Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/482. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Margaret Atwood

# The Penelopiad

*United Kingdom (2005)*

TAGS: Antinoos (Penelope's Suitor) Helen Homer Ithaca Melantho Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Penelope Telemachus Trojan War Underworld






*We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.*

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | The Penelopiad |
| *Country of the First Edition* | United Kingdom |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | Worldwide |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 2005 |
| *First Edition Details* | Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005, 199 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 9781841956459 |
| *Target Audience* | Crossover |
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## Creators



**Margaret Atwood , b. 1939**
**(Author)**

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, on November 18, 1939. Her mother was a nutritionist and her father an entomologist. Her father's field of research resulted in the family spending a great deal of time in the backwoods of Quebec, and Atwood did not attend school until she was eight years old. As a girl she was a prolific reader of fairy tales, comics, and mysteries, and began writing her own stories, plays and poems from the age of six. She completed a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours at Victoria College at the University of Toronto in 1961, where her professors included Jay MacPherson and Northrop Frye, and graduated with a Masters degree from Radcliffe College. She began, but did not complete, a doctorate degree, and has lectured in English at a variety of colleges and universities across Canada and the United States.

Her prolific publication record includes novels, short stories and poetry, as well as literary criticism and social commentary. Her work addresses the themes of gender, power, identity, and dystopian societies, through the lenses of speculative and feminist fiction, though she has expressed ambiguity about her work being labelled as feminist. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman,* was published in 1969. She has written eight children's books, and in 2016 she published a graphic novel *Angel Catbird*, with Canadian artist Johnnie Christmas. Her books have won numerous literary prizes and awards. *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *Alias Grace* and *Oryx and Crake* were all shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, which she won for *The Blind Assassin* in 2000. She lives in Toronto, and is married to the novelist Graeme Gibson, with whom she has a daughter.

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com



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## Additional information

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| Adaptations | Theatrical production by the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre in 2007<br><br>www.cbc.ca/manitoba/scene/theatre/2013/02/22/penelopiad/ (Accessed 19 May, 2018) |
| Translation | German: *Die Penelopiade: der Mythos von Penelope und Odysseus,* trans. Malte Friedrich, Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2007. |

Summary

*The Penelopiad* is part of the Canongate Myths Series, which 'brings together some of the world's finest writers, each of whom have retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way.' Though marketed for adults, the text is accessible to mature teenage readers, and features on secondary school reading lists.

Atwood allows Penelope to tell her own story, drawing upon Homer's *Odyssey* but also on material from beyond this dominant source. Penelope, who has been in Hades for millennia, reflects upon her relationships with her father Icarius, her cousin Helen, son Telemachus, and of course with her husband. The text casts a critical eye over the figure of Odysseus, suggesting that he is "*t*oo clever for his own good" (p. 31). The short chapters of Penelope's narrative are interspersed with 'Chorus Line' performances by her twelve maids. The final books of the *Odyssey* recount how these young girls, who have been sleeping with the suitors, are made to clean up the massacre in the hall, including the slaughtered bodies of their lovers, before being hung by Odysseus and Telemachus. In the *Penelopiad* the Maids act as a Greek Chorus, contributing to the story through a variety of oral performances, including a children's playground rhyme, a sea shanty, an academic lecture and a court trial.

In her Introduction, Atwood highlights two questions that she believes that the *Odyssey* leaves open: "what led to the hanging of the Maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (p. xv). The Maids are tragic figures, with low status and little control over their lives. But they are young and pretty, and Penelope cares for them, though even she cannot protect them when her husband returns. Atwood proposes that



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the Maids have no choice but to sleep with the Suitors, and Penelope encourages them to fraternise with these men and report back to her what they intend to do.

The text develops a complex portrait of Penelope that extends, and at times contradicts, her traditional representation. Atwood retains from Homer the notion that Odysseus and Penelope are well matched. Penelope says that the "two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either of us believed a word the other said" (p. 173). But in contrast to Homer's version, she immediately recognises her husband on his return to Ithaca, though she keeps her revelation to herself while suggesting the bow contest and facilitating his reunion with Eurycleia. "I set the whole thing up on purpose" (p. 139) she says. Unfortunately, her failure to inform the Nurse, whom she resents, of the Maids' true allegiances leads to their murder. The text explores the themes of loyalty and culpability, and the terrible things people will do to ensure their own survival.

## Analysis

*The Penelopiad* is a self-conscious treatise on the multitude of ways that a tale can be told. Penelope's first person prose account contrasts with the variety show performance of the Maids, who sing, dance, and speak in rhyme and double entendre. In this way, Atwood draws not on the structure of Homer's epic poems, but on the form of a Greek drama, with the monologues of the main characters interrupted by the lyric performances of the Chorus.

When the Maids deliver an anthropology lecture that proposes that they signify a matrilineal moon-cult, they refute a suggestion from the audience that such a theory is "unfounded feminist claptrap" (p. 166). Their brutal murder, at the hands of the "usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians" (p. 165), frames this myth within the historical context of the late Bronze Age, but also with reference to gender politics of the contemporary age, where women continue to be subjugated by men. The Maids also serve to highlight how those not born into positions of privilege end up suffering at the hands of those who are.

Atwood explores the ties between the ancient and modern worlds, and seems to relish the ways in which the mythic past infiltrates the present. The trial of Odysseus descends into chaos when the Maids



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invoke the Furies, and they invade the courtroom, barking and hissing, while the Judge helplessly calls for order. Penelope's account also features moments of wry humour. She comments on aspects of the contemporary world that make little sense to her, describing ancient world spirits accessing the internet, and home computers "that serve as domestic shrines" (p. 19). She conceives of antiquities museums as "enormous palaces that have – strangely – no kings and queens in them", and where people acquire worthless miniature versions of the precious relics of her own time.

The text illuminates the topography and customs of the Underworld. Penelope describes encounters with figures from her life, including the suitor Antinous (who chooses to retain the bloody visage of his murdered corpse, with an arrow in his throat), and Helen, still trailed by an adoring entourage of spectral admirers. She doesn't see much of her husband, who is too busy drinking the Waters of Forgetfulness and being reincarnated, only to be eternally doomed to return to Hades because of the Maids' curse. Atwood uses the afterlife as a metaphor for the endurance of the mythic tradition, perpetually reborn into new forms.

*The Penelopiad* is a thought provoking companion to *The Odyssey*, and Atwood's text has received considerable scholarly attention. It confronts the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the Odyssean saga, and employs them to highlight the multivalency of the myth making process.

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| Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts | Antinoos (Penelope's Suitor) Helen Homer Ithaca Melantho Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Penelope Telemachus Trojan War Underworld |
| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Death Family Femininity Gender, female Ghosts Heroism History Intertextuality Invention Life Rape Storytelling Survival Tradition Truth and lies Violence |



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Further Reading

Baig, Mirza, "The Suitors' Treasure Trove: Un-/Re-inscribing of Homer's Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*", *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (2014): 65–VII.

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Šlapkauskaitė, Rūta, "Postmodern Voices from Beyond: Negotiating with the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*", *Literatūra (Vilnius)* 49.5 (2007): 138–146.

Suzuki, Mihoko, "Rewriting the Odyssey in the Twenty-first Century: Mary Zimmerman's Odyssey and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*", *College Literature* 34.2 (2007): 263–278.

Addenda

www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/oct/26/theatre.classics



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