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Exploding the Myth: Women in Margaret Atwood's  
*The Penelopiad*

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## **Abstract**

In *The Penelopiad*, through a postmodernist rewriting of the classic myth of Odysseus and Penelope, Margaret Atwood gives voice to the women who were ignored and relegated to the shadows in the *Odyssey*. Through the creation of the new identities of Penelope and the twelve maids, the Canadian author makes this Homeric myth explode by questioning everything we thought we knew about these women. While the character of Penelope has been praised by critics and authors, the maids have, once again, been disregarded. The aim of this paper is to show how the deconstruction of these characters is used to create new female identities that destroy the myth of Penelope and reinforce the image of the twelve maids.

**Keywords:** myth, demystification, Penelope, the twelve maids, new identities.

## **Resumen**

En *The Penelopiad*, a través de una reescritura postmodernista del mito clásico de Odiseo y Penélope, Margaret Atwood da voz a las mujeres que fueron ignoradas y relegadas a las sombras en la *Odisea*. A través de la creación de las nuevas identidades de Penélope y de las doce criadas, la autora canadiense hace que este mito Homérico explote poniendo en duda todo lo que creíamos saber sobre estas mujeres. Mientras que el personaje de Penélope ha sido alabado por críticos y autores, las criadas, de nuevo, han sido ignoradas. El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar como la deconstrucción de estos personajes es utilizada para crear nuevas identidades femeninas que destruyen el mito de Penélope y refuerzan la imagen de las doce criadas.

**Palabras clave:** mito, desmitificación, Penélope, las doce criadas, nuevas identidades.



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## Introduction

*The Penelopiad* is a novel published in 2005 by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. This work forms part of the *Canongate Myth Series*, in which, from a contemporary point of view, different authors reinterpret ancient myths from all kinds of cultures. In this case, Atwood rewrites the classical Greek myth of Penelope and Odysseus, moving away from the characteristic androcentrism of the Homeric poems, which means that, in this narrative, the woman takes control of the myth. In this way, Penelope and the twelve maids become the posthumous narrators of this new version of the myth, speaking to us from the underworld thousands of years after the events of the *Odyssey* took place.

This is how, from *hades* and a few centuries after her death, Penelope decides to tell the truth about what happened in Ithaca during her husband's absence. Her intention is to refute the rumours that have been spread about her supposed infidelities, as she does not understand how her honour could have been sullied in this way. These versions claim that Penelope slept with all the suitors “one after another over a hundred of them and then gave birth to the Great God Pan” (Atwood 144). To this end, she tells her own story and talks about her childhood, her marriage to Odysseus, and her life in Ithaca until she reaches the moment when she finds herself alone for 20 years due to her husband's absence. It is in these last 10 years, while at the same time Odysseus was “desperately” trying to return home from the Trojan War, that Penelope entertains suitors by telling them that she will not choose a husband until she finishes the shroud she was weaving for Laertes, her father-in-law. During this decade, rumours of Penelope's infidelity gain strength, as authors such as the Victorian satirist Samuel Butler consider the whole story of the shroud to be a ruse used by Penelope to avoid putting an end to the games of seduction that existed between her and the suitors (Beard). In book XXII of the *Odyssey*, the Homeric hero not only kills the suitors for having besieged his palace and wooed his wife, but also executes twelve maidens on the ground that they had behaved indecently by having sexual relations with these men. Due to this outcome, if Penelope slept with one, two or all the suitors is not the main point of *The Penelopiad*, as what really matters is whether or not Penelope was behind the murder of the maidens who were hanged by Odysseus when he returned to Ithaca.

On the other hand, the twelve maids who were hanged, in the manner of a classical chorus, draw the reader away from the version of a superfluous Penelope to focus on the questions that really matter: why were they brutally murdered? did Penelope have anything to do with it? Borrowing Atwood's own words, "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids" (xix), so I have laid the foundations of my work around these questions. These women, through songs, poems, and theatrical performances, tell us how life was for the poor women, how little their lives were worth and how they were considered mere sex objects. Unlike Penelope, they do not deny at any time having slept with these men because they do not want to clear their names; they want justice; they want Odysseus to pay for his crime because they believe that he acted just like them and no one punished him.

With the advent of postmodernism at the end of the 20th century, an interest in the concept of subversion of myths through the creation of new female identities began to awaken. Alicia Ostriker, one of the authors who helped the subversion of myths to experience a definitive theoretical impulse in the 1980s, created the concept known as "revisionist mythmaking", whose objective is to rewrite a myth in which the identity of women takes on different symbolic dimensions from those of the original work, provoking the destruction of the myth due to demystification (Rozells 15). Beteta Martín states that, according to Marina Warner, author of *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, "subversion does not lie in the creation of new myths that lack immortality, an inherent feature of myths, but in rewriting the classics through textual subversion in order to highlight the mutable character of myths" (174). This means that myths have the capacity to change in order to adapt to new social contexts, which is why Atwood gives voice to female characters that would otherwise remain silenced by the yoke of a patriarchal society.

Classical mythology has survived for centuries and has kept its essence intact, making women's identity internalised through literature, which is one of the greatest tools of acculturation. Therefore, if the representation of these women changes in these new myths, it forces a change in the symbolic order which provokes the destruction of the original work through the deconstruction of the established mythical archetypes (Beteta Martín 163-165). But what is a myth? As Atwood states on the back cover of her novel



"myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives -they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human". Therefore, it could be said that the creation of myths is something primary and universal in human beings, since in this way they try to explain universal aspects such as the meaning of human life, human behaviour or social order, among others. In short, this is the reason why throughout history human beings have tried to make sense of their lives by creating stories according to different contexts and historical periods.

Although this novel gives voice to both Penelope and the maids, most studies have only focused on extolling Penelope's image as a contemporary woman and feminist icon while criminalising the maids. Authors such as Leví Caballero, consider that while Penelope is a contemporary woman who fights against the norms imposed by a male-dominated society, the maids merely demystify this woman by accusing her of numerous infidelities with suitors and of having planned a plot with Eurycea, Odysseus' former nurse, to get rid of them because they knew too much. These authors not only silence the maids again but also criminalise them by further destroying their image.

This undergraduate dissertation aims to point out how the characters of Penelope and the twelve maids have been the tools used by Atwood to "explode" the Homeric myth by the demystification and reinforcement of their identities. On the one hand, I will argue that although Penelope's intention is to show that she was indeed the devoted and faithful woman in Homer's *Odyssey*, the truth is that she achieves the opposite effect. On the other hand, with this work I also intend to give the recognition that I believe the twelve maidens deserve, as they do not intend to clean their image, but to make their version count in order to punish their murderer. For this purpose, bearing in mind the archetypes that have been embodied by these women throughout history, my intention is to show how the author deconstructs these Homeric characters by creating new female identities that destroy and create myths with the power of their voices.

Consequently, this paper will be structured as follows. The first section will analyse how women's identity was created in ancient Greece and what their role was in this patriarchal society. It is essential to bear this in mind because we must not forget that

although Atwood's Penelope and the twelve maids are contemporary to us, these women actually belong to ancient Greece, so it is important to know the roots of their identity.

The second section deals with the Homeric representation of the main characters in *The Penelopiad*: Penelope, Helen of Troy and the twelve maids. This point will provide a clear view of the mythic identity of these women before their deconstruction. Although the character of Helen has no voice of her own in Atwood's novel and we can only construct an image of her through Penelope's narration, as will be shown in the third section, Helen is the common thread of Penelope's demystification. Striving to cleanse her image, Penelope also devotes herself to completely destroy the myth of her cousin in an attempt to create a contrast by comparing her archetype of "perfect woman" with that of Helen's "femme fatale"; but the problem is that, as we shall see, by doing this she destroys her own myth.

Lastly, the third section will examine the new identities of Penelope and the twelve maids. My main goal in this chapter is to demonstrate that the women we encounter in Atwood's novel are no longer the same as in the *Odyssey*; they have changed. These new identities serve to help destroy the myth of Penelope and reinforce that of the maids.

Although this work is not intended to be a gender study or a feminist critique of the novel, it is important to establish the way in which female identities are constructed in order to talk about the deconstruction of female archetypes as it is directly linked to the destruction of myths, which is the main theme of the work. Whereas in the *Odyssey*, the mythical identities of Penelope and the maids were constructed based on the female archetype established by the patriarchal system of ancient Greece, in Atwood's work these identities are deconstructed to give way to new personalities that destroy and reinforce different myths. As we shall see, through the mythification and demystification of these new female versions Atwood makes the reader question everything we knew about Homer's *Odyssey*.

## 1. Women in Ancient Greece

According to Irshad, the social construction of women is forged through the evolution of a society's culture and through socialisation between individuals (8). Therefore, although Penelope and the maids tell their version of the story in the 21st century, it should not be forgotten that all the women who form part of Atwood's narrative lived in ancient Greece. It is therefore essential to establish the type of role played by the female sex in the different spheres of Greek society in order to be able to analyse the women in *The Penelopiad*.

Talking about women in ancient Greece is a complex subject because the information we have about their living conditions is obtained from literary and archaeological sources, which are usually not excessively reliable. As Pomeroy explains,

Women pervade nearly every genre of classical literature, yet often the bias of the author distorts the information. Aside from some scraps of lyric poetry, the extant formal literature of classical antiquity was all written by men. In addition, misogyny taints much ancient literature. (Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves 10)

Therefore, in order to analyse the way these female characters think and act with respect to the themes that I have identified as central to the novel, such as marriage, the inferiority of the female sex and infidelity, it is necessary to know the context in which these women's characters developed. To this end, three fundamental aspects will be taken into account. First, it is important to bear in mind that these mythical archetypes of women have been constructed by men, so what we really have today is the conception of Greek women from a purely male point of view. Secondly, the information on women is limited and even more so if we talk about the living conditions of the poor classes, as most of the women in these works belong to the upper class. And finally, it is important to consider the fact that each *polis* or city-state was governed by different laws and had different social structures and forms of government.

Throughout history, the norms of behaviour and values of each civilisation have been defined as its own culture has evolved. In the case of ancient Greece, society was governed by a patriarchal system in which women were subordinate to men and had to

abide by strong morals that valued modesty, obedience, and fidelity above everything else; but how did the idea that women were inferior beings emerge in this society? The social construction of women was based on two fundamental pillars in the development of ancient Greek society: philosophy and mythology. Both areas are closely linked as they try to explain major aspects of human beings and the world that surrounds them, but while mythology goes hand in hand with religion and its arguments are considered irrational, philosophy adopts a rational and secular stance to answer basic questions (Fernández Parmo 5). Because of this search for answers, both areas tried to explain the nature of women in their own way (Fernández Parmo 4-8).

Greek philosophers, addressed this question by agreeing that women were mere instruments that only served to procreate and provide pleasure to men, thus relegating them to a lower plane where they were practically invisible. Although the arguments varied, the main intention of these authors was to demonstrate the inferiority of women in relation to men, which could be seen in the works of some of the most important ones, such as Aristotle and Plato. Aristotle, among other things, considered men superior because he believes that women's role in procreation was passive since men did all the work; and he also claimed that women's mental activity was limited (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 80). On the other hand, other authors such as Plato were not so extreme with this kind of thinking and although he considered the female sex to be clearly inferior, he also admitted that there could be exceptions (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 119-122). This thinking, which today we call sexist, stemmed from the importance the Greeks attached to *logos*; they valued reason above everything else. On this basis, the way women acted was considered to be far removed from the *logos* because they were impulsive beings who, instead of being guided by reason, were guided by the most primal instincts of the human being.

In mythology, women are often characterised as victims, objects of desire or culprits of catastrophes. In fact, if we go back to the myth of the creation of the first woman, it can be observed how they constructed her image with the purpose of making her inferior to the man. Greek mythology considers Pandora to be the first woman and the one to blame for all the misfortunes suffered by humankind. Out of curiosity, Pandora opened a *pithos*, a kind of box containing all the evils of the world. Accidentally, she let

all these evils spread throughout the world, but she managed to close the *pithos* before hope, the only good contained in the box, could escape. Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer, blamed her for man's mortality and "all the ills which beset life, as well as for the frivolous and unseemly behaviour of wives" (Graves 138). Pandora represents the archetype of women in ancient Greece, as she embodies feminine impulsiveness as opposed to the reasoning of men.

The domination strategies of the patriarchal system distance women from the logos and pigeonhole them into an ideological construct in which women are only valued for their reproductive function. Women were driven to act in one way or another, blinded by passions by which they allow their souls to be dominated without regard for the consequences. This meant that they were considered to have weak morals and were not trusted because their judgement could easily be clouded by emotions.

Deemed incapable of making their own decisions, regardless of their social status or wealth, a woman would always be considered inferior to a man. It can be said that the Greek woman lived in a constant infantilisation as they were condemned to remain under the guardianship of a male for their entire life, passing from hand to hand as a mere object denied control over her own life; Cantarella calls this phenomenon "perpetual guardianship" (209). This "guardians" were known as *Kyros* and had full authority over all decisions concerning women. The guardian was usually the father, who arranged the marriage of his daughter to the man who would become her new *Kyros*.

Marriage was a necessary evil that sought to form alliances between families to increase their wealth and power. Marriages were purely political, and love was rarely found in them. Because of this, the woman had no choice and was used as a bargaining chip to improve her family's status. In ancient Greece marriages could be patrilocal or matrilocal. On the one hand, in the patrilocal models the wife moved to the husband's house and there was an exchange of gifts between the two families; Pomeroy claims that the bride was used "as a bridge in a new alliance between the houses of her husband and of her father" (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 30). On the other hand, in the matrilocal model, it was the husband who went to his wife's home to provide protection to his father-in-law's home. In one way or another, women were used for the

exchange of power and wealth.

In this society, infidelity was linked to marriage, as it was a widespread and accepted practice, but only if it was the man who practiced it. This is due to the fact that, women had to remain faithful to their husbands, otherwise they were considered adulteresses and were severely punished. Men, on the other hand, could resort to prostitution and even live with a concubine because they were only accused of adultery if they had sexual relations with a married woman. As Pomeroy explains, “a man had sexual access to a legitimate wife as well as to the female slaves in his household, while his wife was expected to be faithful to him” (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 22). Infidelity committed by women was severely punished because if the woman had relations with another man, the legitimacy of her offspring could be questioned, and if a bastard bore the father's surname, it tarnished his honour. If it was the man who fathered children out of wedlock, they were considered illegitimate but were not punished. Therefore, it can be considered a question of possession, since the woman, being considered inferior, must obey her husband's orders and be faithful only to him. Moreover, beyond protecting the woman's virtue, what they wanted to avoid were possible problems with the offspring, since if the woman committed infidelity, it would be a bastard the one who would carry the father's surname, thus sullyng his honour. This did not occur on the husband's side, as children born out of wedlock were considered illegitimate.

Taking all this into account, it is obvious that women had no choice and were obliged to play the role imposed on them by society, which was to be the perfect mother and wife. In fact, they were educated in the values of silence and submission. The education they received was practically non-existent and they were only instructed in household chores, such as weaving, and sometimes they were also instructed in music and dance, although their apprenticeship usually ended when they got married.

Throughout the different periods that make up the history of ancient Greece, the role of women in society varied very little because domestic activities were completely ingrained in this society. Activities outside the *oikos*, which was the private area of the society, were very rare. The only active role that women played in Greek society was that

of mistress of the house. Women were relegated to the domestic area and were completely excluded from the public sphere, which belonged to men. This meant that, although they were considered citizens, they had no right to inherit, vote or own wealth (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 68). In this sense, women were on the same level as foreigners, slaves, and children, since, like them they could not exercise any of the basic rights enjoyed by men. The only space women could occupy was the home and their main functions were to be wives and mothers.

As mentioned above, it is important to keep in mind that each *polis* was governed by different laws and had different social structures and forms of government. Although the stories narrated in the Homeric poems are set before the constitution of the city-states, Sparta has always distinguished itself from the rest of ancient Greece. In this case, it is important to establish some basic characteristics about Sparta (because Helen of Troy and Penelope were Spartan noblewomen). While in Greek cities such as Athens some of the qualities admired in women were silence and submission, in Spartan society other qualities were valued: “Spartan women were encouraged and trained to speak in public, praising the brave, reviling cowards and bachelors” (Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* 9). Their main role in Spartan society was also that of being mothers, but with the difference that, in order to produce strong offspring, Spartan women were subjected to physical training from an early age. Pomeroy says in this regard that “these activities caught the attention of writers and lead us to conclude that Spartan women’s intense involvement in such activities was probably unique in the Greek world” (Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* 12). What was intended was that strong mothers should give birth to strong children. Another characteristic to keep in mind about the Spartan society was that women's infidelity was not treated in the same way as in the rest of Greece; “at Sparta, the only consequence of adultery apparently was an aspersion that political opponents of a potential king might cast upon his legitimacy” (Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* 75).

The role of women in ancient Greece was marked, in one way or another, as in the case of men, by the fact of having been born into a family of citizens or not; although slaves had worse conditions, all women, regardless of their status, were forced to occupy the margins of society. They were controlled and forced to fulfil the role assigned to them by a patriarchal and misogynistic society. According to Pomeroy, Greek women could be

classified into four roles: wife, prostitute, courtesan or concubine (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 15). Curiously, the women who enjoyed the greatest freedom were the courtesans, foreign women who practiced prostitution and accompanied men at banquets; they were not under the tutelage of a man so they were free to go out into the streets and could even own their own properties.

In classical Greece, female slaves performed a variety of jobs usually associated with sex, housework and sometimes both. The maids were sold to the highest bidder and all aspects of their lives were controlled by the master of the house. The masters controlled their sex life, selected their husbands and if they had children, they became their property. In Pomeroy's words "Kings were heads of patriarchal households which included slave concubines available for their own use or to be offered to itinerant warriors to earn their support" (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* 37). In *The Penelopiad* the young maids who end up being killed are used by Penelope as a kind of sexual weapon. Moreover, as will be analysed in the following points, the class difference is palpable, being the living condition of the slaves very hard.

## **2. Women in the *Odyssey***

Critics consider Homer to be the first Western author and therefore it is said that the Western tradition begins with his poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homer recounts in the *Odyssey* the difficulties Odysseus had to face on his return home after the Trojan War. Unlike the *Iliad*, it is not a war poem, but focuses more on the description of exotic lands, the dangers faced by the hero and the appearance of mythological beings. As war is no longer the focus of the poem, the presence of female characters is greater. The roles played by these women are often either evil women who hinder the hero's return home or allies who help Odysseus to accomplish his tasks.

In the case of the *Odyssey*, it might be thought that the importance of the female characters is minor as everything revolves around Odysseus, but this would be wrong thinking. Although the Homeric woman is, in Cantarella's words, "the victim of an inexorably misogynistic ideology" (209), the role of female characters is decisive for the development of events in the *Odyssey*. In this section we will discuss the original myths



of women that appear in *The Penelopiad*, taking Homer's original work the *Odyssey* as a reference.

## 2.1. Penelope: The image of fidelity and virtuosity

It could be said that, among all the female characters in the *Odyssey*, it is Penelope, whom Homer describes as a faithful, virtuous, patient, intelligent and prudent woman, the only "perfect" woman in the whole poem according to the canon of the time. While she waits for her husband's return, she finds her palace besieged by several men demanding her hand. At no point does Penelope outright refuse to marry any of these suitors, and she even gives some of them hope, as in the case of Antinous. This deeply disturbs Telemachus, her son, because he sees how these men are squandering his inheritance while his mother does nothing:

As for her, though she hates the idea of remarrying, she cannot bring herself to take the final step of rejecting all the Suitors or accepting one of them. Meanwhile they are eating me out of house and home. And they will very soon destroy me too. (Od. 59. bk. I)

But Penelope was really up to something, as she had hatched a plan to entertain the suitors during Odysseus' absence. She told her suitors that when she finished weaving a shroud for her father-in-law she would choose a husband. Penelope would unravel at night everything she had woven during the day, and in this way, she managed to keep the suitors entertained for three years until one of the maids discovered the deception and betrayed Penelope by telling the suitors. This shows great insight on Penelope's part, for if she had flatly refused to marry, the suitors would have taken the palace by force.

Penelope embodies the archetype of fidelity and, although she weeps on multiple occasions for the absence of her husband in books XVII and XIX, she shows her devotion to Odysseus throughout the work. In book I Penelope, wearing a thick veil to cover her face and accompanied by her maids, appears in the room where the suitors were and, grieved by the *aoidos*' song, asks him for another one:

Phemius,' she said, 'with your knowledge of the ballads that poets have made about the deeds of men or gods you could enchant us with many other tales, rather than this. Choose

one of those now for your audience here, and let them drink their wine in peace. But give us no more of your present song. It is too sad; it never fails to wring my heart. For in that catastrophe no one was dealt a heavier blow than I, who pass my days in mourning for the best of husbands, the man whose name rings through the land from Hellas to the heart of Argos. (Od. 61. bk. I)

As mentioned in the previous point, this was unthinkable because women were not allowed to speak in public, but it could also be a nod to Penelope's Spartan origins. Telemachus, noticeably angry, sends his mother to her chambers. Penelope is shown as a broken woman who tries to assert herself in a male-dominated world.

When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, Penelope's cautious and distrustful character becomes stronger. In book XXIII when Eurycleia, the loyal servant of Odysseus, tells her that her husband has returned and has ended the lives of all the suitors and murdered twelve of the maids, Penelope did not believe her. She does not accept that this man is her husband until she sees Odysseus without the disguise of a vagabond.

Eurycleia is a character closely linked to Penelope, as it was the one who taught Penelope all the traditions of Ithaca and how to run the palace; at first the two personalities of these women clashed a lot. The servant Eurycleia represents the role of the loyal servant whom the master can trust and call upon for help. This woman was sold to Laertes, Odysseus' father, and he treated her as a second wife; it is said that he respected her so much that he never slept with her. She was Odysseus' wet nurse and her devotion to the boy made him trust her completely. She was also Telemachus' wet nurse and her devotion to him made the boy trust her as his father did. The role of this woman is key to the outcome of the Homeric poem, as she is the only one who is able to recognize Odysseus when he arrives in disguise in Ithaca. She was also the one who accused the twelve maidens of unseemly behavior towards the suitors and was responsible for warning Penelope of her husband's return and the death of the suitors.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, the intelligence and extreme prudence of Penelope can be appreciated, and so, in book XXI, when the suitors rebuke her for her deception, she proposes a test, promising to marry the winner. The test consisted of drawing a bow that belonged to Odysseus himself and putting the arrow through the hole of twelve axes; this

feat had only been achieved by Odysseus and she knew that none of the suitors could do it.

In the *Odyssey* she is mentioned a total of eighty-three times in the context of daughter, wife, mother and queen. On multiple occasions her qualities are highlighted and even Agamemnon himself compliments Odysseus on his wife's virtuousness:

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. (Od. 306-307. bk. XXIV)

This is used by Homer to make a comparison between Penelope, who embodies the image of the good wife, and Clytemnestra, who possesses all the negative qualities that a wife of the time could have. Clytemnestra is Helena's sister and therefore Penelope's cousin. It could be said that this woman has gone down in history as Penelope's nemesis, since she is the opposite image of the faithful and devoted woman. When Agamemnon, Menelaus' brother, returned from the Trojan War with his concubine, his wife Clytemnestra had hatched a plan with her lover Aegisthus to end their lives. From *hades*, Agamemnon advises Odysseus on several occasions to beware of Penelope and not to trust her lest he too end up dead. However, Agamemnon murdered Clytemnestra's first husband and her son in order to marry her.

It is because of Agamemnon's warning that Odysseus appears in disguise on his return to Ithaca. The woman is a being that cannot be trusted, but it seems that Penelope is the exception. This also serves to compare the fates of the two men, for while one is welcomed with open arms, the other was murdered in cold blood by his wife.

## 2.2 Helen of Troy: The face that launched a thousand ships

Helen is Penelope's cousin, and although in the *Odyssey* her character tends to go unnoticed, it cannot be forgotten that in the *Iliad* everything revolves around her figure. Therefore, although Helen does not play an active role in the *Odyssey*, the stories that Homer tells in this epic poem are an extension of the events of the *Iliad*, since Odysseus' adventures are the result of his eagerness to return to Ithaca after having participated in the Trojan War.

There are several versions of Helen's conception, but all agree that, in one way or another, her origins are divine. The most widespread version is that Zeus descended from Olympus transformed into a swan in order to have sex with the beautiful queen Leda; in the poem *Leda and the Swan*, the Irish poet Yates describes the conception of Helen and the future consequences this would have for Greek history. Following this assault, that same night Leda slept with her husband, King Tyndareus. As a result of this intercourse, Leda gave birth to four children: Helen and Pollux were Zeus' and Clytemnestra and Castor were Tyndareus'. It is said that this assault was premeditated by Zeus because he knew that the fruit of this union would directly involve mortals in their own destruction as punishment for their impiety. Like Pandora, Helen was the scapegoat chosen by Zeus to punish mortals (Blondell 27).

Helen has gone down in history for her dazzling beauty; she was considered the most beautiful woman among mortals and was even compared to Aphrodite herself. For this reason, when she reached marriageable age, all the men wanted to make her their wife. Tyndareus organised a contest, rigged by Odysseus, in which Menelaus was proclaimed the winner. Not only did he win the hand of the beautiful Helen, but this marriage made him king of Sparta.

This woman's beauty is seen as a threat and it is said to have triggered the Trojan War, but again, there are several versions. One of these versions tells that it all started when the goddess Aphrodite promised Paris, the Trojan prince, Helen's love after he had chosen her as the most beautiful goddess in a competition in which Hera and Athena also participated (Graves 556-557). As a consequence, when Paris arrived in Sparta, it was

Aphrodite who clouded Helen's judgement by making her fall in love with Paris and forcing her to flee with him. Another version says that Paris abducted Helen while she was hunting. While a last version, the least known, tells that it was Zeus who ordered the god Hermes to abduct Helen while Hera and Proteus created a spectre made of clouds with the image of Helen to travel with Paris for the sole purpose of the war to break out (Graves 557-559). With this in mind, the reality is that all versions imply that Helen did not voluntarily elope with Paris so that she is actually innocent and not to blame for the misfortunes that befell her in this war. In fact, Priam himself, the father of Paris, defends Helen's innocence:

Come over here, dear child. Sit in front of me, so you can see your husband of long ago, your kinsmen and your people. I don't blame you. I hold the gods to blame. They are the ones who brought this war upon me, devastating war against the Achaeans. (Il. 134. bk. III)

Helen's behaviour can be considered ambiguous, as in the *Iliad* there are moments when she seems content with her life in Troy and others when she shows regret and guilt. In book III, Helen is desolate before Priam for all that her departure to Troy has caused:

I revere you so, dear father, dread you too if only death had pleased me then, grim death. that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child. my favorite, now full-grown. and the lovely comradeship of women my own age. Death never came, so now I can only waste away in tears. (Il. 134. bk. III)

Helen is aware that she is the cause of the death of hundreds of men and constantly blames herself for it. She is aware of her beauty, but at the same time she sees it as something negative because it has only brought misfortune to her and those around her. In book VI, in a conversation with Hector, Paris' brother, we can see how this woman becomes critical of herself, as she insults herself and even wishes for her own death:

My dear brother, dear to me, bitch that I am, vicious, scheming horror to freeze the heart! Oh how I wish that first day my mother brought me into the light some black whirlwind had rushed me out to the mountains or into the surf where the roaring breakers crash and drag and the waves had swept me off before all this had happened! (Il. 207. bk. VI)

Helen's character in the *Iliad* causes the men around her to act violently. That is why it could really be said that the war started because Menelaus could not accept such humiliation. As a woman, Helen was treated as a possession and because of this all the men who vied for Helen's hand vowed that if any man separated her from her husband, they would fight to get her back. Thus Odysseus, who was also the one who made all the men swear this oath on the entrails of a dead horse, was forced to leave Ithaca, leaving his wife behind. According to Blondell "She is conceptually essential to the Trojan War, and thus to ancient Greek constructions of Greek masculine identity, which is, in consequence, founded on the containment of the threat of female beauty" (28).

When Menelaus finally recovered Helen, he intended to take revenge on her, but when he saw his wife, he was dazzled by her beauty and forgave her. After the Trojan War, Helen returned to Sparta with her husband. In book IV we can see Helen playing the role "of the perfect royal wife, spending her time in wool working and acting as a gracious hostess to her guests" fulfilling her role with decorum but without showing a hint of affection towards Menelaus (Blondell 72-73). In this book, Helen acknowledges and accepts the consequences of her actions:

I was already longing to go home again. I had suffered a change of heart, repenting the blindness which Aphrodite sent me when she brought me to Troy from my own dear country and made me forsake my daughter, my bridal chamber, and a husband who lacked nothing in intelligence and looks. (Od. 89 bk. IV)

But although the Helen of the *Odyssey* adheres to the archetype of the "perfect woman" established by society, she still breaks out of the mould. During Telemachus' visit to Sparta, in book IV, Helen plays an active role throughout, which was unusual for a woman at the time. Helen is an assertive, talkative woman and is not as dependent on her husband as the other women in the *Odyssey*; even though she plays the role of the perfect wife, she takes certain liberties in her behaviour (Blondell 76-78).

### 2.3 The maids: The indecent girls

Little is said in the *Odyssey* of the maidens and their tragic end. These women, daughters of slaves and poor women, had been sold to Odysseus when they were just little girls and worked in the palace ever since. Following Penelope's orders, they were in charge of spying on the suitors to inform Penelope of each of their moves. Some of them fell in love with the man they spied on, and others were raped, leading to their tragic end at the hands of Odysseus. The maids are a group, they have no identity of their own, in fact the only name we know is that of the maid Melanthe, who is said to have been the most brazen and the worst behaved. Pointed out by Eurycleia, 12 of these women were accused of having behaved improperly and for this they were killed by Odysseus.

The murder of the maids, which takes place in book XXII of the *Odyssey*, is one of the greatest enigmas of the poem. This subject is often overlooked because, if you take the point of view of the time, it was a deserved punishment. Nonetheless, the execution of the maidens is extremely strange because, although it is true that they behaved inappropriately towards the suitors, this would have happened just the same if they had cried, kicked and refused to do so, since the suitors would have taken them by force. Today, there are authors who defend these murders and others who condemn them, but in this point, we are going to focus on the motive for this murder.

Although it was Odysseus who gave the order, the maids' death is often associated with Telemachus because it was he who disobeyed his father's orders to kill these women with the sword and chose to hang them. Telemachus chose to hang the maidens because he considered it a foul death and what they deserved, so they died without honour: "I would not take away the lives of these creatures by any clean death, for they have showered abuse on the head of my mother, and on my own head too, and they have slept with the suitors" (Od. 294 bk. XXII). Telemachus' decision can be interpreted in the following two ways: as a display of immaturity and brutality or as a demonstration that he is the worthy successor to his father (Fulkerson 335). Telemachus' decision may show frustration and anger towards his mother for allowing suitors to roam the palace in violation of Ithaca's laws of welcome. It is said that the materials used to hang the maidens

symbolically allude to Odysseus and his family, and that by exterminating the disloyal maids his house was cleansed (Fulkerson 337).

The hanging of the maids may symbolise two things. Firstly, it can be seen as the extermination of sexual promiscuity in Odysseus' household, thus reinforcing the cultural order that women were to follow (Fulkerson 342). Secondly, as a typically female method of suicide, it forces women to atone for their own disloyal sexuality (Fulkerson 342). Not only must they die, but they must do so in a way that exemplifies their repentance, while making clear their own inability to recognise that their actions deserve punishment. According to Fulkerson, "Death by hanging retroactively corrects the maids' behaviour" (343).

It is said that Penelope raised these maids as if they were her own daughters and loved them as such, especially Melanthe. According to Fulkerson, based on many similarities between Penelope and the maids, scholars have argued that "the question of Penelope's fidelity is almost entirely displaced onto her servants" (344). This contrast between Penelope and the maids can be seen when Odysseus returns to Ithaca disguised as a beggar because while Melanthe insults and mocks him and later goes with other maids to have sex with the suitors, Penelope stands firm waiting for her husband's return.

### **3. Women in *The Penelopiad*: Rise and fall of mythical identities**

As has already been said, the women we find in Atwood's novel are no longer the same as in the *Odyssey*, so in this point it will be shown how through the voices of Penelope and the maids different myths are destroyed in favour or against these women.

#### **3.1 Penelope**

Penelope's use of language in Atwood's work plays a fundamental role in the demystification of her own myth. Odysseus' wife is not the victim she would have us believe her to be, and in fact she constructs this image in a tremendously intelligent way. From the very first moment, Penelope's intention is to create a bond with the reader; in this way, she becomes our confidant. At all times Penelope only tells us what it is in her



interest for us to know, although she sometimes shows her true personality when she forgets things she has already said or contradicts herself (Leví Caballero 152). As a worthy companion of Odysseus, Penelope is a strategist; she plays with us and tries to control our opinions about her. On multiple occasions she makes use of sentimentality to make us feel pity or empathise with her. In her narration, she uses different registers that mark her discourse to convince us that her story is real and not to question it.

Through Penelope's post-mortem testimony, certain nuances can be observed that indicate that she has not been able to free herself from the norms of behaviour and values that were instilled in her in Ancient Greece, so we must be aware of her origins in order to have a clearer vision of her identity (Scanlon 9). It could be said that the personality of Atwood's Penelope is marked by affective deficiencies and childhood traumas. When she talks about her childhood, Odysseus' wife is presented to us as a victim. When she was a child, her father ordered her to be thrown into the sea because an oracle prophesied that she would be the one to weave her shroud, so in an attempt to escape his own fate, he wanted to kill her daughter so that the prophecy would not be fulfilled (Atwood 9). This failed assassination attempt meant that she could never trust her father again, nor could she show him any kind of affection. Her mother was a *Naiad*, a nymph who, according to the Homeric poems, was the daughter of Zeus. Penelope describes her mother as "beautiful, but cold-hearted" (Atwood 10), with a restless character who neither cared for her daughter nor showed her any affection. Penelope's mother did not conform to the canon of motherhood imposed by the society of the time, and she despises the *Naiad* for it.

Besides, these affective deficiencies remain latent in her personality throughout her narrative and help us to understand Penelope's overweening obsession with her cousin Helen, whom she completely demystifies from the outset. Penelope does not say a single good thing about her cousin; in fact, she refers to her as "Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes" (Atwood 131); these vulgar comments are a far cry from the mythical image of the *Odyssey's* Penelope. Helen is described as a vain, selfish, and shallow woman who prides herself on having been the cause of so many men losing their lives. With the accusations she hurls at Helen we see that Penelope is not the modest and compassionate woman of the *Odyssey*, but she is an envious and self-conscious woman

who does not hesitate to discredit another woman's image in an attempt to reinforce her own. As an unreliable narrator we cannot know if what she says about Helen is true or not, but the way she speaks of her cousin says more about her than it does about Helen. It should be noted that, in *The Penelopiad*, Helen has no voice, so she cannot defend herself against these brutal accusations.

In addition, although Helen is Penelope's main target, she also uses Clytemnestra and Medusa to try to reinforce her image. She describes Clytemnestra as a murderous adulteress while she refers to Medusa as a disgusting being. This is really the image we have of these women, if we interpret the myth from a male point of view; the key is that Penelope hides the real story from us. Clytemnestra did indeed murder her husband Agamemnon along with his lover, but she did it because he had killed her first husband and her son in order to marry her. The same happens with the Gorgon Medusa, we all know her for being one of the most famous mythological monsters, but what few know is that Zeus raped her in one of Athena's temples and as punishment the goddess turned her into a monster.

The iniquity Penelope processes towards her cousin does not cease in *Hades* because, even in death, Helen continues to arouse fascination in the world of the living and the dead. In addition to being summoned by magicians who gawk at her beauty, Helen is also pursued by a retinue of men in the underworld, which unsettles Penelope: "I was not a man eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen" (Atwood 29). Penelope tries to discredit Helen's image in order to give veracity to her story, but unwittingly shows us her true self; this image is far from the one she herself tries to defend. But Penelope not only defames her cousin's image by exploiting Helen's sexuality, she also dares to blaspheme and question the existence of the gods on numerous occasions, displaying a relativistic and iconoclastic attitude unbecoming of a Homeric woman, and even less of a queen (Leví Caballero 157). Penelope constantly questions her cousin's divine roots, "I wonder how many of us really believed that swan rape concoction?" (Atwood 20), but she claims on numerous occasions that, as her mother is a Naiad, her origins are semi-divine. Helen's lack of divinity subverts her myth, while Penelope, on the contrary, tries to reinforce her mythical qualities by constantly mentioning her semi-divine provenance.

Penelope's hatred for his cousin spills over into her marriage to Odysseus, as he was one of Helen's suitors. Penelope did not have the opportunity to choose her husband, nor did she marry for love; she was "put up for auction" and it was Odysseus who won her hand after winning a contest. Penelope is not naïve; she is fully aware that the men did not compete for her, but for the riches she brought with her. In spite of the fact that she constantly reproaches Helen that she is the reason why hundreds of men have lost their lives, Penelope envies the fact that no man would ever lose his life for her love. The future queen of Sparta knows that she is a bargaining chip, and she does not like that: she wants to experience what it is to feel desired. Because of this, from the very first moment we see how she tries to conquer Odysseus by doing what is most valuable in a woman, which is listening to his stories, but Penelope does not receive the affection she expected from Odysseus as he is somewhat paternalistic and treats her as old men treat children.

Predictably, Penelope also blames Helen for her husband's departure to war, but she is not sad because the man she supposedly loves may die, she is genuinely upset at being left alone in Ithaca: "when would he come back and relieve my boredom?" (Atwood 81). At no point does she mention her fear of never seeing Odysseus again, which is unbecoming of a devoted woman. This can also be seen when Telemachus returns from Sparta, since, instead of asking his son if her husband is still alive, all she is interested in is whether Helen is still as beautiful as ever or whether she has finally aged. In relation to this, Heitman suggests that "all her actions and decisions are based on the conviction that her husband is most likely dead and will not return" (48).

Throughout history, Penelope has been regarded as the embodiment of virtue, modesty, and fidelity, so it is surprising to find Penelope confessing that "like a lot of goody-goody girls" she was always secretly attracted to "bad guys" (Atwood 16). Odysseus' wife also admits to having delighted in the attentions of suitors and confesses to having accepted gifts from these men: "I can't pretend that I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this. Everyone does; we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don't believe them" (Atwood 104). Although Penelope attempts to defend herself against these accusations, all she succeeds in doing is to give further strength to the versions of her alleged infidelity. Moreover, as Irshad points out, "while Homer's description of Penelope maintains the myth of her chastity and faithfulness, Atwood's version of the

story reveals the truth of her faithfulness and fidelity by stating Penelope's response to the plea and speeches of the suitors" (38).

Penelope is a clever woman, who multiplies the profits, as she makes clear, when she takes charge of her husband's affairs in Ithaca during his absence. Through this action, she dispels the myth that women should be relegated to the *oikos* and that they are incapable of doing any important work for lack of *logos*. However, this also ends up being negative for her image as it shows how Penelope remains imprisoned in the traditional gender stereotypes as "although she temporarily performs a man's business' while Odysseus is away, her role is always dependent on her husband, which explains her obsessive jealousy with Helen of Troy and her constant need for reassurance" (Rodriguez Salas 25). But Atwood's Penelope is not only presented as an intelligent woman, she is also Machiavellian. Penelope's perversion does not lie in whether or not she has been faithful to her husband, which is not directly stated at any point in the novel, but in the way she uses other women to get what she wants.

Odysseus' wife acquired the twelve young maids, who would later be killed by Odysseus, as children and raised them and loved them as if they were her own daughters. This is contradicted by Penelope's comments about the maids as she describes these women as follows:

The maids were my sources of information. They were ever-flowing fountains of trivial gossip: they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angles, they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them as much as they pleased: no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs.  
(Atwood 30)

Penelope's true intention in raising and "loving" the young maidens was to forge a bond with which to manage them at her whim, and she does this not only by making them scapegoats but by forcing them to use their sexuality to obtain information from suitors. When the maids are forced and come to Penelope, she is as cold as ice and seems unfazed by the atrocities committed by the suitors and at no time shows guilt:

Never mind,' I said to them. 'You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they'll confide in you and we'll know their plans. It's one way of serving your master, and he'll be very pleased with you when he comes home. (Atwood 117)

For Penelope these men deserved to be punished, but not because they had outraged the maids, but because abusing them without the permission of the master of the house was "tantamount to stealing" and could not be allowed. She says that from the very beginning it was her intention to tell Odysseus that the maids were acting unseemly by obeying her orders, but she never stands up for them, not even in chapter xxvi where a contemporary trial is held. When Penelope testifies as a witness, she claims that "almost all the maids were raped, sooner or later; it was a deplorable fact, but commonplace in palace life" so this was nothing to be shocked about. Penelope tries to explain that she had nothing to do with the murder of the twelve maids because when it happened, she was sleeping.

In short, Penelope is not an honest woman, she twists the truth to try to manipulate us and get us on her side. But she also invents versions that make her feel better, as when she tries to justify the fact that her father threw her into the sea by saying that Poseidon forced him to sacrifice her: "But maybe this idea of mine about the prophecy of the shroud pronounced by the oracle is unfounded. Maybe I made it up to make myself feel better"; or when she says that she believes that the attack on Odysseus by a boar that scarred his leg was orchestrated by his grandfather. She herself admits that she likes to think that this was so because then they would both have in common that one of their relatives would have tried to kill them: "The more I think about this version of events, the more I like it. It makes sense" (Atwood 28). This leads us to wonder if Penelope has also made up that she had nothing to do with the death of the maids just to make herself feel better.

### **3.2 The maids**

Unlike Penelope, the maids do not raise their voices from the underworld to try to cleanse their image, but to demand justice for the brutal way in which they were murdered. Although it is not their purpose, the twelve maids participate in the demystification of Penelope by contradicting her version of events. The identity of

Atwood's maids is clearly marked by the fact that they are women and belong to the lower social class of society; these women form a single unit and are a prime example of female bonding (Rodriguez Salas 21).

The maids make the reader listen not only to a woman who speaks from a privileged position, they give a voice to all the women of the lower classes of society: the slaves. From childhood, the fate of these young women was written; they were sold, used, and abused without anyone caring. They were forced to become hypersexualised from a very young age, as they themselves say "we were dirty, dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault" (Atwood 12). These women were considered objects and therefore men could do with them what they wanted, even when they were just little girls. Because of this, they accept the canon that society imposes on them; they have no escape and so they become "the dirty girls". For them, beauty was not something to envy, because the more beautiful the girl was, the more she would be abused.

Although Telemachus, Penelope's son, and the maids grew up together, they were treated in completely opposite ways. While Telemachus' birth was celebrated, the Maids' birth was of no concern to anyone; he was a prince while they were:

animal young, to be disposed of at  
will,  
Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used  
discarded when bloomless. (Atwood 67)

These women's lives have no value and they are aware of it. Since they were children, they were forced to serve Telemachus; they act like adults; their childhood was taken away from them while they watched Telemachus enjoy his. The only time the maids can escape their fate is in their dreams; while they sleep, they do not have to work tirelessly until they die, and are not forced to sleep with men, but when they wake up everything changes:

But then the morning wakes us up:  
Once more we toil and slave, '  
And hoist our skirts at their command  
For every prick and knave. (Atwood 126)

The narration of Penelope and the maids goes hand in hand, but while Penelope uses her narration to manipulate the reader while trampling on the image of other women, the maids are dedicated to telling their reality; at no time do they directly address us or discredit the image of other women in order to reinforce their own. This takes a turn in chapter XX entitled “Slandorous Gossip”, in which Penelope flatly denies having been unfaithful to Odysseus, to which the maids respond in the chorus by completely denying the Queen of Ithaca's version, stating that "when it came to sex - no shrinking sissy" (147). However, the maids do not accuse Penelope of having been unfaithful in order to destroy her myth; they do so to explain why they were killed.

According to the maids, Penelope used them as scapegoats to save her own skin, because if Odysseus found out that his wife had been unfaithful to him, he would murder her. The maids tell that at night they did not help Penelope to undo her father-in-law's shroud, but that they were in charge of sneaking the suitors in and out of Penelope's room. They accuse Penelope of being in cahoots with Eurycleia, as the former wet nurse of Odysseus did not want Odysseus' honour to be tarnished by Penelope's actions. With the execution of the maids, the only ones who knew of Penelope's adulteries were silenced.

The contemporary trial that takes place in chapter xxvi clears up any doubts we might have about Penelope because, although she had the opportunity to defend the maids, she does not do so. The lawyer defends Odysseus by claiming that these were his slaves and that he could do with them as he wished. He also claims that the motive for the murder is that although they were raped, they did not ask permission to rape them, which is a total inconclusion. The judge says that he will not uphold the case as Odysseus' good name cannot be sullied by this. Faced with this impunity, the maids promise to torment Odysseus for the rest of his life.

From the very beginning the maids only blame Odysseus for their terrible end. These young maidens at any time deny having committed these acts but reproach Odysseus for sleeping with every goddess, queen and harlot he came across and, besides not getting any punishment for it, he murders them for something he himself had done. In this way, the maids also contribute to the demystification of the mythical hero as they present us with a womanising, lying, hypocritical man.

## Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation was to show how Atwood creates new female identities that destroy the reading of Penelope and reinforce the image of the twelve maids by exploding the Homeric myth. In this way, my intention was to bring Penelope down from the pedestal on which most authors had placed her in order to give the maids the recognition and attention they deserve.

After an in-depth journey through the construction of women's identity in ancient Greece and the classical myths of Penelope, Helen of Troy and the twelve maids, it can now be observed how the characters of these women have been the tools used by Atwood to destroy the Homeric myths by both demystifying and/or reinforcing the identities of these women. For this purpose, it was essential to establish the conception of women in ancient Greece and their place in society, since the identities of these women were forged in this historical period. Thus, it could be said that the canon of the ideal woman in ancient Greece corresponded to that of a submissive woman, whose main functions were to be a good mother and wife, being completely relegated to the private sphere of Greek society. Moreover, in this society adulterous women were disowned, although it was common practice for men to frequent brothels, cohabit with concubines and abuse maids. In short, women, regardless of their social class, were used as mere sexual objects.

Taking all this into account, only Penelope fulfilled these requirements, as Helen and the maids represented everything that the Greeks detested in a woman. Penelope is the image of perfection, what every Greek woman should aspire to be like. In contrast, Helen and the maids represent the misfortunes that desire and lust can bring about. Although in the Homeric poems Helen shows remorse and it is even suggested multiple times that she was not the cause of the Trojan War, it seems to be more important that hundreds of men died trying to bring her back to Menelaus, even though he was the one who called these men to retrieve his beautiful wife. Following the same thread, the maids are considered to have engaged inappropriate sexual behaviour that had to be eradicated, but this does not take into account that even if they had objected, the suitors would have raped them unceremoniously. Once the original identities of these Homeric women have been established, it has been possible to analyse how in *The Penelopiad* new female



identities emerge and change the vision we had of them.

On the one hand, it has been shown that Penelope is not the devoted and faithful woman presented to us by Homer in the *Odyssey*. She is an envious, misogynistic, selfish and Machiavellian woman who tries to manipulate the reader in order to preserve her mythical identity. Atwood removes the halo of divinity that shrouds Penelope's identity and shows us an ordinary woman of flesh and blood. But the fact that Penelope is portrayed as an ordinary woman is not the reason for her demystification; the destruction of her myth lies in the way she destroys the image of other women in an attempt to enhance her own. Helen is the target of all her resentment but, since she has no voice of her own in the novel, she cannot defend herself against Penelope's attacks. It is clear that Penelope envies her cousin; she wishes she were as beautiful as she is and that hundreds of men would die for her love. Odysseus' wife is shown as a shallow woman who completely destroys the myth of Helen by comparing her archetype of "perfect woman" with that of Helen's "femme fatale". Moreover, Penelope uses her intelligence to manipulate the maids at will. It is never made clear whether Penelope was unfaithful or whether she had anything to do with the execution of the maids, but her version of the story makes these rumours more powerful.

On the other hand, the image of the maids is reinforced because at no point do they try to pretend to be something they are not, nor do they use other women to try to look like "good girls". Even when they demystify Penelope by affirming that she did sleep with the suitors, they do not do it deliberately to damage her image but use it as an argument to explain the plan that Penelope and Eurycleia hatched to end their lives. Unlike Penelope, the maids are not shallow and do not mind the fact that they have gone down in history as "dirty girls". The maids are presented as a unit that fights tirelessly for justice. Although they are convinced that Penelope used them as a scapegoat to save her own skin, they know that if it had not been them, Odysseus would not have hesitated to execute his own wife. They consider their death to be senseless, since Odysseus slept with countless women on his way back to Ithaca and received no punishment for it.

In this way, it can be said that while the image of the maids has been reinforced, Penelope has completely destroyed hers. While the maids have evolved and embody what

is known as gyn/affection<sup>1</sup>, Penelope continues to represent the worldview that considers women's existence as always related to that of men. The maids have freed themselves from the yoke of the patriarchal society of ancient Greece and have found their own voice, but Penelope carries with her the prejudices that were once instilled in her. Although it is clear that Penelope is not the woman of the *Odyssey*, she refuses to abandon the archetype for which she has gone down in history.

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<sup>1</sup> A term created by Janice G. Raymond to speak of feminine unity (Rodriguez Salas p.)

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