

**Myth Retelling: A Study on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad***

*Project submitted to the University Of Calicut in partial fulfillment of*

*the requirements for the degree of*

**Bachelor of Arts**

**In**

**English Language and Literature**

**By**

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## **Declaration**

I, M M Shahina, hereby declare that this project entitled **Myth Retelling: a Study on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*** submitted to the University of Calicut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and History, is a bonafide research work done by me under the supervision and guidance of Miss. Ansiya T.A, Assistant Professor, Department of English and History, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda.

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## **Certificate**

This is to certify that this project entitled **Myth Retelling: a Study on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*** is a record of research work carried out by Ms. M M Shahina under my supervision and guidance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature submitted to the University of Calicut.

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## Introduction

Myths are very old, and they happen to have ruled the world when the science, technology and philosophy were not precise as they are today. Myth is defined as a legendary or a traditional story that usually revolves around a particular event or a hero with or without using factual or real explanations. The mythical stories usually concern gods or demigods and the hurdles that come their way. It involves rituals, practices and natural phenomenon. There are many types of mythical stories starting from classic myths to modern myths. The topic taken for this project is also based on a myth.

*The Penelopiad* is a novella written by Margaret Atwood. It was published in the year 2005. The book is written in the perspective of Penelope where she reminisces on the events of *The Odyssey*, her life in Hades and many more. The book furthermore gives us an outlook on the murder of the twelve maids that happened at the end of the original tale. The book is mainly based on the theme of myth retelling. The book is a part of the first set of books in the Canongate Myth Series where contemporary authors rewrite ancient myths.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, essayist, teacher, environmental activist and inventor. She was born on November 18, 1939. Since 1961, she has published 18 books of poetry, 18 novels, 11 books of non-fiction, nine collections of short fiction, eight children's books, and two graphic novels, as well as a number of small press editions of both poetry and fiction. A many number of her works have been adopted into movies and TV shows. Atwood has won numerous awards and honours

for her writing, including the Booker Prize (twice), Arthur C. Clarke Award, Governor General's Award, Franz Kafka Award, Princess of Asturias Awards, and the National Book Critics and Pen Centre USA Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Atwood's works encompass a variety of themes including gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and power politics. Many of her poems are based on myths and fairy tales which was her interest from a very young age. Her most famous works include *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Tent* (2006). Her works have been translated into an array of different languages and seen several screen adaptations, with the *Handmaidens Tale* and *Alias Grace* becoming ministries in 2017. Her first published work was the pamphlet of poetry *Double Persephone* in 1981. She then published her first novel, *The Edible Woman* in 1969.

The present study at hand revolves around the retelling of a mythological story. While a myth is retold, it upholds the original content of the story along with the understanding and interpretation of the re-telling. The story's content comprises of parts of original telling as well as the authors own understanding and therefore the literary work comes up as a new version in a different light which follows the tradition of the story being told and retold. One can basically infer that retelling is a communicative activity and as a communicative activity it consists of two types – oral and written. The first focuses on the main story while the latter involves language and its notions. Retelling of myths mainly involves re-addressing of many notions like that of major socio-economic events or political events, individual past, national or individual history, traditional, ethnic or racial stories.

Many authors have taken up the theory of myth retelling, noticeably women authors. Their main aim in doing this is to shed some light on the given work with the basis of a women's perspective. The most such notable works are *Circe* by Madeline miller, the book is about a girl born into the house of Helios. The girl, born a witch has an impeccable power of rivals into monsters. Abandoned by her own kin, the story follows her in facing all those hurls that are thrown at her and finding where her heart truly lies. *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar, the story revolves around a Roman emperor. The author re-imagines Hadrian's life from his boyhood to politics. The work is written as a series of letters that Hadrian writes to his successor, Marcus Aurelius. *For The Most Beautiful* by Emily Hauser, the author retells the story of the Trojan War through the view point of the women. Hauser brings light on what was actually happening during the Trojan War, and shows us that the story is not just that. *Hadestown* by Anais Mitchell, in a wild carnival of swamp-folk songs, Mitchell restages the story of Orpheus and Euridice. The story is roughly based on tale of how the witty Hades lures Euridice into the underworld and the rest follows.

The book *The Penelopiad* was written by Margaret Atwood based on the thought that Jamie Byng of Canongate books had on retelling myths. This led to Atwood reading up on all the stories including *The Odysseus* and the idea of *The Penelopiad* came up. She felt that there was something much more behind the story than what was told and that fact bothered her a lot. She felt that the hanging that happened at the end of the story was not only gruesome but also suspicious and that it didn't add up at all.

The entire novella has been divided into 29 chapters with introduction, notes, and acknowledgments sections. It's very similar to a Greek drama, the storytelling alternates



between Penelope's narrative and the choral commentary of the twelve maids. Penelope narrates 18 chapters with the Chorus contributing 11 chapters dispersed throughout the book.

The main themes of *The Penelopiad* are womanhood, violence and class. Atwood's account of the events of the *Odyssey* through Penelope and the Maids' eyes focuses on the hardship and heartbreak of life as a woman in ancient Greece. Among these difficulties are the social and psychological pressures that women face.

The project includes a total of three chapters in which the first chapter explains the concept of myth retelling and mythology along with the relevance of the author. The second chapter explains the whole plot of the novel giving a deeper insight on what the novel is really about. The third chapter explores the themes and different perspectives of the context in comparison to the original text.

## Chapter 1

### The Concept of Myth Retelling

Myths usually consist of Gods, Demigods, and Supernatural Beings etc. Myths are endorsed by rulers and priests and are closely linked to religions. It explains how a society's customs, institutions and taboos were established. There is an indefinite connection between the cycle of myths and enactment of rituals. The term myth is used to imply that the story is not objectively true and is made up. Many of the endorses of religions claim their religious views as true, therefore it cannot be established as the complete truth but rather covered up using fictional stories.

The term mythology refers to a study of myths as a whole. It is said that mythology arose from ancient history, mainly from the Myth is a folklore genre consisting of narratives, the foundation being tales and origin myths. There are mainly three types of mythology to exist - Etiological mythology, Historical mythology and Psychological Mythology. The oldest myth in the world is considered to be a psychological myth, named *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It's often regarded as the oldest known piece of literature in the world and is the most well known Mesopotamian myth. Some of the most famous mythologies are *The Three Sisters of Fate*, *Pandora's Box*, and *The Name Giving of Athens* and so on.

While the fact that tales are old as time, every now and then, a fresh take comes along that makes the reader analyze the whole idea in diverse manner. Inventive

reimaginings of the stories take everyone up on a whole new journey in total.

Legendary myths are being retold by modern writers in an astonishing air. Mythology tends to have a lighter touch on character developments and such minor detailing. This is where myth retellings come in. The attention is showered upon the things that had gone unnoticed in the original text. The legends are placed in a new time and place.

The olden time mythologies and their translations were often written by men. The texts are meant to be objective and eluded of one's own opinion, it was often heavily influenced by their own prejudices and politics to a further extend. Modern women are retelling classics through the eyes of the women whose voices were pushed down and lost through translation and misogyny. There is always something new to discover and learn about in these stories, according to many female writers who have taken the task of retelling myths upon them. Many female writers have taken it under their wings to set the legends right. Some of the most relevant works which have been retold are – *The Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Beowulf* and many more.

Margaret Atwood, the author at discussion, was one of the most celebrated feminist writers at a time. She has criticized contemporary patriarchy and given a voice to the women who had been portrayed as eternally submissive. She has based her stories on characters like Penelope, the Sirens, Sekhmet, and Circe. Raising pertinent questions about classic mythology, such as why they are mostly written from the male perspective, and why abused mythological women remain unheard, Atwood seamlessly weaves them into contemporary society and gives these women the platform they were denied in their original stories.

In most classic mythologies, women are often portrayed as either negative characters or passive aides to the heroes who get all the glory. Contemporary poets like Margaret Atwood have begun retelling these myths by viewing them from a feminist perspective, thereby highlighting the stories of women living in the shadows of men.

Atwood's *Penelopiad* is not just a sad tale of women, but a critical commentary on a society that treats them as nothing more than props in a man's world, and those from lower economic classes as disposable. Most of Margaret Atwood's early novels express a clearly feminist message. They fall under the category of fiction of protest, though this only rarely diminishes their artistic value. But, like other feminist writers, Atwood is very much concerned to demonstrate that women are oppressed in Western society and their options severely restricted.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the fame entirely belongs to Odysseus. He hangs his maids for socialising with his wife's unwanted suitors. His wife Penelope dutifully remains in the background, quietly waiting for her husband. Atwood spins a different version of the classic mythology wherein the clever Penelope is finally given her due. The Penelope of Atwood's *Penelopiad* is now able to tell her tale from the Underworld, as she is now dead. In death, she becomes free of her worldly woes and responsibilities and cannot be judged or insulted for anything she does, which grants her the freedom to convey her innermost thoughts. Even the 12 hanged maids make an appearance, in the form of songs and ballads, which portray how unjustly they were raped and then hanged, all because of their position in the social hierarchy.

By suggesting that Odysseus is a liar and a spinner of falsehoods, Atwood calls into question the narrative of Odysseus from Greek mythology. The unreliability of stories is the key here, as people all have their own perspectives. The theme of storytelling is a key aspect of this text, with Atwood questioning traditional mythical narratives, which are mostly from the perspective of men. Also in the retelling, quite a few affairs which have been completely ignored in the original text are brought up to the surface.

Women are heavily represented in the book and their voices are what shine brightly throughout the work. Margaret Atwood has done complete justice to what she had tried to do throughout the novel. She gives voice to the most marginal women of the story, the maids, and she decides to represent a world in which women's behaviour towards each other is not as perfect as we could think it would be. This is clearly an evolution in feminist rewriting as she doesn't want to portray an unrealistic society but a one where each individual voice is heard aloud.

The original one is been shown in a whole new light altogether which makes the reader linger on the topics, further more think about it and ponder over the possibilities that could have happened during the time.

## Chapter 2

### Plot of the Novel

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a novel written with the basic concept of myth retelling. The novel recaps the whole of Penelope's life, from her marriage to Odysseus and his going off to war to the aftermath of his return. She recalls her life from Hades along with the 12 maids who were brutally murdered by her husband. Her life in Sparta, her son, how her whole life turned around is that in the novel. The novel is told from her perspective, portraying "*The Odysseus*" in a whole new light.

Previously unwilling to tell her side of the story, Penelope finally feels like she has enough time to reveal whatever has happened during her time on earth. Penelope introduces herself as the narrator of her own story. After centuries of hearing Odysseus's version of events in Ithaca, she is determined to clarify the tale. She feels Odysseus tricked her for years, and she chose not to see his deceptions and lies. Though she has no body and no mouth in her present underworld reality, she hopes her audience will be able to heed her advice and avoid repeating her mistakes. The 12 maids who lived alongside and served Penelope and the Ithaca court sing poetically - yet cryptically - about their hated mistress and unfortunate deaths.

She had always considered the tale-telling a "low art" so she was quite reluctant. She remembers the relationship she had with her husband and the Helen of Troy. She

reminiscences her childhood in Sparta, born to king Icarius and Periobea. Penelope, although not a beauty, is known for her modesty, her devotion and her cleverness. She was thrown into the sea at a very young age by her father, concerned about a prophecy regarding his demise. She was saved by a flock of ducks back then. Later on where she had reached the age of her marriage, a contest was arranged for the young men to win her hand. Odysseus won her through his sly ways and married her. She left with him to Ithaca despite of everyone's expectation of them to stay in Sparta.

Penelope fell in love with Odysseus quite quickly and the both spend a lot of time together. Even though they were happy together, everyone mocked them behind their back. Odysseus's mother, Anticleia and his former nurse, Eurycleia did not approve of Penelope and made her stay rather onerous for her. No one around was cordial leaving her to fend for herself. The only solace she found was her son, Telemachus and the love of her husband.

By and by, eventually, the news of Penelope's cousin, Helen, leaving her husband for the prince of Troy came out. A huge uproar happened, and Helens husband, Menelaus came in search of Odysseus, hoping that he would keep his promise of helping him in need. He had sworn an oath previously to protect his rights to Helen. Odysseus tried out all his sly methods and pondered over for a way to get out of the situation but none prevailed. He had no choice but to go along with the others to bring back Helen. He soon sailed for Troy and Penelope was left alone with her son.

Time passed by with no sign of his return. Telemachus grew up and Anticleia passed away during the time period. Penelope learned to manage all of Odysseus's estates

alone and moved on, waiting eagerly for his arrival. Finally, the news of Greeks win transpired all around the place. Odysseus's return was highly anticipated but much to her disappointment, it didn't happen. Minstrels brought strange tales of Odysseus's difficult attempts to get home, until one day the reports stopped coming. The Maids, during one of their commentaries, give a poem-form synopsis of the experiences that Odysseus supposedly had.

Meanwhile Suitors began to show up at Ithaca, asking to marry Penelope in the hopes of gaining access to her dowry. Claiming that they were guests, the Suitors took everything they wanted from the estate, running it into the ground. As the time of Odysseus's absence lengthened, the number of suitors grew bigger and they became more impatient. Penelope devised a plan to fend them off, saying that she would not pick one to marry until she had finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus's father. However, every night, Penelope and her Twelve Maids secretly unraveled the work that she had done that day, prolonging the process and buying her more time. Meanwhile, Penelope told the Maids to spend time with the Suitors and gain their confidence by sleeping with them and saying bad things about Odysseus and his family. The Maids obliged and told Penelope whatever they learned. The Suitors finally learned of Penelope's trick with the shroud thanks to the loose lips of one of the Maids. They confronted Penelope about it. Penelope promised to finish the shroud quickly and then pick a suitor. Telemachus, growing impatient, secretly left to search for word of his father. When he returned, Penelope prayed to the gods once more for Odysseus's return. She then found Odysseus out in the courtyard, disguised as a beggar.



Penelope did not let on that she recognized him, but sent him to Eurycleia for a bath. Eurycleia recognized Odysseus by the scar on his leg, but did not tell Penelope about his identity, although, secretly, Penelope already knew. During his time in the palace, Odysseus overheard the Twelve Maids saying bad things about his family, unaware that they were acting according to Penelope's orders.

After the Suitors' murders, Odysseus asked Eurycleia to point out the Maids who had been unfaithful to him. Eurycleia pointed to the Twelve Maids who had been spying for Penelope, and Telemachus hung them. Following the hanging, Odysseus "revealed" his identity to Penelope, who pretended to be surprised. Odysseus then set sail again soon after finally arriving back at home, to go on a quest to cleanse himself of the Suitors' murders.

In the afterlife, the Twelve Maids haunt Odysseus, following him everywhere. The Maids, in their commentary, evaluate their own murders from an anthropological perspective and then hold a mock trial for Odysseus to attempt to punish him for his deeds. Odysseus chooses to leave Penelope over and over again in order to be reborn and temporarily escape the Maids. Penelope, meanwhile, stays in the fields of asphodel, and the couple replays their estrangement over and over again in the world of the dead.

## Chapter 3

### The Themes and Different Perspectives

The novel *The Penelopiad* is a reinterpretation that is primarily based on Homer's *Odyssey*. Margaret Atwood, the author explains the whole novel from a different view and perspective that has never been seen before. In this retelling, the writer keeps her audience actively engaged throughout the narrative with questions on mythology and retelling, questioning everything that has happened in the past. The novel investigates the relationship between the art of storytelling and truth. The novel explains on how much of a difference a perspective can make and how it will affect the whole plot.

The concept of storytelling is highly important from the very beginning of the novel, when in Penelope's first chapter she talks about why she is finally telling her own story and discusses how she had previously remained silent because she wanted happy endings. Penelope clearly implies that the normal narrative arc towards a happy ending or narrative structure in general, has silenced her side of the story.

The stories told in the *Odyssey* by Nestor and Menelaus to Telemachus and Odysseus to a Scherian court make Odysseus into a hero as he fights monsters and seduces goddesses. According to Penelope in the novel, Odysseus was a liar who drunkenly fought a one-eyed bartender then boasted it was a giant cannibalistic Cyclops. A difference in statements like this one happens throughout the storyline.

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* has many motifs, although the most significant motif is suffering, which is present throughout *The Penelopiad* through

uninformed families, terrified suitors, and the agony of young girls. Even the narrator of the story, Penelope, has suffered ever since her childhood when she was thrown off a cliff. Since the beginning of novella, each individual from Ithaca has ended up in pain. Penelope and Telemachus' pain of not knowing the fate of Odysseus, a father, and a husband, the frightening death of the overstayed suitors, and the agony put on the maids, who are raped and hurt repeatedly by the awful suitors. All together, Margaret Atwood uses the motif of suffering to describe the unavoidable pain that the characters face throughout *The Penelopiad* and how suffering correlates to the departure and return of Odysseus.

Atwood's account of the events of *The Odyssey* through Penelope and the maid's eyes focuses on the hardship and heartbreak of life as a woman in ancient Greece. Among these difficulties are the social and psychological pressures that women face. The whole plot gives a complete feeling on how high and rigid the social expectations of women were at the time.

One of the most problematic social dynamic that was faced was the intense competition between women. Most of this was caused by sexual attraction, like in the case of Helen and Penelope along with Penelope's feeling of inadequacy compared to Helen. Penelope spends quite a bit of her narrative taking stock of her own plainness compared to Helen, while Helen repeatedly rubs in her superior beauty. These toxic dynamic results in Penelope's fierce dislike of Helen, whom she calls "that septic bitch". Rather than being allied in their shared status as women, or in their familial relations, Penelope and Helen are rivals for male attention.

Some of the competition between women, though, is less focused on male sexual attention, and more on correctly filling a stereotypically female role in general. For example, Penelope finds that her mother in law and Odysseus's former nurse are constantly judging Penelope's performance as a wife. Eurycleia takes Penelope under her wing, but many of her instructions gave Penelope unnecessary stress.

While Penelope suffers because of the psychological pressures of her gender, Atwood shows how, in comparison, the Twelve Maids have it much worse. Because of how their class status interacts with their gender, the Twelve Maids suffer even more than Penelope does in the male-dominated society of Greece. Though Penelope still has to fend off the suitors that come to marry her after Odysseus does not return, the Suitors at least never threaten to harm Penelope physically. The Maids, however, are often the victims of rape at the hands of these same Suitors. Both Penelope and the Maids discuss rape as an extremely common event in ancient Greece, committed by both the Greek gods and mortal men. In sum, while Atwood shows the struggles that women face in Greek society in general, her characterization of the Twelve Maids highlights how low class status exacerbates the violence and psychological trauma that all women are susceptible to.

The author depicts religion as one of the most important themes of the novel. Penelope narrates from the afterlife of the ancient Greek underworld, actively engages with spiritual and religious subject matter, imagining the relationships between lofty concepts like death, fate, and repentance. From her post mortem perspective, Penelope spends a significant amount of time describing the conditions of the afterlife, which Atwood bases on Greek mythology.

The Greek gods are shown negatively in the text, and it is suggested that they enjoy human suffering, and are almost like children in their enjoyment. There is a suggestion that the gods are simply bored, and therefore create human suffering for their own amusement. This is emphasized when Penelope says that "not the fat and bones of sacrificed animals, but our suffering, is what they love to savour."

The caste and class difference of the people in the narrative makes up for a theme of the story. The breach between the social statuses of people highly affects their way of living. It matters if you belong to the royal family or are from the village. They are treated on this basis of factors. Atwood emphasizes the difference in the treatment of Penelope and her maids due to class differences. She describes the damaging culture whereby maids and servants are treated as slaves and are also sexually abused without regard. Atwood writes that the maids' mothers were "not royal queens, but a motley and piebald collection, bought, traded, captured, kidnapped from serfs and strangers." This is significant, as it shows the disregard for the maids both in the society they live in, and in cultural narratives about their deaths.

## Conclusion

After describing the major transformation in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, it is evident that it is a feminist rewrite well attuned to the approaches and concerns characteristic of Postmodernism. A remarkable aspect of this literary movement is its multiplicity of styles, juxtaposing the three major genres: prose, poetry and drama. However, *The Penelopiad* is not just a postmodern feminist rewrite. Its portrayal of a non-supportive female community makes it a mainstream feminist work.

Atwood gives voice to the most marginal women of the story, the maids, and she decides to represent a world in which women's behaviour towards each other is not as perfect as we could think it would be. This is clearly an evolution in feminist rewriting, but it also leads us to think in the problems of rewriting: when a writer privileges certain voices, she usually tends to silence other voices. In the *Penelopiad*, Atwood is letting the maids express their point of view. Nevertheless, Penelope is protagonist of the story, a white rich woman, whereas the maids appear as a collective voice; they are not individualised and, although their

The novel sets out to present *The Penelopiad* as a rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* with Penelope as the narrator. It is read as propounding a new genre, the female epic or romance where the heroine's quest is analysed on analogy with the traditional romance pattern. The narrative dwells on the contradictory and parody-like versions of events and characters embedded in the text.

As it is said in the previous chapters, the story revolves around the basic concept of retelling the whole tale based on what Odysseus has filled in on the original one. A new way of perceiving the story is unveiled and many secrets are put out of the dark. Penelope whole heartedly reveals what her real life was like, despite her forever expectation of a “happy ending”. Penelope and her maids live in the after-world where there is anxiety, guiltiness, and anguish among the people as the former reflects what transpires them to that situation.

In conclusion, *The Penelopiad* reshapes the value of *Odyssey* through the exploration of contemporary justice in a positive light where Penelope and the maids are given a chance to evoke anger against their innocent loss of mortality and subjection of emotional abuse from male counterparts and the portrayal of women as assertive against feminine ideals. Ancient Greece presents justice as the omniscient authority of males who utilize violence and deception against sinister complications including the Cyclops that Odysseus face and the hanging of the maids. It also subverts the lower status of women, which is reflected through their limited authority in decision making, inheritance and ability to be involved outside jobs and hobbies including sewing, nursing children and cooking, and values of familial affection, compassion, and obedience. Therefore, the frail and inferior nature of women with little emotional and physical freedom and materialistic entitlements of inheritance and ownership of housing is alienated through the contemporary attitudes within the novella.

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