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**Trabajo Fin de Grado: CLASSICAL TRADITION AND RECEPTION STUDIES
IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE WRITTEN IN ENGLISH: THE PENELOPIAD
BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

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ABSTRACT

The Penelopiad, by Margaret Atwood, is a lyrical drama mainly based on the *Odyssey*, yet phocalized from Penelope's perspective. The original title in English evokes other titles from the ancient Greek epic tradition, which confined the heroic glory to the illustrious male figures of myth. With an acute feminist sensitivity, Atwood accords Penelope a similar heroic stature to her male peers in myth, focusing on her own 'odyssey' at Ithaca and beyond. Moreover, Atwood is also concerned with a social critique of the original poem, a concern she channels through the device of the chorus, composed by the servants of Penelope, as the Spanish translation of *The Penelopiad* – «Penélope y las doce criadas»– underscores. These servants play a pivotal role in Atwood's reception of the *Odyssey* and they are unique in their having a lyrical voice that resounds all over the play. The aim of this essay is, firstly, to analyse the main characters from the *Odyssey*, such as Penelope, Odysseus, Telemachus, the suitors, Eurycleia, and even Helen, and, secondly, to explore the specific refigurations of these very characters in Atwood's version. Our analysis will depend largely on the concepts, methods and terminology from Classical Tradition as well as Gender and Reception Studies.

RESUMEN

The Penelopiad, traducida al español como «Penélope y las doce criadas», es una suerte de drama poético basado en la *Odisea*, si bien desde la perspectiva de Penélope, como declara el título tanto en inglés como en español. En inglés, además, el título de la obra juega con la tradición épica masculina que reserva la gloria heroica a los protagonistas varones del mito. La recepción de Atwood estaría dentro de la corriente crítica feminista que reivindica el valor heroico de la mujer en el mismo nivel que el varón. Además, la sensibilidad de la escritora contribuye a una crítica social en la que las criadas, como destaca la traducción española, tienen una visibilidad especial en la obra y constituyen el personaje colectivo del coro. En este ensayo nos proponemos analizar la tradición clásica de los personajes principales de la *Odisea*, especialmente los de Penélope, Odiseo, Telémaco, los pretendientes, Euriclea, las criadas e incluso Helena, así como su refiguración en la versión poético-dramática de Margaret Atwood.

Para ello nos serviremos de la metodología propia de los Estudios de Tradición Clásica y Recepción, así como de los Estudios de Género.

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I. Introduction

The *Odyssey* is the most famous epic ever along with the *Iliad*. It is the story that has delighted many readers over generations and still delights them to our day. It is also considered as the source of later creativeness in many fields, not only in literature. Even though many scholars doubted for many years about the authenticity of the author, nowadays this matters less and it is really of minor importance, emphasizing that whoever s/he might be,¹ this does not undermine the fact that the *Odyssey* is one of the most influential books in history.

The idea that the *Odyssey* was an inspiration for many authors is not related to one time or place. Many writers around the world still consider it as an inspiration and a source of influence to their works even today. The same thing applies to our writer Margaret Atwood, who makes a brilliant twist to the story choosing to give the leading role to Odysseus' wife, Penelope, and to her twelve maids.

Margaret Atwood is one of the most important authors in contemporary literature. She is an author who tries to write using different literary genres and her works have been translated into many languages all around the world.² She has dealt with politics, economy, society and its problems, but she has been most concerned about female

¹ The authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was put into question ever since the eighteenth century. Nowadays these poems are considered traditional poems performed by singers within an oral epic tradition. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idea of a person responsible for the organization of this traditional literature was plausibly contended. Especially interesting was the idea of a female author of this *Odyssey*, due to the importance of domestic as well as economic concerns in the poem, in addition to the astonishing wide variety of female characters. Cf., in this sense, Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, 1897 and Robert Graves, *Homer's daughter*, 1955, as well as *The Greek Myths*, 1980: 365-6. More recently, cf. Dalby 2007.

² Cf. Somacarrera Iñigo 2000: 09.

identity and the way society controls and fragments women,³ that's why, in most of her novels, she chooses female characters to be the protagonists and "*proves, the things that man do, woman can do better. They are neither deficient physically nor intellectually.*"⁴ She is also known for her original reconstructing narratives of women's lives from Greek mythology. She usually gives to these women voices with which to talk and tell their own versions and opinions. Thus how she criticizes and judges the contemporary world using these fictional characters: "*(...) it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have. If we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse*".⁵

For many years, our perception of the story of the *Odyssey* was primarily concerned with giving the importance to the male protagonist, Odysseus, as the only one who went through many sorrows and misadventures.⁶ We ignored or forgot that Penelope also suffered many difficulties and obstacles in her 'journey' of waiting for her husband, and she also was clever, intelligent and brave in her own way.⁷ Thus, in *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood, with her ingenuity, highlights this side of the story. She changes the old way of seeing the myth with a new light, telling us that there is another aspect that we had not seen yet. More than that, she gives us a modern version which suits the contemporary ways of thinking and strikes a chord with all people in the twenty-first century.

When it comes to the topics of gods, family, love, children, marriage, and women's rights, Margaret Atwood readily distinguishes between the traditions followed in the ancient times and those of our present without changing anything from Homer's *Odyssey*'s events. To take a case in point, the idea of gods is attacked in *The Penelopiad* by Penelope when she says: "... *which goes to show that the gods were not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe.*"⁸ And also when she says: "*In your world, you don't get visitations from the gods the way people used to unless you're on drugs.*"⁹

³ Cf. Somacarrera Iñigo 2000:14.

⁴ Cf. Neeru Tandon 2009: 195.

⁵ Cf. Margaret Atwood, *Second words*, p. 226, cited by Nischik 2009: ix.

⁶ Cf. Doherty 1995: 21: "The *Odyssey* adheres to epic convention in taking a male as its actant-subject; it compounds his privilege by making him the focalizer of most of the action and the narrator of a considerable piece of it."

⁷ Cf. Lefkowitz 1986: 63: "Everyone acknowledges that she is superior to all other women particularly for her intelligence." Cf., also, *ibid*: 12-13.

⁸ Cf. Atwood 2005: 40.

⁹ Cf. Atwood 2005: 24.

Margaret Atwood does not efface gods from the plot. Nonetheless, they are not given the same importance nor the prestigious position they held in the *Odyssey*. Moreover, she criticizes their power, their role in the poem, and also discusses the idea of god's existence:

I can say this now because I'm dead. I wouldn't have dared to say it earlier. You could never tell when one of the gods might be listening, disguised as a beggar or an old friend or a stranger. It's true that I sometimes doubted their existence, these gods. But during my lifetime I considered it prudent not to take any risks.
(Atwood 2005: 40)

So in that sense, this essay will be concerned with the engagement of *The Penelopiad* with the classical tradition deriving from the *Odyssey* onwards as well as with the analysis of Margaret Atwood's reception of it. This analysis will be based on the methods and concepts developed by Classical Tradition Studies as well as Reception Studies.¹⁰ Furthermore, due to Margaret Atwood's well-known feminist writings, we will also try to apply some of the most critical and unbiased perspectives which derive from the application of Gender Studies to the research of ancient Greek literature and myth.¹¹ Finally we will try to explore Margaret Atwood's appropriation of these ancient hypotexts as a contemporary female writer.¹²

II. Development

a. Penelope's character in the *Odyssey*. Classical tradition and reception in Margaret Atwood's version.

Despite the fact that we all know the main plot, events and characters of the *Odyssey*, we are inevitably amazed mostly by the new and realistic refigurations of all of them in *The Penelopiad*. There are so many changes and reelaborations that we end up wondering whether we know the story well or not. Penelope is the best example. She does not change the events when retelling them, but she makes us think and discover things that we had not seen before. According to their new Penelope, she is only known by her good reputation and not by her beauty, a fact that bothers her a lot as a woman and makes her compare herself with Helen throughout the 'novella':

¹⁰ Cf. Hardwick 2003 and Budelmand & Haubold 2008: 13-25.

¹¹ Cf. Doherty 2001 and Lewis 2011: 443-58.

¹² Cf. Somacarrera Iñigo 2000: 19-23.

As for me ... well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to tell me that because I was a princess, and shortly after that a queen, but the truth was that although I was not deformed or ugly, I was nothing special to look at. I was smart, though: considering the times, very smart. That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion (Atwood 2005: 21)

On the one hand, Penelope herself presents a new dimension to the story. She is now given paramount importance and she is described differently from one book to another. While Penelope is the most essential character in *The Penelopiad* together with the maids, in the *Odyssey*, she is an active character only in four books out of twenty four.¹³ This modification itself exhibits the progress that the world has witnessed since thousands of years ago. It reflects also the situation of the women nowadays and the greater visibility which they have achieved. On the other hand, this new Penelope shares little with the original Penelope in the *Odyssey* in what concerns her submissive character, forgiving soul, and good intentions. It seems to me that the new Penelope is tougher, more mature, independent, and self-sufficient. She is not that perfect woman and wife that ancient husbands would dream of having and who is so highly praised by the ghost of Agamemnon at *Od.* 24. 191-8.¹⁴ On the contrary, she is presented as a woman with many flaws, such as her jealousy of her cousin Helen, even to the extent of hate: “*I repressed a desire to say that Helen should have been locked truck in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs.*” (Atwood 2005: 79).¹⁵ Penelope’s hate to Helen is reasonable as the latter was the cause of most of her disasters and is held responsible for ruining her life:

I’ve often wondered whether, if Helen hadn’t been so puffed up with vanity, we might all have been spared the sufferings and sorrows she brought down on our heads by her selfishness and her deranged lust. (Atwood 2005: 76)

¹³ Nevertheless, she is mentioned recurrently in the *Odyssey* and she lies behind all the female characters who try to play the role of surrogates wives of the hero. Cf. Morrison 2003.

¹⁴ “‘Son of Laertes, shrewed Odysseus!’ the soul of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, cried. ‘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.’” This is, in fact, one of the two quotations chosen by Margaret Atwood at the beginning of her “novella”.

¹⁵ According to Suzuki 2010:243, “Penelope’s vexed relationship with Helen in Atwood’s *Penelopiad* is anticipated in her novel *The Robber Bride* (1993).” Or Margaret Atwood’s appropriation of Helen of Troy in her poetry, cf. also Suzuki 2010: 244-5.

This hate and competition between the cousins were not shown in the *Odyssey* at all. In contrast, in Atwood's refiguration, Penelope compares herself several times with Helen as if she wanted to emphasize the idea that she proved to be far better than her, as well as far more resentful too. She says: "*I was not a man-eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquest just to show she could.*" (Atwood 2005: 29) In the same way, she keeps on saying: "*I was a kind girl – kinder than Helen, or so I thought.*" (Atwood 2005: 29)

Another appealing example of Margaret Atwood's appropriation of the ancient mythographic tradition about Penelope as well as her reelaboration of it concerns Penelope's famous modesty. Robert Graves, a source which the author of *The Penelopiad* considers 'crucial',¹⁶ reports on the following episode, which ultimately derives from Pausanias III. 20. 2:

After marrying Penelope to Odysseus, Icarius begged him to remain at Sparta and, when he refused, followed the chariot in which the bridal pair were driving away, entreating her to stay behind. Odysseus, who had hitherto kept this patience, turned and told Penelope: 'Either come to Ithaca of your own free will; or, if you prefer your father, stay here without me!' Penelope's only replied was to draw down her veil. Icarius, realizing that Odysseus was within his rights, let her go, and raised an image to Modesty, which is still shown some four miles from the city of Sparta, at the place where this incident happened.

Nevertheless, this new Penelope blows to pieces the ancient interpretation in order to deal with a more realistic, hilarious and unheroic version. The new bride, an immature girl, laughs at the comic situation created by the patriarchal contest between her father and her newly wedded husband, competing for their masculine authority over her:

You've probably heard that my father ran after our departing chariot, begging me to stay with him (...) It's said that in answer I pulled down my veil, being too modest to proclaim in words my desire for my husband, and that a statue was erected of me in tribute to the virtue of Modesty.

There's some truth to this story. But I pulled down my veil to hide the fact that I was laughing. (Atwood 2005: 49)

¹⁶ Cf. Atwood 2005: 197.

Moreover, one of the most striking elements in *The Penelopiad* is the way Margaret Atwood describes Penelope's love for Odysseus. In contrast to the idealized love of the couple in the *Odyssey*, we have a more realistic love considered from the experience and point of view of the mature ghost of Penelope. She stresses the fact that their marriage was arranged: "*That's the way things were done then: where there were weddings, there were arrangements.*" (Atwood 2005: 23). Notwithstanding, this Penelope loves her husband and is particularly fond of his stories, even though they may not be true. She talks pleasure in listening to the way Odysseus tells his adventures, as if he were a poet. In this respect, they also resemble each other.¹⁷

Not only does Margaret Atwood emphasize the fact that Odysseus' and Penelope's marriage was arranged – despite their eventual mutual affection – but also the fact that the Suitors did not desire the women for her beauty, qualities or erotic spell, but for her money. In the underworld, Penelope meets one of her former suitors, whose name is Antinous. She asks him the reason why they wanted to marry her. Instead of saying they were in love with her and with her beauty, the answer is totally ironic. She asks him to be sincere, but when he comes clean, she kind of wishes she had not asked him because of the bluntness of his answer. He says that they were after her because of her money:

"We wanted the treasure trove, naturally," This time he had the impudence to laugh outright. "What young man wouldn't want to marry a rich and famous widow? Widows are supposed to be consumed with lust, especially if their husbands have been missing or dead for such a long time, as yours was. You weren't exactly a Helen, but we could have dealt with that. (...) – you'd die first, perhaps with a little help, and then, furnished with your wealth, we could have had our pick of any young and beautiful princess we wanted. (Atwood 2005: 102)

As a matter of fact, what elucidates more the differences between this new Penelope and the old one is her attitude towards the suitors and her way of enjoying their existence: "*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.*" (Atwood 2005: 104). In the *Odyssey*, she

¹⁷ Cf. Atwood 2005: 172-3. There is a famous passage from the *Odyssey* which probably Margaret Atwood is aware of, where Odysseus' words to Nausicaa have been interpreted as a hidden clue to Odysseus' and Penelope's equal minds and spirits. This passage seems to have inspired the characterization of both Penelope and Odysseus in *The Penelopiad*: "And may the gods grant you your heart's desire; may they give you a husband and a home, and the blessing of harmony so much to be desired, since there is nothing better or finer than when two people of one heart and mind keep house as man and wife." (*Od.* 6. 180-4)

never stayed alone with the suitors because of her sense of shame: “(...) *However, tell Autonoe and Hippodameia to come here to attend me in the hall. I am not going to face that masculine company alone: modesty forbids.*”¹⁸ In *The Penelopiad*, on the contrary, she is accompanied by her maids only to keep up the appearances, but she admits her curiosity and even day-dreaming about her suitors: “*Once in a while I would make an appearance in the hall where they were feasting– backed by two of my maids – just to watch them outdo themselves (...) I have to admit that I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that.*” (Atwood 2005: 105).

Concerning Penelope’s intelligence, in the *Odyssey* there is no doubt that she was smart and she proved it more than once. For instance: when she came up with the idea of the shroud to postpone the decision which she had to take, *i.e.* to choose one of the suitors as a husband; and later when she had to “*make private promises*” to some of the suitors as a way to take back her wasted wealth¹⁹ or when she “*pretended to view their wooing favourably, in theory.*”²⁰ Penelope as the source of the idea of the shroud is emphasized both in *The Penelopiad* as well as in the *Odyssey*. In the *Odyssey*, it is Antinous, one of the suitors, who tells the story to Telemachus. He emphasizes Penelope’s duplicity and wittiness:

So you’d put us to shame, would you, and fix the blame on us? You are wrong. We Suitors plead “No guilty”. It is your own mother, that incomparable schemer, who is the culprit. Listen. For three whole years – in fact close on four – she has been leading us on, giving us all some grounds for hope, and in her private messages to each making promises that she has not the slightest intention of keeping. And here’s another example of her duplicity. On her loom in her house she set up a great web and began weaving a large and delicate piece of work. She said to us: “My lords, my Suitors, now that noble Odysseus is dead, restrain your ardour, do not urge on this marriage till I have done this work, so that the threads I have spun may not be altogether wasted. It is a shroud for Lord Laertes. When he succumbs to the dread hand of remorseless Death that stretches all men out at last, I must not risk the scandal there would be among my countrywomen here if one who had amassed such wealth were laid to rest without a shroud.” That’s what she said; and we magnanimously consented. So by day she used to weave at the great web, but every night had torches set beside it and undid the work. For three years she took us in by this trick. A fourth began, and the seasons were slipping by, when one of her women who knew all about it gave her mistress away. We caught her unravelling her beautiful work, and she was forced reluctantly to complete it.”
(Words in bold are ours)²¹

¹⁸ Cf. *Od.* 18. 181-4.

¹⁹ Cf. Atwood 2005: 143-4.

²⁰ Cf. Atwood 2005: 108.

²¹ Cf. *Od.* 2.84-110.

Likewise, this new Penelope insists on the authenticity of her idea:

When telling the story later I used to say that it was Pallas Athene, goddess of weaving, who'd given me this idea, and perhaps this was true, for all I know; but crediting some god for one's inspiration was always a good way to avoid accusation of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not. (Atwood 2005: 112)

This new Penelope also emphasizes that she recognized Odysseus when he was disguised as a beggar, while in the *Odyssey*, she was distracted by Athena:²² *"The songs say I didn't notice a thing because Athena had distracted me. If you believe that, you'll believe all sorts of nonsense. In reality I'd turned my back on the two of them to hide my silent laughter at the success of my little surprise."* (Atwood 2005: 141). Moreover, according to her, in addition to having recognized Odysseus in his disguise, she even tried to take advantage from the situation by demonstrating indirectly how faithful to her husband she had been during his absence: *"I described my suffering at length, and my longing for my husband – better he should hear all this while in the guise of a vagabond, as he would be more inclined to believe it."* (Atwood 2005: 138). Furthermore, this new Penelope even argues that the way of getting rid of the Suitors by setting the test of the twelve axes was her idea and her plan.²³ In other words, Odysseus was unwittingly acting according to her "stratagem":

The songs claim that the arrival of Odysseus and my decision to set the test of the bow and axes coincided by accident – or by divine plan, which was our way of putting it then. Now you've heard the plain truth. I knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this archery trick. I knew that the beggar was Odysseus. There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose. (Atwood 2005:139)

There are many references to feminist points of view in *The Penelopiad*. In chapter VII, entitled 'The Scar', Penelope, the narrator, says: *"And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of gilded blood budding."* (Atwood 2005: 39). This quotation implies the

²² Cf. *Od.* 19. 476-9: "With this she turned her eyes in Penelope's direction, wishing to let her know that her own husband was in the room. But Penelope was not able to meet her glance or pay any attention because Athene had distracted her."

²³ Cf. Atwood 2005:138-9. As Suzuki 2010:245 explains: "Atwood is in agreement with feminist criticism of the *Odyssey* in her account of Penelope's actions after Odysseus' return: her Penelope openly admits to having recognized the beggar as her husband, having planned the test of the bow, and having arranged for Eurykleia to bathe Odysseus since she knew that his nurse would recognize his scar."

fact that women were considered as part of men's belongings at that time. The use of the term "meat" speaks volumes: she was treated like someone without feelings to share or a mind to think with; just an object. Her role was limited to giving birth to sons: "*If you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you could have grandson.*" (Atwood 2005: 25)

Furthermore, we have another modern idea in the 'novella' in her way of describing and portraying her mother-in-law as one of her enemies. She solidifies their misunderstanding by the mention of the mother-in-law's disapproval of her as a wife and the way she had usually treated her: "*When I tried to talk to her she would never look at me while answering, but would address her remarks to a footstool or a table. As befitted conversation with the furniture, these remarks were wooden and stiff.*" (Atwood 2005: 72). However, I think that Antikleia used to treat Penelope like that because she was considering her as a child, a fifteen-years-old girl who was incapable of assuming the responsibilities of the real wife: "*You're barely more than a child yourself,*" (Atwood 2005: 72). Similarly, this misunderstanding is shown in Antikleia's blaming of Penelope instead of Helen as responsible for Odysseus' going to Troy. So, she mentions her mother-in-law's silence about the suitors on the island of the Dead as another one of her attacks:

*Her silence is taken as proof: if she'd mentioned the Suitors at all, they say, she would have had to mention my infidelity as well. Maybe she did mean to plant a toxic seed in the mind of Odysseus, but you already know about her attitude towards me. It would have been her final acid touch.*²⁴

To put it in another way, Penelope reveals the normal life of every contemporary family, where some of its members abhor of each other or do not accept each other. Again, Margaret Atwood's appropriation of the ancient epic poetry deprives it of its mythic aura and heroic glamour: "*In other words, there was the standard family push-and-pull over whose word was to carry the most weight. All were agreed on one thing: it was not mine.*" (Atwood 2005: 71)

It is appealing and surprising the fact that this new Penelope acknowledges that she, the one who was always known for her devotion to her husband and by her faithfulness, has now to protect and defend her reputation as well as to prove her

²⁴ Cf. Atwood 2005:144.

innocence both to Odysseus and to the rest of the people. She describes how she was obliged to take some decisions even against her will in order to keep her position as Odysseus' wife. She lies several times and she acts as if she were ignorant of some events while she was the source of them all. Indeed, she was a princess, queen and even demigoddess,²⁵ but at the end of the day, she was still a woman under the rules and traditions of those days: she had to struggle to save her family life. Thus, she justifies the fact that, because of her secret ideas and plans, her maids were hanged to death by her husband and her son, and she could not say a word to save them or to defend them:

*What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life.
It's a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years.*

*Dead is Dead, I told myself. I'll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their
souls. But I'll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me, as well.*
(Atwood 2005: 160)

b. Odysseus' character in the *Odyssey*. Classical tradition and reception in Margaret Atwood's version.

Most of the people know who Odysseus is. He is one of the most famous legendary Greek heroes. He was in Troy as one of the most famous warriors in the war in order to take back Helen, Menelaus' wife, and he is also the protagonist of the best known journey home, the *Odyssey*. This journey keeps feeding the imagination of readers and authors alike.

Margaret Atwood's reworking of the story does not limit itself to adapting or refiguring her main character, *i.e.* Penelope, but all of her characters, protagonists and non-protagonist alike. Namely, her refigurations have not been confined to the figure of Penelope, but also of Odysseus himself.

The way this new Penelope describes Odysseus reveals her real opinions. She analyses what happened at those times in the past when she could not speak out since she was supposed to be a faithful and lovely wife, a woman who stood up for her husband, and supported him in whatever he said and did. Her present opinions are

²⁵ She was the daughter of a Naiad: "My father was king Icarius of Sparta. My mother was a Naiad. Daughters of Naiads were dime a dozen in those days; the place was crawling with them. Nevertheless, it never hurts to be of semi-divine birth. Or it never hurts immediately."

coming up from a mature woman who has seen and learned many things from life and is now living a ghostly life in the realm of Hades:

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of the events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me. (Atwood 2005: 2)

Odysseus has always been a tricky, cunning and a deceitful man. However, he was praised by these qualities both by gods and mortals: *“He told me many stories, (...) and how he'd always been favoured by the goddess Athene because of his inventive mind and his skill at disguises and stratagems, (...).”* (Atwood 2005: 74). In the *Odyssey*, he was described as a “godlike”, “wise”, and “valiant warrior”. His lies and tricks were valuable and even considered as a sort of “wisdom”.²⁶ Nevertheless, this is completely refigured in *The Penelopiad*. He is not considered as one of the heroes of the ancient folklore or equal to them anymore: *“Oh, that's only Odysseus,”* (Atwood 2005: 31). It might be because of his origins from Ithaca: *“His father's palace was on Ithaca, a goat-stewn rock; his clothes were rustic; he had the manners of a small-town big shot, and had already expressed several complicated ideas the others considered peculiar.”* (Atwood 2005:31)

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus hold his high position thanks to his characteristic cunning (*polymêtis*), while in this new version, he is considered as a mere trickster because of his famous lies and tricks. He is called “a liar” and even “a thief” in a clear derogative sense:

In fact he was too clever for his own good. The other young men made jokes about him – “Don't gamble with Odysseus, the friend of Hermes,” they said. “You'll never win.” This was like saying he was a cheat and a thief. His grandfather Autolycus was well known for these very qualities, and was reputed never to have won anything fairly in his life. (Atwood 2005: 31)

²⁶ Cf. *Od.*13. 291-302 and 330-33: “Anyone who met you, even a god, would have to be a consummate trickster to surpass you in subterfuge. You were always an **obstinate, cunning and irrepressible intriguer**. So you don't propose, even in your own country, to drop **the tricks and lying tails you love so much!** But no more of this. We both know how to get our own way: **in the world of men you have no rival in judgement and argument**, while I am pre-eminent among the gods for ingenuity and ability to get what I want. (...) ‘That shows how your mind always works!’ said Athene, goddess of the flashing eyes. ‘And that is why I cannot desert you in your misfortunes: **you are so persuasive, so quick-witted, so self-possessed.**’ (Words in bold are ours)

On the other hand, there is a stark contrast between Odysseus' physical description in *The Penelopiad* and in the *Odyssey*. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope never refers to Odysseus' physical appearance while this new Penelope seems to be much more interested in what he looks like. She is much more demanding than her archetype in the *Odyssey*: "*His disguise was well enough done – I hoped wrinkles and baldness were part of the act, and not real – (...)*" (Atwood 2005: 136). It is no longer that love which is above physical shape. Even before the hero was turned into an old, shabby beggar in order to conceal his true identity, Odysseus' physical appearance was a matter of concern when he first met Penelope:

who's the barrel-chested one? I asked. (...)
"I wonder how fast he can run," I said. (...)

"Not very fast, on those short legs of his," said one maid unkindly. And indeed the legs of Odysseus were quite short in relation to his body. It was all right when he was sitting down, you didn't notice, but standing up he looked top-heavy. (Atwood 2005: 30-32)²⁷

Due to the above mentioned physical traits, Penelope will be able to recognize him later when he is disguised as a beggar.²⁸ Nevertheless, this does not mean that Odysseus did not have some beautiful qualities. As I mentioned before, he was, indeed, clever, "*an excellent raconteur*"²⁹ and a real persuader:

This was one of his great secrets as a persuader – he could convince another person that the two of them together faced a common obstacle, and that they needed to join forces in order to overcome it. He can draw almost any listener into a collaboration, a little conspiracy of his own making. Nobody could do this better than he: for once, the stories lie. (Atwood 2005: 45)

This is, in fact, Odysseus' most outstanding characteristic. In the *Odyssey*, his body changes constantly. The goddess Athene either turns him to a handsome and attractive man or into an old and ugly beggar in order to conceal his true identity. When Nausicaa wants to describe Odysseus, she refers to his beauty in the following terms:

²⁷ Margaret Atwood takes the description of Odysseus as a rather short man from the *Iliad*. Cf. *Il.* 3. 184-220: "Come, dear child, tell me of that one too – now who is he? Shorter than Atreus' son Agamemnon, clearly, but broader across the shoulders, through the chest." (...) "Now, when they mingled with our Trojans in assembly, standing side by side, Menelaus' shoulders mounted over his friend's in height and spread, when both were seated Odysseus looked more lordly."

²⁸ "As soon as I saw that barrel chest and those short legs I had a deep suspicion, which became a certainty when I heard he'd broken the neck of a belligerent fellow panhandler." (Atwood 2005: 136)

²⁹ Cf. Atwood 2005: 45.

“Now, it is their unpleasant gossip that I wish to avoid. I am afraid they might give me a bad name, (...), and I can well imagine one of the cruder ones saying after he had seen us: “who is this tall and handsome stranger with Nausicaa?” (Od. 6. 271-6). This favourable depiction may be due to the gods and goddesses, who do so many things for Odysseus in the *Odyssey* while they play any role at all in *The Penelopiad*. Athena above all tends to make Odysseus taller in order to turn him into a more handsome hero.³⁰ The role of this beautiful goddess is almost effaced from Atwood’s retelling of the story. She wants to depict Odysseus as how actually he looked like.

Regarding Odysseus’ adventures, Margaret Atwood downplays the heroic ‘glamour’ of the ancient epic poetry and myths, and turns them into simple ‘rumours’. Odysseus’ adventures were just rumours that have always had that touch of exaggeration, as we know people usually inflate their stories when they tell them to other people. Additionally, Penelope does not believe those stories as she does not dismiss the idea that it might be Odysseus himself who told them, and we know who Odysseus is when dealing with telling stories. And so were the ancient singers like Demodocus, or Homer himself probably according to Margaret Atwood:

Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably. They always sang the noblest versions in my presence – the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave, and resourceful, and battling supernatural monsters, and beloved of goddesses. The only reason he hadn’t come back home was that a god – the sea-god Poseidon, according to some – was against him, because a Cyclops crippled by Odysseus was his son. Or several gods were against him. Or the Fates. Or something. (Atwood 2005: 84)

As for Odysseus’s love to Penelope, Margaret Atwood’s rewriting of the story casts some doubts on it. As I said before, Atwood questions whether Odysseus really loved Penelope and wooed her just because she was the best candidate, *i.e.*: “at best only second prize” after Helen,³¹ that’s why Odysseus made that deal with Tyndareus. The best prove to that idea is what the author writes in the chapter entitled *The Trusted Cackle-Hen*: “Odysseus was pleased with me. Of course he was. “Helen hasn’t borne a

³⁰ “Athena is always improving on Odysseus’ looks, in particular by making him look taller. (...) Among the ancient Greeks, the gods were thought to be larger than human beings – the statue of Athena in the Parthenon was thirty-five feet high! Aristotle even remarks that a small person might be well proportioned and attractive, but to be beautiful (or handsome), you have to be tall – like a god. (...) To give the impression of being “god-like,” Athena has to add a little extra height if Odysseus is to dazzle the crowd. (Morrison 2003: 84)

³¹ Cf. Atwood 2005: 35.

son yet," he said, which ought to have made me glad. And it did. But on the other hand, why was he still – and possibly always – thinking about Helen?" (Atwood 2005: 64). Another mention of this deromanticized love appears in previous chapter, entitled *The Scar*:

But he wasn't looking at me, and neither was anyone else. They were all staring at Helen, who was dispensing dazzling smiles right and left, not missing a single man. She had a way of smiling that made each one of them feel that secretly she was in love with him alone. (Atwood 2005: 42)

Nevertheless, these quotations do not confirm that Odysseus did not love Penelope. Actually, they speak volumes of Penelope's jealousy at her cousin's striking beauty. There are other situations where it is made clear how warm, kind and friendly with her he was right from the beginning, as we can see from the following scene of their wedding night:

Once the door had been closed, Odysseus took me by the hand and sat me down on the bed. "Forget everything you've been told," he whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it would help us both if you could pretend. I've been told you're a clever girl. Do you think you could manage a few screams? That will satisfy them – they're listening at the door – and then they'll leave us in peace and we can take our time to become friends." (Atwood 2005: 44)

He actually loves and cares about her. His love is also manifest in what he did to protect her, even when he did not tell her who he was when he was disguised after coming back to Ithaca³² and also when he asked her son to put her mother aside with the other women, upstairs in the palace.³³ And she indeed loved him for that³⁴. More importantly he was her only friend in Ithaca after the death of her maid Actoris, that's why she longed his coming back to take her loneliness and unhappiness away:

³² "A more serious charge is that Odysseus didn't reveal himself to me when he first returned. He distrusted me when he first returned. He distrusted me, it is said, and wanted to make sure I wasn't having orgies in the palace. But the real reason was that he was afraid I would cry tears of joy and thus give him away." (Atwood 2005: 145)

³³ "Similarly, he had me locked in the women's quarters with the rest of the women when he was slaughtering the suitors (...). But he knew me well – my tender heart, my habit of dissolving in tears and falling down on thresholds. He simply didn't want to expose me to dangers and disagreeable sights." (Atwood 2005: 145)

³⁴ "I'd gained a great opinion of Odysseus since our wedding day, and admired him immensely, and had an inflated notion of his capabilities – remember, I was fifteen – so I had the greatest confidence in him, and considered him to be a sea captain who could not fail." (Atwood 2005: 55-6)

Despite all this busyness and responsibility, I felt more alone than ever. What wise counsellors did I have? Who could I depend on, really, except myself? Many nights I cried myself to sleep or prayed to the gods to bring me either my beloved husband or a speedy death. (Atwood 2005:89)

Odysseus, nevertheless, eludes from Penelope in Hades. He spent more than twenty years trying to come back to Penelope, his wife and love, and when it seems that the time comes and the couple will be able to live happily together forever, she explains that he keeps going away embodying many famous figures in history. She asserts that it is because of the maids' murdering, *i.e.* he does not stay with her because he feels guilty for having put the girls to death. Thus this distance between husband and wife is always there, in spite of the passing of time. The journey of Odysseus, therefore, is immortal.

c. Telemachus' character in the *Odyssey*. Classical tradition and reception in Margaret Atwood's version.

Telemachus is the son of Penelope and Odysseus. Soon after his son's birth, Odysseus has to go to fight in Troy. The *Odyssey* begins when Telemachus has reached his early twenties. Telemachus has the duty to protect his father status at Ithaca. As a good son, he travels to seek information about him. So when the lost father comes back after such a long time of absence, he supports him and helps him to establish himself again as the king of Ithaca and the legitimate husband of Penelope.

Telemachus suffers a stark refiguration but plausible in Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. This reelaboration is due to the fact that time has changed, and so has the boy. In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is a boy in the threshold of adulthood. The ancient poem emphasizes this particular moment in Telemachus' life: he is on the verge of becoming a man, and, as a matter of fact, the journey he makes in order to look for information about his absent father is considered as a voyage of initiation into adulthood. Telemachus will finally come of age when he fights with his father against the Suitors. Margaret Atwood's appropriation of the figure of Telemachus is alien to the ancient ideas of education. Telemachus is now considered as a naughty adolescent very

similar to most teenagers nowadays. He is, therefore, adapted to our contemporary views.

In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is a young man who “*is well trained in the rules of hospitality: he insists that the beggar keep his seat and asks where he’s from.*”³⁵ While in *The Penelopiad*, he shows bad manners: “*Telemachus wolfed down the food and knocked back the wine, and I reproached myself for not having taught him better table manners.*” (Atwood 2005: 129)

What is common to both books is how Telemachus cares about her mother. He shows his affection for her in many situations. In the *Odyssey*, just after he arrives to Ithaca from his travel to Sparta, he sends Eumaeus to tell Penelope about his coming back, which proves how worried he was about her. Likewise, in *The Penelopiad*, he was also caring about his mother’s feelings, even concerning her jealousy of Helen:

“And how was Helen?” I asked

“She seemed fine,” said Telemachus. (...)

“No, but,” I said, “how did she look?”

“As radiant as golden Aphrodite,” he said. (...)

“She must be getting a little older, by now,” I said as calmly as I could. Helen could not possibly still be as radiant as golden Aphrodite! It would not be within nature!

“Oh, well, yeah,” said my son. And now that bond which is supposed to exist between mothers and fatherless sons finally asserted itself. Telemachus looked into my face and read its expression. “Actually, she did look quite old,” he said. “way older than you. Sort of worn out. All wrinkly,” he added. “Like an old mushroom. And her teeth are yellow. Actually some of them have fallen out. It was only after we’d had a lot to drink that she still looked beautiful.”

I knew he was lying, but I was touched that he was lying for my sake.
(Atwood 2005: 132-3)

Equally important is the difference between the Telemachus from the *Odyssey* and this new Telemachus. The former struggles under the weight of being the son of a hero, living in a time of heroic and great deeds. He is therefore always compared with Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, who is his age. Orestes killed his father’s murderers, Aegisthus and Clitemnestra. He avenged his father’s death by killing his own mother as

³⁵ Cf. Morrison 2003: 132.

well as her lover. Thus Telemachus was almost obliged to act likewise in order to defend his father's kingdom as well as his mother's loyalty to his father against the Suitors. That was his duty. The latter, in *The Penelopiad*, is still an adolescent who wants to prove himself a man to everyone, even to his father. Margaret Atwood highlights the fact that it was Telemachus' idea and responsibility to punish the maids who had slept with the Suitors by putting them to an awful death:

(...). *But my son, wanting to assert himself to his father, and to show that he knew better – he was at that age – hanged them all in a row from a ship's hawser.* (Atwood 2005: 158-9)³⁶

d. Eurycleia's and the maids' characters in the *Odyssey*. Classical tradition and Reception in M. Atwood's version.

The Penelopiad, is a novella that has more than one protagonist. It is about Penelope and her twelve maids. That's why I suppose Gemma Rovira, the translator of the work into Spanish translated the title as «Penélope y las doce criadas».³⁷ This novella is constructed in a way to give the voice alternatively to Penelope and the maids. Accordingly throughout the novella we find one or two chapters where Penelope tells her own version of the story, and immediately afterwards we find another chapter usually named *The Chorus Line*, where the maids, as an ancient chorus sing or perform their own version of the same story.³⁸

The twelve maids play an important role in *The Penelopiad*; they were the chosen girls by Penelope to help her in undoing the shroud during the night. They were her right hand. She chose them as she was the one who raised and took care of them since their childhood. She trusted them as she says: “*They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was they who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years.*” (Atwood

³⁶ This idea belongs to the *Odyssey*, although the ancient poem narrates the death of the maids only in passing, without giving them much detail since they are not noble or heroic characters. Cf. *Od.* 22. 460-65: “Then the thoughtful Telemachus spoke. ‘I swear I will not give a decent death to women who have heaped insults on my head and on my mother’s, and slept with Suitors.’”

³⁷ As aptly put by Suzuki 2010:246, “Atwood’s most striking innovation in *The Penelopiad* is to bring to the center the maids of Odysseus who were executed by their master upon his return. As she states in the Introduction: ‘I’ve always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.’ (2005, xv). By contrast, Homer’s *Odyssey* appears to accept their fate without a scruple.”

³⁸ Cf. Suzuki 2010:248.

2005: 114). She even considers them as if they were all sisters³⁹. The maids have another mission along with undoing the shroud with Penelope. They have to spy on the Suitors and find out their plan to react against them in time. This idea was Penelope's one. She says: "*I even instructed them to say rude and disrespectful things about me and Telemachus, and about Odysseus as well, in order to further the illusion.*" (Atwood 2005: 117). Nevertheless, one of them betrayed Penelope.

It was too difficult for the maids to take any decision by themselves as it was the common rule at those times, even decisions related to their bodies. They were slaves. They were considered as objects at hand, whether for housework or any other duty, even "*a lively night's entertainment*" to hosts.⁴⁰ Their being used, however, was only allowed under their master's permission. Otherwise it would have been considered a 'thievery'.⁴¹ These maids, unfortunately, were not protected by their master's authority. They were unprotected from the Suitors' mistreat and abuse. Thus, they were exposed to more humiliation and depreciation than any other maids:

However, there was no master of the house. So the Suitors helped themselves to the maids in the same way they helped themselves to the sheep and pigs and goats and cows. They probably thought nothing of it.

I comforted the girls as best I could. They felt quite guilty, and the ones that had been raped needed to be tended and cared for. (Atwood 2005: 116)⁴²

In the chapter xxi, *The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama*, Margaret Atwood deals with the myth which tells about Penelope's infidelity.⁴³ It is a brilliant 'drama' acted by the maids to defend their innocence and show Penelope's lies. They claim they were killed because they knew about her infidelity with the Suitors:

Eurycleia:

*Dear child! I fear you are undone! Alack!
The Master has returned! That's right – he's
back!*

³⁹ Cf. Atwood 2005: 114.

⁴⁰ Cf. Atwood 2005: 116.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Cf., once more, Suzuki 2010:247.

⁴³ Cf. Robert Graves: 171, l: "Some deny that Penelope remained faithful to Odysseus. They accuse her of accompanying with Amphinomus of Dulichium, or with all the suitors in turn, and say that the fruit of this union was the monstrous god Pan – at sight of whom Odysseus fled for shame to Aetolia, after sending Penelope away in disgrace to her father Icarus at Mantinea, where her tomb is still shown. Others record that she bore Pan to Hermes, and that Odysseus married an Aetolian princess, the daughter of King Thoas, begot on her his youngest son Leontophonus, and died in prosperous old age."

Penelope: Played by a Maid:

*I knew his as he walked here from afar
by his short legs –*

Eurycleia:

And I by his long scar!

Penelope:

*And now, dear Nurse, the fat is in the fire –
He'll chop me up for tending my desire!
While he was pleasuring every nymph and
 beauty,
Did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?
While every girl and goddess he was prais-
 ing,
Did he assume I'd dry up like a raisin?*

Eurycleia:

*While you your famous loom claimed to be
 threading,
In fact you were at work within the
 bedding!
And now there's ample matter for –
 Beheading!*

Penelope.

*Amphinomus – quick! Down the hidden
 stairs!
And I'll sit here, and feign great woes and
 cares.
Do up my robe! Bind fast my wanton hairs!
Which of the maids is on my affairs?*

Eurycleia:

*Only the twelve, my lady, who assisted,
Know what the Suitors you have not resisted.
They smuggled lovers in and out all nights;
They drew the drapes, and then they held
 the light.
They're privy to your every lawless thrill –
They must be silenced, or the beans they'll
 spill!*

Penelope

*Oh then, dear Nurse, it's really up to you
To save me, and Odysseus' honour too!*

*Because he sucked at your now-ancient bust,
You are the only one of us he'll trust.
Point out those maids as feckless and
disloyal,
Snatched by the Suitors as unlawful spoil,
Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be
The dotting slaves of such a Lord as he!*

Eurycleia:

*We'll stop their mouths by sending them to
Hades –
He'll string them up as grubby wicked
Ladies! (Atwood 2005: 148-51)*

This quotation also implies that they were betrayed by Penelope who tricks them to hide her adultery so she is also as responsible as Odysseus and his son for their death. Nevertheless, this is absolutely denied by Penelope, because as she did not know what was happening downstairs. When Odysseus decided to punish the maids whom he thought had been unfaithful to him, Penelope only knew about their death afterwards from Eurycleia.

On the Other hand, it is interesting how the interpretation of Penelope's famous dream explained by Penelope herself as well as Odysseus in the *Odyssey*⁴⁴ is reinterpreted again in *The Penelopiad*. It was always said that Penelope's dream was about the Suitors' killing. But she gives another point of view:

Odysseus-the-beggar interpreted this dream for me: the eagle was my husband, the geese were the Suitors, and the one would shortly slay the others. He said nothing about the crooked beak of the eagle, or my love for the geese and my anguish at their deaths.

In the event, Odysseus was wrong about the dream. He was indeed the eagle, but the geese were not the Suitors. The geese were my twelve maids, as I was soon to learn to my unending sorrow. (Atwood 2005: 139-40)

Another important character who deserves our attention is the Nurse Eurycleia. Penelope describes her as “*the woman that gave her the most trouble at first*”.⁴⁵ She is

⁴⁴ Cf. *Od.* 191540-59.

⁴⁵ Cf. Atwood 2005: 60.

the one who recognized Odysseus in disguise because of his scar. She is one of the few first people who Odysseus trusted in order to exact his revenge against the Suitors.

e. Helen's character in the *Odyssey*. Classical tradition and reception in Margaret Atwood's version.

Helen is a demigoddess and the most beautiful woman whose beauty caused the death of thousands of men and women. Many warriors of her country gave their lives in the Trojan War in order to take her home together with Menelaus, her husband.

It is well known the oath which, under Odysseus' suggestion, ordered to defend Helen and her husband against any threat which might endanger their matrimony. This was the reason why so many Greek heroes engaged into such a famous war. Helen was kidnapped by, or eloped with, Paris, a handsome prince of Troy and Priam's son, and her suitors had the obligation to fight along with Menelaus in order to get her back.

The Helen from *The Penelopiad* is a woman whose beauty is apparently her only concern in life. She shows off about her stunning beauty, which made so many men fight and die for her. She has the least feelings of guiltiness. While in the *Iliad* and even in the *Odyssey*, she shows repentance, in *The Penelopiad*, she does not seem to be filled with any remorse at all.⁴⁶ Atwood refigurates this character and presents her as a superficial and vain woman. This show-off Helen is actually a selfish woman who only cares about how many men would follow her. This reelaboration of the character's qualities shows us another side of the beautiful woman's personality, that is, her ambition to be the most beautiful of all women. Helen is turned into an unsympathetic and frivolous woman compared to Penelope. She even wants to draw attention onto her whenever and wherever she is, for instance, at Penelope's own wedding: "*Although mine was the marriage in question, she wanted all the attention for herself. She was as beautiful as always, indeed more so: she was intolerably beautiful.*" (Atwood 2005: 33). This ambition is not confined to being the most beautiful and desired woman in her time. She wants to make her name immortal: "*Why couldn't she have led a normal life?*"

⁴⁶ Cf. *Il.* 3. 160-75 as well as *Od.* 4. 145 ff. Nevertheless, we agree with Doherty 1995: 131: "Despite her show of repentance and propriety (4.145, 259-64), her transgression is not altogether in the past, since she reenacts it, not only for her husband but for the younger males Telemachus and Peisistratus."

But no – normal lives were boring, and Helen was ambitious. She wanted to make a name for herself. She longed to stand out from the herd.” (Atwood 2005: 76). This personality does not vanish at all even after she is in Hades and she has no body. It is a matter of her way of thinking: *“‘We’re spirits now, Helen,’ I said, with what I hoped was a smile. ‘Spirits don’t have bodies. They don’t get dirty. They have no need of baths.’ ‘Oh, but my reason for taking a bath was always spiritual,’ said Helen.”* (Atwood 2005:153)

It is outstanding how it does not seem fair the fact that because of Helen, ‘throng’ of men and women lost their lives, many families have been destroyed. But at the end of the day she came back to her house, her bed and her husband without any punishment neither from the gods, or husband or the rest of the people. More than that, there was no mention or any demanding of a punishment. Penelope also asks about the reason behind that: *“Helen was never punished, not one bit. Why not, I’d like to know?”* (Atwood 2005:22). What is more outstanding is not that because of her adultery a war was waged, but her deceit to her people when she tried to trick them by calling out to the Greeks in their wives’ voices.⁴⁷

The attitude of the new Penelope towards Helen is totally different from that of the original one. Penelope of the *Odyssey* does not blame Helen for ruining her life. On the contrary she thinks that thanks to Helen’s infidelity she became famous faithful wife:

By identifying Helen’s adultery as the cause of the Trojan War and of “our sorrow,” Penelope implies that the story has come full circle with the “happy ending” brought about by her own fidelity. At the same time, by blaming the gods, she denies Helen an active role in the adultery and paints her as a “good woman” let astray. (Doherty 1995: 133)

III. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood, as a writer, tries to judge the world to make it better. Thus we find her dealing with controversial topics in her works, and ours is no exception. In this novella, she deals with contentious topics, such as power, feminism and interpersonal

⁴⁷ See “*Siren Songs Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey*” of Lillian Eileen Doherty, especially the chapter called “Internal Narrators, Female and Male” page 127, for more information about Helen’s narration in the *Odyssey*.

relationships. She bases her work in the *Odyssey* as well as the ancient Greek myths, however, as we have tried to explore in this essay, she makes her own version of these inspiring and challenging myths.

This work, as it has just been stressed, tried to examine and analyse a little bit this rewriting by Margaret Atwood, which seems to me one of her most brilliant works. So to sum up, I will draw some conclusions on the most important refigurations as well as well as reelaborations which Margaret Atwood's appropriation of the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad* develops.

The most remarkable refigurations regarding the characters are those of Penelope's as well as her Maids'. First, they are the protagonists of the novella without distorting Homer's events. It is therefore noteworthy that precisely those characters who had played a secondary role in Homer's *Odyssey* are now promoted to the leading light of this new version. Moreover, they both have the voice to talk and speak up their minds with no restraint whatsoever. Atwood also gives them the power to act and to make decisions and plans. She shows that some women are cleverer, more powerful in their ways, and equal to men in many things, or even better. So, in stark contrast with the patriarchal leading roles of male characters in the *Odyssey*, Atwood highlights not the male but the female cast of that complex and challenging ancient epic poem.

Another remarkable refiguration is that of Odysseus', his humanization in keeping with the way Atwood gives away with all the prestigious aspects of immortality which only gods possess. Thus, the concept of the hero, as it was understood throughout the classical traditions, is totally adapted by Margaret Atwood under a more contemporary view. Odysseus' ancient skills regarding practical intelligence as well as rhetorical proficiency are now turned into mere cunning and cynicism as well as political lies. Nevertheless, Odysseus is praised in *The Penelopiad* for his outstanding abilities for storytelling and for his respectful treatment of her wife, Penelope. Although these new Penelope and Odysseus are not actually in love with each other, they are close friends and intimate partners, they resemble each other and they like to be together when it is possible.

In the third place, concerning other secondary characters, we can also pay attention to the adolescent Telemachus and his childish behaviours. Furthermore, we

can see jealousy and hate between the Maids and Eurycleia, on the one hand, and between Penelope and Helen, on the other. Margaret Atwood makes it possible that a story written thousand years ago becomes familiar to us as if it were one of the stories of today. She really makes us feel, when reading the book, as if all these characters were one of our contemporary friends, neighbours or acquaintances.

The *Penelopiad* is a gripping version of the *Odyssey* which is not afraid of dealing with the more controversial aspects of that ancient epic poem, such as the relationship between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children, boyfriends and girlfriends. Despite the fact that Penelope is the narrator, she always tries to take into account other characters' views. In addition to this, her maids interrupt her narration in lyric as well as dramatic ways as a chorus who also have a say in the story. Important subjects such as violence, sex, and afterlife are also put on the front ground. Personally, I enjoyed the experience of reading it and studying it in depth. It will be, for sure, one of my recommendations to be read and it is an example of the power that the ancient Greek literature has in order to inspire and illuminate enriching new versions.

Conclusión:

Margaret Atwood, como escritora, intenta juzgar al mundo para mejorarlo. Así, vemos cómo trata temas polémicos en sus trabajos, y el nuestro no es una excepción. En esta novela, Atwood trata temas contenciosos, tales como el poder, el feminismo y las relaciones interpersonales. Basa su trabajo en la *Odisea* así como en los mitos griegos, sin embargo, como hemos intentado explorar en este ensayo, ella crea sus propias versiones de estos mitos tan inspirados y desafiantes.

Este trabajo, como hemos señalado previamente, intenta examinar y analizar un poco esta reelaboración literaria de Margaret Atwood, la cual me parece una de sus obras más brillantes. Para resumir, sacaré unas conclusiones de las refiguraciones más importantes, así como las reelaboraciones que desarrolla la apropiación de Margaret Atwood de la *Odisea* en *The Penelopiad*, traducida al español como «Penélope y las doce criadas».

Las refiguraciones más destacadas respecto a las figuras, son aquellas de Penélope y de sus criadas. Primero, son las protagonistas de la novela sin modificar los episodios narrados por Homero. Por lo tanto, es digno de mencionar precisamente que aquellas figuras que desempeñaban papeles secundarios en la *Odisea* de Homero, se promueven ahora a papeles principales en esta nueva versión. Además, podemos ver cómo ahora tienen la voz para hablar y expresar sus opiniones sin ninguna restricción. Atwood les concede también el poder a actuar, tomar decisiones y crear planes. Demuestra que algunas mujeres son más inteligentes, más fuertes en sus maneras, e iguales a los hombres en muchas cosas, o incluso mejor. Por lo tanto, en contraste con los papeles principales patriarcales de los personajes masculinos en la *Odisea*, Atwood no subraya el papel masculino del complejo y desafiante poema épico, sino el femenino.

Otra de las refiguraciones más destacadas es la de Odiseo, su humanización concuerda con la manera con que Margaret Atwood elimina todos los aspectos prestigiosos de la inmortalidad que solamente los dioses poseen. Así, el concepto del héroe, tal como había sido entendido a través de la Tradición Clásica, es totalmente adaptado por Margaret Atwood de acuerdo con la visión más contemporánea. Las antiguas habilidades de Odiseo relacionadas con la inteligencia práctica así como la competencia retórica se han convertido ahora en pura astucia y cinismo, así como mentiras políticas. Sin embargo, Odiseo es alabado en *The Penelopiad* por su habilidad excepcional de contar historias y por el tratamiento respetuoso con su mujer Penélope. Aunque estos nuevos Penélope y Odiseo no están realmente enamorados el uno del otro, son amigos cercanos y una pareja íntima, se parecen entre sí y les gusta estar juntos cuando es posible.

En tercer lugar, en cuanto a las figuras secundarias, podemos prestar la atención al adolescente Telémaco y sus comportamientos infantiles. Además se pueden claramente apreciar los celos y el odio entre las criadas y Euriclea por una parte, y entre Penélope y Helena por otra. Margaret Atwood hace posible que una historia escrita hace muchos años nos resulta familiar como si fuese una historia moderna. Nos hace realmente sentir al leer el libro como si estos personajes fuesen uno de nuestros amigos contemporáneos, vecinos o conocidos.

The Penelopiad es una versión fascinante de la *Odisea* que no teme tratar los aspectos más polémicos de aquel poema épico, como por ejemplo las relaciones entre amos y criados, los esposos y esposas, padres e hijos, novios y novias. A pesar de que Penélope es la narradora, siempre intenta considerar las opiniones de otros personajes.

Además de esto, sus criadas interrumpen su narración con la lírica, así como otros estilos dramáticos como el coro que también tienen su participación en la historia. Los temas importantes como la violencia, sexo y la vida después de la muerte se tratan también en la novela. En mi opinión, he disfrutado mucho de la experiencia de leer este libro y estudiarlo a fondo. Este libro será uno de mis recomendaciones para leer y es un ejemplo de la fuerza que tiene la antigua literatura griega para inspirar e iluminar enriqueciendo así nuevas versiones.

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