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Epic Women

A Comparative Study of Appropriations of Homeric Helen and Penelope in
Modern English Literature

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The central problem with any tradition is the ability to recognize not only those who constitute that tradition but those who are at various times excluded from it, or, at the very least, consigned to its margins.

Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006:26)

1. Introduction

That writers assimilate and then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors is, of course, a central fact of literary history.

Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979:45)

1.1 Women and the Classics

The tendency to study any text from a modern-day perspective is difficult to escape or resist, since both frames of reference as well as available systems of classification are necessarily determined by academic nurture. Moreover, the significance of literary analysis is in part inevitably linked to its current social and cultural relevance, whether it be to establish the historical impact on the present or to define thematic topicality. The manner in which literary scholars deal with texts, then, is highly susceptible to both literary theoretical trends and social reality, and as such interpretations and readings of texts change over time. Greek

(pre)classical literature such as the Homeric¹ epics and Hesiod's *Theogony* are texts that have been around, in one form or other, for literally thousands of years and as such have been subjected to numerous and varying readings, analyses, adaptations and appropriations. Contemporary views have affected both reception and analysis as well as translations of the various texts that have survived. In turn, literary appropriations of classical mythology, its concepts and its characters have inevitably been equally influenced by the times in which they were written.

The practise in which modern ideologies are imposed on (pre)classical texts is perhaps most clearly exemplified in feminist reception of (pre)classical texts that sprang to life in the 1970s in the wake of the second feminist wave and as an, arguably logical, consequence to the scholarly exploration of fairy tales from a western feminist perspective, as Lewis points out (2011:444).

Poetry in itself, with perhaps the exception of the lyrical poem, has traditionally always been male territory; women may be the poetic objects, but are rarely the speaker—let alone the poet. Gilbert and Gubar famously argued that male dominance of the poetic domain causes so-called “anxiety of authorship” among female authors, in that the female poet is permanently aware of the fact she either has to rise beyond her gender to supply the verse form with a suitable voice, or is obliged to adapt the conventions to make room for the woman speaker (1979: 49).

Within poetry no genre is as wholly the terrain of the male speaker as the epic poem. The verse form, epic conventions and subject matter of the classical epics established the “epic norms” and the genre itself came to be identified as a solely masculine domain, dealing with the “public, objective, universal and heroic”, aspects which coincide “with western

¹ While I am aware of the ongoing debate concerning the Homeric question, this thesis is mainly concerned with the manner of appropriation of the Homeric characters of Helen and Penelope in English literature. In this context, then, the Homeric question is irrelevant and for the sake of convenience I will use the name Homer for any reference to the author(s) of the original texts.

norms for the masculine” (1986:205). As a result, the epic poem grew into a masculine stronghold in such a way that female authors would in effect trespass when taking on the task of writing an epic with a feminine voice.

The classical epic then, unavoidably, became in itself a focal point for feminist scholarship. Authors such as Pomeroy (1975) set the standard for what would grow into a fiercely feminist approach to classical texts in general and, more specifically, to the manner in which female characters within those texts were subjected to eagerly identified patriarchal values. Cixous’ reappropriation of Medusa (1976), which transformed the image of female horror into one of female empowerment, greatly influenced the approach subsequent feminist scholars took to the interpretation and analysis of classical texts (Lewis, 2011:444). In result, as Lewis remarks:

Similar treatments have been afforded to Helen, transforming her from powerless object to desiring woman, and to Psyche and Penelope. The fundamental principle – that the stories told by a culture can by their nature validate a particular ideology, and that those who oppose that ideology can resist it through a process of reappropriation of the tales—has had a profound effect on gender scholars’ approach to myth in Britain and North America. (2011:444-5)

From the latter half of the 1980s onwards a more tempered tone alongside the radical approach can be seen in feminist critique of classical literature. Lefkowitz, as one of the first, admits that sex and gender play a significant role in the myths, yet she also points out that the importance attached to the role gender plays in the myths is the result of a distinctly modern

reading of ancient tradition, as in the myths themselves the focus on gender generally serves the greater purpose of defining origins and establishing (royal) bloodlines:

The point is that, at least as far as the Greeks were concerned, the human condition—not gender—causes problems that both men and women are bound to experience, especially when they try to accomplish something out of the ordinary. (1985:209)

This notion is further explored by Lewis, who advocates gender impartiality when regarding the myths as a whole. She argues that women within classical mythology ought to be regarded from within their roles as mothers or sisters, since the earlier claim that women in classical tradition were “either victims or monsters, the stories serving to model appropriate and inappropriate female behaviour” was easily countered by the fact that for each of the female parts a male counterpart can be found, and that therefore this theory must be flawed by selective reading (2011:445). Emphasis, according to Lefkowitz and Lewis, now lies on the role of the female character in Greek myth as she is defined by her relationship with the male characters in the story. Zajko moreover stresses the historical relevance of Greek mythology and urges consideration of both the fact that myth throughout history has been signified according to the period in which it was read, and the fact that the position of women has always been subjective to, again, time as well as cultural values of specific societies (2009:388).

From the understanding that radical times call for radical measures, the aggressive feminist approach in rejecting patriarchal values and the underlying masculine sexuality imposed on classical literature is as much a product of its time as the Greek myths themselves are, and in that sense should be read and considered within their time frame. Yet while the

more tempered arguments may indeed hold true to a certain point, this does not eliminate the manner in which gender limited the role a character could perform in an epic, for, as Friedman phrases it, “In the epic, women have mainly existed at the symbolic peripheries as static rewards or temptations, as allies or antagonists, as inspirations or nemeses” (1986: 205).

Moreover, although a case may indeed be argued for gender impartiality in the original Greek myths and epics when solely regarding the myths themselves, the same cannot be said for the manner in which some of these female characters evolved in literary appropriations and in a way became emblems themselves in later times, as that would fail to take those appropriations into account in which these female parts were indeed treated exactly as such. The theoretical frame of reference from which the term appropriation is taken is based on Sanders’ theories surrounding this terminology, in combination with Rich’s theories on Revision, in that appropriation here is meant to imply “a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain.” (2006: 42). An appropriated character, therefore, must involve a purpose distinctly different from its original appearance, whether that purpose be political, social, religious or purely aesthetic. This manner of appropriating, then, does not as such reflect the original epic or myth from which the character originates, but rather reflects the general approach to the position of a woman in society at the time of writing, and in that sense the appropriation itself is clearly as much a product of its own time as the original epics were. The question to ask, then, is not whether or not the original epics were gender-biased, but if manner in which these female characters were appropriated is. Appropriation after all results from interpretation and interpretation is, by its very nature, the product of its time and surroundings, whether it be to conform to contemporary values, or to oppose them.

The two classical female epic characters that have spoken the most to the imagination of authors throughout time and serve as perfect examples of the manner in which

appropriations reflect the time in which they were created are Homer's Helen and Penelope. These particular characters are prime examples of, arguably, minor and peripheral characters which through later appropriations, ranging from the classical tragedies and satires of Euripides to modern-day Hollywood productions, have evolved into highly recognisable emblems in art. The development of what they came to represent through time reflects both sociological, religious and political processes in society concerning the position of women within that same society. It is moreover fascinating to study how these two women, especially in works up until the twentieth century, came to represent exact opposites: one the embodiment of all the seductive danger a beautiful woman could pose to a man; the other as the higher standard to which women were to be held.

The interesting aspect of these two opposing characters, and consequently the impetus for regarding them in parallel, is that, for a long time, appropriations of Helen and Penelope came to be employed for similar purposes—to propagate political, social and religious principles. Indeed, it is through appropriations of these characters during classical times and the middle ages, rather than their original depiction in respectively *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, that the emblems we know today came into being. Towards the end of the 19th century, when women first truly began to call for political, social and legal emancipation, an interesting development in the manner of appropriating occurs, in that appropriations of Helen and Penelope are now used to criticise contemporary views on the position of women in society, rather than support or promote these views. During the twentieth century this portrayal appears to alter again subtly, in that appropriation of these characters often resulted in what may only be described as the opposite of their original emblematic use, and as such the characters themselves both resisted their own emblems as well as reinvented themselves. Rather than commenting on the position of women in society, appropriations of Helen and Penelope, though both representing opposite values, are now commenting on their own

emblematic existence. This reinvention of the characters themselves through appropriation as a response to their traditional depiction culminates in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad*. Her Penelope and, to a lesser extent, her Helen are given voices of their own and these voices express discontent—not with their original lot in life as such, but rather with the way they, as characters, have been treated by the authors that have used them as, in the words of Atwood's Penelope, "An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with." (11).

Since the scope of this research is potentially enormous and thus beyond the scope of this thesis, it is not possible to offer a comprehensive literary analysis of the development of appropriations of Helen and Penelope. Instead, three texts have been selected for a close reading which all exemplify a new purpose behind its use of the appropriations. The choice for these texts is not so much motivated by the era they stem from and thus represent, but are rather selected for the unique approach the authors take in employing the emblems connected to Helen and Penelope. The first two texts serve as excellent examples of the alteration in purpose appropriations of Helen and Penelope simultaneously underwent at the end of the 19th century. Oscar Wilde's poem *The New Helen* reinvents the character of Helen by deifying her for the very quality that caused her to be demonised, and employs his appropriation both in support of the female artists as well as a general celebration of beauty for its own sake. In roughly the same era, Frances Fuller Victor, on the other hand, uses her appropriation of Penelope in *The New Penelope* to outline and criticise a woman's legal and social position in Victorian society.

The third text subjected to a close reading is Atwood's earlier mentioned novel *The Penelopiad* and will comprise the larger part of this thesis. *The Penelopiad* not only allows its appropriations of Helen and Penelope to rise beyond their emblems, it also allows them to engage each other in discussion during which they look back and comment, both in words and actions, on the 2500 years in which they grew into the characters we have come to know

today. The fact that they engage each other, thus confirming the similar manner in which their opposing emblems have been used, in addition to the critical approach the novel takes to the historical emblematic evolution of these characters, can be considered as the culmination of that same evolution which appropriations of Helen and Penelope have undergone. In that sense, *The Penelopiad* is the fictionalised essence of this thesis.

2. Going Back to the Source: Helen and Penelope in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

2.1 *The Homeric Epics*

It can be argued that it is, at the least, remarkable that Homer's two great epics are often mentioned side by side. Remarkable, since other than the fact that general consensus ascribes both epics to, arguably, the same author(s) or the same oral tradition and roughly the same period in that characters and events overlap, these two epics have little in common. *The Iliad*, as a great tale of war that deals with the downfall and rise of dynasties and its focus on the concepts of *time* and *kleos*², is set in the public domain. *The Odyssey*, with its lying, cunning and cheating protagonist, places its focus on the survival and one man's *nostos*³, thereby placing its centre in the private domain.

Another striking difference between these two great tales can be found in the appearance and treatment of female characters. *The Iliad*, while displaying an impressive line-up of male characters, has few female parts and those women who do appear have little to say; and if they do, they generally reflect their male counterparts' roles in the epic. Prime examples are Queen Hecuba, Priam's first and favourite wife, who counsels and supports her husband, and Hector's wife Andromache, whose domestic courage and exemplary behaviour reflect her husband's courage and exemplary behaviour as a leader on the battlefield.

The Odyssey, in contrast, is filled with dangerous female characters, who threaten to distract, bewitch, seduce, swallow and even eat Odysseus during his attempt to reach his

² Professor Tom Sienkewicz in his courses at Monmouth College (Monmouth, Illinois) defines the terms *time* and *kleos* as follows: "Time is the honor or recognition which the hero expects to receive in proportion to his "worth" (arete). The word time may be used in a fairly abstract sense, like English "honor;" it may also be used (sometimes in the plural, timai) for the gifts or prizes which are the tokens of honor. Kleos is the fame or renown which a hero wins when he accomplishes some great deed, like the killing of a powerful enemy or the sacking of a city. Like time, it has both an abstract sense--something like English "glory"--and a more concrete sense, for it is based in the first place on what is reported and can only survive if people, and especially poets, continue to speak or sing of it. To the Homeric heroes, who believe in a dismal and shadowy afterlife for all men, kleos is the closest thing to immortality that a human being can attain. It is thus the ultimate goal of the warrior." In this thesis I will follow his definitions.

³ the return home. See the introductory online course syllabus by professor Thomas for a more detailed explanation of the use of the term in the *Odyssey*.

home. The witch Circe and the nymph Calypso, the monster Scylla, the Sirens—a few of the many female characters that pose a serious threat to Odysseus’ safe return. Even Odysseus’ home is in peril, brought on by women through the treacherous behaviour of the maids, who sleep with the suitors and betray Penelope’s weaving scheme to them.

The main female characters in both epics, Helen in *The Iliad* and Penelope in *The Odyssey*, are in a sense in both cases the odd one out, in that their behaviour and lines differ from that of most of the other female characters. In order to understand how these two characters evolved into two such powerful and opposing emblems in English literature, it is vital to understand the original characters that can be considered the source for these emblems as well as the manner in which the behaviour and discourse of these characters reflects the position of women in bronze-age Greece.

2.2 Finding Helen: Helen as Depicted in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

Homer’s Helen as he depicts her in *The Iliad* does not entirely coincide with the predominant image of the beautiful, yet dangerous temptress that modern-day readers would associate with her name. While she is indeed presented as divinely beautiful, the Helen in *The Iliad* is a tormented creature, caught in a passivity which renders her unable to determine her own fate and, at times, deeply regretful of the choices she has made; or rather that were made for her. Despite arguments against the assertion that the Greeks went to war over a mere—although admittedly divinely beautiful—woman⁴, Homer himself does in fact stress through the mouths of some of the most prominent male characters in *The Iliad* that Helen is indeed the motive for the Trojan war. She is mentioned as the sole cause of the war as early on as book II, when Agamemnon mentions her when trying to stop the Greeks from fleeing:

⁴ Herodotus mentions the poet Stesichorus, who claimed Helen had never been to Troy, and supports this claim as he states that he finds it hard to fathom that a nation would go to war over a woman.

All the Argives flying home to their fatherland,
sailing over the sea's broad back? Leaving Priam
and all the men of Troy a trophy to glory over,
Helen of Argos. Helen for whom so many Argives
lost their lives in Troy, far from native land. (*Il. II.* 186-190)

The idea of fighting over a woman is not uncommon in *The Iliad*. After all, the theme of the epic, Achilles' rage, is caused over *time*: over the slave girl Briseis, who was Achilles' prize after the sacking of a town near Troy, since conquered women were prizes awarded for extreme courage and valour; and in *The Iliad*, Helen "and all her wealth" are the ultimate prize—well worth fighting for.

This notion that Helen was indeed the cause of war is further strengthened by Nestor, when he exclaims the Greeks will not leave Troy until they have conquered it and received retribution "for the groans and shocks of war / we have all borne for Helen" (*Il. II.* 422-23), words later echoed by the speaker (*Il. II.* 682). The Trojans themselves are equally aware of the manner in which Helen's beauty and presence in their city has led to their doom:

... So they waited,
the old chiefs of Troy, as they sat aloft the tower.
And catching sight of Helen moving along the ramparts,
they murmured one to another gentle winged words:
"Who on earth could blame them? Ah, no wonder
the men of Troy and Argives under arms have suffered
years of agony all for her, for such a woman.
Beauty, terrible beauty!

A deathless goddess—so she strikes our eyes!
But still,
ravishing as she is, let her go home in the long ships
and not be left behind ... for us and our children
down the years an irresistible sorrow. (*Il.* III. 183-195)

These “old chiefs of Troy” put into words an idea that is prevalent throughout *The Iliad*: the idea that Helen is to be both despised as well as worshipped for her beauty rather than her actions.

In fact, Helen’s inability to act—her passivity as it were—is a consistent feature of the character presented to us in *The Iliad*. On several occasions she openly laments her elopement with Paris and expresses a strong desire for death, yet these lamentations never result in any action on her part. Even in the manner in which she claims to long for death, she is the object rather than the agent, stressing her inability to determine her own destiny, as can be seen in book III, when she responds to Priam:

And Helen the radiance of women answered Priam.
"I revere you so, dear father, dread you too—
if only death had pleased me then, grim death.
that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking
my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child.
my favorite, now full-grown.
and the lovely comradeship of women my own age.
Death never came, so now I can only waste away in tears. (*Il.* III. 207-14)

Although Helen is granted very little text in the epic, whenever she does speak, she either laments her own beauty and existence, or she expresses a strong disdain towards the man she (supposedly) followed to Troy, calling him “a coward” (*Il.* III. 476) and accusing him of weak character: “This one has no steadiness in his spirit / Not now, nor ever will...” (*Il.* VI. 417-18). When Paris is saved by Aphrodite from being killed by Menelaus in the duel for Helen, she even bitterly exclaims, “Oh, would to God you’d died there, brought down / By that great soldier, my husband long ago” (*Il.* III. 500-1).

The fact that she appears to strongly disapprove of Paris falls in line with the manner in which she deplores having left her husband and native land, and whenever she speaks of Menelaus, it seems to be with admiration and regret, as she refers to him as “that good soldier” (*Il.* III. 501) and “my good soldier” (*Il.* III. 278); her voice even breaks with emotion and a longing for the past when she informs Priam of Agamemnon’s identity and the fact that he used to be her kinsman. When she hears of the upcoming duel between her former and present husband, her preference is made clear, albeit with a little help from the goddess Iris:

Think of it: Paris and Menelaus loved by Ares
go to fight it out with their rugged spears—
all for you—and the man who wins that duel,
you'll be called his wife!"

And with those words
the goddess filled her heart with yearning warm and deep
for her husband long ago, her city and her parents. (*Il.* III. 164-169)

The Iliad itself it remains unclear as to whether or not Helen is there on her own volition.

While she admits to having followed Paris to Troy, which would suggest a voluntary

elopement, a strong argument can be made for the fact that Aphrodite had a strong hand in deciding the case in Paris' favour in this matter, and Helen's own accusatory words to the goddess in book III support this argument:

Maddening one, my Goddess, oh what now?
Lusting to lure me to my ruin yet again?
Where will you drive me next?
Off and away to other grand, luxurious cities,
out to Phrygia, out to Maeonia's tempting country?
Have you a favorite mortal man there too? (*Il.* III. 460-65)

In this passage, Helen stresses her own inability to determine her fate and even rejects responsibility for her actions, placing all the blame on Aphrodite. In an uncharacteristic outburst of apparent active decisiveness, she even defies the goddess by refusing to return to Paris after he has fled the duel, in fear of invoking the ridicule of the Trojan women for staying with such a cowardly husband. Naturally, Helen's defiance is quite as void of action as her lamentations of her own existence and beauty are, and it takes Aphrodite no more than a few angry words to set the reluctant woman straight. Helen's defiance, then, remains limited to a few sullen taunts directed at her husband and further expressions of discontent with her own being, as is made quite clear from the passage in which she addresses Hector, who has come to take Paris back to the battlegrounds:

And Helen spoke to him now,
her soft voice welling up: "My dear brother,
dear to me, bitch that I am, vicious, scheming

horror to freeze the heart! Oh how I wish
that first day my mother brought me into the light
some black whirlwind had rushed me out to the mountains
or into the surf where the roaring breakers crash and drag
and the waves had swept me off before all this had happened!
But since the gods ordained it all, these desperate years,
I wish I had been the wife of a better man, someone
alive to outrage, the withering scorn of men.
This one has no steadiness in his spirit,
not now, he never will ...
and he's going to reap the fruits of it, I swear.
But come in, rest on this seat with me, dear brother.
You are the one hit hardest by the fighting, Hector,
you more than all-and all for me, where that I am,
and this blind mad Paris. Oh the two of us!
Zeus planted a killing doom within us both,
so even for generations still unborn
we will live in song." (*Il.* VI. 406-26)

Diomedes, when he encounters Aphrodite on the battlefield, reinforces the image of Helen's inability to withstand the will of the goddess: "Daughter of Zeus, give up the war, your lust for carnage! / So, it's not enough that you lure defenceless women / to their ruin?" (*Il.* V. 391-92).

Indeed, Homer's Helen in *The Iliad* invokes sympathy and pity, rather than hatred and disgust. It is interesting then, that the Helen encountered in *The Odyssey* seems another

creature altogether. When Telemachus is received by Menelaus and Helen in their palace in Sparta, the Helen he meets is self-assured and content, and eager to share with him how she met Odysseus in the streets of Troy on an espionage mission for the Greeks; a tale which underlines her affiliation with the Greeks and her original husband even then:

And once he'd cut
a troop of Trojans down with his long bronze sword,
back he went to his comrades, filled with information.
The rest of the Trojan women shrilled their grief. Not I:
my heart leapt up—
my heart had changed by now—
I yearned
to sail back home again! I grieved too late for the madness
Aphrodite sent me, luring me there, far from my dear land,
forsaking my own child, my bridal bed, my husband too,
a man who lacked for neither brains nor beauty. (*Od.* IV. 292-302)

It is Menelaus himself who presents a rather more unpleasant side to Helen's character, although he seems to recollect the night when Helen attempted to entice the Greeks from the Trojan horse by imitating their wives' voices without any grudge. Menelaus' apparent good-natured treatment of his wife's presumed treacheries may well be explained by the fact that Helen has drugged his wine, a trait she has learned when Menelaus and she were staying in Egypt, but his message in sharing the tale is nevertheless clear: Helen is a woman not to be trusted.

Where female characters in *The Iliad* are scarce and of limited importance, *The Odyssey* offers an abundance of dangerous and powerful females, of which Helen is just one, and even a minor, example. In fact, Menelaus' tale of Helen's seductive voice seems to anticipate another group of dangerously seductive women in the *Odyssey*, who could entice men with their voices and lure them to their deaths with their song. Only a very limited number of female characters in Homer's second great epic can arguably be classified as just and virtuous. Among those Penelope is the ultimate example and, in the sense of both her active stance as well as her ability to withstand temptation, she stands in direct contrast with Helen.

2.3 Finding Penelope: Penelope as Depicted in The Odyssey

Among the many dangerous females in *The Odyssey*, Penelope, even more so by contrast, stands out as an apparent epitome of virtue and is recognised as such by the honourable male characters, as is exemplified in Agamemnon's ghost's declamation of her admirable qualities in the final book of the epic:

Agamemnon's ghost cried out. "Son of old Laertes—
mastermind—what a fine, faithful wife you won!
What good sense resided in your Penelope—
how well Icarius' daughter remembered you,
Odysseus, the man she married once!
The fame of her great virtue will never die.
The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind,
a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope. (*Od.* XXIV 217-229)

Every time Penelope engages in contact with the suitors in her house, the epic speaker informs us how she draws “her glistening veil across her cheeks”, thereby stressing her chastity in that she covers her face before appearing to men who are not part of her household (*Od.* I 402). Her virtue is moreover made clear from her Homeric epithets: Penelope is “self-possessed” (*Od.* IV 127), “long-courted” (*Od.* IV 882), “wise” (*Od.* V 242), “unswerving” (*Od.* XIII 49), “irreproachable” (*Od.* XV 18) and “cautious” (*Od.* XV 355).

It would seem, then, that Penelope is the prescribed ideal of the faithful wife. Her virtue stands out as it is contrasted with the—far less virtuous—behaviour of her mortal counterparts in the tale, most notably Agamemnon’s wife (coincidentally Helen’s sister) Clytemnestra, whose infidelity results in the ultimate betrayal of her vows through the brutal murder of her husband and, to a lesser degree, that of the maid Melantho, who, although raised like a daughter by Penelope, betrays her by sleeping with Penelope’s favourite suitor without her master’s permission. This contrast in behaviour is typically that which feminist scholars in classical reception have interpreted as,

a system which justified male control of women, by providing on the one hand examples of dutiful and self-sacrificing women who subordinate themselves to male concerns and on the other ‘negative role models’ such as Klytaimestra and the Amazons who show the destructive potential of female power should it be allowed free rein. (Lewis, 2011:445)

At first glance this citation appears to suit the portrayal of women in *The Odyssey* to perfection, as most female parts are strikingly two-dimensional in nature—women are either good or evil. Good and evil in this context must be read as concepts within the epic that either aid Odysseus’ *nostos* or form an obstruction to it. Nausicaa, in addition to being kind and

chaste, is the vessel that finally enables Odysseus to return to Ithaca, and Penelope, with both her loyalty and cunning, strives to maintain the proper order in Odysseus's ultimate destination; in that sense both these characters can be classified as good. The so-called evil female characters mostly obstruct Odysseus' *nostos*, thereby upsetting the natural order in the household by keeping its master away. Calypso attempts to do so through seduction and force, Circe through witchcraft, the Sirens through the lure of their voices⁵ and Charybdis and Scylla simply try to swallow or eat Odysseus and his men. Even Helen, if we are to believe Menelaus rather than Helen herself, has attempted to keep Odysseus from returning home by trying to lure him out of the Trojan Horse (*Od.* IV 283-292). Unfaithful female characters such as the maids who sleep and conspire with the suitors obstruct Penelope's attempts to remain faithful to her husband and in that manner equally impede Odysseus' *nostos* by sabotaging the home itself. The faithlessness of Clytemnestra serves as an example of what domestic and political disorder could result from a wife's infidelity.⁶

While it is difficult to argue the fact that Penelope appears to be the embodiment of chastity and faithfulness, the classification of her character as solely an emblem of virtue falls short in its failure to recognise the epic's admiration for the quality with which she maintains her virtue and which simultaneously reflects her husband's most conspicuous character trait: her intelligence.

The Penelope that is found in *The Odyssey* is as cunning and deceitful as her famous husband in the manner in which she appeases the unwanted suitors in her house as well as tricks them with both her figurative and her literal weaving. The men she deceives show,

⁵ It is interesting to note the manner in which the 'evil' female characters often sing or use their voices in other ways to lure men to their destruction, the Sirens and Helen being the most obvious examples, but also the maids, Calypso and Circe are mentioned singing enchanting songs. For more on the supposed danger of female oral (and other) orifices, see Fulkerson (2002)

⁶ The fact that Helen's infidelity remains apparently unpunished is conspicuous, and confirms Helen, despite the obvious references to her witchcraft as well as the fact that Clytemnestra is her sister, as a unique character altogether.

understandably, little appreciation of this side of “the matchless queen of cunning” as Antinous refers to her (*Od.* II 99). He bitterly recalls her tricks in a speech to Telemachus:

For three years now, getting on to four,
she’s played it fast and loose with all our hearts,
building each man’s hopes—
dangling promises, dropping hints to each—
but all the while with something else in mind.
This was her latest masterpiece of guile:
she set up a great loom in the royal halls
and she began to weave, and the weaving finespun,
the yarns endless, and she would lead us on: (*Od.* II 100-108)

Indeed, even after death the suitors cannot forgive her for using tricks and deceit to escape their unwanted advances, which is made clear from their complaint to Agamemnon, “She neither spurned nor embraced a marriage she despised, / no, she simply planned our death, our black doom!” (*Od.* XXIV 140-141). She even tricks her own husband into losing his temper, which he managed to hold in check throughout insults from both the suitors and the maids, by testing him in order to see if he is truly her long-lost husband:

“Come, Eurycleia,
move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber—
that room the master built with his own hands.
Take it out now, sturdy bed that it is,
and spread it deep with fleece,

blankets and lustrous throws to keep him warm.”

Putting her husband to the proof—but Odysseus

blazed up in fury, lashing out at his loyal wife:

“Woman—your words, they cut me to the core!” (*Od.* XXIII 206-214)

Penelope’s strength as a character can thus be found in the active stance she takes in trying to maintain Ithaca. Admittedly, she weeps a lot in despair and the goddess Athena plays a significant part in her behaviour, and clearly the part she fulfils in *The Odyssey* is justified by her role both as a chaste wife as well as that of a mother to a son, defining her character thereby in terms of the male characters. Yet despite these more obvious classifications, she stands out by the tricks she herself plays on the men around her, her husband included as seen above, and by the manner in which she, on occasion, speaks out and addresses male audiences, as can be seen in the passage in which she remonstrates Telemachus for allowing abuse of a guest in her household:

“Consider the dreadful thing just done in our halls—

how you let the stranger be so abused! Why,

suppose our guest, sitting here at peace,

here in our own house,

were hauled and badly hurt by such cruel treatment?

You’d be shamed, disgraced in all men’s eyes!” (*Od.* XVIII 263-268)

In this passage it is clearly Penelope who maintains the honour of Odysseus’ household by insisting that the sacred laws of hospitality be upheld, and moreover, she does so publicly.

2.4 The Value of a Faithful Wife: Helen and Penelope as Women of the Bronze Age

The most obvious concept that links Helen and Penelope is fidelity, and through this link the most obvious contrast is revealed in the sense that Penelope is faithful and Helen is not. The loyalty they respectively uphold and betray is not merely the sexual loyalty of a wife to her husband; as Pomeroy points out, a noblewoman's infidelity often had political ramifications in Homeric Greece and both Helen and Penelope are prime examples of these (possible) political ramifications (Pomeroy, 1975: 35-37).

Helen is not only unfaithful to her husband Menelaus; by eloping with a Trojan prince she betrays her family and the whole of Greece, which results in the ultimate political ramification: war. As noted before, it is unclear whether or not she came to Troy voluntarily, but the epic itself does appear to alleviate some of her guilt in this matter by attributing her actions to the influence of Aphrodite, and Helen herself is tormented by her grief over the war she has caused. That is to say, the Helen we encounter in *The Iliad* is the Helen who welcomes Telemachus in *The Odyssey* is a different creature altogether in that she seems devoid of any sense of guilt or responsibility. Rather, she appears comfortable in her role as mistress of Menelaus' house again and Menelaus seems to have forgiven her.

The Odyssey itself suggests in book III that some darker forces may have had a hand in Helen's easy reinstatement, as Helen is shown to have become quite crafty with the mixing of drugs, a fact which not only anticipates the witch Circe later on in the epic, but moreover is a clear hint that Helen is a dangerous female: she bewitches men with her divine beauty, her drugs and, as mentioned earlier, her voice. Yet from a historical point of view, as Pomeroy argues, Menelaus' forgiveness of his wife can be explained in a different light: the fact that the marriage between Helen and Menelaus is both matrilineal and matrilocal, in that the heritage of both lordship and property comes through the familial line of the bride (1975: 33). Menelaus lost more than just his wife and his pride when she left for Troy—hence the severe

political ramifications. In contrast, the union between Penelope and Odysseus is both patrilineal and patrilocal, which clarifies the need for Penelope's loyalty as more than a purely moral one, in that the survival of Odysseus's dynasty depends on it. Helen, then, with her infidelity, endangers Menelaus' bloodline and destroys, admittedly by extension, Priam's bloodline, whereas Penelope, through her fidelity to her husband as well as in her bringing up his son, upholds Odysseus' bloodline.

The vices and virtues that both characters employ to cause and achieve this respectively are as equally opposed as their approach to fidelity. Helen's attribute is her divine beauty and in that sense external. This beauty, which is beyond her control, reflects her personality as she is marked by her inactive stance; she is her own victim. Moreover, her inactivity as a character and her inadequacy as a faithful wife are reflections of her beautiful, but cowardly Trojan husband. Helen is not so much a character as she is a prize over which a war is being fought; an object, rather than a subject. As Pomeroy describes it:

The society depicted by Homer and his comments upon it clearly reflect a strong system of patriarchal values (...) In an atmosphere of fierce competition among men, women were viewed symbolically and literally as properties—the prizes of contest and the spoils of conquest—and domination over them increased the male's prestige. (1975:38)

Paris, rather than winning his prize, stole her and thus does not deserve her. This is shown in his inability to dominate Helen, who chastises him and deplors her position as his wife, and further exemplified by Helen's apparent easy return to her old position on Menelaus' side, who, by winning the war, deservedly wins the prize.

Penelope's character, on the other hand, is marked for the active role she plays in the struggle for Ithaca. Her greatest virtue, apart from her fidelity, is internal: her intelligence by which she manages to keep the suitors at bay. It is in large part due to her cunning that Odysseus has a home to return to, and she employs her cunning on the domestic stage that is the domain of the Bronze-age Greek noblewoman: by upholding the laws of hospitality, by weaving and by her refusal to sleep in her marriage bed until her husband has returned. The act and imagery of weaving is in this case doubly important, as the act of weaving or spinning near the hearth was an image of domestic perfection, showing that a woman was literally and figuratively at the heart of the household (Pomeroy, 1975:42).

3. Millennia of Tradition: Appropriations of Helen and Penelope from Classical Times to the Modern Era in English Literature

3.1 Classical Times

Classical appropriations of Helen and Penelope greatly contributed to their evolution into the emblems as we know them today. Although shockingly few actual classical Greek texts have survived, it is clear that Homer's epics inspired the early Greek authors no less than they did authors throughout the ages, perhaps even more so, yet this is mostly known today through comments later authors made on their work or through Roman adaptations and interpretations of those texts. Especially Helen, as she would do in later times, spoke to the imagination and is appropriated by authors such as Euripides, who devoted an entire tragedy to her in which we are presented with a wretched, guilt-ridden Helen, who makes a powerful speech defending her own innocence in the matter of Troy. This tragedy by Euripides is especially important, as in his later satires, although admittedly a different genre altogether, the Helen he presents his audience with is much more the infamous character we know today.

Mostly through Herodotus, we know of the lyric poet Stesichorus, who claimed Helen never went to Troy at all, but was actually in Egypt throughout the war. Herodotus agrees with this idea, as he finds the notion that a nation would go to war over a mere woman quite unlikely. We know from a comment in the introduction to a poem by Theocritus, who refers to the first book of Stesichorus *Helen*, that his *Helen* consisted of more than one book. Moreover, and again through a reference elsewhere, it would seem that Stesichorus devoted a work to the denunciation of Homer, and another to the denunciation of Hesiod, for stating that Helen did go to Troy. Helen was not universally popular in classical Greek texts, having betrayed the Greeks by eloping with (or being abducted by) a Trojan prince, yet classical Greek appropriations do not yet show the full strength of Helen's fatal attraction, but rather

portray an example of a badly-behaved woman. Reports of her behaviour are often contradictory and regionally biased, but her afterlife in classical Greek literature is rather generous compared to that of Penelope, in that Helen does appear in numerous texts.

Penelope features far less in classical Greek literature than Helen does, but when she does appear it is often, and perhaps astoundingly so, to shed doubt on her alleged fidelity to Odysseus. Sources such as Pindar claim her to be Pan's mother through Apollo, whereas Herodotus states she gave birth to Pan after having slept with Hermes. Duris of Samos even goes as far as to state that Penelope slept with all her suitors and consequently, again, gave birth to the god Pan. The one thing all sources seem to agree on is that Penelope was, in fact, not faithful at all and that the result of her infidelity was the god Pan.⁷ The classical Greek authors, then, effectively wipe out the main contrast between Helen and Penelope in terms of their fidelity towards their husbands.

It is through the Roman authors that Penelope regains her status as the ultimate emblem of a wife's faithful devotion to her husband. Roman political and social views of women were the basis for what would evolve into the emblem of chastity Penelope is associated with today. Women could not be trusted to make sound decisions by themselves, as their very being (weak and light-minded) prevented them from doing so and as such they were legally, throughout their entire lives, placed under a male guardian, like a father or a husband or any other male relative. Especially under Augustan rule, marriage became the cornerstone of society and the moral politics of Augustus sought to legally outlaw adultery for women, whilst simultaneously through literary propaganda to idealise marriage as an institute (Pomeroy 1975: Ch. VIII). Within this ideology, an emblem of chastity such as Penelope—uniquely faithful in waiting twenty years for her husband to return—fitted these ideals to perfection and she was consequently transformed into the image of faithful wife that has

⁷ See Jacobsen (1974) for an in-depth study of classical sources claiming Penelope's infidelity.

persistently survived the ages. Authors such as Plautus and Propertius mention her, and Ovid even gives her a voice of her own. Interestingly enough, only a few Latin authors mention her weaving ruse, which stresses the perception that it was decidedly not Penelope's intelligence the Romans admired, but rather her devotion to her husband. And seeing as how Penelope had remained faithful to one man throughout her life (the Romans often conveniently disregarded the rumours of Penelope having given birth to Pan by cheating on Odysseus), this moreover confirmed the Roman ideal of *univira*—a woman having 'known' only one man (preferably her husband) throughout her life.

Helen, on the other hand, was not favoured much among the Romans, and from a political perspective this is perfectly understandable. After all, the Romans claim their origins in the form of their Trojan founder Aeneas, who was forced to flee a burning Troy carrying his father on his back. However, although not being favoured, she was a frequently occurring figure in Roman literature, as her relevance to Roman history as well as her exemplary function of a 'badly-behaved woman' was a moralistically useful tool and her fabled beauty continued to speak to the imagination. Vergil, in *The Aeneid*, sets the tone when the eponymous hero fights his urge to murder Helen, when he stumbles, in the midst of battle upon her, hiding in a sanctuary (ironically, she hides behind Vesta's altar) within the falling city. Vergil refers to "Helen's hated beauty", calling her a monster and presenting the Roman audience with a founder who was morally convinced that history would praise him if he were to kill her on the spot (*Aen.* II, l 606). The husband appointed to her after Paris' death, his brother Deiphobus, even goes through the trouble of making an appearance to Aeneas when he visits the underworld and his account is a decisive accusation of Helen. To him she is not the passive victim, but rather actively treacherous by aiding the Greeks in their capture of Troy.

Ovid in his *Heroides* presents us with a Helen that, throughout her letter to Paris, allows her vanity and her infatuation to slowly overtake her rationale as she persuades herself to follow him to Troy. Like he does in the same text for Penelope, Ovid grants Helen a voice of her own and what we see is a falsely modest and fickle creature seeking flattery and confirmation, thinly veiled by words that are meant to convey her chastity. To Ovid then, Helen's relocation to Troy was most certainly a voluntary elopement on Helen's part and she is thus undeniably guilty.

This general idea of Helen's voluntary infidelity, rather than her being the victim of the overpowering influence of the gods or a simple abduction, as the cause of Troy's downfall is persistent in Roman classical times, and through the Roman sphere of influence spread across Europe, where it would soon meet the added censor in the shape of Christianity.

3.2 *The Middle Ages, the Early Modern Period and the 18th century*

Anglo-Saxon literature from the early middle ages, when the Anglo-Saxons were the politically and culturally dominant force in Britain, are conspicuous for the limited references to the Homeric epics, despite the fact that the Anglo-Saxons did in fact leave a rather impressive quantity of literature behind. This absence is conspicuous, both in light of the frequent Trojan references in later Medieval literature in English, as well as in comparison with Roman tradition, which was still the dominant cultural force in Europe. Yet, considering the fact that the Anglo-Saxon dynasties established themselves after the Romans had left, they evolved outside the Roman sphere of influence, and it is in their use, or rather lack thereof, of the Homeric epics that their independence from Roman tradition and culture becomes evident. In 2012, Tyler argued convincingly that the Anglo-Saxons deliberately refrained from claiming Trojan lineage, unlike the peoples on the European mainland who were within the Roman sphere of cultural influence, in a statement of political and cultural independence from Rome (2012: 1-2).

After the Norman conquest of 1066, and the subsequent influx of French literary traditions, this situation changes quite radically. As the opening lines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrate, the French tradition saw the rebirth of the claim to Trojan descent. However, although Trojan history had made its comeback in English literature, its appropriations would differ quite radically from classical appropriations in the sense that the characters which heavily featured in medieval appropriations were peripheral characters at best, or did not even occur at all in the original Homeric epics. The cause of this phenomenon was the recovery in approximately the 2nd century CE of what we now know to be falsified records of *Dares Phrygius* and *Dictys Cretensis*. In comprehensive studies in 1908 by Griffin, and in 2011 by Clark, the literary trail that ultimately led to these developments, which saw the rise to prominence of Troilus and Cressida, and the diminution of especially the character

of Penelope, is explicated,. Throughout the English Middle Ages and consequently the following periods, her character devolved into little more than an idiomatic phrase such as we encounter in Marlowe's Early Modern *Dr Faustus*: "as chaste as was Penelope" (*Sc.* 5, 1. 152). Thereby her emblem as the epitome of chastity, a side of her character first amplified by the Romans, appears established. While this emblem does not so much misrepresent the Penelope seen in *The Odyssey*, the focus on her intelligence and her ability to determine her own fate is now, and will be for a long time to come, fully disregarded.

Helen, on the other hand, while as a literary character equally as diminished as Penelope, undergoes a significant emblematic change during the Middle Ages in the sense that her infamy increases tremendously. Baswell and Beekman Taylor explore the manner in which Helen becomes the emblem of discord during this period, and find its source with the medieval mythographers:

The Helen of the mythographers is almost entirely a figure of treachery and disaster. Her near-divine beauty is universally acknowledged, but the lust it arouses and the historical chaos it produces are emphasized above all. (1988:295).

As Griffin and Clark had already pointed out, Homer himself was mistrusted as a source for the Trojan wars, and medieval writers, scholars and mythographers turned to Dares and Dictys or to the Roman authors Vergil and Ovid, rather than to Homer (Griffin: 1908). However, this attitude does create a troubling realisation concerning the manner in which Helen's character gained such a negative connotation during the Middle Ages. After all, Griffin also points out that both Dares and Dictys refer to Helen's stay in Troy as being the result of a rape and abduction, therefore not a voluntary elopement at all. This perception does

not coincide with the prevalent medieval image of a Helen who allowed herself to be seduced by Paris and who willingly and knowingly caused the destruction of Troy. The source for this aspect of her character, then, must be found in Vergil and, to a lesser extent, Ovid alone.

Although admittedly not everyone had access to all sources, this does also suggest a certain partial selectiveness in the choice and appropriation of sources among the medieval mythographers, who all too readily amplified the negative side of Helen's character and thus created the emblem of discord by which she is known today, but which shares little resemblance with the Helen met in Homer's *The Iliad*. Where Vergil was politically motivated to demonize Helen, the mythographers, writing from within the strictly patriarchal Christian tradition, were additionally religiously motivated to set out the ways in which a seductively beautiful woman could threaten and harm men. As such, Helen, whose infidelity and beauty caused one of the greatest wars archaic times had seen, served as an excellent medium.

Throughout the Early Modern period, the emblematic use of both Helen and Penelope remains fairly constant and in line with their medieval representations. Penelope remains the embodiment of chastity and is mentioned, as is the case with Marlowe, as an example of what a good wife should be like (chaste) or is revered for her steadfast waiting for Odysseus to return, as is the case with the 1588 anonymous versified translation of her letter to her husband in book I of Ovid's *Heroides*.

The perception that Helen left voluntarily for Troy remains prevalent in Early Modern English literature, and as such the emblematic characteristics of discord and seduction persist as well, albeit slightly nuanced. The vehemence with which the medieval mythographers denounced Helen for her beauty and treachery is replaced with a hesitant admiration of or fascination with a beauty so great it could cause men to go to war. Marlowe famously lets his Dr Faustus refer to her as "the face that launched a thousand ships / and burnt the topless

towers of Ilium” (Sc. 12, ll. 80-81), and Pope, in his poetical adaptation of *The Iliad*, refers to Helen as “that fatal face”(100). This passage is significant as it not only exemplifies the earlier mentioned hesitant admiration for a beauty as great as Helen’s, but it also demonstrates a subtle change in Helen’s role in the war. Where the mythographers emphasized the active role Helen played in Troy’s destruction, and thus decidedly assigned guilt, the Early Modern authors once again treat Helen as a passive object rather than an active agent; a notion strengthened by the fact that Marlowe’s Helen does not speak at all during her appearance in his play. The voiceless female object, which both Helen and Penelope now seem to have become, reflects the female object found in the verse form that knew its hey-days in the Early Modern period, and especially the Renaissance: the sonnet; as does the manner in which Marlowe’s Faustus is forced to admire Helen for her beauty as she slides across the stage, but does not engage in dialogue with her—the female object does not speak.

This objectified passivity, which now in a sense marks the emblematic appropriations of both Helen and Penelope, survives well into the 18th and 19th centuries, at which point, as women in society slowly but certainly begin to demand a voice of their own, an interesting development in the manner in which these two characters are appropriated can be seen. Now they are no longer employed to strengthen political or religious claims and thus by extension either prescribe or warn against certain behaviour, but rather are appropriated as anti-images in an immediate reaction to a woman’s social and political position within society.

4. A Change in Purpose: Appropriations of Helen and Penelope as Social Criticism in *fin de siècle* English Literature

An important difference in the manner in which the appropriation of the characters of Helen and Penelope evolved can be found in their context: Helen, both as an emblem of overwhelming beauty as well as of fatal seduction, is often treated as a character in her own right, whereas Penelope is nearly always mentioned with regard to Odysseus. The irony of this development, when comparing it to the characters' original depiction in the epics, is hard to escape. Helen, marked and tormented by her lack of self-determination in *The Iliad*, is granted that, admittedly questionable, individuality in her afterlife, whereas Penelope, a pinnacle of self-determination and resourcefulness in *The Odyssey*, lives on in the shadow of the husband she had to do without for the entire original epic. This phenomenon is especially true for literature produced between the 18th century and the first decades of the 20th century.

In the Victorian age specifically, one might expect the Penelope image, in the persona of the faithful wife as it was mainly delivered to us through the Romans, to be a significant image in the arts. This period in British history, which would witness the birth of the near-impossible ideal of the 'domestic angel' of the married woman, is (as far as the position of women in society goes) a prime example of women defined and valued by the actions of the men in their lives:

“Women understood that, under both Victorian law and custom, wives had no separate status or identity; their own existences were determined by the actions of the men they had married and whom they could divorce only at great cost and at the price of wearing the unsavory label divorcé” (Stetz, 2001: 515)

A social ideal such as this craves an image such as Penelope's to either fight or flaunt as an example. However, though perhaps exemplary for Victorian sub-surface fascination with all matters taboo and scandalous, it is Helen who is most prominently featured in literature from the *fin de siècle* and the first decades of the 20th century. Authors such as Brooke, Poe, Rooney and Wilde, to name a few, mention her or even devote entire works to her, whereas Penelope makes but few appearances.

Alongside the more traditional, and far more common, archetypal appropriations of Helen and Penelope, another class of appropriations of these characters surfaces in this period. This type of appropriation also draws on the recognisable archetypal features of both Helen and Penelope, yet rather than conforming to their emblematic properties and functioning from within those boundaries, these appropriations are employed to voice criticism on society—especially on a woman's place within that society.

4.1 Redefining an Emblem: Glorification of Beauty in Oscar Wilde's "The New Helen"

Wilde's attraction to an image such as Helen's is perhaps unsurprising when viewed from the perspective of his adherence to literary aestheticism. Within the profound belief that the main function of art is to be beautiful, and to convey its truth in that sense, as Keats so eloquently phrased it, "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'", a character such as Helen's, the veritable embodiment of ultimate beauty, would become a figure to be worshipped rather than despised. Moreover, Wilde's choice of deifying that very quality for which Helen had gained her infamous reputation perfectly fits this author. After all, Wilde was notorious for ignoring many of the oppressive Victorian standards, and he was an open supporter of the 'New Woman'.

The end of the 19th century sees the preamble to the first feminist wave, as women began to question their role in society and demand legal and political emancipation. The

women that would qualify for the label “New Woman”, a term then mostly derogatively used⁸, moved into the public male-dominated domain of the arts and created art herself—art that often critically evaluated the limited rights Victorian women held. This development consequently resulted in what Walls quite strikingly refers to as “domestic feminism”:

“Thus the New Woman novels, enlivening reform rhetoric even while operating within the boundaries of conformist culture, created a new mode of activism for Victorian women that enabled them to proffer critique about marriage and society, although (and often sadly) from within the home: a tactic I term “domestic feminism.”” (Walls, 2002: 229).

Wilde’s poem “The New Helen”, is often disregarded by critics and scholars in favour of his better-known (and better-appreciated) works and, more importantly, in favour of the focus on his sexual preferences, to which the final, and published, version of this poem would seem almost antithetical in its reverence of female beauty personified. The poem was published in Wilde’s first collection of poetry, named uncharacteristically unpretentiously *Poems*, in 1881 and is believed to be an ode to Lillie Langtry. However, the choices Wilde made with regard to his use of Helen deserve a close reading, as his appropriation involves a sophisticated comment on both the virtue of beauty as well as on the manner in which Victorian society was treating those who resisted its ideological representation of a woman’s role in society. Wilde’s use of the Helen imagery in his poem “The New Helen” not only subtly converts the dangers of a beauty such as Helen’s into an object of reverence, but by linking it to a prominent ‘New Woman’ of the worst kind, an actress of low morale by Victorian standards, he simultaneously advocates the role of woman as a creator of art.

⁸ Stetz (2001) notes that before the term was appropriated by the upcoming feminist movement as a badge of honour, the term was often used derogatively in the press long before that.

As mentioned before, Wilde was a prominent believer in the philosophy of Aestheticism and thoroughly abhorred the idea that art should serve a moral or didactic purpose. Where within the ideology of Victorian dogmatic principles concerning the appropriate behaviour of women, the image of Helen might serve to underline the potentially catastrophic results that could come from a beautiful woman allowed to reign free, Wilde completely turns the image around. He fully recognizes Helen's role in the death of the great warriors of Troy and Greece:

It was for thee that young Sarpedôn died,
And Memnôn's manhood was untimely spent;
It was for thee gold-crested Hector tried
With Thetis' child that evil race to run,
In the last year of thy beleaguerment; (22-26)

Yet despite this recognition, this by no means weakens his admiration for her. Rather the opposite, he intensifies it, by suggesting that even in the afterlife the Greeks and Trojans still battle over her:

Ay! even now the glory of thy fame
Burns in those fields of trampled asphodel,
Where the high lords whom Ilion knew so well
Clash ghostly shields, and call upon thy name. (27-30)

In his poem, Wilde validates this devotion by linking her persona and fate to the goddess Aphrodite herself:

Nay, thou wert hidden in that hollow hill
With one who is forgotten utterly,
That discrowned Queen men call the Erycine⁹; (41-43)

Like Aphrodite, Helen is, although decidedly a woman, no ordinary creature and it is in the description that Wilde gives of Helen's birth—very unlike the Leda myth and very much like Aphrodite's mythical birth while also heavenly laden with biblical imagery surrounding the birth of Christ—that he completes his deification:

Thou wert not born as common women are!
But, girt with silver splendour of the foam,
Didst from the depths of sapphire seas arise!
And at thy coming some immortal star,
Bearded with flame, blazed in the Eastern skies,
And waked the shepherds on thine island-home. (81-86)

Wilde's Helen, then, in her magnificent beauty is to be an object of worship rather than hostility:

The lotos-leaves which heal the wounds of Death
Lie in thy hand; O, be thou kind to me,
While yet I know the summer of my days;
For hardly can my tremulous lips draw breath

⁹ Erycine: another name for Venus, the Latin name for Aphrodite

To fill the silver trumpet with thy praise,
So bowed am I before thy mystery;
So bowed and broken on Love's terrible wheel,
That I have lost all hope and heart to sing,
Yet care I not what ruin time may bring
If in thy temple thou wilt let me kneel. (51-60)

The Helen Wilde appropriates is still the Helen Vergil has left to the world, but rather than despising her for the war into which she “Didst lure the Old World’s chivalry and might” (9), he rather admires her for possessing those very qualities. His Helen, while undoubtedly responsible, need not feel guilty or ashamed, but rather she should be proud of the power she possesses. And indeed, this same image of a powerful Helen is encountered in another poem in the same collection. In “The Burden of Itys”, Wilde presents his audience with a royal and mighty Helen, “Queen Helen lying in the ivory room” (157), and her Paris is demoted to “an amorous red-lipped boy” who sits “at her side”, “Trimming with dainty hand his helmet’s plume” (158-160). Those familiar with the original epic unmistakably recognise the passage from book III in which Paris lingers with Helen in her rooms after having been whisked away from the duel with Menelaus by Aphrodite, while his fellow Trojans fight on outside the city walls. Wilde’s representation of this passage underlines Paris’ weakness even further in his contrast of the “red-lipped boy” and “Queen Helen”, and his message is clear: she is a powerful being worthy of such devotion—who can blame Paris?

Few, if any, have ever regarded “The New Helen” as anything other than an ode to an actress Wilde admired, and it is not considered to be among his best work. However, when taking the thorough method Wilde employs in the deification of his Helen as the basis for his comparison to Langtry into account, in addition to the obviously suggestive title, the careful

observant discerns a further-reaching implication than the mere expression of admiration towards an actress. In one of her articles, Stetz makes a compelling case concerning the significance of Wilde's role in the artistic development of female artists in Victorian London. Moreover, she outlines Wilde's social rebellion in his active and open encouragement of these so-called 'New Women':

Wilde, too, moved easily among men, with numerous male friends, heterosexual and homosexual alike. (...) Yet Wilde was also a social rebel—almost a traitor to his gender—in seeking out the company of women and demonstrating how comfortable he was inhabiting their sitting rooms or going with them to their dressmakers, while also publicizing the pleasure he took in doing so. Such conduct might have been forgiven an Irish upstart if his intimacies had been formed only with duchesses, for they could better his position in London or pay for his literary ventures, and social climbing was something that all English gentlemen could understand. From the outset, however, Wilde befriended women who worked—especially women who worked in the arts—and who, in the eyes of other men, were creatures to be viewed with suspicion, if not hostility. (2001: 525)

As stated earlier, Wilde did not believe art should be morally prescriptive or didactic in nature. His poem "The New Helen" falls in line with this belief: it is a conveyance of Wilde's personal admiration of women in the arts in general, and the actress Lillie Langtry specifically and as such it is openly supportive. Wilde's fairly self-explanatory choice of title effectively links the classical embodiment of beauty he so carefully deifies in his poem to a contemporary embodiment of the 'New Woman' he so admires, and thus, in his reconstruction of the image

of Helen, he employs it as a sophisticated, yet to the careful reader blatantly obvious, seal of approval for those women seeking to express themselves in the arts.

4.2 The Old and New Penelope: Victor's "The New Penelope" and Butler's "The Authoress of the Odyssey"

Samuel Butler is one of few modern writers to draw up a rather unflattering character analysis of Penelope as she appears in *The Odyssey*. He admonishes her for her schemes as well as questions her fidelity, and feels certain these characteristics (among other perceived flaws in the original epic) result from the author being female:

A man who was speaking of my theory that the "Odyssey" was written by a woman as a mere *mauvaise plaisanterie*, once told me it was absurd, for the first thing a woman would have thought of after the suitors had been killed was the dining room carpet. I said that *mutatis mutandis* this was the very thing she did think of. (Butler, IV)

This passage is emblematic for Butler's treatment of both *The Odyssey* itself as well as what he is certain must be a "young, unmarried, headstrong woman" (Butler VI), since Butler imagines the fancied archaic Greek authoress like he would any woman of the middle and upper classes in 19th-century Britain. This becomes especially clear from the passage in which he remonstrates the writer for the implausible storyline of Penelope's inability to get rid of her suitors:

Did she set them by the ears by repeating with embellishments what they had said to her about one another? Did she ask Antinous or Eurymachus to sit to

her for her web—give them a good stiff pose, make them stick to it, and talk to them all the time? Did she find errands for them to run, and then scold them, and say she did not want them? or make them do commissions for her and forget to pay them, or keep on sending them back to the shop to change things, and they had given ever so much too much money and she wished she had gone and done it herself? Did she insist on their attending family worship? In a word, did she do a single one of the thousand things so astute a matron would have been at no loss to hit upon if she had been in earnest about not wishing to be courted? With one touch of common sense the whole fabric crumbles into dust. (V)

In short, if Penelope could not expel the suitors from her home, it is probably because she has not really tried—after all, women can easily bore men away. It is precisely this imposition of personal theory and self-satisfaction which literally seeps from Butler’s essays which have caused these essays to be met with barely anything other than ridicule. However, and despite his so clearly missing the mark on so many occasions, his essays are in fact interesting and relevant in the light of this thesis, as Butler perfectly exemplifies not only the near-inescapable practise of appropriation and interpretation from one’s own perspective (and thus from one’s own social and moral framework), but he also, albeit undoubtedly without the express intention of doing so, highlights a few contemporary issues through his analysis of *The Odyssey* quite accurately; issues that are reflected and further developed in Frances Fuller Victor’s short story “The New Penelope”.

Bube, in a 1997 article, through a close reading of several works by Victor, makes a very strong case in arguing Victor’s criticism of both the position of women in society (socially, politically and legally) as well as within marriage, in that their very existence was subject to their husbands. She states that Victor deemed “the nineteenth-century institution of

marriage as unfit for women” (Bube, 1997:40). Bube’s claim that Victor strongly felt the injustice of the impossibility of a woman’s social and economic independence is compelling; especially so when read within the context of 19th-century new western frontier literary traditions, of which Victor was a proponent:

Life in the West betokens the socially oppressive state of gender everywhere in the mid-nineteenth century. The story interrogates and reconceptualizes the equation of women and home as it shows both what regionally specific and wider class- and gender-specific conflicts women must negotiate to create new personal and social identities. (...) Furthermore, Penelope will be the focus of this story, which will be a western version of the deserted wife and mother and the moral and social conflicts that result from her uncertain social status as wife or widow. (Bube, 1997:45)

Yet while she does touch on the obvious appropriation of Penelope, she pays comparatively little attention to the manner in which Victor reshapes her Penelope for her own purpose, without losing touch of traditional contemporary reception. On the few occasions Victor does depart significantly from tradition, the motive for doing so is obvious while simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically so, in line with that same tradition.

Victor goes through great pains to make sure the reader is aware of the allusion to Homeric Penelope in the persona of her protagonist, Mrs Anne Greyfield. She is the mother of a son who was an infant when his father was presumed dead, and who, at the time the narrated dialogue is supposedly documented, is a young man currently away on a trip to recover (as we find out at the end of the story) his long-lost father. Mrs Greyfield, early on in the story described as having “rested her cheek on her hand”, in replication of the traditional iconic

portrayal of Penelope, states that “Mr. Greyfield was my first, last, and only husband,” and despite her many suitors and her having remarried, had remained physically faithful to her first husband as well (5&7). Moreover, as if to ensure that even the most uncultured reader picks up on the allusion, she has her narrator literally make the comparison between Mrs Greyfield and Penelope on several occasions. And then there is, of course, the title.

It is tempting to connect the title to the concept “New Woman”, but it is unclear whether the term as such was already in use during the time in which she wrote. However, whether or not she was familiar with the actual term, the sentiment remains the same in that it entails the reconstruction of an existing and outdated principle. Victor’s “New Penelope”, in the character of Mrs Anne Greyfield, is very much a victim of Victorian marriage morals and gender politics and the most obvious parallel drawn with Homeric Penelope is found in the manner in which society pressures single women into marriage. A significant factor in this portrayal can be found in the term ‘society’, in that men and women alike urge the protagonist to commit herself to a man. This lack of solidarity among her own sex is a recurrent theme in the story, which is made immediately clear from the narrator’s opening lines, in which she introduces herself as “that anomalous creature—a woman who loves her own sex,” (5). To the narrator this is an apparent unique position to be in, “For, among the vices of women I had long counted uncharitableness” (5). In a conversation between the narrator and Mrs Greyfield, the narrator’s proclaimed Penelope, in her unfortunate history, offers further proof of the inability of women to stand up for each other, when she finds no help in escaping her unwanted marriage:

“How could other women hold still, and know that a young creature like you was being tortured in that way?”

“The inertia of women in each other's defense is immense,” returned Mrs. Greyfield,” (20)

It is this lack of female solidarity Butler also notes in women in general and in the *Odyssey* specifically, and takes as a further sign that the author therefore must have been a woman:

Not only does the writer shew a markedly greater both interest and knowledge when dealing with women, but she makes it plain that she is exceedingly jealous for the honour of her sex, and by consequence inexorable in her severity against those women who have disgraced it. Goddesses may do what they like, they are not to be judged by mortal codes; but a mortal woman who has fallen must die. (IV)

Indeed, it is through the vicious gossip of women that Mrs Greyfield is actually put in the position of not being able to escape marriage in the end. As does Penelope, she finds little sympathy and no understanding for her desire to remain a widowed wife, faithful, like Penelope, to her long-lost husband.

Yet, whereas Penelope implements her intelligence in both deceiving the suitors and stringing them along with apparent encouragements she hands out¹⁰, Victor's Mrs Greyfield is characterized by fear and inactivity, terrified as she is of giving out the wrong impression and thereby tempting men to believe she is open to suggestions of both the moral (marriage) and the immoral (affair) kind:

¹⁰ The contents of these messages is not revealed in *The Odyssey*, but the suitors, as well as Telemachus and Athena refer to them scathingly, suggesting them to be a kind of betrayal on Penelope's part (books II, XIII, XVI). For an in-depth study on the function of these messages, see Marquardt (1985).

“I was telling you that although I had so many suitors, of so many classes, and none of them desirable, to my way of thinking, I was really gradually being influenced to marry. You must know that a woman so young and so alone in the world, and who had to labor for her bread, and her child's bread, could not escape the solicitations of men who did not care to marry; and it was this class who gave me more uneasiness than all the presuming ignorant ones, who would honor me by making me a wife. I know it is constantly asserted, by men themselves, that no woman is approached in that way who does not give some encouragement. But no statement could be more utterly false—unless they determine to construe ordinary politeness and friendliness into a covert advance. The cunning of the “father of lies” is brought to bear to entrap artless and inexperienced women into situations whence they are assured there is no escape without disgrace.” (10)

It is not so much that Victor’s “New Penelope” lacks the necessary intelligence, quite the contrary, but rather the point she is making is that intelligence will not help a woman’s position in society, as she is first and foremost defined by her sex and in that sense 19th-century society severely limits her prospects where social and economic independence are concerned.

At this point in the narrative, Homer’s Penelope and Victor’s Mrs Greyfield clearly take different paths. The only way, after all, for Penelope to maintain her virtue is to remain unmarried and thus true to Odysseus. Society’s pressure, however, proves too much even for Mrs Greyfield: “It is as Pope says: You ‘first endure, then pity, then embrace.’ I endured, felt contempt, and finally yielded to the pressure.”(8). Paradoxically, she does not yield simply because her surroundings demand her to be wed, but rather to avoid remaining the subject of

gossip. Indeed, the only manner for Mrs Greyfield to maintain her virtue then is by remarrying.

Victor reshapes her Mrs Greyfield into a Penelope as she would have been had she lived in the 19th century; a woman socially and economically fully dependant on her husband, much like the way in which the ancient Romans subjected their women to the guardianship of men. This falls in line with the belief among Victorian men, even pseudo-scientifically written up by Edward Clarke in 1873, that a woman's limited intellectual capacity was a biological fact and that women should not be allowed legal or economic freedom for their own protection. It is precisely this fundamental belief which likely prompted Butler to question Penelope's fidelity in the first place—after all, the idea that any woman would willingly remain alone for more than twenty years, and having to look after the business side of things during that time to boot, must have been simply inconceivable to the average 19th-century white Anglo-Saxon male.

Butler suggest his 'authoress' to have attempted to "whitewash" Penelope in order to protect her (clearly lost) virtue (Butler, V). These attempts to keep up a woman's good name did fall in the sphere of Butler's, as well as Victor's, understanding and were recognised by both as relevant. Butler clearly refuses to "swallow" the Odysseys' account of Penelope's virtue and reviles Homeric Penelope for her supposed behaviour:

As for Laertes being so badly off as Anticlea says he was in Book xi., there is not one grain of truth in that story. The writer had to make him out poor in order to explain his not having interfered to protect Penelope, but Penelope's excuse for making her web was that he was a man of large property. It is the same with the suitors. When it is desired to explain Telemachus's not having tried in some way to recover from them, they are so poor that it would be a

waste of money to sue them; when, on the other hand, the writer wants Penelope to air her woman's wit by getting presents out of them (xviii. 274-280), just before Ulysses kills them, they have any amount of money. One day more, and she would have been too late. The writer knew that very well, but she was not going to let Penelope lose her presents. She evidently looks upon man as fair game, which male writers are much less apt to do. Of course the first present she receives is a new dress. (Butler V)

Although academically speaking Butler's analysis of the situation is, at the very least, questionable, the sarcasm and open disdain he displays towards the manner in which he supposes, quite in the same manner as how gossip starts in that it is based on half-truths and assumptions, Penelope to have behaved were very real and potentially socially fatal evaluations of a woman's behaviour in the 19th century. In that sense then, Victor's choice of having her protagonist succumb to the pressure is self-explanatory and it is, in fact, Samuel Butler's unkind assessment of Penelope's character which acts as a bridge between the Penelope we find in *The Odyssey* and the one Victor reinvents in the character of Mrs Greyfield.

5. An Edifying Legend: Women Writers, Women Speakers and Emblematic Representations in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

“The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak.”

Penelope, *The Penelopiad*, by Margaret Atwood (2005: 13)

When scholars analyse and discuss Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, attention is usually drawn on either the narrative technique, or on the role that the twelve hanged maids play within the story. Howells focusses on the narrative style, stating that “The Penelopiad is her [Atwood's] Gothic version of Homer's *Odyssey*” (2008:5), whereas Staels argues that Atwood parodies “mythologizing and de-mythologizing devices to achieve a semantic transformation of the classical myths and employ[s] burlesque travesty to bring about ... stylistic modification” (2009:100). Staels' moreover emphasizes the maids' interposing chorus and its distinctly burlesque qualities as the manner in which Atwood foregrounds both gender and class in her novel (2009:100). This last idea is confirmed by Mihoko, who argues that the maids,

respond to the *Odyssey's* own representation of the creative process as feminine and reflect the reassessment of the epic by recent feminist criticism (...) Atwood mounts a critique of the *Odyssey* from a perspective that foregrounds issues of class as well as gender, calling attention to the unjust fate of the executed maids and to Penelope's responsibility in their sacrifice to the interests of patriarchy and the ruling class. (2007:263)

Atwood's narrative style is, admittedly, interesting and it is moreover hard to escape both gender and class issues when reading any of Atwood's novels. However, the narrow approach

taken in each of these studies results in a failure to recognise this novel as a whole. As such, little to no attention has been paid to the manner in which Atwood effectively claims the epic as a genre for the woman writer; not simply by parodying the verse form or the underlying myths, but by employing female stereotypes in her redefinition of epic conventions. In that sense, Atwood deconstructs the epic genre and reinvents it as one suited for a female speaker and moreover, through the intensified female domain she creates, makes sure it is recognisable as such.

Amplified female stereotypical traits are myriad in *The Penelopiad*, but are most clearly exemplified in the female speaker, Penelope, who carefully, both through her words and her personality, deconstructs her own iconic representation.

5. 1 Deconstructing the Genre: The Penelopiad as a Female Epic.

The act of writing an exclusively female epic appears to call for a renewal of certain epic conventions. Female authorship of epic poetry has long been a controversial subject among feminist scholars. Friedman argues that the epic is a problematic genre for the woman writer as it typically deals with the “masculine domain”, in that “the epic hero is traditionally male, his heroic qualities are masculine, and the ordeal he faces is a masculine *agon*” (1986:205). The epic poem, then, is a traditionally masculine genre: written by men, told by men and populated by men. This prompted Gilbert & Gubar to speak of “anxiety of authorship” when female writers attempt to enter the male sphere of epic-writing. The problem they identify consists not only of the fact that the female epic writer must fear, that “she cannot fight a male precursor on “his” terms and win,” but moreover “that she cannot “beget” art upon the female body of the muse” (1979:49). Gilbert and Gubar turn to Rich’s theories of “Re-vision”; “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical new

direction” (1975:90). In Rich’s theories, then, Gilbert and Gubar find, lies the answer or at least the starting point, for the female epic writer:

“She can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.” (Gilbert & Gubar: 49)

In a somewhat adapted manner, this is precisely what Margaret Atwood has achieved in her novel *The Penelopiad*; not by finding a precursor in the shape of a female writer, but rather in the shape of the appropriated epic female character, Penelope, who becomes the speaker in her own epic. Atwood transforms the masculine public domain in which an epic is traditionally set into a female narrative sphere by changing its themes to domestic themes, and by supplanting the oral tradition in the shape of the bard’s song with gossip and hear-say. Moreover, she reconstructs the role of the epic speaker itself through her exclusively female speakers by linking its essence to the act of creation rather than the act of conveying.

The traditionally public stage of the epic is replaced by a domestic setting and domestic themes in Atwood’s reconstruction of *The Odyssey*. As Penelope is the epic speaker, the domain must necessarily for the greater part be set at Ithaca, but Atwood does not limit Penelope’s tale to that which is known from *The Odyssey*, as she includes both her (after)life before and after *The Odyssey* takes place. While her husband finds himself wandering the seas and being held captive by nymphs and goddesses, Penelope finds herself in charge of Odysseus’ estates, an occupation (generally glanced over in *The Odyssey*), that she describes in great detail:

As the years passed I found myself making inventories—where there are slaves there's bound to be theft, if you don't keep a sharp eye out—and planning the palace menus and wardrobes. (75)

Through my steward I traded for supplies, and soon had a reputation as a smart bargainer. (76)

Through my foreman I oversaw the farms and the flocks, and made a point of learning about such things as lambing and calving, and how to keep a sow from eating her farrow. (76)

In addition to the general handling of estate affairs, she is also confronted with the running of the household staff, having to “tell the spinners and weavers what to make” (75-76).

Moreover, she finds herself in charge of managing the slaves, which involves being “aware of any animosities and vendettas” (76) and keeping track of any romantic affiliations between them:

The male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones, not without permission. (...) If that sort of thing got out of hand I naturally had to sell them. (76)

This attention to detail, and consequently the great pride Penelope takes in excelling at these tasks, marks a clear shift from public to domestic setting.

Moreover, even when events do take place in the public domain, Penelope's accounts of them are decidedly domestically themed. This becomes especially clear in her description

of her own wedding. The wedding competition and feast are settings that would not be misplaced in a traditional epic; indeed, we see competitions and feasts in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The shift in tradition, then, is not to be found in the setting themselves, but rather in the manner in which the female epic speaker chooses to convey them. Where in the competition at the court of the Phaeacians in *The Odyssey* in book VIII, for example, the focus is on the competitors and their behaviour during the various matches, *The Penelopiad* brushes over the competition at Penelope's wedding in a few short sentences: "Thus I missed the race itself. Odysseus won it. He cheated, as I later learned" (37). Penelope, like any young girl about to be married, prefers to describe her own feelings on the day itself instead:

Picture me, then, as a clever but not overly beautiful girl of marriageable age, let's say fifteen. Suppose I'm looking out of the window of my room—which was on the second floor of the palace—down into the courtyard where the contestants are gathering: all those young hopefuls who wish to compete for my hand. (...) The palace women have dolled me up as best they can, minstrels have composed songs of praise in my honour—'radiant as Aphrodite', and all the usual claptrap—but I feel shy and miserable. The young men laugh and joke; they seem at ease with one another; they do not glance up.

I know it isn't me they're after, not Penelope the Duck. It's only what comes with me—the royal connection, the pile of glittering junk. No man will ever kill himself for love of me.

And no man ever did. (31-32)

The same applies to the wedding feast: where both in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* feasts, sacrifices and the amount of food and valuable wares are described in great detail, again, in

The Penelopiad, the focus is on the internal sphere of emotion in Penelope and the traditions are summarized into casual references, almost as an afterthought:

As for me, I had trouble making it through the ceremony—the sacrifices of animals, the offerings to the gods, the lustral sprinklings, the libations, the prayers, the interminable songs. I felt quite dizzy. I kept my eyes downcast, so all I could see of Odysseus was the lower part of his body. *Short legs*, I kept thinking, even at the most solemn moments. (39)

Both the domestic settings in the form of her childhood home, Ithaca and even Penelope's afterlife, as well as the domestic themes in the form of the focus in Penelope's accounts of scenes that could equally be found in the public domain facilitate the construction of a distinctly domestic atmosphere in which the female speaker, especially the one who stayed behind at home, can deliver her version of the story.

The Penelopiad presents a cast of exclusively female speakers (by nature uniquely qualified for the act of creation) with Penelope as the epic speaker and the maids as the interposing Chorus. In doing so, the novel redefines the role of the epic speaker by making it one of story-making rather than story-telling—of creation rather than imitation. Atwood positions her Penelope, albeit in retrospective and in her Penelope's own words, as Odysseus' equal in intelligence, but, more importantly, as an equally gifted story-maker. Anyone who has read *The Odyssey* knows of "wily" Odysseus' ability to lie and tell tales; the epic's opening lines mention these very qualities: "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns ..." (*Od.* I. 1). *The Odyssey* itself does in fact mention this ability in Penelope as well, most notably voiced in the complaints of Antinous about the manner in which Penelope has tricked them with her messages into believing she would eventually choose one of them

(*Od.* XIV 133-168). Atwood amplifies this side of Penelope's character not only by making her the narrator and focaliser of her own story, but most specifically through the hints her Penelope drops every now and then, warning her audience she might not be such a reliable narrator as one might hope for.

Penelope the story-maker first and foremost deals with the legend "the singers, the yard-spinners" (12) created around her:

And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? (12)

She is fully aware of her epic status, but even more conscious of the fact that she has mostly survived as a supporting role in her husband's great tale, rather than as an independent character:

Down here everyone arrives with a sack (...) full of words—words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you. (...); my own is of a reasonable size, though a lot of the words in it concern my eminent husband. (11)

She complains of "how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself" (13), and noting the many stories which are downright "outrageous", "monstrous" and not "worth the breath expended on them" (118). In reaction, after having bided her time, she claims the right to tell her own tale with conviction. However, in her claim she also gives out a warning: this is to be "story-making" rather than

simply her version of events (13). It is not a task she relishes, as it is a “low art”, done by “old women” like Eurycleia; “strolling beggars” like her long-lost husband; “blind singers” like Homer; and “children”, like her own son (13). Yet despite her repulsion, “She’ll “spin a thread” thereby simultaneously indicating she might not prove to be the most reliable of narrators (13); a notion that is confirmed in the scene in which Penelope and Odysseus are finally reunited:

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

But we did.

Or so we told each other. (139)

Atwood continually accompanies references to story-making with references to spinning and weaving throughout the story: the bards are “yard-spinners” (12); and when announcing herself as the epic speaker, she states she’ll “spin a thread of my own” (13). Penelope’s status as a creator of stories is validated by the very myth which has her perpetually connected to the art of actual weaving:

Finally a scheme occurred to me. When telling the story later I used to say it was Pallas Athena, goddess of weaving, who’d given me this idea, and perhaps this was true, for all I know; but crediting some god for one’s inspirations was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not. (95)

In accompanying the references to narration throughout *The Penelopiad* by imagery connected to the art of spinning and weaving, while simultaneously presenting Penelope as an expert in the craft, her position as an authoritative creator of art, or the figurative spinning and weaving of stories, is both confirmed as well as reinforced. The suggestion of divine inspiration from Pallas Athena, coincidentally also the goddess of wisdom and her husband's greatest supporter, further validates this position.

In accordance with epic convention Penelope announces herself as the epic speaker, yet she simultaneously modifies this announcement by suggesting it to be an act of story-making, rather than story-telling. This suggestion that stories by their very nature are untruthful, in addition to the accusation that it is an art practised by "old women, beggars, blind singers and children" (13), supplies the kind of stories expected to follow with a gossip-like connotation, which is exemplary for the manner in which information is passed and ultimately related in *The Penelopiad*. As mentioned before, *The Penelopiad* is unique in that it is told exclusively from a female perspective. The epic as a genre is deliberately reformed into near-parody to make room for the female speakers, in that it consciously dispenses with many of its conventions,¹¹ or adds conventions from other genres¹², yet by its very title the epic subject matter is clearly announced: this is to be the domestic epic of the one who stayed behind. Women tell the tales this time, and women dominate its discourse. Atwood, playing with the oral tradition through which Homer's original epics have survived, has reshaped the tradition into a type of oral discourse traditionally associated stereotypically with the female sphere: that of gossip. The overlying implication here, however, is not the idea that women tend to turn to gossip more readily than men, but rather the fact that rumours and gossip were the main source of news and information, since "Any rumour was better than none," and so they "listened avidly to all" (79). This is especially true for Penelope, who depends mainly

¹¹ Penelope deliberately does not start *in medias res* (16) nor invokes the muse, for example.

¹² The most obvious example of which, of course, is the chorus of the maids, taken from Greek drama.

upon her maids and Eurycleia, who “had a fund of information” (90); not always an undivided pleasure:

Sometimes I wondered whether the maids were making some of this up, out of high spirits or just to tease me.(...) Eurycleia was especially diligent in the reporting of malicious gossip, whether true or invented. (90)

Despite the fact that what we today would describe as common gossip is Penelope’s sole source of information from the outside world, she does on occasion betray a certain preference for gossip in her (often unfavourable) descriptions of the women around her, as in one of her accounts of Eurycleia:

she was widely respected—according to her—because she was so intensely reliable. (...) Some of the maids told me later that Laertes had refrained, not out of respect for Eurycleia, but from fear of his wife, (55)

Many of the myths referred to in both of the Homeric epics are conveyed as hear-say and rumour, and Penelope herself points out it would be wise not to take them too literally. The myth of Odysseus being a demi-god through the (secret) union of his mother with a god is brought as “a slanderous item going around by Anticleia”, which she finds “difficult to believe, as who would want to seduce Anticleia?” (45); and her reference to the mythical birth and parentage of Helen clearly demonstrates her own opinion on the truth of that particular tale:

It was claimed she'd come out of an egg, (...) I wonder how many of us really believed that swan-rape concoction? There were a lot of stories of that kind going round then— (26).

In a matter of a few sentences she downgrades *The Odyssey* itself to a collection of confused reports and jumbled rumours:

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 cave full of bates, 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. (78-79)

Gossip and hear-say, and the act of story-making, is not solely a female occupation in *The Penelopiad*. In her claim for the position of speaker in her own epic, Penelope already hinted as much, by mentioning Homer, Odysseus and Telemachus in the same breath as “Old women” (13) and she further amplifies male participation in this particular art when admitting that Odysseus “spun a plausible yarn,” (114) and saying about Telemachus that “He was by nature a spinner of falsehoods like his father, but he was not yet very good at it.” (113). Men, in Atwood's novel, are inhabitants of the female sphere and as such partake in gossip quite as much as women do, as is moreover made clear from the manner in which the news of Helen's elopement with Paris reaches Ithaca:

Helen, he said, had run away with a prince of Troy. (...) Meanwhile, Paris and the wicked Helen were laughing at them from behind the lofty walls of Troy. It was quite the business, said our guest, with evident relish: like all of us, he enjoyed it when the high and mighty fell flat on their faces. Everyone was talking about it, he said. (67-68)

It is thus imperative to recognize the fact that each word of Penelope's account of her side of *The Odyssey* has reached her audience after having not only passed through several channels, in all likelihood having been slightly embellished with each new story-teller, but also having been carefully censured by modern-day Penelope in Hades, who, after all, is the one telling the story now. In effect, by designing the flow of information as such, Atwood creates a parodic reflection of the epic oral tradition, while simultaneously placing her Penelope on equal footing with her husband as a master of story-making.

5.2 Deconstructing the Myth: Stereotypes and 'Real' Women in The Penelopiad

The association of the image of Penelope in the arts as the archetypal wife, and its ensuing use as a prescriptive role model have been problematic, if not aggravating, for those harbouring feminist sympathies. When perfection of character is measured by a woman's faithfulness and subservience to her husband, a challenge presents itself to those who wish to advocate a woman's emancipation and independence from masculine supervision, while this simultaneously calls forth the uneasy reality of a lack of solidarity among women themselves. Feminist scholars and authors such as Victor (1870), as seen earlier, but also Cicoux (1976)

and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) have called upon women to unite themselves, rather than fight among each other, in essays and works of fiction.

Competition among women is also a persistent theme in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Atwood's Penelope destroys her own myth, and does so deliberately, by giving her version of events and characters. Yet rather than creating a fairly straightforward feminist appropriation of the traditional epic, Atwood moreover, and most effectively, deconstructs the myth through the character of her Penelope, as she presents her audience with an insecure, cynical and at times petty and jealous woman. Atwood's Penelope actively speaks up against the manner in which her character has been sanctified in the arts, while passively she simultaneously displays character traits that are decidedly unsaintly. By allowing Penelope to tell her side of the story and be a true story-maker, added to the fact that she speaks retrospectively, carefully having censured her side of the story, Atwood pulls her out of her husband's shadow and positions her as Odysseus' equal, while also destroying her mythical status by portraying her as a round, therefore flawed and thus realistic, or at least recognisable, character.

In accordance with conclusions drawn by Lefkowitz (1985) and later Lewis (2011) that the role of women in classical texts should be examined in light of their relationship to the men in those texts, be it either as a mother, a wife or a daughter, Atwood's Penelope is portrayed in all of these roles: a mother desperately trying to deal with her stubborn teenaged son; a wife left to her own devices by her husband for all intents and purposes for twenty years, during which time she is expected to both remarry as well as stay faithful to a decidedly unfaithful husband; and a public figure under constant scrutiny from all those around her—especially the women. The maternal influences in her life are determined by her own mother, her mother-in-law and Odysseus' old nurse, Eurycleia and are, arguably unsurprisingly, all complicated. Her role as a mother is clearly exemplified in her strained relationship with her

teenaged son and, to a lesser extent, in her relationship to the twelve maids. Atwood, however, offers an additional role: that of Penelope as a woman—a role best portrayed in light of her relationship with Helen. Especially in Penelope's relationships with other female characters, this lack of solidarity among women, and their competitive stance towards each other, which feminist scholars determine to be an obstacle to true female emancipation, is made painfully clear.

Penelope as a daughter has a highly complicated relationship with all maternal figures in her life. Her own mother, who is an immortal Naiad, does not appear to be particularly well-suited for the part:

My mother, like all Naiads, was beautiful, but chilly at heart. (...) She was elusive. When I was little I often tried to throw my arms around her, but she had a habit of sliding away. (...) she preferred swimming in the river to the care of small children, and I often slipped her mind. If my father hadn't had me thrown into the sea she might have dropped me in herself, in a fit of absent-mindedness or irritation. She had a short attention span and rapidly changing emotions. (19)

Their relationship is, at the very least, distant, albeit not hostile. The problem for Penelope lies mainly in the fact that her mother has not taught her how to be a good wife. As an immortal, her mother simply has her own way of seeing and doing things, and she has no patience for mortal futilities such as the running of a household, as she “disliked ordering slaves around” and “merely laughed” at the thought of making inventories:

‘Naiads can’t count past three,’ she would say (...) She would laugh her rippling laugh. ‘We immortals aren’t misers—we don’t hoard! Such things are pointless.’ (75)

Penelope’s mother moreover has no use for weaving and spinning—and thus by extension for story-making: “Too many knots. A spider’s work. Leave it to Arachne” (75), and as such is no success as either a natural creator in the form of a mother, nor as a figurative creator of art. She does not need to be: as an immortal she is more likely to be the object of art, rather than the agent. Although Penelope considers her flawed in her maternal duties, since in her inability to teach her daughter how to be a good wife, she “had not set a good example.” (74), she does in fact foreshadow a different kind of woman, for she is strong and independent. It is disheartening perhaps to realise she owes that freedom to her immortal status, yet it is her advice to her daughter on her wedding day that gives Penelope the strength and confidence to deal with the Suitors much later in life:

Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (43)

Penelope’s new home on Ithaca comes with two additional maternal figures, whose influence by location as well as design intertwines: her new mother-in-law Anticleia and her Odysseus’s old nurse Eurycleia. Her relationship with these two women is as equally complex as is the relationship with her own mother, albeit on different grounds, as the underlying sentiment in this case is one of competition for the affection of Odysseus. Both women treat Odysseus as a much-loved son, an only son at that, but the manifestation of their affection for

Odysseus results in two very different kinds of behaviour towards Penelope. Anticleia is cold, disapproving and even cruel at times:

She was happy her adored son Odysseus had pulled off such a coup—a Spartan princess was not to be sneezed at—but I think she would have been better pleased if I'd died of sea-sickness on the way to Ithaca and Odysseus had arrived home with the bridal presents but not the bride. (56)

Eurycleia, on the other hand, is domineering and controlling:

Eurycleia made a point of taking me under her wing, leading me about the palace to show me where everything was, and, as she kept saying, 'how we do things here'. (55)

Penelope's relationship with Eurycleia is perhaps the most complicated relationship in the story, in that it is one of both love and hate, in equal measures. The old woman is a great help to her on the one hand, as she at least goes through the trouble of acquainting Penelope with the ways of Ithaca, a task her mother-in-law fails to perform:

That was lucky, for my mother-in-law, Anticleia—who ought to have taken charge in this way—was content to sit silently and say nothing while I made a fool of myself, a tight little smile on her face. (56)

Furthermore, "She did make herself invaluable when Telemachus was born. I am honour bound to record that" (57), and she is the closest thing Penelope has for a friend for a long

time. Yet at the same time, Penelope describes Eurycleia as “The woman who gave me the most trouble at first” (55), and she is highly annoyed by her chatter: “She talked all the time, and nobody was the world’s expert on Odysseus the way she was” (56). Moreover, she complains of how Eurycleia keeps her from being a wife to Odysseus:

She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn’t how Odysseus liked things done. (57)

Indeed, in Penelope’s own words: “If she’d been younger I would have slapped her” (78). The thing that ultimately binds them, then, is twofold and they are the very matters that they compete over: the love they share for Odysseus: “She was always Odysseus’s biggest fan” (91); and their position in the household; neither one of them truly being a part of the family, yet the two of them in charge of keeping Ithaca intact either for Odysseus’s return or the ascent to the throne of his son when he comes of age, whom Eurycleia adores as if he was her own: “Her delight in him was boundless” (58). The strength of Atwood’s appropriation of Penelope is in large part due to the manner in which she manages to create a woman who is recognisable as such, while she simultaneously demonstrates how relationships between females are all too often marked by competition rather than solidarity. The underlying cause of competition in this case is perhaps the worst kind of threat to female solidarity, as it essentially boils down to a struggle for the number one position in a man’s life.

Penelope does, in fact, search for companionship among women, and thus seems all too aware of its use in her position. Yet her description of the one situation which supposedly supplies her with exactly that is highly suspect; not only because her assumed companions—the twelve maids—in their intermittent songs suggest a different relationship and version of

events altogether, but moreover since Penelope's own account of events is at the very least sufficiently ambiguous to cast doubt on its reliability.

While the maids are slaves, it is through her own admission that Penelope can be considered to at least aspire to something approaching the role of their mother:

But if a pretty child was born of these couplings [between slaves], I would often keep it and rear it myself, teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant. Perhaps I indulged some of these children too much. Eurycleia often said so.

Melantho of the pretty cheeks was one of these. (76).

Her maids become accomplices in her grand weaving scheme; helping her to unravel the shroud at night, and these scenes are described by Penelope as a utopian picture of female solidarity and companionship: "We were almost like sisters." (97). The maids not only aid her at night with the shroud, they moreover infiltrate the Suitors on Penelope's command:

'You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they'll confide in you and we'll know their plans. It's one way of serving your master, and he'll be very pleased with you when he comes home.' That made them feel better. I even instructed them to say rude and disrespectful things about me and Telemachus, and about Odysseus as well, in order to further the illusion. They threw themselves into this project with a will: (...) There is indeed something delightful about being able to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act. (98-99)

Eventually, though, one of her maids betrays her to the Suitors and they force her to finish the shroud. Yet still, even after this betrayal, Penelope does not appear to hold a grudge: “The fact that my secret was betrayed was, strictly speaking, my own fault” (97). However, she does fail to speak up for them and cannot—or will not—prevent their execution. She offers a number of excuses for the hanging of the maids; she had not shared their alliance with Eurycleia, “in hindsight, a grave mistake” (98); she “resolved to interpose myself when the time was right, and to tell Odysseus that the girls had been acting under my direction” (114), yet fails to do so in time; and after the fact she tries to justify her ongoing silence on the subject by stating that “Dead is dead, I told myself. I’ll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their souls. But I’ll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me as well” (130-131).

Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding the death of the maid are suspicious, and Penelope, by her own admission, is not the most reliable of narrators, as an earlier mentioned citation demonstrates (139). These suspicions appear confirmed in light of Atwood’s own introduction:

I’ve chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses 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? (9)

The maids themselves, from within the Chorus, further suggest that all may not have been as the narrator would have us believe. While the Chorus mainly calls for justice and accuses both Odysseus and Telemachus as well as the system into which they were born as slaves, towards the end of the novel, Penelope herself is not spared. In the chapter “The Perils of Penelope, A Drama”, the maids more than imply Penelope’s guilt: “Word has it that Penelope the Prissy /

Was—when it came to sex—no shrinking sissy!” (120). Indeed, some of Penelope’s own comments on her Suitors are ambivalent, at the very least, as are her dealings with them:

I can’t pretend I didn’t enjoy a certain amount of this. Everyone does; we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don’t believe them. (...) I have to admit that I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that. (89)

For this reason [being like water, as her mother had advised her] I pretended to view their wooing favourably, in theory. I even went so far as to encourage one, then another, and to send them secret messages. (91-92)

Penelope is quite aware of the importance for a queen to have an untarnished reputation, as she herself mentions: “—I had a reputation to keep up, and the reputation of a king’s wife is under constant scrutiny—“ (64). And a good reputation lost once lost, is difficult to reclaim, since “What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself, she sounds guilty” (p 13). In her attempts to protect her reputation then, this Penelope may well have eliminated witnesses to acts of infidelity, for all her audience knows. Or not.

As readers we are granted but a limited view as she herself is eventually the sole narrator—teller or maker—of the story. But the fact that the maids “shun” her in Hades, “as if I had done them a terrible injury”, as well as the maids’ accusation in their Chorus Line certainly does not aid her claim to fidelity (97, 120-124). Atwood’s suggestion of guilt, rather than offering tangible proof of it, both demonstrates the persistent nature of rumours such as these, and the lengths women will go through to avoid being hit by them, as well as undermines the emblematic chaste and faithful wife literary tradition created. The underlying

thought though, that Penelope was in fact not faithful at all, but was clever enough not to get caught, however morally questionable, does succeed in shedding light once more on that very quality of Penelope that has so long been disregarded: her intelligence.

5.3 Through a Woman's Eyes: The Relationship between Atwood's Helen and Penelope

Atwood goes to great lengths in *The Penelopiad* to allow her Penelope to deconstruct her own myth in both her own words as well as her behaviour. It is interesting then, that her epic counterpart Helen is subjected to completely the opposite treatment, in that the Helen we meet in *The Penelopiad* is exactly the dangerously beautiful, selfish and fickle creature she has evolved into through numerous literary appropriations. Helen flaunts her beauty and takes pride in the havoc she wreaks. She rises beyond the passivity of Marlowe's "face that launched a thousand ships" and Pope's "fatal face", in that she claims awareness of and even pride in the fact that men died by the thousands for her, thereby asserting an active part in her own history that she most certainly did not display in Homer's original epic. The Helen Penelope describes is superior and at times deliberately cruel to those around her, and in that sense she not merely confirms, but actually amplifies her emblematic representation in the arts.

The most interesting aspect of Helen, though, is not so much found in her representation in *The Penelopiad*, but rather how she is represented: this Helen, of course, is brought to us solely through Penelope. Her unflattering treatment of Helen's personality, rather than painting a reliable picture of Helen herself, serves as a further deconstruction of the Penelope myth. Penelope proves to be susceptible to an image created in literature, in this case Helen's image, while she herself struggles to rectify her own myth. Penelope's character flaws as a woman are exposed in her treatment of Helen, as it shows her to be insecure,

jealous and mistrustful of female beauty. Helen, on the other hand, accuses Penelope of being the dull little housewife history has created her into. As such, in their dialogues they confirm each other's literary emblems, while they simultaneously represent that same lack of solidarity among women.

The Helen brought to us by Penelope is not merely aware of her own beauty, she flaunts it, much to Penelope's annoyance:

At this moment my cousin Helen came sailing up, like the long-necked swan she fancied herself to be. She had a distinctive swaying walk and she was exaggerating it. Although mine was the marriage in question, she wanted all the attention for herself. (...) She tilted her head towards me, looking at me whimsically as if she were flirting. I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice.
(35)

She enjoys appearing for the conjurers and magicians in her Trojan outfit, stressing the role she became most infamous for, and relishes male attention in that she thoroughly enjoyed to "make conquests just to show she could. As soon as the man was grovelling, and it never took long, she'd stroll away without a backwards glance," (32). This Helen envelops herself in the power her physique offers her and takes pride in its consequences: "I do feel that so many of them died for me—well, because of me—surely I owe them something in return" (126). The "something in return" she so obligingly offers the men that died for her, is a glimpse of her naked body while she bathes. The Helen in *The Penelopiad* is indeed an active agent in her own destiny. To Penelope, the consequences of Helen's self-determination are as simple as destructive, since it is "Helen" who "Ruins My Life" as the knowing and willing cause of the

destruction of Troy (63). Thus, in effect, Helen's pride and ambition are the direct causes for Penelope's own hardship:

I've often wondered whether, 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 head by her selfishness and her deranged lust. Why couldn't she have led a normal life? But no—normal lives were boring, and Helen was ambitious. She wanted to make a name for herself. She longed to stand out from the herd. (67)

While Penelope admits to Helen being divinely beautiful, she portrays her as a selfish and vain creature, and moreover as a cruel being who treats men as toys, and other women as lesser beings: "her lightest sayings were often her cruellest. Why is it that really beautiful people think everyone else in the world exists merely for their amusement?" (36). She ridicules Penelope for husband who won her:

I think Odysseus would make a very suitable husband for our little duckie," she said. "She likes the quiet life, and she'll certainly have that if he takes her to Ithaca, as he's boasting of doing. She can help him look after his goats. She and Odysseus are two of a kind. They both have such short legs. (35)

Yet Helen does not forego the opportunity to point out, that Odysseus was among her suitors as well, but that she preferred Menelaus:

‘It was lucky for both of us that he didn’t win *me!*’ (...) She gave the patronizing smirk of someone who’s had first chance at a less than delicious piece of sausage, but has fastidiously rejected it. (36)

And indeed, she hits Penelope where it hurts, as she laments that “Divine beauty is such a burden”, and then adding, almost as an afterthought: “At least you have been spared that!” (126).

As Penelope, throughout *The Penelopiad*, constantly compares herself to Helen and consequently finds herself wanting in the comparison, it is in the relating of remarks such as this that Penelope’s greatest, and most recognisable, weakness shows—her insecurity—while it also exposes, time and again, her greatest (yet undeniably equally recognisable) character flaw: her jealousy. Atwood’s Penelope in her critique of Helen reveals her desire to, in part, be Helen, or at least be as wanted as she was. She bitterly points out that “No man will ever kill himself for love of me. And no man ever did” (32). This, which in popular psychology today would be called a negative self-image, is prevalent in Penelope’s dealings with Helen, but is moreover confirmed to her in an afterlife confrontation with Antinous, who grudgingly admits that she wasn’t “exactly a Helen” and that, quite honestly, she “may not have been much to look at” (87-88). Although he modifies his statement by adding, “but you were always intelligent”, this is clearly not what Penelope wants to hear: “I’d said I preferred straightforward answers, but of course nobody does, not when the answers are so unflattering” (87-88). In her mind, she is “plain-Jane Penelope” (38), and Odysseus was competing for “what was at best only second prize” (36).

In Penelope’s remarks on Helen, she exposes the most petty and vicious side of herself. Helen is “poison on legs” (68-69) and a “sceptic bitch” (110), and she finds injustice

in the fact that Helen, despite her behaviour, remains the source of the most interest to the world:

I never got summoned much by the magicians. I was famous, yes—ask anyone—but for some reason they didn't want to see me, whereas my cousin Helen was much in demand. It didn't seem fair—I wasn't known for doing anything notorious, especially of a sexual nature, and she was nothing if not infamous.(...) Anyway, the magicians insisted on seeing Helen and she was willing to oblige. It was like a return to the old days to have a lot of men gawping at her. (25-26)

This passage reflects a similar reality in the arts; while the representation of Helen's character grew more antagonistic as time progressed, she remained an object of fascination among artists, whereas Penelope, famed for virtue, became a by-line in her husband's exploits. *The Penelopiad*, set in present-day Hades, allows for a unique situation in that Helen and Penelope actively engage each other in conversation and in doing so, reflect on their reputations, rather than tangible characters. Through their dialogue, it becomes painfully clear that, like the rest of the world, they regard each other in light of their literary emblems, rather than their original representation in the Homeric epics. Moreover, rather than supporting each other, they still compete. Helen attacks the very qualities Penelope became known for, as she ridicules Penelope's supposed intelligence: "'You're being witty,' said Helen. 'Better late than never, I suppose'" (126). Moreover, highlighting that in which they are least alike according to their reputations, she mocks Penelope's fidelity to Odysseus:

'We're all aware of your legendary modesty, Penelope,' she replied. 'I'm sure if you ever were to bathe you'd keep your own robes on, as I suppose you did in life. Unfortunately'—her she smiled—'modesty was not among the gifts given to me by laughter-loving Aphrodite.' (126)

Penelope, for her part, accuses Helen of still, even in the afterlife, being a cheap flirt, ready to give “the unusual large crowd of spectators” her “bare-naked tits-and-ass bath treat for the dead” (126). Nevertheless, Helen is obviously stung by Penelope’s suggestion that she should be feeling a lot more guilty about all the men that died for her, whereas Penelope, in her turn, finds herself once again on the losing side of her competition with Helen, when Helen asks her:

‘Tell me, little duck—how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?’

‘Quite a lot,’ I replied. She knew the exact number: she’d long since satisfied herself that the total was puny compared with the pyramids of corpses laid at her door. (127)

This passage voids Penelope’s own accusation of the guilt Helen should have felt, as she undeniably feels she has somehow lost to Helen in a match over which woman is most worth killing for. Helen herself words it strikingly: “It depends on what you call a lot. (...) But that’s nice. I’m sure you felt more important because of it. Maybe you even felt prettier” (127).

In a sense, both Helen and Penelope are the victims of their own portrayal in the arts, and Atwood, by allowing them to engage in conversation, portrays two women who both relish as well as struggle with what they came to represent. Through Penelope, we see a cruel and vain Helen, but between the lines we also see a woman whose beauty has turned her into

a desirable object which caused her to be abducted at a very young age and which even after death prevails, and this same beauty is perpetually linked to the accusation of complicity in the death of many men. Moreover, Penelope's own treatment of Helen is emblematic of the unforgiving stance women take towards those of their own kind who are exceptionally beautiful, as underneath her remarks about Helen, her own jealousy of Helen's beauty and power over men always manifests itself.

Penelope herself feels the burden of her mythical reputation and struggles to free herself from its bonds; a fact which asserts itself in her irked reaction to Helen's confirmation of that same reputation. Yet at the same time, she struggles to uphold her chaste image, which is made clear both from her reaction to Helen's plan to expose herself to her many dead followers as well as to the manner in which she devotes an entire chapter to agitate against the "slanderous gossip" that was spread about her supposed infidelity in the works of later authors. She feels compelled to compete with Helen, and in fact most of her battles in *The Penelopiad* are with other women; over Odysseus' affection; over the ruling of Ithaca; and over the raising of her son. The fact that Helen's myth is maintained within *The Penelopiad* has everything to do with the fact that Penelope is its narrator, and in that sense Penelope's myth is reconstructed and transformed by Atwood as one exemplary for the manner in which women fail to support each other.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that our fascination with Helen and Penelope is a constant phenomenon, as the many works of art, whether they be poems, prose, paintings or films, testify. Helen's potentially catastrophic beauty has, admittedly, proven to be slightly more fascinating than Penelope's chastity, but in all it is remarkable that two peripheral epic characters, created millennia ago, are still such recognisable names today. It is moreover fascinating to realise how these two characters evolved into two such distinct emblems in the arts, and how little these emblems in effect have in common with their original depiction.

Penelope's original depiction in *The Odyssey* as a woman who was as clever as her husband with whom she shared a marriage based on equality, has, over time, been reduced to an image of a woman who completely effaced herself for that same husband. There was limited space for her intelligence and no place for her ability to determine her own fate in the idealized representation of the archetypal wife she grew into. It is this emblem Penelope became, rather than her original depiction, that modern writers appropriated; initially in their criticism on the position of women within society and later on in their criticism on the emblem itself. Ironically, these appropriations aimed to achieve for women what Penelope originally represented: independence and (the right to) self-determination. In that sense, then, Penelope as a character as well as an emblem, has come full circle.

The same is true for the manner in which Helen evolved. In *The Illiad* we meet a wretched creature, marked by her inability to determine her own fate and decidedly unhappy with the way things turned out. This image is a far cry from the emblem that emerged from the middle ages: the selfish and fatally beautiful seductress who actively caused the destruction of Troy. It is through appropriations of Helen from the 19th century onward, that the catastrophic consequences of her beauty are no longer automatically considered her fault, and her passivity in these matters becomes more pronounced again. Like Penelope's, her

image too is used to question the emblem she grew into in the arts, and, again like Penelope, through appropriations she now approaches her original depiction rather than her emblem.

Helen and Penelope are not often considered alongside each other. This is, at first glance, not altogether unsurprising as they appear to have little in common. Yet, if one looks beneath the superficial representation, many more commonalities than distinctions are found. Both characters were originally peripheral female characters in great epic exploits of male heroes and both characters evolved into, albeit admittedly opposing, highly recognisable emblems in the arts. However, the main similarity may be found in the purpose of their appropriations throughout history. The Romans appropriated both characters for political propaganda; the medieval mythographers appropriated both characters for moral and religious instruction; 19th-century novelists and poets appropriated both characters to criticise a woman's position in society; and from the 20th century onward both characters were moreover appropriated to comment on their own depiction in the arts. Throughout time, then, appropriations of Helen and Penelope were motivated by whatever the times, in which they were appropriated, dictated, but these two opposing images were nearly always appropriated for similar purposes.

As said, the scope of comprehensive comparative research into the evolution of both appropriations of Helen and Penelope themselves, as well as the development of the purpose of these appropriations over time, is potentially enormous and, as yet, largely unexplored. This thesis is necessarily restricted to a limited study of appropriations of these two characters in modern English literature and as such has ignored appropriations in other literatures as well as other expressions of art. A true understanding of the manner in which these characters' emblems historically were appropriated, and the effect of these appropriations on the times in which they were employed, calls for far more extensive research spread across several academic disciplines. Through understanding both the purpose and the effect of literary

appropriations of Helen and Penelope, the social and political relevance of the arts in society becomes clear. Limited though the scope of this thesis may be, it does demonstrate the way in which art functions within society; whether this is the case because it is employed for political or religious propaganda, or rather as a means to criticise certain elements within society, it is nevertheless a vital part of that same society. In times such as these, when the humanities are under siege, this is a reality often overlooked or disregarded. But it is a reality nonetheless.

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