

Assignment: THE PENELOPIAD

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Chapter 26 of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* eloquently brings into focus a prevailing disparity between the values of an epic work borne out of oral tradition, and those of her twenty-first century critique of the same. Perhaps ironically, this chapter may be read as an assertion of the inadequacies of judgement aside from the context to which the alleged 'crime' belongs. Atwood's portrayal of the Judge delineates with absolute clarity the detachment of classical and contemporary values, even illustrating a difference in the semantics of what is, today, an unambiguous term: "rape".

The notion of 'permission' (i.e. consent) in the sense argued by the Attorney for the Defence is such that a third-party is granted control over every facet of the lives of their slaves.

JUDGE: *(chuckles)* Excuse me, Madam, but isn't that what rape is? Without permission?

ATTORNEY: Without permission of their master, Your Honour.

Bizarrely, the Judge plays along with this argument of words – eventually, leading to his/her¹ dismissal of the case. Significantly, *no* judgement is made either for or against the defence. This is not, however, the only method used by Atwood to challenge the authority of a twenty-first century court of law. In the closing lines of this chapter, the responder is presented with a scene absurd in nature – certainly, a scene absurd from the perspective of the Judge – in which a "troop" of Erinyes appear, invoked by the incensed Maids' demands for justice. The Judge is depicted ineffectually crying "Order! Order! This is a twenty-first-century court of justice!

¹The Judge's gender is undefined throughout

You there, get down from the ceiling!” – clearly, comment here is not only on the disparity of myth and reality, but also regarding the chronological state of this judging institution: it is rooted firmly in the twenty-first century, whilst the *Odyssey* is tied to a much earlier time; hence, no authority can hold.

Yet, for all this criticism of judgement, Atwood’s re-constructed appropriation of this myth² has all the appearances of being a rather judgemental work. She ridicules preconceived images of Penelope’s character as a woman whose sole function was as a motif of faithfulness and patience, and develops a figure whose character is unambiguously strong (if perhaps of an aqueous disposition), and sneers at the notion of divine intervention in a number of instances, substituting Penelope’s own cunning. These variations from the commonly known ‘myth’ *The Odyssey* should not, however, be construed as necessary challenges to it. Myth is borne from an oral tradition, enabling scope for re-telling and variation: that is what Atwood has done.

There is a clear distinction between “The Chorus Line” – which, it seems, follows more closely the original version of events (distinguished from it by the *imprimatur* granted the maids to voice their complaint) – and the core narrative in Atwood’s work, which overtly challenges the centripetal epic mode of *The Odyssey*. Yet, in this chapter, the two are seen to coalesce, and the very purpose of the narrative is unveiled in dramatic style. The Furies are invoked in a block of dialogue characterised by excessive exclamation and rhetoric, as the Maids issue imperative after imperative to this “troop of twelve Erinyes”.

The impassioned language of these lines nearly disguises the work’s *raison d’être*, embedded here:

“Dog his footsteps, on earth or in Hades, wherever he may take refuge,
in songs and in plays, in tomes and in theses, in marginal notes and in
appendices!”

This, it would seem, epitomises Atwood’s role as author of *The Penelopiad*: she is one of this “troop of twelve” (or the entire troop), and is, in her re-construction of myth outside of epic mode, dogging the footsteps of Odysseus in songs, plays, and

²As was her brief: “[to retell] a myth in a contemporary and memorable way.” Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2005. (Verso soft title page)

other literary works.³ Is this ‘judgement’ of Odysseus? Arguably not. Atwood’s principle concern is the elocution of the Maid’s story (in the Chorus aspect of her work), and also that of Penelope. The two are undoubtedly intertwined, yet that is of less concern than the reasons behind Atwood’s election to convey these stories over any others, and the form in which she conveys them.

In the original text, the Maid’s execution consumes a paragraph. The death of the maids is not even the fault of Odysseus⁴: Telemachus declares “I will not give a decent death” to women who, by his reckoning, have “heaped dishonour on my head and on my mother’s”. Half of Atwood’s work is built off a paragraph. She recursively (i.e. in her version of the myth) evokes Furies to speak on behalf of those whose cause she champions, all the while fulfilling this role. Why does the original work not devote Atwood’s concern and compassion to the plight of these twelve maids? Clearly, something has changed.

Atwood’s own context is radically different from that of classical Greece, and, despite claims to the contrary⁵, *The Odyssey* can hardly be regarded as a tome delivered from a context particularly empowering to women. Conversely, Atwood is writing from a period of comparative equality – there is, undoubtedly, bountiful evidence of feminist influence upon this work. Her role, therefore, is that of consociate between the two periods, as she continues to “dog [Odysseus’] footsteps” in a new time, from a new perspective – giving a *voice* to the Maids they were previously denied, but not pronouncing them wronged. Judgement, it seems, is left to the responder. Atwood is an aggressive prosecutor of mythological standing, but the reader is called upon to make their own judgements. This trial presents the responder with precisely that: an invitation to draw one’s own conclusions – recognised as subjective – from the evidence presented.

³Note the various modes employed by the Chorus throughout *The Penelopiad*: song; dance; film (video); and verse, both whimsical and hauntingly spoken in chorus.

⁴Fulkerson, Laurel. "Epic Ways of Killing a Woman: Gender and Transgression in Odyssey 22.465-72." *Classical Journal* 97, no. 4 (April-May 2002): 335-50. – In which it is suggested, amongst other things, that Telemachus sought to conduct the execution differently as an expression of his ‘coming of age’ (defiance of his father’s authority).

⁵Butler, Samuel. *The Authoress of The Odyssey*. 1897. – In which it is proposed Homer was a female bard. Possibly true, but not an indication of any degree of equality in expression... especially for female slaves.