

A MODERN PENELOPE: THE NARRATOR IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD*

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RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa o romance *The Penelopiad* de Margaret Atwood como uma contranarrativa da história de Penélope, esposa de Ulisses, como a conhecemos na *Odisseia*. A partir de perspectivas dos estudos pós-coloniais e feministas, examinam-se as estratégias da autora na criação de uma narradora, Penélope, que quer justamente não mais ser somente o modelo de esposa fiel no Ocidente. Percebemos, neste estudo, como Atwood, pelo uso de uma das narrativas fundacionais do mundo ocidental, desafia e subverte suas noções ao mesmo tempo em que, de certa forma, homenageia tal narrativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: narrador, feminismo, Atwood

ABSTRACT

The present text is an analysis of the novel *The Penelopiad*, by Margaret Atwood, as a counter-narrative to the story of Penelope, Odysseus' wife, as we come to know it in *The Odyssey*. Having post-colonial and feminist studies as basis, the strategies Atwood employed in the creation of Penelope as a narrator, one that no longer wants to be the model faithful wife, are examined. We highlight in this article how Atwood is at once challenging western notions and paying tribute to it by the use of one of the foundational narratives in western civilization.

KEYWORDS: narrator, feminism, Atwood

Penelope, the Greek character, Odysseus' spouse, is known for being flawless, prudent, constant. Her figure is (if not the literary origin) certainly attached to the image of a devoted wife, one who would weep and wait for her beloved husband's return. The epithets mentioned can no longer be connected to her in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* (2005). In this narrative, Penelope's version of what happened during the twenty years Odysseus was absent from Ithaca, she is able to metaphorically weave the shroud once again: she tells the story from her perspective. The aim of this paper is to analyze the strategies used by Atwood, in her postmodernist writing, in order to update Penelope's discourse, that is, to investigate how the classic character is reconstructed as a protagonist/narrator in contemporary circumstances.

Initially, it is important to emphasize that the novel is a review of *The Odyssey* through the eyes of Penelope. The term "review" here should be read with its two connotations: seeing an object for the second time, but also criticizing this object, which is exactly the two things Atwood's Penelope does. The reconstruction of Penelope and the rewriting of *The Odyssey*, then, are made possible through a critical mindset, a modern subjectivity. This is the point this paper defends as one of Atwood's main strategy in the making of *The Penelopiad*.

In this work, the term "modern" is used so as to refer to a critical perception of the world, distinguished from a more religious oriented view that was predominant in the Ancient and Medieval worlds. The modern subject is someone who is active in the procedure of knowledge: sees, observes, doubts, inquires, imagines, researches and discovers, or, rather, creates an answer that can be put to proof. If, previous to modern era, men were supposed to protect and religiously ritualize the knowledge they had – revealed by God; after the Enlightenment, it became more a matter of daring to produce knowledge (and not fearing God that much). This first moment of Modernity is significantly related to René Descartes philosophy of the cogito, ergo sum, in which reason plays the central role. Embedded in this process is a new sensibility towards our surroundings. That is, nature, religion, institutions, conventions and even language, that were previously accepted as they were, are now perceived as objects of a certain suspicion, reflection, investigation. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts

it, “The central dislocation towards modernity, thus, relies on the fact that men will see themselves playing the role of the subject who produces knowledge [...] Instead of being part of the world, the modern subject sees him/herself as eccentric to it” (1998, p. 12, my translation). This separation from the world will, then, enable men to interpret, that is, produce knowledge.

Despite being inexorably linked to the classical tradition, Penelope behaves as a modern subject throughout Atwood’s narrative and that is precisely what enables and triggers the development of the novel. Through discourse, she rebels against the constrictions imposed by the Greek condition: religious beliefs and social and familial boundaries for women. Atwood, intelligently, makes use of this modern sensibility in order to voice Penelope, who is, in the novel, distanced from the world twice: she no longer lives in the ancient Greece and she is not present in the world of the living, she speaks from the underworld. This double separation is also an interesting circumstance to be observed in the reading of the novel. Another important element of the narrative is the fact that our protagonist seems to have watched and learned from the events in the course of history, so that the feminist discourse constitutes her new identity as well. According to Stuart Hall in “The Birth and Death of the Modern Subject”, feminism, both as a social movement and as a theoretical approach, represents a very important turning point in modern thought (2002, p. 44). One of its main contributions is related to the slogan “the personal is political” that would claim the elimination of the boundaries of private and public, internal and external, and would also emphasize gender as a social-cultural construct rather than a given one.

Penelope’s modern subjectivity will be displayed since the very beginning of her speech. In the first chapter, “A Low Art”, reference to the weaving of the shroud, a female, thus low, art, she already questions Odysseus, the great teller of stories.

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of 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 wouldn’t think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 2).

Right after she reveals what she really thought of her husband, she also discloses how she felt during his absence. “Hadn’t I been faithful? Hadn’t I waited, and waited, and waited despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 2).

The narrator, now, speaks from a very different position, having, then, a new perspective and tone to her discourse. We can perceive a self-confident voice that no longer associates to the traditional image of the weeping wife. In these passages above, two great truths are dismantled and destabilized: Odysseus’ image of a great story teller and Penelope’s image of waiting patiently. Here we also have hints of an issue that will be further discussed: how the “real”, the “truth” and even a certain sense of tradition are made up in and through discourse, that is, in and through language. And how words, despite not being tangible, can create really solid realities that, in turn, can, with a certain effort, be dissolved.

The following moments of this first chapter are also relevant in Atwood’s strategy of making up a modern Penelope. She shows awareness of Ulysses actual behavior back when they were married even though she did not express it in that time, because the circumstances would not allow her to speak. She says:

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his – how can I put this? – his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn’t contradict, I didn’t ask awkward questions, I didn’t dig deep (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 3).

Penelope will, then, close the chapter showing her dislike of the stories told about her in Western tradition. She says she waited, in the world of the dead, for things to become “less legendary” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 3) so that, having the opportunity to create her own versions, she could express her voice. “Now that the others have run out of air, it’s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I’ve had to work myself up to it: it’s a low art, tale-telling [...] So I’ll spin a thread of my own (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 4).”

The relationship between Penelope and her father, king Icarius of Sparta, is also relevant to our discussion. She says that when she was “quite young” her father ordered her “to be thrown into the sea” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 7). She never got to know, during her lifetime, the exact reason for that. However, she suspects now that it might have been due to a misunderstanding related to the shroud she would have to weave for her father-in-law (the shroud was a burial garment). Thus, her father tried to kill her in order to protect himself. The relevance of this event relies on the critical perspective Penelope shows concerning the possible explanations. She says: “No matter – into the sea I was thrown. Do I remember [...] the breath leaving my lungs and the sound of bells people say the drowning hear? Not in the least. But I was told the story.” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 9). This passage emphasizes the power and influence of discourse and words over our identities and, most importantly, Penelope’s awareness of this power, which she will smartly, cunningly, make use of.

Later in the novel, the narrator will return to the issue of her relationship with father, in an attempt of, once more, finding or creating a suitable answer for his evil deed. Penelope wonders: “Why did he throw me in? That question still haunts me. [...] I’ve never been able to find the right answer, even down here” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 27). Then, she creates a story that would justify her father’s act. She was a “sacrifice to the god of the sea” and “if the sea-god had failed to drag me down and devour me, that was his own tough luck. The more I think about this version of events, the more I like it. It makes sense” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 27). Going over and over this matter, Penelope creates the story that best suits her reality, reproducing, in a way, the modern paradigm: speculating and providing an “objective” answer to a problematic question or issue. And this paradigm will be repeated whenever she wants to fill the blanks of stories poorly told and also when she is not satisfied with what has been said. The world of language, then, is for her, as a modern subject, a tool for building up her own experience and reality, for empowerment.

Following a certain linear chronology, the protagonist narrates her wedding ceremony and how she and Odysseus got intimate. It is interesting that both characters have a feature in common: Penelope and Odysseus like to tell stories, only

that in ancient Greece women would be much more often in the position of the listener. Penelope deemed it as a positive factor: that Odysseus would tell her stories of his life. Especially after sexual relationships, he would not just “simply roll over and begin to snore. No, Odysseus wanted to talk, as he was an excellent raconteur I was happy to listen. I think this is what he valued most in me: my ability to appreciate his stories. It’s an underrated talent in women.” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 45). Odysseus, having been asked by his wife about his scar, tells a long story involving a boar hunting during which he was severely hurt by a “particularly ferocious boar” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 47). Penelope doubts he told the complete truth:

There was something in the way Odysseus told the story that made me suspect there was more to it. Why had the boar savaged Odysseus, but not the others? Had they known where the boar was hiding out, had they led him into a trap? Was Odysseus meant to die so that Autolycus the cheat wouldn’t have to hand over the gifts owed? Perhaps. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 47).

Like a scientist, she investigates the verisimilitude of the story told and raises questions, trying, once again, to interpret, produce knowledge, make sense. Interestingly, the couple developed a friendly relationship based, to an extent, on their sharing of their personal stories. “In return for his story, I told Odysseus my own story about almost drowning and being rescued by ducks. He was interested in it, and asked me questions about it [...]” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 48).

Another aspect of Penelope’s critical mindset is her attitude towards religion and the gods, who can no longer provide her with answers, since she is the one who undertakes this task. If, on the one hand, gods from Greek mythology and humans were very much alike in terms of behaving passionately, on the other hand, there was also a sense of respect, fear, worship and faith from humans to gods. In a certain sense, Penelope transgresses this inferiority to the Greek gods in her narrative by having an ironic tone towards religion and by problematizing certain beliefs and practices. For instance, it was a common thing in Greek mythology for gods and humans to mingle, establishing more than spiritual relationships. They would fall in love and even have children with one another. Our contemporary Penelope frowns

upon that. “Immortality and mortality didn’t mix well: it was fire and mud, only the fire always won” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 24). She continues:

The gods were never averse to making a mess. In fact they enjoyed it. To watch some mortal with his or her eyes frying in their sockets through an overdose of god-sex made them shake with laughter. There was something childish about the gods, in a nasty way. I can say this now because I no longer have a body, I’m beyond that kind of suffering, and the gods aren’t listening anyway. As far as I can tell they’ve gone to sleep. In your world, you don’t get visitations of the gods the way people used to unless you’re on drugs (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 24).

Penelope is skeptical. She criticizes and doubts the existence of the gods throughout the narrative. In another moment, she says: “I can say this now because I’m dead. I wouldn’t have dared to say it earlier. [...] 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, p. 40). Here she claims that she has always questioned the gods but was not able to express it before. As we will see, Penelope, like Odysseus, is not that trustworthy, so she may say she acted in a certain way in the past in order to be coherent to the identity she constructs for herself now. One way or the other, once again she shows she learned with history. Having seen the enormous changes from the underworld, she is able to relativize. She has the privilege of knowing things only people who are not alive are able to know. Thus, our contemporary narrator knows there are countless religions with very different, and also very similar, beliefs. Having a broader view on the world, she is able to compare. She does not have her own experience (while she was alive) as the only parameter. And this distance will have another effect in the narrative, besides the critical mindset: the ironic tone.

Irony is, indeed, a very important factor, not only in this particular novel, but also in practices of rewriting traditional stories. As Linda Hutcheon argues in “Intertextuality, Parody and the Discourses of History” (1988), the use of irony is a postmodernist strategy. Atwood, in her rewriting of one of the major narratives of Western civilization, is both acknowledging the relevance of *The Odyssey* and subverting its status, through a transgressive narrator. Thus, the relationship between the traditional narrative and the contemporary version is, in this case, one of parody.

That constitutes the postmodern paradox. As Hutcheon puts it “there is always a paradox at the heart of that ‘post’: irony does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm — textually and hermeneutically — the connection with the past” (1988, p. 125). And also: “To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (1988, p. 126). The critique in the process of rewriting is towards a totalizing view, usually attached to grand narratives such as the epic poems. In a certain sense, then, we may say that Atwood’s intention in the use of irony is to disclaim any possibility of being a transparent record of truth. As a postmodernist writer she is aware that truth is made up by people in particular circumstances and is not a material, essential given. This awareness can be perceived in Penelope. Thus, parody in *The Penelopiad* works as a means of appropriating and reformulating, but not exactly rejecting, Eurocentric discourses.

The novel goes on and the ten years Odysseus is away fighting in the Trojan War seem to go by really fast. Penelope says that nothing happened during this period. The other ten years it took him to return, however, seem to never end. During this last decade Penelope was never sure of where Odysseus was and what was really going on. Many people told many stories about his return but, after a certain point, she starts to wonder if he is even alive. One of Penelope’s ways of keeping the memory of her husband was to remember the stories he told her. She would retell these stories to Telemachus, their son: “I’d tell him stories of Odysseus – what a fine warrior he was, how clever, how handsome, and how wonderful everything would be once he got home again” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 90). Odysseus absence is soothed through words. Penelope remembers:

Once he’d finished making love, Odysseus always liked to talk to me. He told me many stories, stories about himself, true, and his hunting exploits, and his looting expedition [...] and so on, but other stories as well – how there came to be a curse on the house of Atreus [...] (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 74-75).

She also mentions a story he told her about her cousin Helen being kidnapped by two men that wanted to marry her. At this point, she contrasts Odysseus version of this event with the one she already knew, told by Helen herself:

This last story I already knew, as I'd heard it from Helen herself. It sounded quite different when she told it. Her story was about how [...] The part of the story she enjoyed most was the number of men who'd died in the Athenian war: she took their deaths as a tribute to herself (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 75).

She continues her critique: "Why couldn't she have led a normal life? 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, p. 76). It is interesting to observe Penelope's wit in comparing the two stories: it is clear that she knows each one will tell a story according to one's desires and purposes. The importance of stories to the novel will be explicit again when people will tell Penelope, each with their version, why it took so long for Odysseus to come home to Ithaca.

Rumours came, carried by other ships. Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of call and the men had mutinied, said some; no said others, they'd eaten a magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus had saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 83).

The narrator emphasizes the fact that the best versions were told in her presence: "the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably. They always sang the noblest version in my presence – the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave and resourceful [...]" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 84).

One day Odysseus is finally back in a bum's disguise and is recognized by Euryclea, a maid that had taken care of him as a baby, because of his famous scar. In Penelope's version she says she pretends not to have recognized him at first, which, in fact, she did. She decides to postpone their reunion for a few more moments, probably to show him she was not submissive and in control of her feelings. She says: "I decided to make him wait: I myself had waited long enough" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 169). It is also relevant that she makes Odysseus prove he is himself, so that he would not think she had been throwing herself "into the arms of every man who'd turned up claiming to be him" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 170), but probably also to show him she had managed the situation pretty well while he was not around. Nonetheless, their effective reunion will only take place when they are able to share again their stories and feel the pleasure they had in it.

After a little time had passed and we were feeling pleased with each other, we took up our old habit of story-telling. Odysseus told me of all his travels and difficulties – the nobler versions, with the monsters and the goddesses, rather than the more sordid ones with the innkeepers and whores (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 172).

Penelope has her turn as well: “I related the tale of the Suitors, and my trick with the shroud of Laertes, and my deceitful encouraging of the Suitors, and the skillful ways in which I’d misdirected them and led them on and played them off against one another” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 172-173). They continue taking turns: “Then he told me how much he’d missed me, and how he’d been filled with longing for me [...] and I told him how very many tears I’d shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I’d been [...] (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 173).

The most interesting element in this reunion, however, is not the romantic atmosphere Atwood decides to create. What is intriguing about these two characters is their relationship with the words, stories, reality and truth, as described by Penelope, the narrator.

The two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.

But we did.

Or so we told each other (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 173).

Once more, Odysseus has to leave and he explains why. To which Penelope’s reaction is: “It was likely a story. But then, all of his stories were likely” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 174). For the point this paper wants to defend – a modern sensibility as crucial to the remaking of Penelope and the tradition linked to her, the above passage is indispensable. In a first moment of Modernity, a moment of rupture, men would see themselves as creatures of reason that had the ability to criticize and investigate so as to find answers, truths. In a second moment of Modernity, men will start to observe themselves in the procedure of observing the world. That is, gradually, men and women will not be considered neutral observers, and, elements that constitute humanity, first and foremost, language, will be seen as non-objective, non-linear: not

entitled to be trusted without a certain sense of doubt. In *The Penelopiad*, we can perceive, in a first moment, a narrator that wants to be the creator of her own versions, of her own stories: she has the mission of providing for the world a second, alternative view of herself and her story, so she grabs language as her tool, her instrument, to make her own voice possible and audible. In the process of making up her versions, Penelope follows a scientific pattern related to Modernity's first moment: her method is that of doubting, raising questions, speculating, imagining and finally creating a coherent story that suits her needs and is in accord with her perspective, a story that, in her view, makes sense. Atwood is really successful: she really presents us a different Penelope, one that is not so much subjected to the weight of Western tradition, one that manages to be who she wants (to a certain extent, of course).

However, the new image of Penelope, built up by herself as narrator, collapses when she admits, towards the end of the novel, as we have seen, that she is a "proficient and shameless liar" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 173). At this moment of the narrative, something that had been indicated more subtly in passages we examined in this paper – how words will be used to create certain truths according to the position of the speaker, or, the impossibility of Truth, will come to the surface more clearly. One of the consequences this strategy has is an atmosphere of disbelief. Are we or are we not to believe in the narrator's words? This question has no answers. More important than answering this question, though, is perceiving how this crisis dialogues with a broader issue: the experience of crisis we live (and have been living for a while) in late modernity. The decay of solid institutions, of correct models and patterns, and a suspicion of language and communication: all of which are woven in the shroud of Atwood's text as a way of making Penelope a woman of our days.

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