

# Ways of Sentencing: Female Violence and Narrative Justice in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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## Abstract

Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) redrafts the story of Homer's *Odyssey* from the point of view of Odysseus' wife, Penelope, and in the process reformulates cultural narratives of women, violence, justice and their interstices, thus indicating Atwood's interest in creating points of intersection between literature and broader social and political processes. While Atwood's revision of the *Odyssey*, as an inherently corrective and political pursuit, can be viewed as a form of justice in itself, this critical discussion focuses on Penelope's engendering of justice through the writing process, and how the resultant 'narrative justice' is informed by inequitable and unstable power relations, despite its apparent impartiality and certainty. Continuing the role as arbiter of justice, assigned to her during her life in ancient Greece, Penelope draws attention to Helen of Troy's unfair exoneration following her incitement of the Trojan War and, in an effort to correct this wrong through the act of writing, constructs and displays Helen as a figure whose previous public acts of indirect violence parallel the psychological violence she commits on a personal level in the present. Penelope's use of narrative justice to redress the falsely flawless image of Helen signals her appropriation of the traditionally masculine realm of justice in order to exact a feminine form of 'sentencing', yet, in doing so, it also reveals traces of both her own biases and her involvement in the murder of her Suitors and her twelve maids. It is the voices of the murdered maids in particular that provide the chorus of the text and *ipso facto* offer a further revision to Penelope's revisionary narrative, thereby evoking the struggles for power often inherent in judicial processes.

The myth narratives that appear characteristically throughout the fiction and poetry of Margaret Atwood move beyond exclusive literary interests in order to address the human need for justice and retribution. Contrary to Karen Armstrong's assertion that 'Today mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute due to our perception of such modes of thought as irrational and self-indulgent',<sup>1</sup> Atwood, in her novella *The Penelopiad* (2005), rewrites both traditional myth theories and myth narratives in order to demonstrate the enduring relevance of myth and its utility in providing readers with a means to explore and critique the effectiveness of judicial responses to the violent acts of women, thus offering a place where literature and broader human rights issues meet. Reflecting Atwood's understanding of revisionism as "re-vision"—seeing something again<sup>2</sup>— *The Penelopiad* redrafts the story of Homer's *Odyssey* from the point of view of Odysseus' wife, Penelope, whose influence under both ancient and modern notions of justice places her in a position to imagine a unique form

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<sup>1</sup> K. Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2005), at 2.

<sup>2</sup> M. Atwood, 'A Conversation with Margaret Atwood' in B. Mendez-Egle and J.M. Haule (eds.), *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, (Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University Print Shop, 1987) 172-180 at 174.

of 'narrative justice', which she uses to redress Helen of Troy's acts of indirect violence in causing the Trojan War. More precisely, in seeking to requite Helen for the wrongs she has committed, Penelope crafts her narrative into a vehicle of adjudication by publicly portraying Helen as an appropriate recipient of justice whose previous public acts of indirect violence parallel the psychological violence she commits on a personal level in the present. Penelope's use of a narrative-based justice to correct the erroneously idealised image of Helen suggests Penelope's appropriation of the traditionally masculine realm of justice in order to exact a feminine form of 'sentencing', only to reveal increasingly her own involvement in the murder of her Suitors and her maids, the latter of whom enact their own narrative justice as they struggle for voice, legitimacy and retribution in the narrative. In bringing to light such observations and identifying Penelope's unique yet ultimately flawed use of justice, this discussion aims to critically address the potential for justice to be engendered through the writing process, and to destabilise the image of judicial procedures as impartial and reliable by revealing the inequalities and instabilities of power that they frequently belie. The palimpsestic tale that emerges is ultimately one of continuation and disruption, where the association of mythic literature with moral concerns is maintained, while the various traditional notions of violence as exclusively physical, of women as victims and witnesses of violence, and of justice as a 'just' construct are destabilised and themselves put on trial.

The persistence of mythic figures in the contemporary settings of Atwood's recent fiction suggests the ways in which Atwood's conceptualization of myth has been influenced and shaped by the theories of Northrop Frye, who, in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), posits that mythic archetypes constitute the underlying pattern of literature across time and space and that 'myths explain the structural principles behind familiar literary facts.'<sup>3</sup> According to Frye, there exist a finite number of timeless images and structures of meaning that provide the basic 'grammar of literary archetypes',<sup>4</sup> where the reshaping and development of art over time is in fact a return to, and a re-plumbing of, its own depths. Atwood, in her essay on the role of women in literature, clearly aligns herself with Frye's delineations of myth when she describes how female conventions established in Homer's epics are 'still very much with us'<sup>5</sup> in contemporary writing, yet Atwood moves beyond Frye's theory of myth by demonstrating how the archetypal 'grammar' of literature, and more broadly language in general, offers a space of play for the writer and an opportunity for the rewriting of such grammatical rules and precepts. Moreover, while Frye insists that mythical episodes, replete with pure metaphorical activity, possess 'an abstractly literary quality', and '[give] up the external analogy to "life"',<sup>6</sup> Atwood endeavours to reinvigorate traditional archetypal criticism with a new dynamism by rewriting myths, or what Frye terms 'the mythical mode',<sup>7</sup> positioning them within quotidian settings and investing them with the unexceptional issues of daily existence, which, common as they may be, continue to challenge us. In addition to providing a world parallel to our own, mythic realms, for Atwood, often coincide with everyday life and describe a place where 'grudges are held, vengeance is exacted' and 'crimes [...] beget consequences

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<sup>3</sup> N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), at 215.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, at 135.

<sup>5</sup> M. Atwood, 'The Curse of Eve—Or, What I Learned in School' in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982) 215-228 at 222.

<sup>6</sup> N. Frye, n.3 above, at 135.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, at 134.

years later.<sup>8</sup> Through this system of action and reaction, transgression and justice, myths in Atwood's recent fiction describe a moral imperative and, as Armstrong notes, '[put] us in the correct [...] posture for right action'.<sup>9</sup>

The self-reflexive revision of the *Odyssey* offered by *The Penelopiad* provides a valuable example of how Atwood both aligns with and advances Frye's myth theory by re-writing archetypes of female passivity and victimisation and by suffusing her myth with the everyday. Set in modern day Hades, *The Penelopiad* re-tells Homer's famous epic from the perspective of Penelope as she describes her daily thoughts and encounters in the afterworld, and offers a retrospective account of her previous life in ancient Greece and her wait for the return of Odysseus at their home in Ithaca during his twenty year absence of epic travel and adventure. Penelope's difficult childhood, as the daughter of a selfish father, Icarus of Sparta, and a negligent Naiad mother,<sup>10</sup> is clearly seen to leave its deleterious mark upon her, and ill-prepares her for the later challenges of single-handedly raising her son, Telemachus, and ruling Ithaca, while dealing with the vast number of belligerent Suitors who invade her palace in Odysseus' absence. In Penelope's struggle to maintain the resources and honour of her kingdom, it is her maids, whom she likens to sisters, that embody the greatest wellspring of support and stability and that later represent the chorus of her narrative, while Penelope's veritable kin, Helen of Troy, signifies the greatest source of disruption in Penelope's past and present life. Odysseus' murder of both Penelope's slothful Suitors and her ostensibly disloyal maids upon his return at the end of the narrative is described by Penelope as an event of betrayal and bloodshed. Yet what Penelope does not explicitly identify is that Odysseus' slaughter was also an event that was carried out with the help of unexpected accomplices, and which conceals many secrets.

Similar to Atwood's perception of myth, which can be imagined as a composite informed by both Frygian theories and her own innovations, Penelope's understanding of justice is a necessarily synthesised one. Before examining Penelope's specific attempts at, and reasons for, employing justice measures in *The Penelopiad*, it is necessary to observe how she is represented in Atwood's narrative as a figure whose notions of justice form a complex that responds to and integrates both present-day and ancient Greek constructions of justice.<sup>11</sup> While Penelope's dually informed understanding of justice will be returned to later in this discussion, it is significant to note here how *The Penelopiad* spans the two very different historical times of the ancient past and the modern day present, thus indicating how Penelope has been inculcated with two disparate notions of justice. Outlining the modern perceptions of justice that Penelope aligns with, Elizabeth Kiss definitively states that justice is today understood as 'the virtue or norm by which all receive their due', and as a process in which

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<sup>8</sup> M. Atwood, 'Of Myths and Men: Atanajuat: The Fast Runner' in *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1982-2004*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004) 259-262 at 260.

<sup>9</sup> K. Armstrong, n.1 above, at 4.

<sup>10</sup> In Greek mythology, the Naiads are water nymphs.

<sup>11</sup> While Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* mutually describe the Trojan War, which scholars estimate took place in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century BC during the Mycenaean era, it is widely accepted that Homer composed his epic poems centuries later during a period falling between 750-700 BC. Additionally, while the events of the *Odyssey* historically took place during a different historical era, the historical environment of the poem is that of Homer's own day, thus suggesting that Penelope's retrospective narrative in *The Penelopiad* reflects the archaic, rather than Mycenaean, period.

there is a 'morally appropriate distribution of social benefits and burdens, rewards and punishments, status and voice'.<sup>12</sup>

Contrasting with such modern constructions of justice is the ancient Greek understanding of judicial principles and retribution. For the inhabitants of early archaic Greece, justice was predominantly a masculine realm wherein little consideration was given to a proportionate graduation of penalties, and typically brutal punitive acts were ultimately determined by the offended party. Preceding the development of courts, constitutions and inscribed legal codes in the seventh century BC, Greece in the eighth century BC possessed 'no written laws or courts' and 'Crimes were defined not by the state but by the accepted customary norms of the kinship households that made up the society.'<sup>13</sup> The absence of larger justice systems and regulatory laws required that the duty of defining criminal acts and of carrying out punishments for inter-familial crimes be placed upon the victims themselves (or on the household head of the victim's family in the event of the incapacity, death, infancy or female gender of the victim), or on the king following the occurrence of a state offence. In both the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*, the long-term absence (and potential death) of Odysseus and the adolescence of Telemachus uniquely render Penelope head of both her household and state and permit her growth into the powerful, albeit traditionally masculine, role of adjudicator. Moreover, Penelope's ability in the *Odyssey* to make 'sophisticated moral choice[s]',<sup>14</sup> to settle disputes amongst her male suitors,<sup>15</sup> and Agamemnon's praise of Penelope's virtue and constancy combine to suggest that Penelope's refined judicial abilities became a constituent element of, and in large part defined, her traditional public identity.<sup>16</sup>

Steady in her ancient legacy as judicial figure, Atwood's Penelope refuses the promise of oblivion offered by the Lethean waters of the afterlife, and as a result is herself consumed with the injustices of the past, and, in particular, with Helen of Troy's eluding of justice following her provocation of the Trojan War. The type of violence that Penelope holds Helen culpable of is one in which her violent actions exist in an indirect relationship to the resultant harm, and which reflects Patricia Pearson's insistence that women frequently circumnavigate physical violence and 'become aggressors of a different kind' by developing into masters of indirection'.<sup>17</sup> Recalling Atwood's earlier poetic attempts to work through the image of Helen by depicting her as an erotic dancer who evokes the 'bleary/hopeless love'<sup>18</sup> of her

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<sup>12</sup>E. Kiss, 'Justice' in A.M. Jaggar and I.M. Young (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 487-499 at 487.

<sup>13</sup>E.M. Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment in Ancient Law and Society* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), at 27.

<sup>14</sup>H.P. Foley, 'Penelope as Moral Agent' in B. Cohen (ed.), *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 93-115 at 105.

<sup>15</sup> See *Odyssey* 21. 311-343, where Penelope insists upon the equal opportunity of all her suitors in the bow challenge she proposes.

<sup>16</sup>In addition to Penelope, the ability of Arete, queen of Skheria, to settle men's disputes in the *Odyssey* (7.71-73) suggests that women's capacities for justice and fair judgment were not entirely uncommon during the archaic period and that, despite the traditional associations of justice with the masculine realm, women were accepted and at times honoured for their judicious abilities. Also see *Odyssey* 7.66-70.

<sup>17</sup>P. Pearson, *When She Was Bad: How and Why Women Get Away with Murder* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998), at 17. Also, Atwood's own sense that females are given greater opportunities 'to be more manipulative and conspiratorial and Machiavellian' ('The Beaver's Tale' at 159) suggests the frequency and facility with which women act indirectly in engendering violence.

<sup>18</sup>M. Atwood, 'Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing' in *Morning in the Burned House*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995) 33-36 at 34.

worshippers and who bears the warning, 'Touch me and you'll burn',<sup>19</sup> Penelope's first mention of Helen in *The Penelopiad*, in which she protests Helen's unfair and preferential treatment amongst modern day conjurers and admirers despite her notorious deeds, quickly evolves into her indictment of Helen as 'a woman who'd driven hundreds of men crazy with desire and had caused a great city to go up in flames'.<sup>20</sup> Further, Penelope observes how Helen consciously continues to drive men 'mad with lust through her tantalizing, yet ultimately immaterial, apparitions that signify for Helen 'a return to the old days'<sup>21</sup> and which parallel the 'mental torture' of the gods, who inflict punishment upon the villainous dead by 'conjur[ing] up banquets—big platters of meat, heaps of bread, bunches of grapes—and then snatch[ing] them away'.<sup>22</sup> Penelope's arraignment of Helen, while clearly concerned with linking her to the commencement of the Trojan War, is particularly invested in revealing Helen's unfair exoneration for her acts: 'Helen was never punished, not one bit. [...] You'd think Helen might have got a good whipping at the very least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. But she didn't.'<sup>23</sup> Unlike the Penelope of Homer's *Odyssey*, who mitigates Helen's guilt by stating that 'It was the god [Aphrodite] who drove her to do [her] shameful deed',<sup>24</sup> Atwood's Penelope adamantly insists upon Helen's guilt and her suitability to receive justice measures by exhibiting the intentionality behind Helen's indirectly violent acts and by undermining her ostensible genealogical connection to the gods, who, in Atwood's text, are largely peripheral to and exempt from systems of human justice.

In contrast to the ambiguity behind Helen's admission of guilt and repentance in the *Odyssey*, in which she admits to the 'shameless creature that [she] was'<sup>25</sup> immediately after flattering Telemachus and aggrandizing herself through her magnificent entrance, Atwood's Penelope highlights how Helen's ruminations and stories of war clearly evince her indirect violence as not only purposeful, but also pleasurable. In addition to the selfishness and lust that she finds responsible for enkindling Helen's actions, Penelope reveals that it is Helen's enjoyment of violence that incites her enactment of it. Penelope recalls that, in Helen's recounting to her the story of the Athenian War, the 'part of the story that [Helen] enjoyed the most was the number of men who'd died,' since Helen 'took their deaths as a tribute to herself';<sup>26</sup> clearly, such details allow Helen to confirm the grandiose mythologies she has constructed around herself, yet they simultaneously corroborate Penelope's perception of her as a figure whose actions are in need of reckoning. Similar to the self-congratulatory tales Helen weaves before an audience of Telemachus and her husband, Menelaus, in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, the stories Helen relates to Penelope in *The Penelopiad* concerning her rebirths and 'latest conquests' in the world of the living reveal Helen's propensity to experience a sense of pleasure and self-affirmation in recounting stories of the 'men she's ruined' and the 'Empires [that] have fallen because of her'.<sup>27</sup> The intimate ties between Helen's storytelling and her pleasure in violence suggest that the inherent capacity of narrative to be endlessly reiterated is a great source of gratification to Helen, yet Penelope's similar use of narrative as a correctional measure to

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, at 36.

<sup>20</sup> M. Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2005), at 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, at 20.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, at 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, at 22.

<sup>24</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Trans. E. V. Rieu (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2003), at 23.221-222.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, at 4.145.

<sup>26</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 75.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, at 187.

bring Helen to justice reveals that this selfsame enduring quality of narrative will also function towards the achievement and permanence of Helen's downfall.

In an effort to further demythologise the idealised image of Helen and to render her a suitable recipient of justice, Atwood's Penelope undermines Helen's claims to be the daughter of Zeus and brings to the fore the falsity of Helen's reputed divine lineage, since 'crediting some god for one's inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not.'<sup>28</sup> Acknowledging how Helen is 'quite stuck-up'<sup>29</sup> about her presumed genealogical link to the supreme deity of ancient Greece and the license to immorality that this creates in Helen, where Helen imagines 'she could do anything she wanted, just like the gods from whom—she was convinced—she was descended,'<sup>30</sup> Penelope attempts to give Helen a thoroughly human dimension and to expose as fraudulent her supposed divine conception by derogatorily terming it 'that swan-rape concoction'.<sup>31</sup> In aiming to disassociate Helen from the gods of Olympus, who are described as 'childish' and prone to 'making a mess' in their excessive acts of violence before exhausting themselves and 'g[oin]g to sleep',<sup>32</sup> and as such are both external to human justice structures and largely inculpable for the '[human] suffering [...] they love to savour'<sup>33</sup> and instantiate, Penelope seems further conscious of what Nancy Felson-Rubin observes is the propensity of half-divine humans to escape the full experience of the human condition and be exempt from 'the full force of human pain'.<sup>34</sup> This inability to suffer additionally helps to explain Penelope's insistence on Helen's mortality, and suggests that, for Penelope, Helen's capacity to experience the mental anguish of guilt plays an integral part in the enactment of narrative justice.

Yet Penelope is not solely concerned with holding Helen accountable for her public and indirect malefactions of the past. Penelope's repeated focus on Helen's current use of language as a weapon to undermine others' sense of self-worth signals Penelope's interest in both allocating moral blame for the personal and direct abuse Helen commits in the present, and representing such acts as extensions of her previous transgressions.<sup>35</sup> Helen's use of psychological violence against Penelope suggests how Helen has consciously tailored her acts of aggression to suit her victim's vulnerabilities; responding to the fact that Penelope is no longer a part of the corporeal world and is thus 'beyond that kind of suffering',<sup>36</sup> Helen targets the less physical aspects of Penelope that remain. Aiming to diminish Penelope's sense of her own ingenuity, a trait that Penelope reveals is central to her identity, Helen insinuates to Penelope that her cleverness is a dubious attribute perhaps sustained by rumour alone, and further endeavours to undermine Penelope's appreciation of her own physical beauty (as manifested by her spirit, or 'shadow' body) by drawing Penelope's attention to her short legs

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, at 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, at 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, at 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, at 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, at 24.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, n.20 above, at 124.

<sup>34</sup> N. Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), at 99.

<sup>35</sup> The understanding of Helen's psychological and verbal abuse as a veritable form of violence is confirmed by J. Freeman, who describes how an individual's interiority can become a 'bloody pulp' following a lifetime of 'verbal whipping' ('The BITCH Manifesto' at 217), and P. Chesler, who observes that 'verbal abuse, coupled with social ostracism, can damage girls in a lasting way' (*The Death of Feminism* at 41).

<sup>36</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 24.

and by referring to Penelope through the epithet of 'little duckie'.<sup>37</sup> While this diminutive commemorates Penelope's rescue by ducks after her father attempted to drown her, Helen's reference to Penelope as 'little duckie' is undoubtedly further intended to draw Penelope's attention to Helen's contrasting beauty and her reputed genealogical connection to a seemingly more glorious father in the figure of Zeus, who, in the guise of a swan, impregnated Helen's mother Leda. While Helen's words are undoubtedly damaging, Helen's attempt to suggest contrast here is, to a certain extent, a failure, since Penelope refuses Helen's claims to divine lineage, and Zeus, like King Icarus, was similarly capable of inglorious violence towards women, as demonstrated by his rape of Leda. Significantly, Helen's use of artificial pleasantries to obscure her psychological violence, where her 'lightest sayings were often her cruellest',<sup>38</sup> parallels Helen's self-proclaimed divine beauty, which imperfectly conceals the 'septic bitch'<sup>39</sup> Penelope finds lying half-hidden beneath. Despite Telemachus' perception of women as being 'overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment',<sup>40</sup> Penelope's focus on Helen's use of cruel words as 'her sting',<sup>41</sup> and her broad use of judicial phrases such as 'aided and abetted' and terms such as 'evidence', 'witnessed' and 'proof', confirm how Penelope is consciously acting as a moral agent and attempting to reckon Helen's past and present, public and personal transgressions.

Penelope's use of narrative justice in *The Penelopiad* as a means to retribute Helen for her various enactments of violence requires us to recall Penelope's influence under both modern and ancient understandings and structures of justice, and to recognise how Penelope's innovation and implementation of her unique mode of justice emerges from her divided ascendance. Penelope's engendering of justice through narrative, while indicative of her efforts to maintain the position as judicial arbiter assigned to her during her life in ancient Greece,<sup>42</sup> and thus her alignment with ancient judiciary structures, simultaneously signals her divergence from archaic and primarily masculine modes of punishment, which, according to Elisabeth Meier Tetlow, 'had to be immediate and simple, such as death, because there were no structures for other forms of punishment, no prisons, and no currency'.<sup>43</sup> Penelope's use of her personal narrative to 'write' the wrongs committed by Helen works to produce the opposite effect to that achieved by masculine and ancient modes of discipline by enabling a form of justice which, through its inherent connection to narrative, engenders a more enduring, subtle and complex form of retribution; in offering a catalogue of her diverse motivations for writing, Atwood suggests her similar use of narrative as justice in admitting that writing allows her to 'satisfy [her] desire for revenge'<sup>44</sup> and to create identities 'that [will] survive death'.<sup>45</sup> Belatedly responding to her Naiad mother's advice to 'Behave like water [...] Flow

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, at 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, at 33.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, at 131.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, at 128.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, at 35.

<sup>42</sup> While Penelope operates as moral agent in the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*, it is Atwood's Penelope alone who draws attention to the fact that such a role was always complicated and frequently underwritten by her simultaneous functioning as a moral object, whose modesty and 'edifying legend' were used in a figurative manner as a 'stick [...] to beat other women with' (at 2).

<sup>43</sup> E.M.Tetlow, n.13 above, at 21.

<sup>44</sup> M. Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), at xx.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., at xxii.

around [obstacles],<sup>46</sup> and to remember that ‘Dripping water wears away a stone,’<sup>47</sup> Penelope crafts a means of exacting justice by constructing a narrative which, through its dialogue and descriptions, encircles and moves around the image of Helen in a fluid manner to slowly erode her falsely flawless image, ultimately signalling both Penelope’s alignment with and divergence from ancient constructions of justice and her appropriation of the traditionally masculine realm of justice in an effort to achieve a feminine form of sentencing. Penelope’s movement towards justice here is by no means direct or linear; rather, justice in *The Penelopiad* operates through Penelope’s gatherings of observations and responses that collectively aim to falsify and correct the idealised image proffered to Helen in the *Odyssey* and more recently in contemporary culture. While Mihoko Suzuki maintains that poets writing after Homer, such as Virgil, Spenser and Shakespeare, often recast Helen as a figure of duplicity and suspicion ‘to be scapegoated and repudiated’,<sup>48</sup> it is the dually ancient and modern image of Helen as a figure of innocence, naïveté and goddess-like beauty that Penelope protests and endeavours to revise.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to her use of an enduring, rather than abrupt, mode of retribution, Penelope’s influence under contemporary conceptualizations of justice is further suggested by the appropriateness of her retributive act to Helen’s character and the transgressions she has committed.<sup>50</sup> Unlike Penelope’s suitors, who Penelope describes as being staunchly resistant to the threat of public defacement and immune to the ‘fear [that] the others would jeer at [them],’<sup>51</sup> Helen is viewed by Penelope as highly sensitive and responsive to the presence of others, and as an individual who, as exemplified during the Trojan War, manipulates her physical appearance when in the presence of men to gain a sense of power, often ‘just to show she could’.<sup>52</sup> Exemplifying her dependency on others to generate her sense of self-worth, and thus her vulnerability to shifts in public perceptions about her, Helen is never seen unattended in the narrative. As such, Penelope’s effort to correct Helen’s public image is a ‘morally appropriate’, and thus modernistic, approach to justice that combines with elements of ancient judicial structures to produce a mode of justice that retributes Helen for her violent transgressions and, perhaps most significantly, prevents the recurrence of such wrongs in the future.

Yet Penelope’s narrative mode of justice, however promising and innovative, is not itself entirely just. Exhibiting Atwood’s perception of her fiction as ‘linked with notions of

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<sup>46</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 108.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, at 43.

<sup>48</sup> M. Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), at 17.

<sup>49</sup> Additionally, L. L. Clader, in *Helen: The Evolution from Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradition*, contends that representations of Helen prior to Homer’s epics in cult and religious contexts identified her as a divine nature goddess who was ‘closely connected with fertility, with the power of growth’ (at 71), an identity which G. Nagy, in his ‘Forward’ to *Helen of Troy and her Shameless Phantom*, maintains became ‘vulnerable [...] once it g[ot] exposed to narrative traditions belonging to Hellenic cultures’ (at xii). Clader’s and Nagy’s suggestion of the mutation Helen’s early identity underwent in the face of cultural shifts, when considered alongside the post-Homeric changes in Helen’s image noted by Suzuki, indicates that Helen’s representation has been variously altered throughout history and that Atwood is participant in, and continuing, a historic trend of Helen’s shifting cultural identity.

<sup>50</sup> See Kiss’ definition of contemporary justice, n.13 above, at 7.

<sup>51</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 107.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, at 29.

morality' and of her fictional characters' tendencies to 'judge each other',<sup>53</sup> Penelope's sentencing of Helen endeavours to correct the pervasive image of Helen as a paragon of unblemished beauty and womanly grace, yet in her effort to do so, Penelope collapses evidence convicting Helen and judgment, corroboration and correction, into one abbreviated act of justice. As such, what is made manifest through Penelope's judicial process is not justice itself, but the injustices and human rights violations underlying the enactment of justice,<sup>54</sup> and the imbalances of power existent between the judicature and the judged. While Penelope directly addresses her readers through the second person pronoun and thus invites, or more aptly requires, them to bear witness to her narrative justice, readers of *The Penelopiad* are ultimately a silent jury, leaving Penelope to powerfully perform as judge, prosecutor and evaluative jury as she works to evince Helen's indisputable culpability for her past and present acts of violence. In her impassioned pursuit of reparation, Penelope attempts to construct a perfectly polarised, yet subjectively-defined, world in which she imagines that the dichotomies of good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood can, and should, exist in their unalloyed states; Karen F. Stein, in her examination of Atwood's fictional storytellers, confirms that the 'motif of telling a story in order to name and blame an evil-doer recurs in different forms in Atwood's fiction'.<sup>55</sup> It is significant to note, however, that Penelope's attempts to 'name and blame' Helen ironically work to expose her own guilt in acting as a Medusa figure who powerfully transforms Helen's elusive and mythic flesh into stone by depicting her as uniformly evil and predictably malicious,<sup>56</sup> thereby illuminating how the fair trial of all individuals in processes of justice is one of the central fictions of the narrative. Penelope's interrogative questions to Telemachus upon his return from visiting Helen and Menelaus, in which Penelope foregoes all other interests in enquiring "'how did [Helen] look?'"<sup>57</sup> exemplifies Penelope's broader tendency to overlook the complex interiority of Helen in favour of examining her exteriority and manifest actions.

Perhaps more pressing, however, is the recognition of how Atwood's Penelope, through her persecutory focus on Helen, unsuccessfully attempts to obscure and direct attention away from her own dubious and indirectly murderous behaviours, revealing how those in positions of judicial power possess, and can thus abuse, the authority to determine whose transgressions are punished, and whose are passed over. Adrienne Rich's observation that evasions of the truth are 'usually attempts to make everything simpler [...] than it really is, or ought to be'<sup>58</sup> helps to illustrate how Penelope's constructed persona as moral arbiter masks her less esteemed and even lesser known behaviours, and reflects the imperative stated in

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<sup>53</sup> M. Atwood, 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behavior in the Creation of Literature' in *Moving Targets*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2004) 157-172 at 161.

<sup>54</sup> Penelope's insistence on Helen's mortality reveals how such human rights infringements have indeed been enacted upon a human individual, rather than a half-deity.

<sup>55</sup> K.F. Stein, 'Talking Back to Bluebeard: Atwood's Fictional Storytellers' in S.R. Wilson (ed.), *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003) 154-171 at 158.

<sup>56</sup> It is the element of power informing justice efforts that ultimately acts to blur the division between restitution and revenge, and between justice and violence. Penelope's attempt to bring justice to Helen's image can be seen to simultaneously satisfy Penelope's personal vendetta against Helen by authorizing violence to be acted upon her traditional identity, resultantly disfiguring, flattening and dismembering an image once held in its entirety as an icon of beauty.

<sup>57</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 132.

<sup>58</sup> A. Rich, 'Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying' in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979) 185-194 at 188.

Atwood's 'Murder in the Dark' that 'The murderer must lie.'<sup>59</sup> As a failed escape artist, Penelope is unable to evade the guilt that she wishes to assign to others, or to withhold and contain evidence of her own involvement in the deaths of her Suitors and her twelve young maids. The oversights that Penelope attempts to ensure through her concentration on Helen reconfigure the axiom that 'justice is blind and reveal that, unlike Teiresias the seer, who Odysseus encounters in the Isle of the Dead and whose blindness is indelibly linked to his ability to see the truth, Penelope's selective blindness to certain realities in her role as adjudicator is simultaneously her refusal to acknowledge her full version of the truth and its various implications.

Through small ruptures in the unity and coherence of her character, Penelope reveals her self-representation as a consciously laundered one, where her public projection of herself as a pundit of justice unsuccessfully blankets her abominable acts and inevitably does an injustice to her own layers of complexity and inconstancy. Fittingly, it is Helen who most clearly exposes such inconsistencies in Penelope's performance of inculpability and her involvement in the murder of her Suitors. Encountering Helen in the fields of asphodel en route to her bath, Penelope exchanges feigned pleasantries with her as their conversation, which appears as a thinly veiled form of verbal sparring, rapidly crescendos into Helen pointedly asking Penelope: "'Tell me, little duck—how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?'"<sup>60</sup> Distracted by the competitive undertones of the sharply posed question, and concluding, presumably correctly, that Helen is interested in comparing the death tolls resulting from the Trojan War with those resulting from the return of Odysseus, Penelope is led to respond that the number of deceased is quite a lot. In addition to Penelope's off-handed reply, which clearly exposes her intimate connection to the massacre committed, Helen's retort, in which she states to Penelope, 'I'm sure you felt more important because of it. Maybe you even felt prettier,'<sup>61</sup> suggests how, for Helen and perhaps for Penelope, a woman's ability to incite and indirectly commit large-scale violence is in part definitive of her self-worth and femininity. Similar to Helen, whose use of an Egyptian potion in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* demonstrates her recognition of the utility of forgetting, Penelope's use of the language of forgetfulness in *The Penelopiad*, and her seeming tendency to lose her narrative thread, leading her to casually state 'Where was I? Oh yes,'<sup>62</sup> deludes the reader into believing that Penelope's memory is a tenuous one and obscures the fact that Penelope holds deeply resonant and discomfiting memories which trouble the unimpeachable and authoritative image she aims to uphold.

Yet Penelope's implication in atrocity is not confined to her involvement in the massacre of the Suitors. After claiming that she 'never would have hurt [her maids], not of [her] own accord', Penelope discloses that it was she who both told the twelve young women 'to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent' in order to discover the subversive plans of her increasingly menacing guests, and who made the decision not to tell Odysseus' former nurse, Eurycleia, of her intricate machinations to defend her marital status and properties. It is this latter decision that Penelope, in hindsight, concedes was 'a grave mistake'<sup>63</sup> in leading Eurycleia to accuse the maids of high treason.

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<sup>59</sup> M. Atwood, 'Murder in the Dark' in *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983) 29-30 at 29.

<sup>60</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 155.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, at 156.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, at 24.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, at 115.

While illustrating Atwood's recognition of the written word's ability to perform as evidence, such small and ultimately partial admissions of culpability on Penelope's behalf are padded by both her further diversionary tactics to localise blame in Eurycleia, where Penelope insists that prior to the slaughter Odysseus relied on Eurycleia's assistance to identify the unfaithful maids, and by her claims to self-defence. This suggests that Penelope is carefully moderating the degree of guilt she is opening herself up to. Looking back on the events leading up to the execution of her maids, Penelope concedes that her 'actions were ill-considered, and causing harm', yet immediately qualifies this statement with the self-justifying claim, 'But I was running out of time, and becoming desperate, and I had to use every ruse and stratagem at my command;'<sup>64</sup> here, Penelope's use of the rebuttal process integral to justice procedures is the self-same rejoinder that she elsewhere authoritatively denies to Helen in her truncated justice practice. Considered together, Penelope's small admissions of *mea culpa* draw attention to her own guilt and blameworthiness in the deaths of the Suitors and the maids. Yet such confessions also summarily reveal how Penelope is offering a red herring through many of her revelations and attempting to evade the reader's recognition of her more damning crime through confessing to lesser transgressions. Moreover, Penelope appears fully aware that her role as judicator has permitted her to become a paradoxical figure of both exposure and deception, and that sometimes the safest place to hide is out in the open. Recalling her earlier representation of Penelope in 'Circe/Mud Poems' as a manipulator and victimiser, Atwood's depiction of Penelope in *The Penelopiad* reveals her identity as a text which must be read with suspicion and caution.

Beyond the fleeting and carefully monitored inconsistencies which cumulatively work to demonstrate Penelope's involvement in the murders enacted upon Odysseus' return, it is the unauthorised and deeply intentional testimonies of the maids themselves which provide the most damning evidence against Penelope's innocence and judicial authority. In an appropriate performance which both re-enacts an inculcating scene between Penelope and Eurycleia and which operates, paradoxically, as a paratext offering tentative answers to the central questions of the narrative, the maids draw attention to Penelope's extramarital affairs and to the 'Suitors [she] ha[s] not resisted'.<sup>65</sup> Such information is dramatised by the maids in order to reveal how their dangerous knowledge of Penelope's conjugal infidelity and her 'every lawless thrill'<sup>66</sup> has led Penelope, in the company of Eurycleia, to devise an intricate murder plot that will ensure their silence concerning such matters upon Odysseus' homecoming. Despite Penelope's concerted efforts, in the previous section entitled 'Slandorous Gossip', to repudiate rumours of her unfaithfulness by rendering the possibility of such extra-marital relations absurd and illogical, the thespian maids in their drama expose Penelope's masterminding of their murder and how Penelope had conscripted Eurycleia to perform in her scheme by pointing out to Odysseus 'those maids as feckless and disloyal' and by convincing him that such women 'are not fit to be/ The doting slaves of such a Lord as he!'<sup>67</sup> Implicitly agreeing with Eurycleia's observation that this charge will most certainly lead to the death of the accused maids, Penelope is depicted as resting satisfied at the closing of the maid's performance, confident that this plot will allow her to remain a model of justice and constancy.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, at 118.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, at 150.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

The interruptive presence of the maids' choral voices provide intervals of counter-narrative to Penelope's master narrative, and counter-truths to Penelope's truth claims, thus instantiating a degree of balance that Penelope's attempts at justice unsuccessfully endeavour to restore, and providing further evidence of the indelible struggles for, and instabilities of, power that underlie justice processes. The persistent presence of the maids and their palimpsestic revisions of Penelope's story indicate an additional level of narrative justice at work in *The Penelopiad*, wherein Penelope, traditionally a figure of prudence and inculpability, is revealed as implicated in the violence of the past and the constructions of guilt that she attempts to assign to others. The biases and manipulations of authority evident in Penelope's attempts at narrative justice generate the sense of a text that is out of balance, and it is the persistence and variety of the maids' voices, in conjunction with their perpetual haunting of Penelope in Hades (where the latter acts as a form of mental punishment upon Penelope and in the end leaves her in tears), that restore a broad sense of equilibrium. Frye identifies that 'the righting of the balance is what the Greeks called *nemesis*, where 'the agent or instrument of *nemesis* may be human vengeance, ghostly vengeance, divine vengeance, divine justice, accident, fate or the logic of events, but the essential thing is that *nemesis* happens.'<sup>68</sup> Performing as ghostly agents of *nemesis*, rather than righteous bearers of justice, the maids attempt to restore stability, an operative which is reinforced by what Frye identifies is the traditional capacity of the chorus to symbolise the 'social norm', or 'the society from which the hero is gradually isolated'.<sup>69</sup>

Yet intimately linked to this stability that the maids usher in is the battle for, and abuses of, power that often accompany justice measures; in this sense, the degree of balance instantiated by the maids is one which is tenuously achieved and temporarily maintained through struggle. Disregarding the goal of human rights to inspire impartial and public judicial processes, Penelope, in her subjective and personal enactment of justice, has both left Helen with an unfair trial and worked to de-legitimise the voices of others exposing the inconsistencies of her claims. The maids' marginalised contributions to discourses of justice in the narrative, where their testimonies are confined to unauthoritative cultural forms such as the popular tune, the idyll, the shanty, and the ballad, reveal how Penelope's pursuit of justice has forced to the periphery those perspectives that differ from her own. It is only in the latter half of the narrative, where the maids' persistent voices have permitted them to gradually gain access to culturally valued forms, such as the lecture, the dramatic performance and the judicial proceeding, that the possibility for such power inequalities to be equalised and for the justice processes to be conducted equitably is suggested, but not confirmed.

The continuing dialogism between Penelope and her maids brings to the fore several concluding, but certainly not conclusive, observations regarding the nature of justice and blame in the narrative and Penelope's claims to jurisprudence. Similar to the shroud of Odysseus' father, Laertes, which is unwoven as it is woven, Penelope attempts to fabricate a narrative mode of justice and to 'spin a thread of [her] own'<sup>70</sup> in order to retribute Helen for her past and present violence, yet she simultaneously and unawaredly unweaves the strands of justice created by exposing the frequently purblind nature of judicious processes. The

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<sup>68</sup> N. Frye, n.3 above, at 209.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, at 218. In drawing attention to the chorus of maids as a supportive community for Penelope and an embodiment of the social norm, it becomes evident how the maids occupy a position that enables them to both designate Penelope's criminal involvements as transgressions from the norm, and to demonstrate the consequences of isolation, alienation and revenge that result from recalcitrant and socially deviant behaviours.

<sup>70</sup> M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 4.

indelible acts of blindness concealed by Penelope's retribution and sentencing of Helen, and Penelope's selective failure to account for all aspects and versions of reality, suggest how justice often fails to act upon the whole truth and nothing but the truth and, moreover, how it puts into question the possibility of truth itself. Barbara Hudson similarly identifies that conceptions of justice and penalty are determined by 'who has the power to say who is punished, whose ideas count',<sup>71</sup> thus revealing that the ostensibly universal principle of justice is underwritten by social inequalities and inequitable power dynamics, leaving us to question which political or social process will guarantee or enable the achievement of human rights, if judicial processes do not. Where is the moral centre to reside? Exemplifying her assertion that 'There is indeed something delightful in being able to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act',<sup>72</sup> Penelope's acts of narrative justice reveal her moral agency as a self-serving position, suggesting that the justice instantiated in the narrative is not done in the name of an impartial and universal abstraction, but rather enacted in service of Penelope's own perceptions and evaluations of villainy, injustice and retribution.

The above discussion of *The Penelopiad* has suggested the ways in which power is far from singular. While the title of Atwood's novella and the framing of the narrative as an opportunity for Penelope to bring justice to Helen intimates that narrative authority is exclusively held by Penelope, and thus that all acts of justice will occur under her direction, the persistent return of the maids' unauthorised voices through the chorus chapters identifies that, while power is linked to the enactment of justice, power is ultimately multiple and negotiable. The maids' similar attempts to enact narrative justice upon Penelope expose the falsity behind perceptions of justice as a teleological concept which progresses singularly and uniformly towards the ultimate achievement of societal order, and as a construct which is enacted through a stable and impartial process. What the narrative suggests is that, if justice can be achieved at all, it will be through a process of struggle and the recognition of the inequitable and unstable power relations that underlie justicial measures, revealing that justice is often not absolutely served, but continually in pursuit of an unachievable ideal of order and social harmony. As such, Atwood's text indicates that, in addition to Helen and Penelope, the concept of justice itself must necessarily be put on trial.

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<sup>71</sup>B. Hudson, *Understanding Justice: An Introduction to Ideas, Perspectives and Controversies in Modern Penal Theory* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), at 6.

<sup>72</sup>M. Atwood, n.20 above, at 117.

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