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Space, Time and the Female Body: Homer's Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005)

“...Shrewd Odysseus!... You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope... The glory of her virtue will not fade with years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope” (Homer, *The Odyssey*, cited in Atwood, *Penelopiad* first epigraph, first and second ellipsis in *The Penelopiad*).

As this quote reveals in Homer's *The Odyssey* the name Penelope has become synonymous with prudence and wifely faithfulness. In contrast to *The Iliad* where the presence of a woman is a rather rare occurrence, *The Odyssey* is a poem of one man and many women, who do not seem to play their traditional feminine role in a patriarchal society and simply assist the hero in his adventures. The powerful sorceress Circe, for example, leads Odysseus to her bed where they make love as equals. When he decides to leave Circe's island Aea, for the island of Ithaca she helps him to survive his mandatory visit to the underworld and never tries to hold him back with womanly tears or evil spells. The episodes which describe Odysseus' reaching Ithaca and being reunited with Penelope indicate that Homer does not always follow the rules of his patriarchal society, which define women as either all-devouring demonic transgressors or all-nourishing earth mothers. Penelope is not only the docile wife but a transgressor and a trickster, who runs Odysseus' estates for twenty years better than any man and keeps the suitors at bay until Odysseus' return. The question for a modern audience is, was Penelope faithful or clever at hiding her faithlessness? Atwood's intention is to tease out Homer's mythic complexities, especially in relation to Penelope, expand and explore them. When the epic confirms patriarchal notions of femininity, however, as in the case of the twelve hanged maids, Atwood encourages a re-reading of the original text by re-writing it entirely.

Atwood's postmodern and feminist re-writing of myths reflects Adrienne Rich's 1971 essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision', where Rich famously asserts that revision is

the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction... You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call it experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming (35, 43).

What Rich calls "re-naming" Atwood defines as "new renderings" of mythical and past figures and events, which shed new light on the present and therefore "find new meanings within their own times and places" ('The Myths' 35). The re-imagining of the past allows expression to previously silenced, marginalized voices, such as colonized or racially other people, the lower classes and women. Through this fresh and open literary narrative, which rejects the idea of any unique grand narrative, issues that may have previously been neglected, such as sexual desire, family relations, religion, science, education, emotions and states of mind are teased out and explored.

Atwood's first recreation of a mythical woman started in 1961 with Persephone, when she wrote her first poetic collection *Double Persephone*. As she explains, "[s]trong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out" ('The Myths' 35). Atwood's recreation of Greek myths continues with poems such as 'Eventual Proteus' (1966), 'Cyclops' (1970), 'Siren Song' (1974), 'Orpheus I and II', 'Eurydice', 'Letter From Persephone' (1984), 'Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing' (1995) and more recently, a short piece of prose on Helen of Troy called 'It's Not Easy Being Half-Divine' (2006). In an interview with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, Atwood points out that

When you have a story that everyone knows, you can use that story and reinterpret it...find out what new meaning is being

attached to the story. Many women characters in Greek mythology are being reinterpreted – for example, Medea, who killed her children. From one point of view, this mythical character is very bad. But from another point of view, she can be reinterpreted as a feminist metaphor (*Two Solicitudes* 48).

If Penelope is recreated by Atwood as a feminist metaphor, she is a metaphor for disobedience against gender essentialism. Atwood concentrates on Penelope in a detailed reinterpretation of her Homeric role called *The Penelopiad*, published in 2005 by Canongate as part of a series entitled *The Myths*. Two other two books were published by Canongate at the same time, Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth*, which offers a compelling historical investigation into myth, and Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, which explores the myth of Atlas. Atwood's Penelope fights using the voice of a realistic, humorous and, at times, sardonic woman who lives in a patriarchal society but does not necessarily accept its rules. She experiences the freedom of a ghost from the underworld: "who cares about public opinion now? ... the opinion of shadows, of echoes. So I'll spin a thread of my own" (*Penelopiad* 4). But *The Penelopiad* is also narrated from the point of view of the twelve hanged maids, who sing in-between episodes like the Chorus of the wise old men in the Greek drama. Atwood uses the maids' witty but angry singing to focus "on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to" (*Penelopiad*, xv) in relation to the suitors?

In this article I will critically engage with the answers that Atwood offers to these questions and examine their validity in light of contemporary space-time theory. In particular, I will examine the female body figured in terms of space and nature and the male body figured in terms of time and culture. I will explore the possibility of imagining space/time and sexual identity in a way that attempts to resolve this seemingly irreversible

dualism. My theoretical debate will draw on Julia Kristeva's article 'Women's Time', published in 1979, where Kristeva contrasts the linear time of man and history to the cyclical/monumental time of women and maternity. Kristeva discusses two generations of women and how they fight to place themselves within space and time, before suggesting that there should be a third generation that unsettles the space/time dichotomy and secures a more creative position for women within language and socialization. Kristeva's theory works well in accordance with Rich's statement that

A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it. Not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (35).

Another tradition that should be broken is the one that equates space with dull and passive homogeneity and lack of mobility, as Doreen Massey argues in her book entitled *For Space* (2005):

what I'm interested in is how we might imagine spaces ... pursue an alternative imagination. What is needed, I think, is to uproot 'space' from that constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly so often been embedded (stasis; closure...) and to settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity...liveliness indeed) where it releases a more challenging political landscape (13).

Gender is a salient factor in the re-imagining of space and I will be drawing from Massey's earlier work entitled *Space, Gender and Identity* (1994) when I explore the bedroom, the weaving room and the kitchen as material spaces, heavily invested with the gender essentialisms of a patriarchal society. Massey is a geographer and Kristeva a philosopher and a linguist, but they both strive to imagine and define space and time free from old stifling dichotomies. For Kristeva this means the third new generation of women, as mentioned before, whilst for Massey it means understanding material space

not as separate and inferior but as part of a space-time dualism that is characterized first and foremost by equality. Although *The Penelopiad* has not attracted the same critical attention as Atwood's other novels, various critics have discussed Atwood's feminist, revisionist mythmaking, as well as the dismantling of the rules of the epic poem and their replacement with a pastiche of literary genres that liberate the silenced female voices of Homer's *The Odyssey*.¹ This article will build on some of this existing criticism but will also utilize a critical reading that explores the role of space and time, in relation to the body, language, gender and class in Atwood's revisionist mythmaking reading of the original epic. In my final analysis of space and time I will contrast extracts from Homer against Atwood's in order to offer a revisionist mythmaking interpretation of three crucial episodes: Penelope's meeting with Odysseus who is disguised as a beggar and the role of the maids during this meeting; Penelope's dream of the white geese; and the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.

The Penelopiad

Homer's narrative places Penelope in an interesting double role: she is the object of Odysseus' "nostos", of his yearning for homecoming, but she is also a subject in her own right. Like the king and not the queen of Ithaca, she single-handedly runs Odysseus' palace, livestock and land, keeps both the suitors and her teenage son Telemachus under control and behaves as a flawless and gracious hostess, who always welcomes strangers with news of Odysseus. Therefore Odysseus has to deal with an intelligent, assertive Penelope, whose cunning and endurance matches his own. Penelope's traditional weaving in *The Odyssey* is replaced by her autobiographical text in *The Penelopiad*. The novel consists of two narratives that dove-tail with each other: in the main narrative, Penelope offers a detailed unraveling of her life story using anachronisms or flashbacks, from as

early as her childhood in Sparta to Odysseus' return to Ithaca, the slaughtering of the hundred suitors and the hanging of the twelve maids. Penelope also offers a second narration of her present existence as a ghost in the underworld, with the twelve maids perpetually tormenting Odysseus' ghost by singing like owls about his murdering them. In Atwood's words Penelope "had a whole lifetime of keeping her mouth shut. Now that she's dead, she doesn't have to do that anymore...It's like those tell-alls that people do at the end of their lives" ('A personal *Odyssey*' 4). Penelope's linguistic and weaving plots are so prominent in Homer's epic that, as John Finley points out, "*Odysseia*...comes near" being turned into "a *Penelopeia*" (3), so Atwood draws Homeric Penelope's complex plots out of the epic and focuses her own novel around them, shedding clear and sometimes harsh revisionist light on any vagueness or inconsistency, such as Penelope's true feelings towards the suitors and the hanging of the twelve maids. Perhaps Atwood calls her work *The Penelopiad* because her novel seems to be following the literary tradition of the mock epic, which is political and cultural satire that relies on classical epic for comical effect. Alexander Pope did the same with *The Dunciad* (1728), which drew material from both *The Iliad* and *The Aeniad*, but lowered the heroic language of the epics, to produce both laughter but also scathing criticism of the morals of his society.

The other narrative belongs to the silenced voices of the twelve maids, who have been haunting the pages of *The Odyssey* and are given freedom of expression in Atwood's postmodern parody of the epic. Their narration functions as a pastiche of the ancient Greek chorus and a modern musical, with a variety of poetic genres, such as nursery rhyme, sea shanty, ballad and idyll, as well as courtroom drama and anthropology lecture. Their stories alternate with Penelope's monologues and are full of energy and playfulness, but at the same time provide an alternative ethical background that is repressed in the

original epic. *The Penelopiad* is multi-voiced, with Atwood, Penelope and the maids weaving, unraveling and re-weaving, offering to the reader multiple perspectives. In 2007 the Royal Shakespeare Company in association with Canada's National Arts Centre presented a stage adaptation of *The Penelopiad*, and in the winter of 2011/12 the text was given its Toronto premiere by Nightwood Theatre. Unlike the all-male cast of an ancient epic, both stage adaptations of *The Penelopiad* had an all-female cast, which underscored the empowerment with intelligence and agency of marginalized female characters in Homer's epic.

In the patriarchal society of ancient Greece, where women do not have rights to property, the vote or life outside their home, marriages are arranged. Penelope is the object of exchange between her father Icarius and her future husband Odysseus within a masculine, capitalist economy. Penelope's "huge pile of sparkling wedding loot" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 27) and the future sons she might produce to fortify the kingdom of Sparta against outside enemies make her a desirable bride. However, women are not, as Ann L.T. Bergren explains, simply

like words... but they are also original sources of speech, speakers themselves. They are both passive objects and active agents of linguistic exchange...In this relation to the linguistic and social system, the woman, like her weaving, is paradoxically both secondary and original, both passive and active, both a silent and a speaking sign (76, emphasis in original).

Homer's Penelope is a living proof of this since she uses the traditionally female art of weaving as a silent language in order to create her own plot and manipulate space and time to her advantage. Atwood's Penelope has excellent command of language but is also fully aware of her social position as silent object in *The Penelopiad*: "I know it isn't me they're after ... It's only what comes with me – the royal connection, the pile of glittering

junk” (29). So “plain-Jane” (37) but clever and kind Penelope is “handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat...in a wrapping of gold” (39). Despite Penelope’s description of her marriage as an act of brutal objectification, she soon, surprisingly, starts to admire “polytropos” Odysseus’ wit and inexhaustible bag of tricks. He

could draw almost any listener into a collaboration, a little conspiracy of his own making...he had a wonderful voice as well, deep and sonorous...everyone had a hidden door, which was the way into the heart, and it was a point of honour with him to be able to find the handles to those doors...he who could master the hearts of men and learn their secrets [could control] the thread of his own destiny (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 58).

Odysseus certainly finds the key to fifteen-year-old Penelope’s heart and with his wonderful verbal dexterity he proves to be a surprisingly excellent match for Penelope, despite the seemingly bleak prospects of an arranged marriage. Odysseus convinces Penelope to go with him to Ithaca, against her father’s wishes, a courageous adventure for a young woman whose body has been mostly confined in the domestic space of her father’s palace all her life. A woman’s body has always been identified with space, as Kristeva argues in ‘Women’s Time’: “and indeed, when evoking the name and destiny of woman, one thinks more of the space generating and forming the human species than of time, becoming or history” (190). Space and nature are directly related to a woman’s biological reproductive capacities. Her womb provides the nourishing space where new life begins. Kristeva associates only two types of temporality with a woman: cyclical and monumental. Cyclical time is related to the female monthly menstruation or to the nine months of pregnancy, while monumental time is related to eternity, to Greek myths or myths of Christianity, which, frozen in time, are controlling women with stifling gender stereotypes. Both of these types of temporality confirm the passive female corporeality. On the other hand linear time, time as departure, progression and achievement, time as history, is only related to man. His active body and his patriarchal language operate in the

public realm and shape culture. Space, time and marginalised voices, once written out of myth, are preoccupations central to Atwood's work and it is for this reason that *The Penelopiad*, although published twenty six years after Kristeva's article, is amenable to readings that utilize Kristeva's theory. Although Penelope's decision to leave her father's palace represents an unusual twist for a princess of ancient Greece, in Ithaca her body is again confined in domestic space, Odysseus' palace. Soon after her arrival in Ithaca Eurycleia, Odysseus' aged nurse points out to Penelope: " 'We'll have to fatten you up ... so you can have a nice, big son for Odysseus! That's your job, just leave everything else to me' " (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 63). Therefore Atwood's Penelope becomes part of Kristeva's cyclical time, by going through nine months of pregnancy and providing the kingdom of Ithaca with an heir, like any dutiful young queen.

Penelope's weaving room as female space is identified with her body and her sexuality: "I spent whole days in my room ... in the women's quarters" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 109). This is the room where Penelope conceives of the plan to start weaving and un-weaving her father-in-law's shroud, so that she can remain in charge of her own fate despite the suitors' destructive plans: "*When's the old bitch going to make up her mind?...What's to stop... us from ... grabbing the old cow and making off with her?*" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 105-6, emphasis in original). Atwood's Penelope does not only use the silent language of weaving though but also her own narrative to unravel her story. The notion of the feminine speaking and feminine writing ("l'écriture féminine", a term coined by Hélène Cixous, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' [1976]), is a thorny issue for Kristeva. In 'Women's Time' Kristeva discusses the second generation of post-1968 feminists, who, "in France particularly", struggle to keep the male and female identity separate and refuse

to allow women to add themselves to linear history. According to Kristeva, these feminists argue that

whatever is in language is of the order to strict resignation, of understanding, of logic, and is male... On the other hand, that which in language, according to the same feminists, is feminine, is whatever has to do with the imprecise, with the whisper, with impulses, perhaps with primary processes (*Women Analyze Women* 134).

What Kristeva is referring to here is what she calls the semiotic (pre-oedipal) elements within the symbolic (oedipal) phase/language, which are unruly, excessive, and have the power to transgress the symbolic order. The semiotic realm of signification proceeds Jacques Lacan's mirror stage and refers to the time when the infant experiences a blissful, symbiotic union with the maternal body. The semiotic is, in Kristeva's words, "detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes and sentences" ('From One Identity to an Other', 133), in other words to syntax and vocabulary. We, as human beings, are genetically equipped with semiotic elements that will eventually lead to language acquisition. The presence of the semiotic in the symbolic means that, for Kristeva, language is always heterogeneous. What Kristeva objects to is the exclusive use of the semiotic elements within language by women, because the semiotic is connected to the maternal body, to instincts, drives and rhythms, which challenge the structure of the existing language of the symbolic and lead to what Kristeva calls poetic language, which delights by playfully stretching meanings, bodies and texts. However, the semiotic is not only connected to the maternal body but also to the Freudian unconscious; therefore both men and women can have access to it. According to Freud, two primary processes take place in the unconscious, "*displacement* and *condensation*", or, as they were later renamed by linguists, "*metonymy* and *metaphor*" (Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' 111, emphasis in original.). In the

light of psychoanalysis, metaphor, and metonymy are two figures of speech that allow the unconscious, repressed material to make its way into consciousness through dreams, jokes and slips of the tongue. Unlike Lacan, who argues that figures of speech like metaphor and metonymy indicate that the unconscious is structured like a language, Kristeva points out that the unconscious, like the semiotic, is heterogeneous to language and can either enrich the symbolic with its musicality (poetic language) or destroy it. This is why Kristeva advises that a return to the symbolic use of language is necessary otherwise, the human subject, male or female, will lead themselves to psychosis, even suicide. In *The Penelopiad*, both Penelope and the maids burst out on the page, like the suppressed unconscious/semiotic long enclosed in the consciousness/symbolic of Homer's epic.

Women desire to disassociate themselves from "the socio-symbolic contract" that is, in Kristeva's words, "a sacrificial contract" ('Women's Time' 200), since it forces them to separate their body from their child's and remain in the semiotic realm, whilst they encourage their child's introduction to the symbolic language and socialization under the stern eye of the law of the father. By using both the semiotic elements of the symbolic language and the symbolic language itself, women can express themselves in a much more fulfilling and enriching way, both for themselves and for society. Since Kristeva's linear time is also associated with language, this creative use of the semiotic and the symbolic by women can facilitate their more seamless entry and incorporation into linear time. Atwood's Penelope uses Kristeva's poetic language in order to narrate her side of the famous epic story, especially in the chapters entitled 'The Suitors Stuff Their Faces', 'Yelp of Joy', 'Slandorous Gossip' and 'Odysseus and Telemachus Snuff the Maids.' In

each of these chapters, she drops the high diction of the epic and has fun with colloquial language.

Homer's Penelope though, who is not given the same freedom of speech, weaves instead, because it is simply one of her domestic functions as a woman. The domestic space, the "οἶκος", is connected to the female and there is great creative and economic value in the art of household weaving. But its most important function is that it allowed women to bring to life something outside the rules of patriarchy, their very own text of alterity made with their own "language". Bergren makes an interesting connection between this weaving and poetic language that defines Penelope as the co-author of *The Odyssey*:

in Greek culture, where women lack citizenship, where men play all the parts in drama, and from which no women's poetry remains except for fragments of Sappho...the woman's web would seem to be a "metaphorical speech," a silent substitute for (her lack of) verbal art...the "trickiness" of weaving [lies in] its uncanny ability to make meaning out of inarticulate matter, to make silent material speak. In this way, women's weaving is...a "writing" or graphic art, a silent material representation of audible, immaterial speech (72).

By using the metaphorical silent speech of weaving, Penelope creates her own story within her own female space that is interwoven into Homer's poetic language.

There is more to Penelope's weaving than silent language though; she is in command of time in two distinct ways as well, time that is usually related to masculinity, not femininity. By weaving at day and unweaving at night, she renders herself unavailable as a future bride and keeps the suitors waiting for three whole years. Therefore she maintains her status as Odysseus' wife and freezes the passage of Kristeva's linear time, which is a dynamic historical and political movement forwards; as Atwood's Penelope states: "I set up a large piece of weaving on my loom, and said it was a shroud for my

father-in-law, Laertes, since it would be impious of me not to provide a costly winding sheet for him in the event that he should die” (112). Through this weaving, both Homer and Atwood’s Penelope play a clever and calculated game with space (weaving room/bedroom) and time (day/night) in order to remain the married queen of Ithaca. As Peggy Kamuf explains, there is “[n]o clever play of words but rather a spatial and temporal shift between the two centers of her woman’s life preserves Penelope’s indecision” (6). Kamuf argues that Penelope manages to remain indecisive about a new husband, by walking through the secret passage that connects her bedchamber with her weaving room and unweaving her embroidery all night, when the suitors cannot imagine her body anywhere else but in her bed. Kamuf also imagines Penelope like a spider, watching the suitors “fly into the web she has stretched across the entrance to the room in which she sits weaving” because they “remain strangers to a woman’s work which is never done” (6) and are fooled by their eagerness to believe Penelope will soon be finishing her embroidery. However, in contrast to Kamuf’s use of simile, Atwood’s Penelope does not think of her weaving as a “web”: “[i]f the shroud was a web, then I was the spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies: on the contrary, I’d ... been trying to avoid entanglement myself” (119). Barbara Clayton’s explanation about the possible connection between Penelope and Arachne is useful here: “[i]f Arachne, or the weaving spider, appears as a significant subtext in Penelope’s literary tradition, it is because the fragility of her web compels her to endlessly weave and reweave, and because the spider, like Penelope, is associated with a domestic...space” (86). In this domestic space Penelope is trying to control her own fate, by using weaving as one of the few tools patriarchy has made available to her.

The other tool that Penelope cunningly uses is the maids, in order to she maintain control over space and time until Odysseus returns. The two rooms of the palace which are traditionally defined as domestic spaces are the kitchen and the bedroom. Massey argues that the “identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” and challenges “the argument” about “the dichotomous characterization of space and time” which “may both reflect and be part of the constitution of...the masculinity and femininity of the sexist society in which we live” (*Space, Place and Gender* 5, 259). Massey explains that the place which consists of space and time should not be defined by sterile dualisms, such as neutral and passive and vital and active, or be subjected to gender essentialisms. This idea lends itself nicely to Penelope who, as I mentioned before, renders the space of her bedroom/weaving room open and porous to serve her purposes. However, the kitchen is invaded by the suitors who eat and drink all day, crippling Penelope’s access to a domestic space that should have been hers to command, especially since she is not given any access to the public realm in return. It is not gender but class though that turns the kitchen into an accessible space for Penelope once more. She sends her twelve most beautiful maids to spy on the suitors:

The maids were my sources of information...they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angles, they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them... no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 30).

For all their powerlessness as objects of patriarchal exchange in *The Odyssey*, the whole palace represents malleable and accessible space for the maids. Penelope wants her husband back, so she seduces the suitors with her beauty and delays the moment of her final decision, while weaving and unweaving Laertes’ shroud. However, without the twelve maids’ freedom to move anywhere within the domestic space, Penelope would not

have succeeded in keeping the suitors half-drunk idiots, so they are weakened as warriors and become easier prey for Odysseus.

In Homer's epic, Penelope is alone in her brave task of unweaving, until she is betrayed by one of her maids, possibly Melantho. Then Penelope is forced to finish the shroud and organize the bow contest in order to choose a husband amongst the suitors. The maids are briefly mentioned in the last books of the epic, and their swift sentence to death by Odysseus and brutal execution by Telemachus is an aspect of the plot that is marginalized in Homer's version in the process of Odysseus' regaining of power as the king of Ithaca. However, Atwood is deeply disturbed by their casual hanging: "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" ('Introduction', *Penelopiad* xv). Here the twelve maids are the youngest, prettiest and most faithful servants to Penelope, especially instructed by her to be pleasant to the suitors in order to spy on their secrets and report back to her. They even help her with her unweaving at night, creating a delightful atmosphere of sisterhood that pokes a finger in the eye of patriarchy and eradicates the class system, albeit briefly: "these nights had a touch of festivity about them...Melantho ... smuggled in treats for us ... – figs in season, bread dipped in honeycomb, heated wine in winter. We told stories...we made jokes. We were almost like sisters" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 114). The use of the word "almost" is very important, as it demonstrates the unequal power dynamic between Penelope and the maids. They may give the impression of sisterhood when they all unweave the shroud at night, but Penelope does not hesitate to throw the maids as baits to the suitors' lustful and violent tempers in order to gather valuable information. In *The Penelopiad* sisterhood is weak and when danger becomes real, Penelope cloaks herself with the safety of her class and does little to protect the maids from Odysseus' unjustified wrath.

The Homeric narrative is ambiguous about the nature of the maids' sexual relation with the suitors. Although in book twenty Odysseus, in the disguise of a beggar, calls them "the Suitors' regular mistresses" and has to suppress the desire to "leap up and put them all to death" (Homer 266), in book twenty-two, he accuses the Suitors of raping "my maids" (Homer 289). The fact remains that the maids of a palace were sexually available not only to the king and his immediate family – in this case Odysseus, Laertes and Telemachus – but also to all the male guests of the king, which the maids clearly demonstrate in Atwood's version:

In dreams we all are beautiful
 In glossy crimson dresses;
 We sleep with every man we love,
 We shower them with kisses...

 But then the morning wakes us up;
 Once more we toil and slave,
 And hoist our skirts at their command
 For every prick and knave (126).

Submitting to the suitors' sexual advances could have been an act of survival on the part of the maids, and therefore it is impossible to tell who were raped and who slept with the suitors as an act of free will. Their rape by the suitors is not, however, as Penelope admits later, what "told against them...in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 181). This means Odysseus' permission, as king of Ithaca. Through their collective "we", the maids are witty and energetic satirists of the dominant order, which sacrificed their bodies and normalized their hanging.

The maids' story continues in book nineteen, which contains the complex narrative regarding Penelope's interview with Odysseus dressed as a beggar and pretending to be a traveler from Crete. Penelope's knowledge or ignorance of her husband's true identity has

attracted different critical interpretations. According to Ingrid E. Holmberg, “Penelope is ignorant of the presence of Odysseus, while Odysseus watches her and places an interpretation on her actions, a controlling position which he will maintain until the end of the epic” (115), whilst John Winkler argues that “everything she says and does in Book 19 is guided by her thought that the beggar might be...Odysseus” (143). Atwood’s Penelope, however, is certain that the beggar is Odysseus:

if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognize him: it’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness... The songs claim that the arrival of Odysseus and my decision to set the test of the bow and axes coincided by accident...Now you’ve heard the plain truth...I knew that the beggar was Odysseus...I set the whole thing up on purpose (137, 139).

Atwood’s Penelope demonstrates her shrewdness by seemingly abiding to gender stereotypes and allowing Odysseus to think that he outwitted her, whilst he unknowingly plays part in her plan to kill the suitors. The presence of the maids on stage when she converses with the disguised Odysseus is perhaps Homer’s plotting device to add tension to the scene: husband and wife must be careful during their dialogue because any information could be transferred to the suitors by the maids. This is why both Atwood and Homer’s Penelope tests Odysseus by narrating her dream about her beautiful pet geese and a great eagle who suddenly appears, kills them all and then speaks to her with a human voice: “ [t]ake heart...daughter of... Icarus...The geese were your Suitors, and I that was the eagle am now your husband home again and ready to inflict a gruesome fate on every man among them’ ” (Homer 263). The beggar/ Odysseus confirms that such a dream will come true.

However, the text here invites a number of interpretations again. If the suitors are indeed Homeric Penelope’s pet geese, she boldly states that she loves watching them and weeps

bitter tears after the eagle kills them. The feminist interpretation is perhaps that a young and active Penelope allows her body sexual pleasure whilst her husband, gone for the best part of twenty years, does exactly the same. Atwood's maids confirm this interpretation; a maid dressed as Penelope and another dressed as Eurycleia share this dramatic dialogue:

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 with the
 bedding!
 And now there's ample matter for –
 beheading! (*Penelopiad* 149).

According to the maids, the weaving room and the bedroom as material spaces exceed their traditional function of performing a socially acceptable female craft and acquiring repose, both acts related to the myth of Penelope as the archetypal faithful wife. The maids state that Penelope conducted numerous sexual affairs with the suitors in her bedroom, when she pretended to unweave the shroud at night. Atwood's Penelope offers a subtler version of events by admitting that she did enjoy the suitors' "moronic speeches about my ravishing beauty and my excellence and wisdom ... I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that" (104-105). Thinking and doing are two separate things though, and in any case Atwood's Penelope does not mourn for the suitors in her dream: "[t]he geese were my twelve maids, as I was soon to learn to my unending sorrow" (140).

In Homer Melanthe is very rude to Odysseus and scolded by Penelope, whilst in Atwood Penelope promises “to interpose myself...and to tell Odysseus that the girls had been acting under my direction” (138); but she never keeps her promise, and her inactivity effectively becomes the maids’ death sentence. In the end the maids have to be killed, because in the patriarchal kingdom of Ithaca somebody needs to pay for Penelope’s lustful thoughts, as the maids state in their dramatization of Penelope’s story:

Eurocleia: Played by a Maid:

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

.....

Penelope:

And now, dear Nurse, the fat is in the fire –
He’ll chop me up for tending my desire!

.....

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!
(Atwood, *Penelopiad*, 148)

The issue of class enters the narrative and, as Lillian Doherty explains, “the epic invites members of the implied audience to identify with the privileged characters and to ignore the similarities between these and the subordinate characters used as ‘limiting cases’ ” (159) or, in the case of the maids, as scapegoats. According to Angela Carter, birth, sex, reproduction and death are all socially determined; when it comes to reproduction, “rich women are more in control...than poor women and so may actually enjoy fucking and childbirth, when poor women might find both atrocious simply because they are poor and cannot afford comfort, privacy and paid help” (12). This is true for the maids’ impoverished mothers and reflects why the maids themselves, as servants/slaves and females occupy the very bottom of the social pyramid in patriarchal Greece. Using the

strong, angry voice that Atwood has granted them, they contrast their births to the birth of the spoilt royal prince and their future killer, Telemachus:

For his birth was longed-for and feasted, as
 our births were not.
 His mother presented a princeling. Our
 various mothers
 Spawned merely, lambled, farrowed, littered

 hatched out their clutch.
 We were animal young, to be disposed of at
 will,
 Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used,
 discarded when bloomless (*Penelopiad* 67).

The brutal execution of their expendable female bodies absorbs Odysseus' wrath caused by Penelope's understandable lust for the suitors:

Blame it on the slaves!
 The toys of rogues and knaves!
 Let them dangle, let them strangle -
 Blame it on the slaves!

Blame it on the sluts!
 Those proxy little scuts!
 We've got the dirt on every skirt -
 Blame it on the sluts! (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 152).

The use of the obscene word is, as Kristeva argues, a feature of poetic language: "the obscene word mobilizes the signifying resources of the subject, permitting it to cross through the membrane of meaning where consciousness holds it, connecting it to gestuality, kinesthesia, the drives' body" ('From One Identity to an Other' 143). The movement from the semiotic/unconscious, to the symbolic/conscious, is once again reflected on the maids' transgressive speech, which undermines patriarchal power and authority.

Atwood supports the interpretation of the maids' being used as sacrificial victims for Penelope's lust for the suitors, by presenting Penelope as the potential receiver of Odysseus' brutality in case of her infidelity. This is a dialogue about their famous marital bed before Odysseus leaves for Troy:

one post...was whittled from an olive tree that had its roots still in the ground...This bedpost of his was a great secret ... If the word got around about his post ... he said...he would be very cross indeed, and he would ... chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the roof beam.

I pretended to be frightened, and said I would never, never think of betraying his big post.

Actually, I really was frightened (*Penelopiad* 73-4).

The bedroom is not only a space for rest and sexual communion but also for potential violence and death. Interestingly enough, being chopped into pieces by a sword is the punishment that Odysseus initially orders Telemachus to perform on the maids, so this is the second instance where the class difference between Penelope and the maids seemingly disappears.

In book twenty-three of *The Odyssey* however, Penelope uses the marital bed as a final test for her husband by claiming that it can be moved outside her bedroom, so that the "stranger" can spend the night on it alone. When Odysseus accuses her of taking a lover who has "cut the tree-trunk through and moved it" and therefore gives her "infallible proof" (Homer 306) of his identity, she sheds tears of joy and takes him in her arms.

Penelope's delayed official recognition of her husband is justified by her unwillingness to be tricked by a god posing as human, like her cousin Helen:

Helen of Argos, born of Zeus, would never have slept in a foreign lover's arms had she known that her countrymen would go to war to fetch her back...It was the god who drove her to do this shameful deed, though not until that moment had her heart contemplated that

fatal madness (Homer 306).

By comparing her fate to Helen's without showing any anger or judgment towards her beautiful cousin's choice to elope with the Trojan prince Paris, Penelope throws the narrative into confusion. She questions the misogynist patriarchal absolutes about a "good/faithful" and a "bad/unfaithful" wife, indicating once more that Homer is perhaps more willing to write past gender stereotypes than a superficial reading of *The Odyssey* might give him credit for. Atwood's Penelope though, is not as forgiving towards Helen: "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... she was poison on legs" (*Penelopiad* 76, 79). Atwood's Penelope declares that Helen abandoned her husband Menelaus not because a god fooled her, but because she followed her own desire and therefore caused the death of thousands of Greeks. As I mentioned before, sisterhood is a difficult issue not just in *The Penelopiad* but all through Atwood's work, with perhaps the exception of Toni, Roz and Charis in *The Robber Bride* (1993) and various female characters who seem to truly care for each other in Atwood's speculative novels *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). Atwood is not convinced by Homeric Penelope's attempts to blame Helen's unfaithfulness on a god or goddess, and since Atwood grants Penelope the voice to narrate her story, it stands to reason that Penelope will not forgive the woman who left her an uncertain widow for twenty years. The use of rough, subversive language by Atwood's Penelope provides a sharp contrast to the elevated Homeric style and resembles the maids' disobedient language when they playfully dramatize Penelope's infidelity:

Word has it that Penelope the Prissy
Was – when it came to sex – no shrinking
sissy!

Some said with Amphinomous she was sleeping.
Masking her lust with gales of moans and
weeping (*Penelopiad* 147)

Such shared subversive and liberating use of language, with its common use of humor and slightly malicious wit, neutralizes for the third time Homeric class distinctions between Penelope and the maids. In the end, however, both in Homer and Atwood's narratives the class divide proves victorious and the maids' sacrifice ensures Penelope's survival.

Homer's description of the couple's reunion is tender and lyrical: "he wept as he held his dear and loyal wife in his arms... It was bliss... for Penelope to see her husband once again. Her white arms around his neck never quite let go" (Homer 305). Atwood offers a more realistic picture of the couple, whose marriage has always been blessed by "homophrosyne", like-mindedness:

he told me how much...he'd been filled with longing for me even
when enfolded in the white arms of goddesses; and I told him...how
I would never have...thought of betraying his...bed...by sleeping in
it with any other man. The two of us were...proficient and shameless
liars...It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.
But we did.
Or so we told each other (*Penelopiad* 173).

The issue of time as an ageing process enters this unromantic mutual confession and seals it with credibility; Penelope admits that their bodies have aged: "[w]e're not spring chickens any more," and Odysseus responds "[t]hat which we are, we are" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 172). Although it is normally Odysseus who represents time, Penelope's shrewd strategies, as mentioned before, also manipulate time to her advantage. It stands almost still in Ithaca during the three years when the suitors take over the palace, but now that Odysseus is back the clocks are ticking again. Wallace Stevens offers a

moving but realistic description of Penelope's feelings about the progression of time on their faces and bodies:

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined...
But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together...

It was Ulysses and it was not (520-21).

Although Penelope is also the same but not the same to Odysseus, their love-making is tender and delightful. The question concerning her future position in the social structure of Ithaca is open-ended, maybe because the anticipation of Odysseus' arrival is much more important. Atwood's Penelope informs the reader that "[n]o sooner had Odysseus returned than he left again. He said that... he'd have to go adventuring again" (*Penelopiad* 173). Now that Odysseus is gone again, will Penelope's body be identified with the inside of the palace, but not with the herds and the harvest of Ithaca which she used to manage like a king? Atwood does not offer a clear answer, but in *The Odyssey*, Telemachus is assertive with his own authority over his mother. Before the famous bow contest, he orders Penelope to leave the main hall of the palace, which is considered male space, and withdraw to her own space: "So go to your quarters now and attend to... the loom and the spindle... The bow is the men's concern, and mine above all; for I am master in this house" (Homer 285). These words foreshadow that it will be Telemachus and not Penelope, who will become the king of Ithaca when Odysseus leaves again; by ruling the island/space Telemachus will make his own history. However, this interpretation is the product of a patriarchal society and Penelope in both Homer and Atwood's version of the story refuses to be victimized by patriarchy. Given the shrewdness, wisdom and ability to use poetic language/weaving to create her own story that both Homer and Atwood's Penelope has demonstrated, one could deduce that she

would aim to add herself to Kristeva's linear time, time as progression and history, to aid Telemachus as the queen mother and be part of both the domestic environment and of the city council. It is up to the reader to decide whether Penelope will succeed in remaining a strong and powerful woman, after Odysseus goes traveling again and Telemachus becomes the king of Ithaca.

Atwood's Penelope wants to spend eternity with Odysseus in Hades' asphodel fields but the maids will not allow that: "[h]e sees them in the distance, heading our way ... They make him want to be anywhere and anyone else" (*Penelopiad* 189). The underworld represents the space which can be defined as what Massey calls "the other which lies beyond", a metaphysical but at the same time very material place because of "the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond' " (*Space, Gender and Identity*, 5). What Massey means here is that the "spatial is socially constructed" (*Space, Gender and Identity*, 264) and "the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself...[but] stretch beyond – the global as part of...the local, the outside as part of the inside" (*Space, Gender and Identity*, 5). According to Greek mythology the space of the physical world stretches to another place which is the underworld, where social relations continue since the underworld is the receptacle of the souls' social lives, including their traumas and memories which they cannot suppress, unless they drink from the river Lethe and get reborn, as Odysseus does many times. This is the space where all dualisms based on class, gender and space/time are rendered non-existent. The nameless maids, murdered and denied any power of speech, are all powerful and vengeful in Atwood's underworld. They challenge the double sexual standards of ancient Greece, which allow Odysseus' adulteries, whilst their sexual relations deserve the punishment of death:

with every goddess, queen, and bitch
 from there to here
 you scratched your itch

we did much less
 than what you did
 you judged us bad
 you had the spear
 you had the word
 at your command (*Penelopiad* 5-6).

The “spear” and the “word” are metonymies for patriarchy, both related to men and to their potential for violence/war and language, which allows them to impose their power and superiority. However, in the underworld, the maids also have access to language and use their sharp, satirical wit to communicate through space and time the message that they will always follow and punish Odysseus, like the Erinyes (Furies) of Greek mythology. The maids have the last laugh and the joke is on Odysseus: “[y]ou should have prayed for our forgiveness... Yoo hoo ... Mr Godlike, Mr Judge!... Here we are, walking behind you... close as a kiss ... We’re the servant girls... We’re here to... serve you right. We’ll never leave you, we’ll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 192-3). Massey argues that when we accept the potentiality of space as unfixed, multiple and expanding beyond a single place because of the social relations invested in space, the “possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities” (*Space, Gender and Identity*, 5), in other words, to Kristeva’s cyclical/monumental time, is challenged. However, time in the underworld is not linear, which means historical and dynamic, but it is instead what Kristeva defines as cyclical/monumental, which means repetitive and eternal. Whilst when humans are alive cyclical time seems more invested with the feminine, in the underworld it is applied to both men and women, free from gender essentialisms.

Rita Felski explores the ideas behind 'Women's Time' twenty one years after the publication of Kristeva's article and applies them to the relationship men and women have with temporality at the end of the twentieth century. Felski comes to the conclusion that "those who believe that linear time is masculine and cyclical time feminine usually point to the dramatic contrast between the grand narratives of male historical time and the repetitive everyday time of women. If, however, the daily lives of women are compared to the daily lives of men, the contrast is much more muted" (20), since both male and female lives are characterized by routine and repetition. Both male and female bodies function according to a repetitive rhythm of sleep, food and expulsion of natural waste. On the other hand, women as well as men are passionate about being part of what Felski defines as "large-scale narratives of time" such as "national progress, racial uplift, women's growing freedom" (21). Therefore Felski argues that "all experience of time is multi-leveled, complex and heterogeneous. Consequently, it is hard to argue for a distinctive 'women's time' without oversimplifying the links between gender and temporality" (22). This is similar to Kristeva's conclusion when she advises that all men and women should be part of both linear and cyclical/monumental time by using both semiotic and symbolic language free from any conventionalities of gender. This is what Penelope achieves at the end of *The Penelopiad*.

Conclusion

Homer's Penelope is far more complex than the stereotypically imagined loyal wife to a famous mythical hero Odysseus, who silently weaves her own story within Homer's narrative. Atwood acknowledges and explores this fact, but also shrewdly reconstructs the parts of the old, established myth of Penelope, lifting it out of its patriarchal context and

renegotiating the social positions of male and female, time and space, dynamic and static. Gina Wisker defines the “reclamation and redefinition of myths, symbols, legends” as “liberating and exciting and usually also amusing” because “[i]t enables us to read and construct a different subject position ... the laughter which sweeps away all the old formations, takes them apart and rewrites them in language which seizes different values...enables a reclamation of the body” (108-9). Atwood’s Penelope reclaims her body by using her weaving as language, like her ancient predecessor, but also by rewriting the story of *The Odyssey* with her own autobiographical narrative, without restricting her body in space, or excluding it from linear time. At the end of the novel Atwood’s Penelope and her maids no longer have a body to reclaim, since they narrate their stories as spirits from Hades; but their sharp, ironic voices offer alternative realities which include the re-positioning of their bodies in space and time and shake the foundations of the patriarchal Greek society. Both Kristeva and Massey’s theory advises against a renegotiation of terms within the old dualism of space-time, therefore a third position should be possible, a position that transcends such dualisms and offers both women and men what Kristeva calls “a signifying space, a both corporeal and desiring mental space” in order to be able “to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name...the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.” (‘Women’s Time’ 209, 207). Although Kristeva refers to the use of such a liberating space by women here, she makes it clear that it is both available to men and women to make, in their everyday lives, what literature does as an artistic expression, “a game, a space of fantasy and pleasure, out of the abstract and frustrating order of social signs, the words of everyday communication” (‘Women’s Time’ 207). Space is temporal, time is spatial and they are both in a constant state of flux.

Notes

¹ Mihoko Suzuki discusses how Penelope from the underworld revises *The Odyssey* to include her remorse and responsibility for the death of the maids (263-78), whilst Coral Ann Howells develops Atwood's arguments "about legendary women and myths of femininity, primarily in relation to *The Penelopiad*" but also with references to the other female mythical figures (58). Earl G. Ingersoll explores the idea of *The Penelopiad* "as Atwood's pastiche of tragic drama" (113), whilst Hilde Staels demonstrates how the use of parody and burlesque travesty aims "at liberating the protagonists from the boundaries and limitations of the ancient epic story world" (101). Susanne Jung explores the poetic literary genres employed in *The Penelopiad* (41-62), whilst Kifah Ali Al Omari and Hala Abdel Razzaq A. Jum'ah employ Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia to read Atwood's novel, placing emphasis on "the existence of different meanings within the same language due to the dialogic nature of language" (2555).

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