

LOOKING INTO MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD*: *APPROPRIATION, PARODY AND CLASS ISSUES*

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RESUMO

Autores pós-modernos constantemente lidam com obras canônicas a fim de subverter e questionar ideias e valores. Muito se tem falado sobre *The Penelopiad* (A Odisseia de Penélope, em português) da autora Margaret Atwood, obra que oferece voz não apenas à Penélope, mas também às escravas que foram enforcadas. Elas têm a oportunidade de oferecer suas versões e histórias, essas que não foram contadas na *Odisseia* de Homero. Esse artigo oferece uma breve análise de como Atwood utiliza a paródia na obra supracitada para revelar a questão da classe social. Os estudos sobre apropriação de Julie Sanders (2005) e sobre paródia de Linda Hutcheon (2002) serão úteis para guiar a discussão aqui pretendida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Apropriação, Paródia, Questões de classe.

ABSTRACT

Postmodern writers have often found themselves making use of canonical works in order to expose and subvert ideas. Much has been said about Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a work which gives Penelope and the hanged maids an opportunity to tell their side of the story – one which went untold in Homer's *The Odyssey*. This article offers a brief analysis of how Atwood manages to parody this canonical work in order to reveal the issue of class. Julie Sanders' study on appropriation (2005) and Linda Hutcheon's understanding of the parody (2002) will prove fruitful to lead the discussion on these topics.

KEYWORDS: Appropriation, Parody, Class issues.

INTRODUCTION

Parody is difficult to accomplish as well. There has to be a subtle balance between close resemblance to the 'original' and a deliberate distortion of its principal characteristics. It is, therefore, a minor form of literary art which is likely to be successful only in the hands of writers who are original and creative themselves. In fact, the majority of the best parodies are the work of gifted writers.
(CUDDON, 1999, p 640)

While some may disagree with what the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* has to say about parodies, it definitely foregrounds the fact that writers who accomplish to develop parodies are deemed to be 'gifted'. If that is the case of Margaret Atwood, it will depend on the reader's perspective, but one must not disregard the importance of her works in contemporary literature. Ranging from so-called science fiction dystopian novels to retelling of myths and legends, Atwood has not only created a very unique style, but also books which question social issues. This article will focus on her 2005 work called *The Penelopiad* and analyse two aspects of this novel: how parody plays a central role in Atwood's appropriation of the myth and how it foregrounds the issue of social class. The aforementioned work not only has Penelope, Odysseus' wife, tell the story of the twenty years of waiting between his departure and arrival, but it also has her show glimpses of her childhood and marriage.

Penelope, often deemed to be the quintessential faithful wife, goes from being the object of a masculine narrative to becoming the subject of her own story. Despite working with Brazilian writers, in the introduction to their book on women writers Brandão & Branco (2004) criticise the general image of the feminine character(s), created by the male writers. According to her, they do not reflect or even coincide with women. Instead, these characters are, first of all, the product of a dream, which allows them to stroll along the world of fiction and it is in this very world that they have often become the romanticised heroine ready to fulfill her hero's desires and wishes. Fortunately, as we are to discuss ahead, this idea seems to have fallen out of fashion as more and more writers challenge it in order to create works of art which demand a new critical thinking regarding the roles women play in society.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon mentions Angela Carter's short story "Black Venus" to illustrate her point that "male discourses need confronting, challenging, debunking" (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 141). She does so to state her defense of

feminist artist's works of art and, therefore, their deconstruction – *de-doxifying* - of history in which nothing should be accepted as innate or natural. Although Carter's deconstruction of the story of Baudelaire and 'his mulatto mistress' Jeanne Duval, "the woman to whom history denied a voice" is not applicable in the novella to be discussed, it does bring to mind the subject-object idea present in Atwood's retelling of the *Odyssey*, appropriately and humorously named *The Penelopiad* to show its alike epic qualities, namely the fact that epics dwell on the deeds of male heroes and warriors.

What is meant by the subject-object dichotomy is that, while Carter gives Duval a voice to become the subject of her own (hi)story, she was the object of one of Baudelaire's works. The same is the case of Penelope, Odysseus' faithful and devoted wife who patiently waited for his return after the Trojan war – or so it was believed. While in Homer's epic poem Penelope is not given a voice to express her feelings and ideas, thus making her the subject of Homer's writing, she is given an opportunity to make amends and share her side of the coin in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.

Atwood makes use of the introduction to set the context and to warn the readers that she has chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and the twelve hanged maids [who] form a chanting and singing chorus" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. xv). Also, she tells readers that the book will focus on two questions which need to be posed after the reading of *The Odyssey*. "what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope up to?" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. xv). By allowing the dead to speak, she is clearly evoking her own ideas on why writers *actually* write – these are more carefully and completely developed in *Negotiating with the Dead*, published in 2002. Atwood describes that, behind the motivation and the willingness to write, there lies an unstoppable force which propels writers to face death and give it a second thought and that when the dead come back, it may be a totally unexpected experience especially if they are angry or mad (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 200). As a result, writers tend to either accept or avoid death, for all taboos it is associated with. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood puts these ideas (once again) into practice, after all, Penelope no longer belongs to the world of the living and neither do the maids.

APPROPRIATION AND PARODY: DECONSTRUCTING THE EPIC

While Atwood draws her main characters from the Greek epic, therefore making it her main source, she deliberately uses other influential works to discuss Penelope's story, which was not dealt with in *The Odyssey*. Thus, by focusing on Penelope's background, Atwood is deconstructing some conventions inherent to the epic form such as the grandiloquence of tone, the portrayal of a male hero and the *in media res* narrative. Penelope narrates her story in hindsight and starts from the very beginning and the title of the novel itself indicates a subversion of the Greek model: the title "Penelopiad" suggests that what follows is going to be a story – if not a poem as the suffix –iad suggests – about Penelope as the critic Sigrid Renaux discusses in her article on intertextuality in this novel:

We thus realize that this contrast results not only from the comparison of the title with other epics – the majority of which have a man as their hero, or the glorious feats of a nation, such as *The Aeneid*, *La Chanson de Roland*, *El Poema del Cid*, *Os Lusíadas*, *La Henriade*, *La Messiade*, among so many others – but also from the fact that this woman did not become known for any heroic or other feat of far-reaching effect. (RENAUX, 2011, p. 69)

Renaux draws attention to the fact that Penelope became only famous for her fidelity and not because of any heroic deed. If *The Penelopiad* will add to that or not, only time may tell, but Penelope's own telling of the story leads to the deconstruction of another characteristic of the epic. While in *The Odyssey* Homer sings of the deeds and feats of heroes, it is Penelope and the maids who tell their stories in Atwood's novel, challenging the often expected heterodiegetic narrator of the epic form. The autodiegetic narrator, one that is part of the narrative, becomes one of Atwood's crucial strategies to challenge the expected male gaze of the Greek epic.

By choosing to write a novel, Atwood is able to expose the conventionality of not only the epic, but also of the other genres used by the maids in their chorus line. The novel, unlike the epic, allows the story to be fragmented, a fact which creates the uncertainty of who might be telling the whole story in *The Penelopiad*: Penelope herself or the maids?

Critic Monica Bottez states that *The Penelopiad* may be "read as propounding a new genre, the female epic" (2012, p. 49) as it has a new perspective on facts once considered the truth. She also takes the opportunity to comment on how the novel may be understood

as a “mythographic metafiction”, comparing it to Linda Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction. While we are not going to discuss whether the term “female epic” would be proper or not, it is worth mentioning that Bottez openly questions the genre of the *The Penelopiad* and decides to call it “hybrid of several genres”, thus complicating the issue of whether to refer to it as a novel or not. We have, however, decided to rely on the fact it has often been referred to as a novel and that this genre allows for experimentation as *The Penelopiad* does when it blurs different genres.

Atwood’s wittiness certainly adds to the novel and lends Penelope and the maids a certain humorous, if not sarcastic, tone, such as when Odysseus is described as a “tricky”, “barrel-chested” and “short-legged” man or when his heroic and grand deeds come into questioning.

Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over non-payment of the bill. Some of the man had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of the usual kind, said others, with ear-bitings and nosebleeds and stabbings and eviscerations. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 84)

However, before delving deeper into the novel and exemplifying how the *Odyssey* is demystified through some excerpts, it is of the utmost importance to understand how *The Penelopiad* appropriates the aforementioned epic poem.

While an adaptation “signals a relationship with an informing sourcetext or original”, an appropriation “affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” (SANDERS, 2005, p. 26), especially when it rewrites and challenges the authority of a canonical text. Sanders also goes on to say that “what is often inescapable [in appropriations] is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes the writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text” (SANDERS, 2005, p. 2). In other words, an appropriation often has a political view – as *The Penelopiad* does when allowing Penelope and the maids to focus on their own stories instead of the one provided by the male gaze in the *The Odyssey*. Once again, Hutcheon’s words enable us to re-think art: she goes on to state that postmodern art “cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however as ‘aestheticized’ as they may appear to be in their parodic self-

reflexivity” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 3). As a result, we cannot but think of *The Penelopiad* a postmodern parody with a political commitment.

Parody has become a recurrent strategy in postmodernist works by women writers. Hutcheon indicates that she considers

[...] postmodernist parody [to] be among the ‘practical strategies’ that have become ‘strategic practices’ (Parker and Pollock, 1987b) in feminists art’s attempt to present new kinds of female pleasure, new articulation of female desire, by offering tactics for deconstruction – for inscribing in order to subvert the patriarchal visual tradition. (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 156)

However, one must bear in mind that parody, as a form of ironic representation, “both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 97). In other words, a work of art which makes use of parody may cut both ways:

[It] may reinforce what has been originally said in the hypotext, but it can also be subversive because it may contradict what has been previously stated. Accordingly, either might parody make honorable allusions to previous texts showing some sympathy toward them, or it might subvert precursor texts showing a more controversial attitude toward them (SARDENBERG, 2013, p. 8)

Then, understanding a piece of work as parodic does not necessarily mean it is prone to subvert values or ideas. Usually, if not quite often, films and books pay homage to influential works of art in ways they do not mean to deconstruct what the former has clearly stated. On the other hand, as we are to see, authors have also used parody to shed some light on issues which have frequently been overshadowed.

Homer’s *Odyssey* has often been regarded as one of the most influential books in history. Its importance must not be underestimated as it has influenced writers from James Joyce to Ezra Pound and it has remained a source of inspiration and debate throughout the years. Atwood is no stranger to this influence and states by the very beginning of her novel that she has “always been haunted by the hanged maids” and that she will “give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. xv).

By allowing Penelope and the maids to share their own sides of the story, Atwood manages to give, as Carter did, a voice to these women who are left aside in *The Odyssey*, especially when concerning the maids.

Not only does *The Penelopiad* allow Penelope to share her ideas and feelings, but it also makes room for the maids, the girls who are hanged in *The Odyssey*. What is remarkable is that fact that while Penelope gets to do most of the storytelling, her version is contested by her own maids, as in the chapter aptly titled “The Perils of Penelope, A Drama” in which the maids play the roles of their master, Penelope, and Eurycleia, the servant, so as to show that these two had already planned to have them killed before they could “spill the beans” and tell Odysseus that Penelope *might have been* cheating on him.

Once again, having different voices telling the story encourages the reader to understand (and to question) the myriad of versions of the myth, a fact which Atwood herself called attention in the introduction. Unlike the Greek epic which conjures up its version of history, *The Penelopiad* presents at least two *other* sides: Penelope's and the maids'. Therefore, it brings up a very important issue: the issue of class.

BRIEFLY LOOKING INTO THE ISSUE OF CLASS

In feminist art, written or visual, the politics of representation are inevitably the politics of gender (...) Postmodern parodic strategies are often used by feminist artists to point to the history and historical power of (...) cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them.
(HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 97-98)

Bearing in mind that Atwood's deconstruction of the epic *The Odyssey* is understood to be a postmodern work, it goes without saying that Atwood's feminist gaze definitely poses questions which have long been left unanswered. Having been haunted by the hanged maids, as she herself states in the introduction, Atwood manages to critique certain social aspects present in *The Odyssey* and allows these to become central issues in her rewriting of the epic poem. Among these social aspects, one which will receive brief treatment here is the issue of class. Needless to say, one which lends a political commitment to the novel.

One issue which has not gone unnamed in *The Penelopiad* is the portrayal of the hanged maids and of Penelope. While the latter acknowledges her privileged position – being the daughter of a King and of semi-divine mother, the former do not deny their lack of privilege – being helpless maids, destined to suffer.

Like Penelope, the maids have the chance to have a word as well and they do so by means of different genres: jumping-rope rhyme, an idyll, a sea shanty, a drama, a love song among others. Each of these parts allows them to dwell on past facts, for instance, whether they should have drowned Telemachus or not and how they doubt Penelope's own version of facts. The multiplicity of voices along with Penelope's decision to tell only what she wants – "Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself." (ATWOOD, 2005: 03) – highlight how interwoven their (Penelope's and the maids') (hi)stories are, but it also brings to question who may be telling *the whole story*.

In "The Chorus Line: Dreamboats, A Ballad", the maids sing of how they find peace only when sleeping and dreaming when dreams become the only way out of their harsh lives: "Sleep is the only rest we get; / It's then we are at peace: / We do not have to mop the floor / And wipe away the grease (...) And when we sleep we like to dream; / We dream we are at sea, / We sail the waves in golden boats / So happy, clean and free." (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 125)

The ballad focuses on these girls' wishes and desires. They were denied the right to be "happy, clean and free" as maids were supposed only to work and do their jobs. In the chapter "Waiting", Penelope describes that in the absence of Odysseus, she was the one in charge of running the castle and, among her everyday tasks, she had to "keep a sharp eye" because "where there are slaves there's bound to be theft" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 87). After that, she draws out attention to the corn grinders, the ones in the "low end of the slave hierarchy," who were kept and locked in a building outside. Not only do these two comments represent the different social class strata, but they also show the stark contrast between Penelope and the others.

The male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones, not without permission. This could be a tricky issue. They sometimes fell in love and became jealous, just like their better, which could cause a lot of trouble. If that sort of thing got out of hand I naturally had to sell them. But if a pretty child was born of these couplings, I would often keep it and rear it myself, teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant. (Atwood, 2005, p. 87-88)

It is therefore no wonder or surprise that the maids decide to sing about Penelope in the drama "The Perils of Penelope": they play the roles of Penelope and Eurycleia and question Penelope's fidelity:

Penelope

Which of the maids is in on my affair?

Eurycleia:

Only the twelve, my lady, who assisted,
Know that the Suitors you have not resisted
They smuggled lovers in and out all night;
They drew the drapes, and then they held the light.
They've 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 avenge 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 doting slaves of such a Lord as he!
(ATWOOD, 2005, p. 149-150)

This version of the story tears down Penelope's one: according to the latter, she had devised a plan in which the maids would intentionally be around the Suitors so that she would always know what they were up to. However, things went out of her control and the maids ended up being raped. Penelope describes these maids as her "eyes and ears among the Suitors", her "helpers during the long nights of the shroud", her "snow white geese". She acknowledges it was her fault they were killed, but quickly hastens to add that "Lamentation wouldn't bring [her] lovely girls back to life". (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 160) She seems to have come to terms when she finally says that "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, p. 160).

Despite her acknowledgement of her privileged position, it needs to be highlighted the fact that Penelope was a woman in a very specific historical moment, one in which women did not vote and would often be relegated to their homes. According to Paula Cruz,

this condition “led them to live a subordinate life, mostly confined to the realm of home and subject to the male power and to the pleasing of men” (CRUZ, 2012, p. 77). Therefore, Atwood’s novel allows the reader to focus on two facts which would easily go unquestioned in *The Odyssey*: Penelope had previously been thought of as a model of virtue and fidelity and the maids had never been thought of as humans. In *The Penelopiad*, they become human and are given a life, yet Atwood’s choice to breathe life into and to play with their stories do not efface issues of class, instead they emphasise and foreground these to the point they cannot be ignored as they once were in *The Odyssey*.

Atwood makes the maids present their true and unknown story in a chorus in several chapters, and as a counterpoint to Penelope’s narrative. (...)

This creation of Atwood reveals the submission which these maids were subjected to, from their obscure birth to their execution and posthumous life in Hades: forced to work for their masters since they were children, submissive to them and to the visitors as concubines. (RENAUX, 2011, p. 76)

Another important point to be highlighted is the fact that the novel was deliberately called *The Penelopiad*, that is, it focuses mainly on Penelope. Obviously, it is another subversive act: giving voice to Penelope, but also letting the maids have theirs so as to counter Penelope’s version. However, naming it *Penelopiad* may lead readers to initially believe it will basically focus on Penelope.

Violence also seems to play a central role when discussions centre on issues of class. Kapuscinski (2007) argues that Penelope’s storytelling works as a weapon which, instead of being just, turns out to be unfair as it does not remedy the maids’ situation and it only tries to clean her slate by stating how she made a pact with the twelve maids and goes as far as saying that Helen was to blame for everything that happened in her life.

Penelope also was the victim of home violence in her early days. Her father tried to kill her by throwing her to the sea, but a flock of ducks ended up saving her – whether this was an act of her semi-divine mother’s mercy or not, it remains a mystery. Penelope uses this very episode to justify her need to learn “early the virtues (...) of self-sufficiency” as she could “hardly count on family support”. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 11)

Violence, it seems, was not only part of *The Odyssey*, but it also makes itself very present in *The Penelopiad*, even though in different ways. The latter plays with the fact that Penelope tells a story which privileges her persona while the maids do not worry about

portraying themselves in the best possible light. Instead, the maids, as a chorus line is supposed to, 'entertain' the audience by speaking of the silent violence they had to undergo.

CONCLUSION

While *The Odyssey* is likely to inspire several writers to come, a fact itself which needs not be countered, it must be noted that it has also inspired a work as *The Penelopiad* which counters, critiques and parodies its source. Atwood managed to craft such an enthralling piece of art which encompasses social and political issues which were not questioned in the source text.

Although not concerned about the same issues in her book, Showalter claims that the

feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny. There is sporadic sisterhood and kindness between women in this world (...) on the whole these women are helpless to aid each other, even if they want to. (SHOWALTER, 2012, p. 96)

Showalter's ideas only add fuel to the fire as they can also easily portray the plight of the maids. If Penelope had been given the opportunity, would she have done something? Would she have had the chance to speak on behalf of her then beloved maids? Although this is not the central issue of *The Penelopiad*, these questions make themselves ever so present throughout the reading that pondering becomes inevitable.

The "sporadic sisterhood" is not completely visible in *The Penelopiad* and that adds to the creation of uncertainty: was Penelope actually telling the whole story? Postmodern works have relied heavily on the debunking of the one-sided truth, thus allowing themselves to account for other sides and other stories and this is what Atwood managed to do.

Luiz Manoel da Silva Oliveira (2009) states that, despite being short in terms of pages, *The Penelopiad* manages to spotlight the issue of women being finally heard and seen. He also adds that an inattentive reader or one that does not know about myths and history may not fully understand Atwood's references and subtle humour.

Penelope's and the maids' sharp wit entertains the reader and enables them to have a second opinion regarding the Odyssean myth. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,

Wollstonecraft makes use of Rousseau's opinion to express her dissatisfaction with women not being able to stand by their own opinion: "In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason." (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 2004, p. 12). Such was the situation to which the maids and Penelope were subjected, but at least now they have been given a chance to unveil their untold stories.

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