

The Maids of Atwood's *The Penelopiad*: "We Could Not Refuse"

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Inception

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the voices of the Maids in Margaret Atwood's novella, *The Penelopiad*. Many of Atwood's works show the female protagonists, who experience victimization, take control of their voices and lives; however, the Maids are not one of the protagonists. The Maids are created to remain trapped in their own death and are unable to take control of their own voices and their own lives. The Maids in *The Penelopiad* never gain their own identities, but begin taking on the voice of others and as time progresses; the Maids are dehumanized when they become monstrous and animalistic forces.



In Homer's *The Odyssey*, composed "in the early eighth or late ninth century [BCE]" (Powell, "Odyssey" 16), Penelope's Maids are slaughtered upon the hero's return. The ancient poem tells the story of Odysseus, who struggles to return home after the Trojan War and to regain his place as the king of Ithaca. His wife Penelope waited twenty years for her husband's return to Ithaca after he left to fight in the Trojan War. Throughout this time, suitors came from surrounding areas to win her hand in marriage and to become King of Ithaca in the place of Odysseus and his rightful heir, Telemachus. Penelope remained loyal to her husband and waited for his return

by tricking the suitors into not wedding her. However, Penelope's twelve Maids begin intimate relationships with the suitors (whether consensual or not). When Odysseus returns home and re-establishes his authority, he punishes the Maids for their supposed immorality and slaughters them.

One modern text that re-interprets the ancient tale and gives it a feminist perspective is Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* (2005). Atwood was one of the first writers commissioned by Canongate to start the Myth Series. The concept was "to carve out a space in the world that does not always acknowledge the ancient nature of our stories" (Perkins 14); authors and editors would bring "new voices to readers" (17). Atwood is known for her feminist writing, and readers became familiar with this feminist perspective through her protagonists who experience victimization. Her protagonists followed a pattern of "reconstruct[ing] their lives, imprinting their own designs in the worlds of patterned fabric" (Goldblath 282). Atwood's novella takes on the voice of Penelope and offers her perspective on her marriage to Odysseus, her relationship with her son, her deceit to the suitors, and the hanging of her twelve Maids.

Numerous journal articles have analyzed the voice of Penelope in Atwood's story. In "*The Penelopiad* and Weight: Contemporary Parodic and Burlesque Transformations of Classical Myths," Hilde Staels views Penelope and the twelve Maids in *The Penelopiad*, "as first-person narrators, [who] boldly challenge and liberate themselves from 'the official version' imposed on them" (105). Staels uses the scene where the Maids turn into owls and fly away as "an image of metamorphosis" and recognizes the Maids' flight as empowering (110). She does this by connecting the metamorphosis to "Athena, the Great Goddess" who gives the Maids the "power of wisdom and transformation" (Staels 110). In her view the Maids are liberated this way along with the "parody and burlesque travesty" of their scenes (Staels 110). Penelope does liberate herself from

Homer's version of *The Odyssey*; however, I argue the Maids do not. Atwood gives the Maids a voice, but it remains limited and, at the end, it vanishes.

In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope tells her story to an implied audience, whereas the Maids do not tell theirs at all. They speak to an audience in a series of fragmented Chorus lines while Penelope retells her story to the audience, from the day of her birth to Odysseus's return. The Maids only relate the details of the ill-treatment and the unjust murder that they endured. Throughout the book, the Maids try to speak to their male audience but are always unable to be acknowledged or taken seriously, even when they interact with male characters. The twelve Maids never obtain their own identity, but instead take on identities of others and become more animalistic and monstrous towards the end. As a result, the reader never gets a sense of who the Maids really are because they are always trying to retell their murder and in the process they get stuck in their own tragedy.

In this essay, I demonstrate that the Maids are limited characters who have no control over their story. First, I contextualize the Maids within the story of *The Penelopiad*, and I analyze the performances that the Maids give to their male audiences; next I show how their voices are associated with Rumor who appears in *The Aeneid* and I connect the Maids to other female and monstrous forces like the Furies (Erinyes). Finally, I explain how in their last metamorphosis in which they turn to owls, they lose their ability to communicate with their audience altogether. Through connecting these points—the inability of the Maids to communicate and their eventual transformation into unintelligible creatures—I argue that the Maids are unable to gain control of their voice and, as a result, never gain control of their story, in life or death.

The Context of the Maids in The Penelopiad

In *The Odyssey*, the Maids are fleeting figures whom Telemachus and his father Odysseus kill for having sexual relations with the suitors. This is seen in Book 22 when Odysseus orders Telemachus to kill the Maids so that the Maids forget “all about the sex that they enjoyed with the suitors—sleeping with them in secret” (Powell, “*Odyssey*” 407). Odysseus sees the Maids’ sexual relationships with the suitors as disrespectful to his rule. In *The Odyssey* the readers only see the Maids clearly through the context of Odysseus who orders their deaths.

In *The Penelopiad*, the Maids appear in a series of Chorus lines where they detail their childhood and explain how their death came about through hanging. At first glance, the Maids appear to represent a lower class and to demonstrate the hardships that they face because of their gender. In “The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids,” the Maids relive their childhood abuse. When the Maids were children, they held no power and were told that they were “motherless...fatherless” (Atwood 13); thus, they did not gain a sense of personal or social identity. In contrast, Penelope’s identity is heavily influenced by that of her parents. She was the daughter of “King Icarius of Sparta” and her “mother was a Naiad” (Atwood 7). Naiads are thought to be “water-nymphs who are often daughters of the river-god” (Malkin). Penelope would have grown up with the advantages that come from having a king as a father; she was of high social standing and was saved from drowning as a child by her Naiad mother who rescued her with her divine powers. Penelope had many advantages for “it never hurts to be of semi-divine birth” (Atwood 7). While they were growing up, however, the Maids had no one to protect them.

Even as children, the Maids were forced to have sex with their owner or his/her relatives and whomever visited (especially if the men were of high rank), for they “could not refuse” (Atwood 14). They were

easily replaced since their “bodies had little value” (Atwood 14), and they had to do what they could to survive. To survive was their main drive when they were alive, and when they grew up they “became polished and evasive” and “mastered the secret sneer” (Atwood 14). They grew into the role as property which was established when they were still children. Thus, the Maids harden themselves to their situation and, in the process, are unable to show their emotions when they are alive. This hardening and unemotional exterior continues to characterize them in death.

In all of the Maids’ scenes the main mood that they harbour is anger, frustration and sadness. In “The Chorus Line: We’re Walking Behind You, A Love Song” the Maids try to grab the attention of the audience they are addressing and say “We’re here too, the ones without names...The ones with the shame stuck onto us by others. The ones pointed at” (Atwood 191). Even towards the end of the book, the Maids still harbor anger, frustration, and sadness at being ignored and having shame repeatedly put onto them. Throughout Atwood’s story, the intensity of the Maids’ Chorus Lines never wavers. They recount their lives and deaths, and even in the afterlife they cannot escape their own tragedy. For example, when Penelope tries to confront the Maids who do not leave Odysseus alone in the afterlife, they reply, “it’s not enough for *us*” as they run away with their “still-twitching feet [that] don’t touch the ground” (Atwood 190). The Maids are therefore constantly in pain and reliving their murder.

The Maids undergo no character development that shows them in a positive light, and their true feelings are never made clear since only the “Three Spinning Sisters, spinning their blood-red maze...know [their] hearts” (Atwood 69). The Spinning Sisters are known as the Fates or “the *Moiria*” in Ancient Greek; they are the “spinners of fate,” who weave the Fates of men and women (Robertson and Dietrich). The Maids are so trapped in their death that only the Fates know what lies in their hearts. As a result, readers are blocked from knowing who the Maids are outside of their abuse and murder.

The Performances of the Maids in The Penelopiad

Because of the Maids' upbringing they become accustomed to being around male audiences. The readers see the Maids' attempts to discuss their murder to their male audience in their Chorus lines, and they continually fail. First they try to sell their story through performances. In the performance "The Chorus Line: If I Was A Princess, A Popular Tune," the Maids sing of their hope to be married off to a young hero, and they lament their reality as slaves. After the Maids perform, they curtsy to the audience and Melanthis, who is the only one the readers know by name and the group's leader, is seen "passing the hat" to collect money from men (Atwood 53); this is further confirmed in the last stanza when Melanthis says "Thank you, sir" (Atwood 53). The Maids are selling their story in an entertaining fashion in hope of being heard, but they remain figuratively silent to the male audience whom they are addressing. The readers see their figurative silence in the last line in the chorus before Melanthis passes the hat. The Maids lament over their own demise: "maybe you'll sink in your little blue boat..." but it's "hope only that keeps us afloat" (Atwood 52). There is a sense that the Maids are not in control of their fate or their stories. Atwood places the main voices of the Maids into the format of Chorus lines, an allusion to the choruses in Greek tragedies that "never explicitly broke and addressed the audience" (Scodel 4). The Maids are lamenting and trying to be heard, but their male audience is never going to interact with them in the way they desire. The audience to whom the Maids perform are not watching them to interact but to observe.

The male audience's lack of interest may also be seen later in "The Chorus Line: The Anthropology Lecture." The Maids attempt to give both meaning to their position in life and death. First, they change their identity to no longer be slaves, but to be "twelve moon-maidens, companions of Artemis," who is later identified as Penelope (Atwood

164). Artemis is the daughter of Zeus who is King of the Gods and is known as the huntress and virgin. In ancient Greek literature she overlooks rites of passages, men's and women's physical "transition[s] to adulthood," and "certain aspects of war" (Sourvinou-Inwood, "Artemis"). The Maids claim to be linked to Artemis and attempt to raise their statuses to spiritually pure and untainted positions.

Next they try to make their death a heroic sacrifice by asking "why should Iphigenia be credited with selflessness and devotion, more than we?" (Atwood 164). In myth Iphigenia is closely related to the goddess Artemis. She was the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and "Artemis demanded her [Iphigenia's] sacrifice as the price for sending a fair wind to the Greeks waiting at Aulis to sail for Troy" (Sourvinou-Inwood, "Iphigenia"). There are many different traditions of Iphigenia's fate, such as Artemis sparing her and being "replaced by a bear" (Sourvinou-Inwood, "Iphigenia"), but Atwood picks the version where Iphigenia was sacrificed. The Maids thus struggle to reinvent their stories and change their own status by comparing themselves to people in myth or legend who have a relationship to the ancient Greek gods and whose fates were altered by them. By claiming such a connection, the Maids hope that their voices will have some authority in the afterlife and that their deaths therefore had divine meaning.

Their struggle continues when the audience, who are men, keep questioning their story; readers can implicitly sense the questioning by the Maids' replies to the men: "You, Sir, in the back" (Atwood 163), "What's that, Sir?" (Atwood 165), and "No, Sir" (Atwood 166). Towards the end of this scene, the Maids give up trying to reinvent their story because the audience does not view them as "real girls, real flesh and blood" but instead views them as a "pure symbol. [They were] no more real than money" (Atwood 168). In this scene they are referred to as money (objects) and their murder is just a symbol to be retold for entertainment and the money that comes

from it. Their voices do not matter to the audience they are addressing and, as a result, they are unable to be heard. Because they are still unable to be heard through their ordinary performances, they invoke the voice of Rumor to help them tell the truth of their murder.

The Maids Take on the Voice of Rumor

Atwood makes the Maids invoke the voice of Rumor, which complicates their storytelling and creates multiple versions of truth for the readers and audience whom the Maids address. In “The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama,” the readers see how the Maids become the goddess Rumor. The Maids act like the goddess Rumor—as a messenger—when they recount “another story. Or several, as befits the goddess Rumor” (Atwood 147). They take on her voice because they show the audience “a peek behind the curtain” (Atwood 148). Rumor is “symbolically represented as intruding into things private and public” (Keith 301), and the Maids in Atwood’s depiction were also viewed this way. The readers are being told the truth of the Maids’ unjust deaths, not by the Maids themselves, but in the characters that disposed of them: Eurycleia and Penelope. They express Penelope’s driving need to keep her reputation intact as “boo-hooing” (Atwood 151), and they show the readers that Penelope’s is not a trustworthy voice. Eurycleia tells Penelope that the Maids “must be silenced, or the beans they’ll spill” (Atwood 150). They were killed because they were in a position to tell a truth about Penelope (who might have been sleeping with the suitors) and to create scandal for her. In death the Maids attempt to tell the audience by performing the truth in the Chorus lines and, as in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, “the strength of a rumour [grows]... Rumour herself grows in force, so the wagging tongues, prying eyes, and pricked-up ears grow in number” (Dyer 31). They attempt to take control of their own voice; however, at the same time they remain voiceless because it is not the voice of the Maids that tells their story,

but the goddess Rumor's voice. The goddess Rumor takes over their identity and the Maids become lost in their act.

The goddess Rumor plays a role in other major literary works and these characterize her appearance in *The Penelopiad*. For example, Rumor appears in Vergil's *The Aeneid*. Vergil writes that Aeneas, through his quest to find a new home for his people, would become the founder of the Roman people. One of the obstacles he faces is the Carthaginian Queen Dido. Dido, who is struck with love for Aeneas by the god Cupid, ends up having sex with Aeneas. Afterwards, Rumor spreads the news to all of Carthage and the surrounding areas that Dido and Aeneas slept together. In this poem, Rumor is seen as a destructive feminine force that "is a messenger of truth" and whose own voice is heard as "screeching" (Powell, "*Aeneid*" 125). There is a subtle relationship between Rumor and the Maids which influences any interpretation of Atwood's Maids. When the Maids invoke Rumor they are beginning to be associated with destructive feminine forces that distance them from the audience they are address. In fact, like Rumour, who is a destructive and almost animalistic feminine force, the Maids also take on the bodies of ancient monstrous—and feminine—beings, especially when they take on the forms of the Furies (*Erinyes*).

The Maids Invoke the Angry Ones

In ancient Greek culture Furies (*Erinyes*) were known as spirits of vengeance who "punished perjurers, and those who had violated the laws of hospitality and supplication, and came to assume the character of goddesses who punish crimes after death and seldom appear on earth" ("Furies" *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*). Atwood introduces these vengeful spirits when the Maids feel like they have no other choice to be taken seriously. In doing so the Maids become lost within these creatures' identities.

In "The Chorus Line: The Trail of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids," the Maids try to confront Odysseus and reclaim their voice; however, the Judge and the Attorney of the Defense never seriously speak to them. The Judge first addresses the Maids when they enter the court room, and he tells them to "stop making a spectacle of [themselves]," to "adjust [their] clothing," and for them to "take those ropes off [their] necks" (Atwood 177). From the beginning, the readers get a sense that the blame will shift onto the Maids and not Odysseus. The Judge does not see the Maids as victims, even when the ropes (the murder weapons) that were used to hang the Maids are still wrapped around their necks. The Attorney of Defense belittles the Maids further by saying "they were the best-looking and the most beddable" in defense of Odysseus's decision to kill them and their rape by the suitors (Atwood 179). When the Judge lets the "minor incident" go (Atwood 182), the Maids demand justice and call upon "the Angry Ones" (Atwood 183).

Initially, the readers believe that the Furies and the Maids are separate entities; however, I argue that they are one and the same. In ancient Greek mythology the Furies are seen as "three goddesses of vengeance and retribution" (Atsma), but in Atwood's version there is a "troop of twelve Erinyes" (Atwood 183), which corresponds to the twelve Maids. Atwood changes the number of *Furies*, so that the Maids can embody these monstrous forces. Their anger comes from the same source: their unjust death. The Maids tell the Furies to "hunt him [Odysseus] down! Appear to him in their [the Maids] forms, [their] ruined forms...corpses. Let him never rest" (Atwood 183). Earlier in the book, the readers find out from Penelope that the Maids always chase off Odysseus when he returns to the Underworld. When the Maids demand that the Furies hunt Odysseus down in the form of their deceased bodies, they reveal that it is they themselves who they are demanding justice. They cope with the continued injustice by taking on monstrous bodies to seek vengeance and justice.

This monstrous embodiment recurs when they are left in the court room after Odysseus flees, and the judge tells them again to “cover up [their] chests and put down [their] spears” (Atwood 184). Atwood depicts them as having the “heads of dogs...They sniff the air” (183). First, this shows readers that the Furies are unable to be understood by other people because they cannot speak. Secondly, it demonstrates that the Furies are perceived to be animalistic. The Judge confronts the Furies with the same language he used for the Maids, but he tells them to put down their weapons that were once used against them by Odysseus who once “had the spear” (Atwood 6). Even when they turn into Furies, who are supposed to be a dangerous force, they are still controlled by the male audience and remain voiceless because the audience cannot understand them.

The Maids Become Animalistic

As the Maids embody the Furies, they become more animalistic in the remaining Chorus lines. In the aftermath of the court scene, they become more physically animalistic. The Maids describe their bodies to Odysseus as having “twenty-four feather-pillow tits” (Atwood 191). This image contributes to a slow transformation into bird-like creatures. The “Envoi” confirms that the Maids are becoming animals. It begins with them saying they “had no voice [they] had no name” (Atwood 195). The Maids admit that they had no identity or voice to speak within life and in death. As the end of the book approaches there is a transition in their speech because they begin to say “too wit too woo” (Atwood 195), and therefore the readers and the audience completely lose the ability to understand the Maids. Second, the repetitive sounds the Maids make remind readers of bird sounds, a fact that is reinforced when “the Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls” (Atwood 196).

It first seems that the Maids gained freedom when they fly away, but, with a closer look, they remain voiceless and trapped within their own tragic story. Early in the book, Penelope explains the many

times she has tried to tell her story in the past although it would always come out as a “scream” that would make her “sound like an owl” (Atwood 2). While Penelope is finally successful in telling her story, Atwood leaves the Maids voiceless as they turn into owls since they can no longer communicate at all.

The Maids not only become animalistic, but they also become monstrous towards the last few Chorus lines, especially when the Maids invoke the voice of the goddess, Rumor. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the goddess Rumor was thought to be “the last-born child of Terra, the mother of monsters” and is depicted having “as many eyes, tongues, lips, and ears as there are feathers on her body” (Keith 300). She is a powerful and intimidating figure in mythology and is unable to be heard because her own voice is described as screeching. The Maids associate themselves with Rumor and become bird-like and, at the end, they actually become owls. Even though the Furies do not appear to be bird-like they are considered be a monstrous force that “have hair made of serpents, the heads of dogs, and the wings of bats” (Atwood 183). The Maids are so desperate to be heard that they connect themselves to monstrous mythical figures. The Maids create a false comfort for themselves in the hopes that they will be listened to because of the nature of the mythical figures. However, in this transformation, they end up dehumanizing themselves. Rumor, the Furies, and the Maids, who will later turn into birds, remain unheard because people are wary of them and are unable to understand them. They lose all ability to gain control of their story when they turn into birds and are lost in their own suffering.

The Role the Maids are given in The Penelopiad

The reason why the Maids remain voiceless is because their function is to be voiceless. In Atwood’s introduction, the maids have two aims during their “chanting and singing Chorus” (xv). The first is to explain what led to their hanging and second was to describe what

Penelope was really up to while Odysseus was away from Ithaca. The Maids succeed because the readers learn what led to their hanging and what Penelope was doing throughout the story. However, Atwood makes the Maids forever trapped: they are stuck retelling and reliving their abuse and their death. Throughout the novel, they are represented as stuck at the moment of their death or in their earlier abuse: “their [the Maids] still-twitching feet [that] don’t touch the ground” (Atwood 190); or when they appear in the Court Room with the ropes wrapped around their neck. Even in the afterlife where the dead are not supposed to have bodies, the Maids are stuck within their murder—and thus still embodied. They never find peace since they never get a chance to tell their stories.

The Maids’ individual personalities or voices are never represented, unlike that of Penelope. Their Chorus lines are based on the traditional format of ancient Greek Tragedy. Indeed, their only job is to be tragic. They are not supposed to talk about things that they want to discuss but are forced to talk about their slavery and murder. In this aspect, the Maids again connect with their tragic predecessors, since choruses “were often women or slaves” who “reveal[ed] secrets [and] could not stop an act of violence” (Scodel 5). Atwood creates the Maids to further Penelope’s story, to reveal her agency to the audience, and to show what Penelope thought of the Maids’ murders. The Maids are compelled to always focus on their abusers (including Penelope) and their murder. In doing so they become dehumanized to a point where they become monstrous and later become owls and as a result they continue to be voiceless.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood is known for her feminist writings, and *The Penelopiad* touches upon feminist issues like rape and the unjust acts that lead to it and its aftermath. However, the Maids are not successful feminist figures. Scholars of Atwood’s work stress that her protagonists’ follow a transformation that lets them be in control

of their lives and voices. I have shown that the Maids do go through a transformation, but it is not the liberating one for which Staels argues. The Maids in Atwood's novella are changed from the Maids in *The Odyssey*. In *The Odyssey* they existed for Odysseus to kill as a way to restore social balance within the household. Atwood liberates them from that role by giving them multiple scenes to point out the wrong-doings that happened to them and for them to tell readers the "real" events that surround Penelope. However, Atwood traps the Maids in her own piece and leaves them unliberated.

Being voiceless is the twelve Maids' role in Atwood's book, and they never gain control of their voices and their fates. Throughout their lives they adapted to other people's demands to survive and that meant to take on roles that other people wanted them to take without question. Even after death the Maids are stuck in this pattern of being. The readers see this in the audience, to whom the Maids speak and for whom they perform. They take on the voices of others to cope and to escape from their reality and become lost. As the story continues the Maids become more animalistic and monstrous in their attempts to be heard until, finally, they turn into owls, leaving them unable to communicate to their audience and the readers: they are dehumanized figures. Through the structure of Greek Chorus lines and the mythical figures the Maids call upon the Maids remain figuratively and literally voiceless and are unable to take control of their lives and voices.

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