowry of (a woman) belonged . . . to her husband" (p. 75). In case of father's lacking sons, the focus shifts to getting them from the daughter's line. Contextualizing Penelope's case, it can be understood that a daughter's life from birth to adulthood is an interim place which is to lead to marriage, fertility and production. She is just a means to patriarchal success. She was a source of economic boost to her father as the words "wedding loot" tell. Eventually, the sons are a source of power. The male family members were considered more dependable than the other allegiants, and thus, they were means to a kingship which is fortified by kinship. She is a means to and symbol of "treasure." Through her body and presence, a woman is to bring forth wealth for patriarchy. Once the grandson or "wedding loot" is received, she loses her importance.

### **Penelope's Fidelity, Odysseus' Delayed Return and Sexual Corruption**

Though Odysseus himself has been a product of an illegal relationship between Anticleia and Sisyphus, and has been sleeping with goddesses and women, he is hard and threatening when it comes to his wife. The nuptial bed of Odysseus and Penelope has symbolic importance in the story. It is related in *The Penelopiad* that one post of the bed was of an olive tree. It was rooted in the ground and it was so fixed that it could not be displaced. In the text, Odysseus shares this secret with his newly-wed wife and forewarns her if this secret of bedpost is known to the men around, it would prove her infidelity and "he would have to chop me into

little pieces with his sword or hang me from the roof beam” (p. 59). Keeping the secret of the bedpost was a litmus test for her fidelity. This forewarning was sinister: as he chopped down the suitors and his son hanged the maids even though his bedpost was not displaced. It is hypocrisy of patriarchy that one thing is lawful or exonerative for a man, but the same is unlawful and punishable offence for the woman. Penelope relates the ways in which Odysseus misinterprets her dream. It is Odysseus himself who is “a huge eagle with a crooked beak” (p. 110) who killed not only the suitors but also her “flock of lovely white geese.” To Odysseus’ interpretation, her husband would slay the suitors. Quite contrary to his interpretation, Penelope replaces the metaphors “geese” for maids instead of the suitors as she was fond of her maids, not the suitors. She makes old Eurycleia wash the beggar’s feet—“the booby trap” for her. She gives out a “yelp of joy,” (p. 111) once she recognizes the scar on Odysseus’ leg. Penelope contradicts the claim made in the songs that the arrival of Odysseus coincided with the test of the bow and axes: “I knew that the beggar was Odysseus” (p. 110). Telemachus scolds her mother for not extending “a warmer welcome” to his father on his homecoming and calls her “flinty hearted” (p. 135). Once Odysseus passed the bedpost test, she accepts him to be her real husband.

The Greek heroes had other material motives and ambitions as well. The minstrels exalted Odysseus’ treachery into acts of heroism:

They always sang the noblest versions in my presence the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave, and resourceful, and battling supernatural monsters, and beloved of goddesses. The only reason he hadn’t come back home was that a god the sea-god Poseidon, according to some was against him, because a Cyclops crippled by Odysseus was his son. (p. 67)

Where a “natural reason” was not possible in the “noblest version” of Odysseus’ voyage, a supernatural was offered. Odysseus is set up against a much powerful divine opponent, the “sea-god Poseidon.” In “my presence,” shows that the minstrels had ulterior motives in turning her lost husband into a legendary figure, fighting against a much more potent rival.

The text understates the intensity and level of his sin when it relates that his sin is crippling a Cyclops and, thus, against gods. His crimes against humanity have been ignored and are not the import of the text. The text overlooks the killing of human beings, throwing off the boys to death by patriarchy and the selling of the captured women in slavery in return for money, in the war of Troy, of which Odysseus has been an

essential and integral part. She listens to his heroics at the sea. Odysseus also shares that “the nobler versions, with the monsters and the goddesses, rather than the sordid versions with the innkeepers and whores” (p. 137). The nobler versions of Odysseus are comparable to the “sordid” versions, and the monsters and the goddesses can be compared with the innkeepers and whores. It is to be noted that the change of equivalents in an adventurous story makes it heroic instead of a story with lowly credentials.

## **Conclusion**

*The Penelopiad* is full of contradictory standards fixed by patriarchy. The “reality” and “truth” in patriarchal version absolve men of their sins and, instead, despises and tarnishes women for their uncommitted sins. Fidelity has been the distinguishing attribute of a woman glorified in Penelope’s person and not a single character rivals her in the text. No one except Penelope has a pure relationship with patriarchy as per the nobler version of the story.

*The Penelopiad* as a text and rewriting does not completely fit in Spivak’s (1985) desire and demand to have a text that can “answer one back” (p. 251) against the imperialist project of erasures, silences and absences. However, by taking up the case of injustice and not letting the demand of justice go, Penelope has shown what Bhabha (1994) terms “partial presence” (p. 86) and has partially responded to the situation of stasis prevalent in the world of canonicity.

Patriarchy has its covert objectives when it standardizes a suffering and left alone Penelope as a role model to follow for other women. Penelope is wry of the “nobler” version of Odysseus’ heroic adventures. Historically, only Penelope has been presented as a woman of worthy credence by patriarchy. However, the rumor about her giving birth to the god Pan through excessive sexual adultery also tarnishes her images as a “pure” woman. It also questions the patriarchal assumptions which could not think a woman of that times anything else or higher than a whore, seductress or sex-toy. The strong patriarchy is found defending its aggression and violence as its right and declares it something “natural,” normative and beyond the invocation of (patriarchal) law.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lacan differentiates between the Other and other on the basis of “locus” of speech. The Other with capital ‘O’ is the one who gets the position of speech and constitutes the other with small ‘o’: “There is an Other, and this is decisive, and structuring . . . The Other must first of all be considered a locus, the locus in which speech is constituted” (Lacan, 1993, p. 274).

See Lacan, J. (1993). *The psychoses*. (R. Grigg, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.

<sup>2</sup> The section “Canonical representation of Penelope in Homer’s *The Odyssey*” is solely based on Homer’s *The Odyssey*, translated by E. V. Rieu & Peter V. Jones, so I do not repeat author and year in citation and only give page numbers.

<sup>3</sup> I use E V. Rieu’s translation while citing from *The Odyssey* for the reason that Margaret Atwood herself has used the same as her primary source while writing *The Penelopiad*.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, I analyse Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad: The myth of Penelope and Odysseus* and the year and page numbers in citation are not repeated.

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