

A short guide to: The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood & Photograph 51 by Anna Ziegler

written by Jonathan Wong

The Penelopiad

Author Bio

Name: Margaret Atwood

Key facts:

- Canadian author (born Nov 18, 1939) who has published novels and poetry in a diverse range of genres
- Author of *The Handmaid's Tale*
- Many of her stories cover the topic of gender & identity

Mini Plot Summary:

In *The Penelopiad*, the titular character Penelope tells the events of the *Odyssey* from her perspective. A chorus consisting of Penelope's twelve maids interject at various points in the story to express their views. The story is told in reflection: Penelope and her Maids are dead, and they are explaining these events retrospectively.

Extended Plot Summary:

Penelope begins by explaining that she's dead, and describes what it's like living in the afterlife. The Maids' first chorus is a 'Rope-Jumping Rhyme', in which they describe themselves as 'the ones [Odysseus] killed'.

Penelope then explains who she is: the daughter of King Icarius and a Naiad. She was thrown into the sea by her father, but in the end she was saved by a flock of ducks. The Maids decry the fact that they were 'born to the wrong parents' and discuss what it was like being slaves.

When Penelope was fifteen, a contest was held for her hand in marriage - it was a running race that Odysseus won, although he cheated.

Penelope confesses that 'people told [her she] was beautiful' but that truthfully she was 'nothing special to look at'. But she does admit that '[she] was smart' and that she was known for '[her] weaving ... [her] devotion to [her] husband, and [her] discretion.'

Her marriage with Odysseus was arranged (she was fifteen years of age), and she was 'handed over to [him], like a package of meat'. Her wedding feast was extremely lavish - there was 'lots of everything', including 'great glistening hunks of meat, great wads of fragrant bread, great flagons of mellow wine'. She was afraid of Odysseus on her wedding night, but he proves to be kind, and tells her 'forget everything you've been told' and 'I'm not going to hurt you'.

Penelope comes to love Odysseus, but she is not fond of Anticleia (Odysseus' mother) nor Eurycleia (Odysseus' former nurse), whom she finds condescending.

The Maids lament that they 'fetch and ... carry ... hear and obey' and that 'it's Yes sir and No ma'am the whole bleeding day'.

Telemachus (Penelope's son) is born. Odysseus is called to war, and Penelope is left to run his kingdom on her own.

A number of Suitors decide to move into Penelope's palace due to the rumours that Odysseus might not return from war.

Penelope believes that the Suitors only want to marry her for money and power, and she is afraid they might become violent if she denies their advances outright. To stall them, she devises a scheme wherein she tells the Suitors that she will only make her decision on marriage once she has finished weaving a shroud.

Her twelve maids are her ‘most trusted eyes and ears in the palace’, and she enlists their help in order to carry out her plan. The maids unravel the shroud every night, and they also spy on the Suitors and provide Penelope with information.

Odysseus returns, but he is in disguise; Penelope immediately recognises him, but she tells her maids not to expose his identity.

Odysseus executes the maids: he summons Eurycleia and ‘[orders] her to point out the maids who had been ... “disloyal”’. They are hanged while Penelope is asleep.

Penelope and Odysseus ‘[take] up [their] old habit of story-telling’, and recount to each other what has happened in the intervening couple of decades apart. Penelope does not tell Odysseus that the Maids were not traitors.

Odysseus soon leaves to go ‘adventuring’ again. He is ‘told by the spirit of the seer Teiresias’ that he has to undertake a quest concerning ‘carrying an oar’ so that he can ‘rinse the blood of the Suitors from himself’.

The Maids haunt Odysseus in the afterlife. They tell him they ‘brought the water for [him] to wash [his] hands’ and ‘rinsed [his] laundry’ and ‘oiled [his] shoulders’, and that their reward for this was to be ‘roped’ and ‘strung ... up’ and ‘dangling like clothes on a line’.

Overarching themes

Power

Patriarchal power

- Patriarchal power is the major theme in both texts. In ‘The Penelopiad’, power is consolidated primarily through physical dominance, whereas in ‘Photograph 51’

it is consolidated through a mixture of misogyny + a pre-established social hierarchy favouring men

- The Penelopiad
 - Although Penelope is a ‘nobly born woman’ who possesses a ‘treasure trove’ of riches, she still cannot drive out the Suitors from her home
 - She notes that they were like ‘vultures when they spot a dead cow’
 - The Suitors ‘[take] advantage of [Penelope’s physical] weakness’ as well her ‘lack of manpower’ at the palace
 - The Suitors ‘[help] themselves to ... livestock’ and ‘[order] the maids about ... pinching their bottoms’
- Photograph 51
 - Towards the end of the play, Gosling notes that it would have been beneficial for Rosalind to be ‘born at another time’, and Crick adds that it would be helpful to be ‘born a man’
 - Rosalind notes that ‘not a single female scientist from Britain’ was handed a research position during the war

Physical appearance

- Women in these worlds are judged largely by their appearance, which can be a source of power or of further disempowerment for them.
 - The Penelopiad
 - In The Penelopiad, Helen's 'radiant' beauty sets the standard of physical perfection by which Penelope and the maids in Sparta judge themselves
 - Penelope, in comparison to Helen, is not beautiful - her power comes from wealth, not from beauty
 - Penelope is ‘thirty-five years old’ and ‘getting quite fat around the middle’
 - When Penelope asks Antinous, in the afterlife, why the Suitors were pursuing her, he responds that they ‘wanted the treasure trove’ and that they wanted to ‘marry a rich and famous widow’
 - Photograph 51

- Rosalind is disempowered by a perceived lack of beauty
 - Watson calls her a ‘right old hag’
 - She becomes an object of the male scientists' ridicule and seemingly is viewed by them as therefore undeserving of winning a Nobel Prize
 - Rosalind states that ‘no one thinks [she’s] warm’
- Watson comments that Odile’s roasts are ‘almost as tender as her thighs’

Race and class

- Both texts explore how certain racial/class groups have greater power than others, and how they use that power to oppress:
 - The Penelopiad
 - The Maids are oppressed due to their lower class status
 - They are children of ‘slaves’ and ‘peasants’
 - They lament that they were ‘born to the wrong parents’
 - Photograph 51
 - The 'otherness' of race or nationality is similarly disempowering
 - After Rosalind decides to keep all the ‘best equipment’ for herself, as well as the ‘best samples’, Wilkins comments to Crick and Watson that she is ‘hoarding everything’
 - This is an example of racial prejudice:
 - Holocaust survivors were known to hoard possessions long after the Holocaust ended
 - It is implied by Ziegler that Wilkins believes Rosalind’s instinct to hoard relates to her Jewish heritage

Women's roles

Oppressive expectations

- In both texts, women are expected to conform to long-standing gender roles
 - The Penelopiad

- Penelope describes her mother-in-law Eurycleia as an ‘expert on such matters’ in trivial things such as:
 - ‘whether to cover the mouth when you laugh’
 - ‘On what occasions to wear a veil’
 - Penelope notes that women are not allowed to speak their mind to men
 - She notes that it would be ‘[imprudent]’ for a woman to ‘step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness’
 - Photograph 51
 - Odile, Crick’s wife, is expected to ‘bring out [a] new tea set’ so that the men can ‘have a nice cup’
 - When Crick asks Jim to help her with this task, he responds by saying ‘Why should I help her?’ and makes the comment that ‘She’s your wife’
- In both texts, the protagonist breaks social norms by taking on roles usually dominated by men - however, they ultimately fail in achieving anything substantial
 - The Penelopiad
 - Penelope shows her legendary cleverness by supervising the estate workers and becoming a skilled trader in the marketplace
 - ‘Now I was running the vast estates of Odysseus all by myself’
 - ‘My policy was to build up the estates of Odysseus so he’d have even more wealth when he came back than when he left’
 - Penelope ‘[sets] up a large piece of weaving’ and promises the Suitors that she will pick a husband once the shroud is completed
 - This is a clever scheme, but it has unfortunate ramifications
 - The ‘twelve ... maidservants’ she conspires with suffer terrible fates
 - They are ‘raped’ and ‘seduced’ and Penelope reflects that the suitors helped themselves to the maids as if they were ‘sheep’

- Photograph 51
 - Rosalind is able to achieve more than the average woman in the 1950s - she works in a specialised field of science
 - But although she desires to be a recognised/reputable scientist, she is unable to escape the highly patriarchal nature of society
 - Wilkins' treats Rosalind as his subordinate
 - 'I will not be anyone's assistant'
 - This leads her to think that she has been lured to London 'under false pretences'
- Women are restricted in various ways due to their gender
 - The Penelopiad
 - The Maids are slaves, and have very limited rights
 - They are 'property'
 - They mention that '[Telemachus] saw [them] as rightfully his, for whatever purpose'
 - Penelope laments that she had 'little authority' within the household, and that she felt as if she were a 'prize horse on parade'
 - Photograph 51
 - Rosalind was not permitted to 'eat in the senior common room', which was for 'men only'.
 - When Rosalind tells her father, at a young age, that she '[wants] to become a scientist', he discourages this dream

Virtues of women

- In both texts, the virtues of women often go unnoticed due to a lack of respect from men
 - The Penelopiad
 - Virtues:
 - Eurycleia is 'widely respected' and 'intensely reliable' for her abilities as a servant
 - The only recognition she gets for these virtues is the fact that Odysseus' father 'valued her' so highly that 'he hadn't even slept with her'

- And even regarding this supposed mark of ‘respect’, it is rumoured that Laertes actually ‘refrained’ from sleeping her due to ‘fear of his wife’ instead
 - Disrespect:
 - Being a wife in the world of The Penelopiad meant being a possession
 - Women such as Penelope were 'handed over ... like a package of meat'
 - Photograph 51
 - Virtues:
 - Rosalind is a highly intelligent scientist who possesses a ‘single-minded devotion’ to her research
 - She states that she is doing ‘much ... for British society’ by conducting her research in France
 - Disrespect:
 - Men discount Rosalind’s intelligence at various points in the play
 - Wilkins addresses Rosalind as 'Miss Franklin' rather than 'Dr. Franklin'
 - He also calls her 'Rosy'
 - At a lecture Wilkins ‘referenced “his” DNA work’, failing to give Rosalind credit
 - He shows everyone ‘the X-ray patterns he’d made’

Storytelling and the power of narrative

- Both Photograph 51 and The Penelopiad demonstrate the power of storytelling and, in particular, the liberating power of taking control of one's own story
 - Photograph 51
 - Rosalind isn’t allowed to tell her own story - she goes uncredited for the work she does, and is ‘thirty-seven when she [dies]’
 - Authorial intent
 - Ziegler wrote Photograph 51 to give Rosalind a voice/shine light on her story

- To make the ‘invisible visible’ and to help us see ‘what was right in front of us’
 - Through Wilkins, Ziegler uses the analogy of Hermione in the play *The Winter’s Tale*
 - Wilkins states that he ‘[loves] that Hermione wasn’t really dead’ and that ‘she comes back’
 - This is what Ziegler wants to achieve - she wants Rosalind to ‘come back’ and be given her rightful place in history
 - In the last line of the play, Rosalind mentions how Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* ‘simply didn’t stand out, I suppose’
 - This is Ziegler’s analogy for Rosalind herself
 - Rosalind, who is isolated and vilified, is unable to take control of her narrative.
 - She does speak out but gains a reputation as a 'difficult woman' (p.46) in stories about her circulated by men.
 - Watson is eager to set the story straight that Rosalind ‘was meant to be Wilkins’ assistant’ and that ‘she misunderstood the terms’
- The Penelopiad
- Penelope is able to use storytelling to control her own story
 - .. it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself.' (Penelope, p.3)
 - Penelope's spinning of her own 'thread' in *The Penelopiad* (p.4) disputes Homer's idealised version of her in *The Odyssey* and displays her considerable intelligence and resilience.
 - Maids also able to do this through their chorus:
 - ‘We ... were born to the wrong parents’
 - ‘Drudged from dawn to dusk’
 - Authorial intent:

- Similar to Ziegler, Atwood wants to recognise women who were controlled/marginalised - to tell the story from their side

Key Characters:

The Penelopiad

Main characters:

- Penelope
 - Protagonist
 - Daughter of King Icarius
 - Wife of Odysseus
 - Smart, devoted, not beautiful
 - Tells her story from the afterlife
- Odysseus
 - Husband of Penelope
 - Marries her after winning a running race (which he won by cheating)
 - Kind to Penelope
 - Absent for most of the novella
- Eurycleia
 - Former nurse to Odysseus
 - Helps Penelope settle in when she arrives in Ithaca
 - Well-respected
- The Twelve Maids
 - Penelope's most trusted and loyal servants
 - Daughters of slaves
 - Spend their entire lives working hard
 - Tell their story in the form of choruses, which are interspersed between Penelope's chapters

Other characters:

- Helen of Troy (Extremely attractive; Penelope often compares herself to her)

- The Suitors (Men who desire Penelope's hand in marriage after the departure of Odysseus for many years)
- Telemachus (son of Odysseus and Penelope)

Photograph 51

Main characters:

- Rosalind Franklin
 - Brilliant scientist
 - Takes groundbreaking x-ray photographs which prove to be critical in the discovery of DNA
 - In her 30s
 - Dies early from breast cancer
- Maurice Wilkins
 - Formal and polite scientist
 - In love with Rosalind
 - In his 30s or 40s
 - Works closely with Rosalind
- James Watson
 - Confident, arrogant scientist
 - Driven and competitive
 - Works with Francis Crick
 - Alongside Crick, receives renown (in particular the Nobel Prize) for discovering the structure of DNA
- Francis Crick
 - Scientist in his 30s or 40s
 - Very proper
 - A 'comedian philosopher who enjoys being the centre of attention'
 - Brash

Other characters:

- Ray Gosling (Scientist in his 20s, awkward and endearing, lacking in confidence)
- Don Caspar (Scientist in his 20s or 30s, open and affable, humble and honest)

- Odile (Francis Crick's wife; although Crick and Watson make reference to her throughout the play, she never receives any actual lines herself)

Key quotes:

The Penelopiad:

“If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse. It did us no good to weep, it did us no good to say we were in pain.”

“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.”

“I was a kind girl – kinder than Helen, or so I thought. I knew I would have to have something to offer instead of beauty. I was clever, everyone said so – in fact they said it so much that I found it discouraging – but cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him. ”

“The maids began discussing her splendid necklace, her scintillating earrings, her perfect nose, her elegant hairstyle, her luminous eyes, the tastefully woven border of her shining robe. It was as if I wasn't there. And it was my wedding day.”

“I fetch and I carry, I hear and obey; It's Yes sir and No ma'am the whole bleeding day”

“He saw us as rightfully his, for whatever purpose”

“If the word got around about his post, said Odysseus in a mock-sinister manner, he would know I'd been sleeping with some other man, and then – he said, frowning at me in what was supposed to be a playful way – he would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the roof beam. I pretended to be frightened, and said I would never, never think of betraying his big post. Actually, I really was frightened.”

“I was a princess, after all, and work was what other people did.”

“I had such a clear picture in my mind – Odysseus returning, and me – with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man’s business. On his behalf, of course. Always for him.”

“I remembered my mother’s advice to me. Behave like water, I told myself. Don’t try to oppose them. When they try to grasp you, slip through their fingers. Flow around them.”

“They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was they who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years.”

“It’s hard to lose an argument to one’s teenaged son. Once they’re taller than you are, you have only your moral authority: a weak weapon at best.”

“I didn’t let on I knew. It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognise him: it’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.”

Photograph 51:

“We made the invisible visible.”

“We could see everything, really see it - except, sometimes, what was right in front of us.”

“And when I told my father I wanted to become a scientist, he said, ‘Ah. I see.’ ... Then he said ‘No.’”

“Dr Wilkins, I will not be anyone’s assistant.”

“If, for whatever reason, I am forced into a different situation, I should feel that I came here under false pretenses.”

“Maybe you’re aware of the fact that not a single female scientist from Britain was given a research position during wartime?”

“All right, Rosy.”

“To be born at the right time. There’s an element of fate to it, don’t you think? And I don’t believe in fate.” (Watson)

“It’s self-aggrandizement at the cost of any kind of integrity.”

“This achievement alone secured her place in history.” (Caspar)

“The Jews really can be very ornery.” (Watson)

“You offered it up, like a leg of lamb we’d share for dinner.” (Watson on Wilkins giving him the x-rays)

“Right old hag” (Watson about Rosalind)

“Odile’s roasts aren’t bad.” ... “Almost as tender as her thighs.” (Watson)

“Jim, you go and help Odile bring out our new tea set and then we’ll sit and have a nice cup.” (Crick)

“Haven’t you heard the story about the woman physicist who had to sneak into Princeton’s lab in the middle of the night to use the cyclotron? And you probably know women aren’t even permitted into Harvard’s physics building.” (Caspar)

“I think the things we want but can’t have are probably the things that define us...”

“Why do you seem so tired? I can’t sit still. I’m energised. I want to take on everything now. The world. Everything. Women. You know.” (Watson)

“I love that Hermione wasn’t really dead. That she comes back.” (Wilkins)

“You know... I think there must come a point in life when you realise you can’t begin again. That you’ve made the decisions you’ve made and then you live with them or you spend your whole life in regret.”

“[Hermione] simply didn’t stand out, I suppose.”

