

“A Chorus Line”:
Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* at the Crossroads
of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres*

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“Don’t ask for the true story,” the speaker of Margaret Atwood’s 1981 poem “True Stories” implores; “why do you need it? / It’s not what I set out with / or what I carry. / [...] The true story lies / among the other stories, / [...] The true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue / [...] Don’t ever / ask for the true story.” This poem might very well serve as a motto for Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Penelopiad*, which features many stories, both “vicious” and “multiple” and also “untrue.” *The Penelopiad* (2005) could be described as an attempt to depict one such “true story” lying “among the other stories,” in more ways than one, not just the story as seen by one character and seen by another character, but also the story as told in prose and in verse.

In her novel, Atwood artfully employs a mix of narrative, poetic and dramatic styles. While the main narrative—a retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* by Penelope—comes along as a straightforward narrative in the vein of Christa Wolf’s *Kassandra*, Atwood intersperses Penelope’s tale with lyrical segments, giving voice to the twelve maids killed by Telemachus on Odysseus’ return to Ithaca. Both ancient Greek chorus and modern musical number, these lyrical interludes employ a range of poetic genres, from nursery rhyme to sea shanty to ballad and idyll, thus giving the maids voice as a collective. Further interludes have them take on singular roles in, variously, a courtroom drama and an anthropology lecture.

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This paper is going to investigate the various forms and functions of Atwood's poetic insertions into her narrative text.¹ Incidentally, Atwood's *Penelopiad* is quite literally situated at a crossroads of genres, as Atwood herself turned her novel into a play. Differences between the novel and play version of *The Penelopiad* as regards the lyrical interludes will therefore also be discussed. I will argue that the interludes serve as a performative enactment of the silenced female voices of the *Odyssey*. They may furthermore serve as a pointer, an invitation extended to the reader to go in search of silenced voices haunting other texts of the Western literary canon.

A Line of Echoes

Since the time of its inception, Homer's *Odyssey* has inspired many rewritings.² The most prominent among them have made Odysseus, the epic's protagonist, the centre of their work. In his seminal study *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*, W. B. Stanford identifies the complexity of the epic's protagonist with regard to his "character and exploits" as the main reason for Odysseus' enduring popularity with subsequent writers (7). Later critics, such as Edith Hall in *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey*, extend Stanford's argument by pointing towards a whole cast of characters that might attract future readers' and writers' attention, stating that "one reason for the poem's enduring popularity must be that its personnel is so varied that every ancient or modern listener, of any age, sex or status, seaman or servant, will have found someone with whom to identify" (4).³

Margaret Atwood's rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* is then, in her own words, "an echo of an echo of an echo" (*Penelopiad: The Play* v).⁴ *The Penelopiad* was originally commissioned as a novel, as part of the Canongate Myths Series which saw a number of well-known authors rewrite traditional myths (Atwood, "The Myths Series" 58). Two years after the publication of the novel, *The Penelopiad: The Play* premiered in July 2007 at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in

Stratford-upon-Avon, a co-production with Canada’s National Arts Center, and the play later transferred to Canada as well.⁵ For her portrayal of Penelope, Margaret Atwood drew on both the *Odyssey* and other mythological sources of Greek antiquity (cf. *Penelopiad* 197-98).⁶ The novel consists of two intertwined narratives: in the main narrative, Penelope, speaking from the Underworld, relates her life from birth to the end of the Trojan War and, finally, Odysseus’ return to Ithaca. Both her own and her husband Odysseus’ afterlife in the Greek Underworld are also described. This main narrative, a prose monologue, or as Penelope herself has it, a “tale” (*Penelopiad* 4), is shadowed by the narrative of the maids, who relate their side of the story in lyrical segments interspersed throughout the main narrative. The maids speak mostly as one collective voice, mostly in verse.

Coral Ann Howells describes “Atwood’s project” as a retelling of “*The Odyssey* as ‘herstory’ for modern readers” (“‘We can’t help’” 59). Significantly, “Atwood shifts the focus of *The Odyssey* away from grand narratives of war, relocating it in the micronarratives of women at home” (63). Susanna Braund notes that, by presenting the maids’ story prominently alongside Penelope’s story, Atwood “reminds us that the stories of myth are not in the least concerned about the ordinary people who make the lives of the kings and heroes possible and [...] challenges us to reassess the consequences of the identifications we make when we read modern retellings of ancient myth” (203).

This is how Atwood herself describes her reasoning behind the unusual structural features of her novel: “The chorus of Maids is in part a tribute to the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy, in which lowly characters comment on the main action, and also to the satyr plays that accompanied tragedies, in which comic actors made fun of them. The Maids in *The Penelopiad* do such things, but also they’re angry, as they still feel they have been wrongfully hanged” (*Penelopiad: The Play* vi).⁷ This explains very well the overall structure of the novel, which features alternating chapters of Penelope’s and the maids’ stories, much like in Greek tragedy episodes would alternate with choral

dance segments. According to Brockett and Hildy, the functions of the chorus in Greek drama include among other things: setting “the mood for the play,” adding “dynamic energy,” “giving advice” to the characters or even serving as an “antagonist,” but also, setting up an “ethical [...] framework” of the events portrayed in the main action (19-20). I would argue that especially the last one applies strongly for Atwood’s novel.⁸

So who are the twelve maids who make up this chorus in Atwood’s novel? *The Penelopiad* features two epigraphs, excerpts from the *Odyssey* pertaining to Penelope and the maids. The following is the one pertaining to the maids (*Penelopiad* xiii):

... he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare ... so the women’s heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (*The Odyssey*, Book 22, 470-73)

In her novel, Atwood prefaces all the chapters containing the maids’ narrative with the chapter heading “The Chorus Line,” which is then followed by the title of each individual chapter. I take this to be an allusion to another genre evoked by Atwood here: that of modern-day musical theatre; so the maids literally appear as chorus line girls dancing and singing in the chorus line segments of Atwood’s novel. This may also be an allusion to the 1975 musical *A Chorus Line* by Marvin Hamlisch which turns the chorus line into protagonists, foregrounding what is usually backgrounded in musical theatre: the musical numbers containing dance and choral song.⁹ And, indeed, many of the poetic forms used here by Atwood happen to be songs: the nursery rhyme, the popular tune, the sea shanty, the ballad, the love song. (Note, however, that this practice of referring to the chorus as the chorus line is not retained in the play, where the song or scene headings only feature the occasional “chorus” in front of the individual songs or scenes.) Like Hamlisch’s musical, Atwood’s novel and

play foreground previously neglected characters and storylines: it is Penelope and the maids-as-chorus-line who take centre stage in this particular rewriting of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Forms and Functions of the Lyrical Interludes

Before taking a closer look at the forms and functions of the poetic insertions in Atwood’s prose narrative, I would like to give an overview of the lyrical segments in both novel and play. As can be seen from the following table, the lyrical segments of the novel are mostly integrated into the various scenes of the play. Some segments constitute whole scenes of the play; others are excluded from the final text of the play. Two additional lyrical segments are added to the play text:

Novel ¹⁰	Play
The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme	incorporated in Scene 2
*Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids	incorporated in Scene 4
If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune	Scene 8
The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll	incorporated in Scene 10
The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty	incorporated in Scenes 15 and 26
Dreamboats, A Ballad	Scene 22
The Perils of Penelope, A Drama	-
*An Anthropology Lecture	-
*The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids	** (partly incorporated in Scene 30)
*We’re Walking Behind You, A Love Song	-
Envoi	incorporated in Scene 32
	new: untitled weaving song (Scene 19)
	new: untitled nursery rhyme (Scene 13)

(* printed in prose)

** the invocation of the furies from the trial, printed in prose in the novel, is retained in the play, but appears in the play printed as a free verse poem)

Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* is thus structurally and thematically multivoiced, a polylogue offering multiple perspectives. By choosing

to separate Penelope's first-person account from the account of the maids-as-chorus, the novel appears structurally with, on the one hand, an autodiegetic narrator (Penelope), and, on the other hand, the speaker/narrator of the interludes (the maids as chorus line). An integration of both voices into one (prose) narrative is withheld throughout the novel.

The reader first encounters the maids in chapter two, placed after the novel's opening chapter in which Penelope, speaking as her shadow self from the Underworld (*Penelopiad* 1), announces to the reader that she is now ready to tell the tale of her own life—"it's a low art: tale-telling" (3-4). The maids speak as one here.

The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme

we are the maids
the ones you killed
the ones you failed

we danced in air
our bare feet twitched
it was not fair

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

we scrubbed the blood
of our dead
paramours from floors, from chairs

from stairs, from doors,
we knelt in water
while you stared

at our bare feet
it was not fair
you licked our fear

it gave you pleasure
you raised your hand
you watched us fall

we danced on air
the ones you failed
the ones you killed (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 5-6)

The **rope-jumping rhyme** comes along as a deceptively simple iambic dimeter, with three lines to each stanza. And yet this poem is highly crafted. We find anaphora (multiple times: "the ones," and very emphatically: "you"), chiasmus ("from floors, from chairs / from stairs, from doors"), the odd rhyme ("bitch / itch"), and a striking enjambment ("dead / paramours," resulting in an emphasis on the adjective "dead"). Most striking of all, however, is the metaphor of the dying maids "dancing" at the end of another set of ropes, not the ropes used by seven-year-old girls, but the ones placed by Telemachus, noose-like, around the maids' necks in the novel's mythical intertext. Atwood takes the image of the maids' twitching feet straight out of the *Odyssey's* Book 22, and turns it into an extended dance metaphor: "For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long" (473). But who is the "you" here, the poem's addressee? Odysseus for sure, who "scratched [his] itch / with every goddess, queen and bitch" while the maids did "much less" in sleeping (for the most part against their will) with Penelope's suitors. But the maids address Penelope as well, who "failed" them by not coming clean with Odysseus in time about her role in instructing the maids to behave the way they did. Atwood is rewriting Homer here, giving more agency to Penelope in the story of her long wait for Odysseus' return. The dance metaphor is a grotesque one, and it is among other things this image, the image of the hanged maids, which compelled Margaret Atwood to set out on the task of rewriting this particular myth in the first place: "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids," she says

in the introduction to the novel (xxi). Indeed, in the dramatized version, the stage directions for the maids for this lyrical segment read: “*while jumping ropes or doing other rope tricks*” (*Penelopiad: The Play* 4).

In the **envoi** Atwood returns to the same kind of seemingly simple poetic form: three five-line stanzas containing iambic dimeter and using mostly rhyming couplets. “It was not fair,” the maids emphatically repeat, a direct quote from the rope-jumping rhyme from the novel’s beginning.

Envoi

we had no voice
 we had no name
 we had no choice
 we had one face
 one face the same

we took the blame
 it was not fair
 but now we’re here
 we’re all here too
 the same as you

and now we follow
 you, we find you
 now, we call
 to you to you
 too wit too woo
 too wit too woo
 too woo (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 195-96)

In simple, nursery rhyme-like verse the maids take their exit, “sprout[ing] feathers, and fly[ing] away as owls” (*Penelopiad* 196). Their transformation into birds of wisdom at the novel’s close allows for the possibility of release for the maids.¹¹ Telling their tale, presenting their side of the story, a shadow narrative to both the *Odyssey* and Penelope’s tale, might serve in this reading as a kind of redemption

for the maids, who have released not just their physical human form but also their negative affect, with the implied twenty-first century reader serving as witness to their trauma. The transformation of anger into art, into poetry and song, releases their negative affect and its hold over them.

However, in the play, the transformation of the maids into owls is withheld; the maids take their exit as their eternal chorus line selves, “*danc[ing] away in a line, with their ropes around their necks, singing*” (Atwood, *Penelopiad: The Play* 82). Thus, the ending of the play does not allow for such an affective closure. Here, the maids remain stuck in their chorus girl selves, following Odysseus and Penelope, and haunting the Underworld as angry, damaged spirits. When Penelope tries to address them in the play’s final scene, the stage directions read that the maids “*titter eerily, bat-like, and circle away from her*” (Atwood, *Penelopiad: The Play* 82). I read this performative gesture as a sign of trauma. The trace of what has happened to them still remains visible in their non-verbal utterances. The dance of the chorus girls turns into a grotesque mocking shadow of an entertaining dance of the Broadway musical chorus line.

“[B]ut now we’re here / we’re all here too / the same as you,” the maids intone. Death serves as the great equalizer, eliminating class differences between the maid servants and Odysseus and Penelope. Finally they are “the same as you,” their masters. But what has happened in between? What kind of story have the maids narrated in between? And to what kind of poetic forms have they made allusion, incorporating and ventriloquizing the master discourse of Western literary canon?¹²

Some of their commentary uses straightforward poetry and song, such as the popular tune, the sea shanty and the ballad. The **popular tune**, which is prefaced in the novel by the note “*As Performed by the Maids, with a Fiddle, an Accordion, and a Penny Whistle*” (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 51), uses simple four-line stanzas with dactyls, a tetrameter and rhyming couplets. The maids present the stanzas as soloists but are joined in the chorus by all the other maids. At the end the maids

all curtsy, and Melanthe of the Pretty Cheeks walks around, “*passing the hat*” (53).

First Maid:

If I was a princess, with silver and gold,
And loved by a hero, I'd never grow old:
Oh, if a young hero came a-marrying me,
I'd always be beautiful, happy, and free!

Chorus:

Then sail, my fine lady, on the billowing wave—
The water below is as dark as the grave,
And maybe you'll sink in your little blue boat—
It's hope, and hope only, that keeps us afloat.

Second Maid:

I fetch and I carry, I hear and obey,
It's Yes sir and No ma'am the whole bleeding day;
I smile and I nod with a tear in my eye,
I make the soft beds in which others do lie. [...] (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 51-52)

In the manner of street musicians or music hall singers, the maids describe their daily life at Odysseus' court while expressing their dreams of becoming princesses. It is all very much tongue in cheek, and yet there is a serious undertone to the maids' jesting.

The **ballad** follows a similar formal pattern, using the regular ballad metre: iambs and simple four line stanzas with alternating tetrameter and trimeter, and one rhyme per stanza. But the social criticism already present in both the rope-jumping rhyme and the popular tune is harsher now, as the fate of the maids at court has become much more dire: in Atwood's version of the *Odyssey*, it is Penelope who sets the twelve maids up to mingle with the suitors and spy on them; they are to be her “eyes and ears” among the suitors (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 114-15). While being a clever plan for Penelope, it also results in a number of the maids getting raped by the suitors; this is not prevented by Penelope herself. The maids relate their life as Penelope's spies thus:

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.

We are not chased around the hall
And tumbled in the dirt
By every dimwit nobleman
Who wants a slice of skirt.

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.

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. (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 125-26)

Only when asleep, so the maids relate, are they released from their bonds of servitude. Remarkably, the sea serves for them as a space of longing, standing in metaphorically for a place of freedom and happiness. This is in stark contrast to Odysseus’ own longing, throughout the *Odyssey*, to leave the sea behind and reach the shore of, preferably, his homeland Ithaca. Neither the popular tune nor the ballad feature stage directions in the play (presumably because both constitute stand-alone scenes), leaving the dramatization of the songs to the play’s director and movement director.

In the **sea shanty**, the maids take on the role of Odysseus’ sailors and present a summary of Homer’s *Odyssey*. What happened really to Odysseus during those long years between the end of the Trojan War and his eventual return to Ithaca? Penelope herself offers rumors; but

even after her death and speaking from the Underworld, she knows “only a few factoids I didn’t know before” (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 1). Thus the reader of at least this tale is left with nothing but an array of conflicting stories. This is what Penelope relates to the reader at one point, in prose:

Odysseus had been to the Land of the Dead to consult the spirits, said some. No, he’d merely spent the night in a gloomy old cave full of bats, said others. He’d made his men put wax in their ears, said one, while sailing past the alluring Sirens—half-bird, half-woman—who enticed men to their island and then ate them, though he’d tied himself to the mast so he could listen to their irresistible singing without jumping overboard. No, said another, it was a high-class Sicilian knocking shop—the courtesans there were known for their musical talents and their fancy feathered outfits.
(Atwood, *Penelopiad* 91)

The reader is offered a myriad of stories, theories, points of view of what might have happened, but knowledge of the “truth” of what happened is forever deferred. Or, looking at it in light of the poem quoted at the beginning of my paper, it is the sum of all the stories that constitutes “the truth.” Both the narrative and the shadow narratives, the line of echoes, coexist.

The maids present to the reader the “official” version, as laid down in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Their telling takes the form of a sea shanty: Regular four-line stanzas using anapest and tetrameter (the concluding line always uses trimeter) are interspersed with a chorus using the same form. This is the sea shanty, “*As Performed by the Twelve Maids, in Sailor Costumes*” (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 93):

Oh wily Odysseus he set out from Troy,
With his boat full of loot and his heart full of joy,
For he was Athene’s own shiny-eyed boy,
With his lies and his tricks and his thieving!
His first port of call was the sweet Lotus shore
Where we sailors did long to forget the foul war;
But we soon were hauled off on the black ships once more,
Although we were pining and grieving.

[...]

*Here’s a health to our Captain, so gallant and free,
Whether stuck on a rock or asleep ‘neath a tree,
Or rolled in the arms of some nymph of the sea,
Which is where we would all like to be, man! [...] (Atwood, Penelopiad 93-94)*

The crossdressing maids put on the costumes of Odysseus’ sailors for this song. Incidentally, their captain, whom the sailors praise in the chorus (“so gallant and free”), manages to lose all of them and get them killed in Homer’s epic. So how seriously are we as readers supposed to take this praise? In presenting the *Odyssey* as a sea shanty, the maids’ retelling takes on the form of travesty. But is this Margaret Atwood presenting a caricature of the *Odyssey*, or just an entertaining way of presenting a summary of the mythical intertext? The ironic mode would of course allow for both to be true at the same time.

There is another parody the maids present to the reader: “The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll” relates the story of the birth and childhood of both Telemachus and the maid servants, his childhood playmates. On a formal level, Margaret Atwood presents in the **idyll** verse in the vein of Tennyson or Whitman¹³; on the level of content this poem, too, tells the story of the makings of the future king of Ithaca. But it is closely linked to the story of the maids:

Nine months he sailed the wine-red seas of his mother’s blood
Out of the cave of dreaded Night, of sleep,
Of troubling dreams he sailed
In his frail dark boat, the boat of himself,
Through the dangerous ocean of his vast mother he sailed
From the distant cave where the threads of men’s lives are spun,
Then measured, and then cut short
By the Three Fatal Sisters, intent on their gruesome handcrafts,
And the lives of women also are twisted into the strand.

And we, the twelve who were later to die by his hand
At his father’s relentless command,
Sailed as well, in the dark frail boats of ourselves
Through the turbulent seas of our swollen and sore-footed mothers
Who were not royal queens, but a motley and piebald collection,
Bought, traded, captured, kidnapped from serfs and strangers.

[...]

Our lives were twisted in his life; we also were children
 When he was a child,
 We were his pets and his toythings, mock sisters, his tiny companions.
 We grew as he grew, laughed also, ran as he ran,
 Though sandier, hungrier, sun-speckled, most days meatless.
 He saw us as rightfully his, for whatever purpose
 He chose, to tend him and feed him, to wash him, amuse him,
 Rock him to sleep in the dangerous boats of ourselves.

We did not know as we played with him there in the sand
 On the beach of our rocky goat-island, close by the harbour,
 That he was foredoomed to swell to our cold-eyed teenaged killer.
 If we had known that, would we have drowned him back then?
 [...]
 Ask the Three Sisters, spinning their blood-red mazes,
 Tangling the lives of men and women together.
 Only they know how events might then have been altered.
 Only they know our hearts.
 From us you will get no answer. (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 65-69)

The poetry used by Margaret Atwood here is marked by sophistication and retains an almost epic quality: parallel constructions and repetitions of words and phrases reminiscent of oral literature, as well as the use of extended metaphor, the journey of pregnancy and birth as a sea voyage. All of this speaks of a language and style far more elevated than the previous examples of speech allocated by Atwood to the maids. The maid servants here successfully imitate highbrow poetry, the discourse of their masters. While on the level of content, the inequality in social hierarchy between Telemachus and the maids is foregrounded, on the level of form, it is successfully deconstructed.

In his essay “‘Poetry in Fiction’: A Range of Options,” Matthias Bauer delineates the different forms the appearance of poetry in prose can take, differentiating between “poetry as genre,” “poetry as form of speech,” and “poetry as mode.” All the examples from Atwood’s *Penelopiad* discussed up to this point could be argued to exhibit the characteristics of “poetry as genre.” But the other two forms of poetry in prose can be found in Atwood’s novel as well. “Poetry as form of speech” makes an appearance in the chapter “The Perils of Penelope,

A Drama,” which again employs verse, but this time it is the verse of eighteenth-century mock-heroic drama.¹⁴ The topic is Penelope’s surmised marital infidelity; the maids assume the roles of Penelope, Eurycleia, and the chorus line, while Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks presents a prologue; the **drama** is written in iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets (cf. Atwood, *Penelopiad* 147-52).¹⁵ It is removed in its entirety from the play version, as is the “Anthropology Lecture,” a parody of critical writing on the *Odyssey* in the vein of Robert Graves, which reduces the maids and their suffering to mere symbol. As one would expect from a parody of critical writing, no poetry is to be found here (cf. Atwood, *Penelopiad* 163-68).¹⁶

Three more numbers of the chorus line can be found to be using prose, as marked in the overview above: the lament, the love song, and the trial of Odysseus. But is it really prose that is used here? Both the **love song** and the **lament** exhibit poetical qualities: parallelisms abound; the titles—love song and lament—refer to poetic genres. They can thus serve as an example of what Matthias Bauer refers to as “poetry as mode” as it appears in prose. To illustrate my point, here are two short excerpts from both lament and love song:

We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not gods, they were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in the palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk, as children. [...] (“Lament”; Atwood, *Penelopiad* 13)

Yoo hoo! Mr Nobody! Mr Nameless! Mr Master of Illusion! Mr Sleight of Hand, grandson of thieves and liars!

We’re here too, the ones without names. The other ones without names. [...]

We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. 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.¹⁷

(“Love Song”; Atwood, *Penelopiad* 191-93)

In Atwood’s version of the tale, the shadows of the maids really do stick to Odysseus like glue in the Underworld. In the novel, Odysseus

is tried for the murder of the maids in a courtroom drama, over the course of which the maids take matters into their own hands, calling on the Erinyes, the Furies, to punish Odysseus for his wrongdoings. (The twenty-first century judge refuses to sentence Odysseus on grounds of the case being some 2000 years out of date.) The courtroom drama does not make it into the play, but the invocation of the Furies is kept, with the maids themselves *becoming* the Furies and carrying out their revenge. Atwood uses the same text for the **invocation**, basically a curse, in both novel and play. In the novel, this is written in prose, whereas in the play, the same lines are presented in free verse. Clearly, the invocation transcends generic boundaries, blending poetry and prose in one of the most emotionally charged texts of the play:

O Angry Ones, O Furies, you are our last hope!
 We implore you to inflict punishment and exact vengeance on our behalf!
 Be our defenders, we who had none in life!
 Smell out Odysseus wherever he goes!
 From one place to another, from one life to another!
 Whatever disguise he puts on,
 Whatever shape he may take,
 Hunt him down!
 Dog his footsteps.
 On earth or in Hades.
 Wherever he may take refuge!
 Appear to him in our forms.
 Our ruined forms!
 The forms of our pitiable corpses.
 Let him never be at rest! (Atwood, *Penelopiad: The Play* 78)

We are now in the realm of poetic language, which here is also the language of the sacred, the diction of biblical texts, of prayer. One might even hear in this grotesque parody echoes of biblical prayers such as the Lord's Prayer.¹⁸

In Atwood's version of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and to a certain extent also Penelope remain haunted by what has happened. In Odysseus' case this includes a literal haunting, as the dead maids keep following him even in the Underworld. "He sees them in the distance, heading

our way," Penelope recounts towards the novel's close. "They make him nervous. They make him restless. They cause him pain. They make him want to be anywhere and anyone else" (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 189).¹⁹

With her borrowing from Ancient Greek tragedy by making use of choral interludes, Atwood presents a prose narrative haunted by its excluded shadow narratives. In her essay "'We can't help but be modern,'" Coral Ann Howells contends that, with its myriad of textual transformations and hauntings, "*The Penelopiad* might be seen as Atwood's Gothic version of *The Odyssey*" (58), where "[the maids'] stories persist, for their fates represent the dark underside of heroic epic and their voices celebrate the return of the repressed," and where, finally, her "Underworld despite its classical trappings is the Gothic territory of the Uncanny" (69).

Another way of reading the interludes, this time drawing not on psychoanalytic theory, as Howells does, but on recent trauma theories, might be the following: the maids' subjectivities, which have been denied agency in the main narrative, haunt this same narrative. (Lyric) poetry lacks the temporality that (narrative) prose possesses. The failure to reintegrate the narrative voice of the maids within the main (i.e. Penelope's) narrative is presented—appropriately—as an ever present haunting of that narrative in the form of poetic insertions. The insertions might thus be argued to serve, structurally, also as representations of intrusions produced by the trauma of exclusion of these voices. And as such they remain, appropriately, forever severed from the temporality of the main narrative.²⁰

More Than a Number

The maids' poetic insertions serve several functions within the framework of Atwood's novel. By presenting their utterances as exterior to Penelope's prose narrative, Atwood illustrates the maids' social status as slave servants who cannot make their voices heard and who retain no agency within the framework of the main narrative.²¹ Transferred to the culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,

the maids retain their roles as entertainers, becoming girls in a chorus line. However, while, on the level of plot, no agency is given to the maids, they still manage to speak out and present their point of view, to make their voices heard from the position and within the space allocated to them: in their poetic interludes, dances and songs. Female voices silenced in the *Odyssey* are thus by Atwood performatively made audible in the novel's interludes.

These interludes are much more than just the equivalent of the musical numbers of a background chorus line to either Homer's *Odyssey* or Penelope's retelling of it from her own point of view. Being excluded from Penelope's prose narrative, the maids raise their voices, in the interludes, as outsiders; yet, as outsiders they also speak from a position of epistemic privilege.²² It is with them that an important "truth" of the story resides. And it is in their interludes that questions of ethical responsibility and accountability of actions (Odysseus', Penelope's, Telemachus') are raised.

"For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long" (*Penelopiad* xiii). This is the line from Homer which Margaret Atwood started out with. Why not, dear reader, take this as a pointer: which other silenced voices haunting other texts of the Western literary canon can you hear?

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NOTES

¹I am indebted to Burkhard Niederhoff's, Michal Ginsburg's, and Ingrid Hotz-Davies's as well as the anonymous reviewers' comments on my conference paper for the development of my argument.

²For an extensive overview of rewritings see, e.g., W. B. Stanford's *The Ulysses Theme*, and Edith Hall's *The Return of Ulysses*.

³For an overview of rewritings of the *Odyssey* focussing on Penelope as the main character, see Hall (115-29). A number of critics have read *The Penelopiad* alongside other retellings of Greco-Roman myths. Susanna Braund, for whom

“myth permits endless reinvention, revisioning, refocalization, renewal” and “is always available to articulate both the certainties of the dominant culture and the challenges to those certainties” (206), reads Atwood alongside Marguerite Yourcenar’s “Clytemnestra, or Crime” and a selection of poems from Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife*. Sarah Annes Brown reads *The Penelopiad* alongside Ursula Le Guin’s *Lavinia*, and Hilde Staels compares Atwood’s rendering of the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad* with Jeannette Winterson’s taking on the Atlas myth in *Weight*.

⁴Indeed, Atwood counts six echoes in her introduction to the play text. “The original explosion was the Trojan War, some version of which—say the archeologists—may well have taken place at an undetermined date in the Bronze Age” (*Penelopiad: The Play* v). Next are a myriad of oral myths surrounding the Trojan War; *The Odyssey*; “post-Homeric retellings, stretching from Ovid through Dante and Chaucer and Shakespeare and Tennyson to James Joyce and Derek Walcott and Barry Unsworth and Lewis Hyde” (v); *The Penelopiad* as commissioned by Canongate; a dramatized version of *The Penelopiad* performed at St. James’s Church, Piccadilly; and finally, the stage adaptation of *The Penelopiad* (see v-vi).

⁵According to Shannon Hengen, audiences in Canada and the UK reacted differently to the play. In contrast to UK audiences, “Canadian theatre-goers frequently awarded the show with standing ovations,” which Hengen attributes at least “in part” to Canadian audiences’ demonstrations of “solidarity with its author” (54).

⁶For instance, Atwood draws heavily on Robert Graves’s findings in *The Greek Myths* (see *Penelopiad* 197).

⁷Staels traces Atwood’s use of genre conventions of both the satyr play and Menippean satire. Dating from the fifth century BC, the satyr play “primarily parodied the tragic heroization of epic heroes by creating a comic double” (102). The menippea, on the other hand, “parodies the monological style as well as the coherent perspective and world view of ancient genres such as the epic,” mixing among other things “various genres” and contemporizing “the heroes of myth” (102-03). For Staels, “Atwood’s excavation and adaptation of the ancient Penelope myth results in a highly experimental text in which the author not only liberates the epic story from its generic constraints, but also Penelope and her twelve maids from the limitations imposed on them by the traditional narratives” (111).

⁸For Mihoko Suzuki, too, the maids “function as a tragic chorus, commenting on the actions of the hero, Odysseus (and in a later chorus, Penelope)” (272). Suzuki sees Atwood as mounting, with the *The Penelopiad*, “a critique of the *Odyssey*, which normalized the punishment of the maids, from a perspective that foregrounds hierarchies of class as well as gender. [Atwood] presents this challenge through the dramatic form of the Greek chorus—inflected by vaudeville and burlesque—as a response and a means of ‘talking back’ to the authoritative epic narrative” (275).

⁹Usually, in musical theatre as in opera, the main characters are not part of the chorus but have their own musical numbers, arias or songs (and the occasional

duet, tercet or quartet). They are perceived by the audience to be the protagonists, and it is their stories which the (musical) plot in most cases centres on.

¹⁰Cf. Contents (Atwood, *Penelopiad* xv-xvi; my emphases).

¹¹Staels points to the owl as a “symbol of Athene, the Great Goddess who helps Odysseus murder the suitors and who possesses the power of wisdom and transformation” (110).

¹²Howells notes that the maids “will not go away and [...] refuse to be silenced. They transform *The Penelopiad* into a polyphonic narrative where their dissident voices counter the authenticity of Penelope’s confession. Indeed, it is the maids and not Penelope who have the last word, defaming (to use De Man’s terminology) the Homeric monument to male heroism and female fidelity” (“Five Ways” 12).

¹³With Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” which some critics have described as an American epic (cf. Miller xv-xviii), the poem shares its speech cadence and free verse form; with Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, it shares the subject matter of the making of a (legendary) once and future king.

¹⁴Such as can be found, for instance, in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Thumb*.

¹⁵To provide just one textual example, the following is Melantho’s prologue:

As we approach the climax, grim and gory,
 Let us just say: There is another story.
 Or several, as befits the goddess Rumour,
 Who’s sometimes in a good, or else bad, humour.
 Word has it that Penelope the Prissy
 Was—when it came to sex—no shrinking sissy!
 Some said with Amphinomus she was sleeping.
 Masking her lust with gales of moans and weeping;
 Others, that each and every brisk contender
 By turns did have the fortune to upend her,
 By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan
 Was then conceived, or so the fable ran.
 The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain—
 But let us take a peek behind the curtain! (Atwood, *Penelopiad* 147-48)

¹⁶For Howells, the maids’ stories highlight “gender and class issues which go unchallenged in *The Odyssey*: the physical and sexual exploitation of servant girls [...], male violence against women [...], and also, more shamefully, women’s betrayals of other women” (“Five Ways” 13). Also, “the sheer variety of [the maids’] narratives draws our attention to the different generic conventions through which stories may be told, so that the interaction between Penelope’s confession and the maids’ shifting narrative forms cast doubt on the absolute truthfulness of any single account, including Penelope’s” (14).

¹⁷The last sentence directly quotes the nursery rhyme “Mary, Mary, quite contrary” (cf. Opie and Opie 301).

¹⁸With biblical prayers such as the Lord’s Prayer or the Psalms of the Old Testament, the invocation shares syntactical structures, and therefore a similarity in speech cadence, which is mostly due to the high number of supplications present. A clearer echo of the Lord’s Prayer can be heard in the line “[o]n earth or in Hades. Wherever he may take refuge.” This quite resembles the Lord’s Prayer’s “on earth as it is in heaven,” with its gesture of encompassing the whole universe.

¹⁹Hilde Staels reads the maids who haunt Odysseus in the Underworld as transformational trickster archetypes: “The trickster in his role as catalyst displays wisdom in helping individuals confront their shadow. Penelope’s maids, women who possess as much tricky intelligence as Odysseus [...], indeed want to confront the legendary hero with his repressed evil side” (109).

²⁰For an understanding of trauma structures and the temporality of traumatic intrusions see, e.g., Julian Wolfreys in “Trauma, Testimony, Criticism.”

²¹By *agency* I mean the maids’ ability to act in accordance with their own interests, needs and desires and also to effect change accordingly. By *voice* I mean the maids’ ability to not only speak but also articulate their own experience, needs, desires and point of view—the maids speaking *for themselves*—and also be heard.

²²*Epistemic privilege* denotes the experience of recognizing the workings of certain power structures (such as class, race, gender, sexuality) afforded to individuals in a minoritarian subject position. Social privilege remains usually invisible to the socially privileged. One example: If I (as a gay man) am asked by a (presumably) straight person, “Do you have a wife/girlfriend?” I realize that they read me as straight and the possibility that I might have a husband or boyfriend has not occurred to them. Their epistemic “blind spot” is visible to me but not to them—as long as I do not draw their attention to it (cf. also Elizabeth Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science”; and José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*).

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