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"Disposable Women": Class and Gender Oppression through Twelve Maids in Atwood's The Penelopiad

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad reimagines Homer's Odyssey from the perspective of Penelope and the twelve maids, shifting focus from epic heroism to gendered and class-based injustice. By giving voice to those traditionally silenced—Penelope, long overshadowed by Odysseus's exploits, and the maids, brutally executed as collateral to his triumph—Atwood uncovers the hidden costs of patriarchal myths. This paper examines the twelve maids as emblematic of disposable womanhood, whose fate reveals the intersecting oppressions of patriarchy and class hierarchy. Drawing on feminist materialist theory alongside structuralist and deconstructionist criticism, the study argues that the maids, as enslaved female labourers, are not merely narrative detritus but structural casualties of a myth that upholds masculine dominance and social order. While Homer's Odyssey silences and erases their suffering, Atwood disrupts this canonical silence by granting the maids a haunting, collective voice that questions the binaries of loyalty and betrayal, purity and defilement. Their execution, once mythologized as an act of righteous justice, is reinterpreted as a violent performance of gendered control. Ultimately, The Penelopiad exposes how classical myth renders certain female bodies expendable and insists, through its postmodern retelling, on remembering those historically unheard. The maids thus emerge as both victims and spectral commentators—embodying the cost of mythic erasure and the radical potential of narrative reclamation.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Agency, Resistance, Hierarchy, Patriarchy, Gendered Oppression, Materialism

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Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad offers a bold reimagining of Homer's Odyssey by shifting the narrative lens away from its heroic male protagonist to focus on those historically silenced—most notably, Penelope and her twelve maids. Through this revisionist lens, Atwood dismantles the glorified image of Odysseus's homecoming and exposes the shadowed consequences of his return, particularly the brutal hanging of twelve young slave women. In Homer's epic, these maids are executed—by order of Odysseus and carried out by Telemachus—for having allegedly betrayed the household during the hero's absence. Labeled as disloyal for consorting with the suitors, they are swiftly and unceremoniously removed, their deaths framed as necessary to restore patriarchal order. By giving the maids voice, Atwood not only resurrects the forgotten victims of epic storytelling but also deconstructs the foundational myths that silence them. Crucially, Atwood's narrative aligns with a feminist materialist perspective by foregrounding the Maids not merely as symbolic casualties but as real bodies caught in a web of gendered servitude, sexual exploitation, and class-based oppression. As Jennifer Wicke puts it, materialist feminism "insists on examining the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop … [and] argues that material conditions of all sorts play a vital role in the social production of gender" (Wicke). The maids' labor, sexual subjugation, and disposability reveal how mythic narratives naturalize and legitimize the violence required to maintain masculine heroism and social hierarchy. By rewriting their fate as a collective chorus demanding to be heard, Atwood's text exposes how economic and sexual exploitation intersect, illustrating that mythic violence is rooted in material relations of power. In this way, The Penelopiad performs an act of feminist materialist recovery: reclaiming erased female labor and exposing how ancient myths obscure the exploitation of women's bodies in service of epic grandeur.

In the aforementioned novella the twelve maids are no longer nameless victims pushed to the margins of Homer's epic—they are given a collective voice that calls into question the reasons for their execution and the systems that allowed it. Using the frameworks of feminist materialism and deconstruction, this paper argues that the maids embody the intersection of gender-based oppression and class exploitation. Atwood's retelling exposes how ancient myth naturalizes the disposability of enslaved female bodies and critiques the enduring patriarchal systems that normalize and aestheticize such violence. As low-born, enslaved girls, they are forced into domestic labor, subjected to sexual violence, and ultimately punished—not for betrayal, but for

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their social vulnerability. Their deaths are not necessary acts of justice, but calculated acts of erasure that preserve male power. In one of their bitter choral songs, they mock the logic of their scapegoating: "Blame it on the slaves! / The toys of rogues and knaves! / Let them dangle, let them strangle— / Blame it on the slaves!" (Atwood, 120). This darkly ironic refrain reveals how the maids' bodies were made to carry the shame, guilt, and disorder caused by men. They are not only violated, but then blamed for that violation, illustrating how patriarchal systems redirect accountability downward—toward those with the least power. By giving the maids, a voice—angry, accusatory, and unrepentant—Atwood restores their dignity and personhood, forcing the reader to see them not as footnotes to Penelope's virtue or Odysseus's heroism, but as deliberately silenced subjects. The Penelopiad thus becomes a critique of mythic justice, exposing how epic traditions aestheticise violence and erase the human cost behind their narratives.

Retrospectively, In Homer's Odyssey, the twelve maids appear only fleetingly, occupying a liminal space at the fringes of the epic's grand narrative of heroism and homecoming. Homer's text offers them no individual names or backstories; they exist instead as an indistinct collective, stripped of personal voice and agency. When Odysseus reclaims his household, their deaths—ordered by him and enacted by Telemachus—are portrayed not as an injustice but as an expedient ritual to cleanse the palace and reaffirm patriarchal control. Their punishment is presented as a restoration of moral and social order rather than as a profound human loss, underscoring how mythic structures erase the lives of the expendable to glorify the deeds of the celebrated few. Their supposed crime is "disloyalty": having consorted with the suitors during Odysseus's absence. However, the epic offers no investigation into the nature of this "betrayal"—whether it was voluntary, coerced, or simply an act of survival under occupation. This act of hanging the Maids functions symbolically as a cleansing ritual, purging the palace of perceived defilement. It is a moment that reasserts patriarchal authority, with Odysseus reclaiming his household and Telemachus demonstrating filial loyalty and masculine control. Through this lens, the violence against the maids becomes righteous, part of the larger mythic logic that frames the return of the king as a cosmic and social restoration. Embedded within this logic is a reinforcement of class hierarchy: Odysseus, the noble and cunning king, is contrasted with the "servant girls" who are expendable, morally suspect, and socially inferior. Their position as enslaved women ensures that their lives hold little weight within the narrative economy of the epic. Their sexuality, whether

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coerced or chosen, is framed as a transgression—subject to lethal punishment. Meanwhile, male violence is celebrated, and sexual agency is a privilege reserved for male figures. This asymmetry underscores the gendered moral code of the epic: men may kill, deceive, and conquer without consequence; women, especially of lower status, are judged and destroyed for perceived impurity. In this way, the twelve maids are not only physically eliminated but symbolically erased. Their deaths are required not just to conclude the narrative, but to affirm the mythic structure's commitment to hierarchy, purity, and patriarchal dominance. It is this deeply embedded logic that The Penelopiad will later confront, disrupt, and interrogate.

Subsequently, Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad radically shifts the narrative authority of the Homeric myth by foregrounding the twelve maids as active, conscious voices rather than passive casualties. No longer silenced or anonymous, the maids in Atwood's retelling emerge as a haunting chorus—a collective conscience that questions the moral assumptions of the original epic. Through lyrical interludes, nursery rhymes, ballads, and even a mock trial, Atwood reclaims narrative space for the maids, granting them a form of posthumous agency. These interjections are not merely stylistic innovations; they serve as political acts, confronting the reader with uncomfortable truths about gendered violence, complicity, and injustice. In one of their most poignant laments, the maids remind us of the circumstances that shaped their fate: "We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen." (Atwood, 11) This moment collapses the distance between epic abstraction and lived suffering, stripping away the illusion that their deaths were necessary or deserved. It reframes them not as traitors or seductresses, but as victims of systemic poverty and exploitation, punished for conditions entirely beyond their control. With lines like these, the maids not only reclaim narrative authority but also demand ethical attention—exposing the classist and patriarchal structures that once erased them. The Penelopiad thus becomes a counter-myth, a re-voicing of those denied voice, and a critique of the cultural traditions that have historically aestheticized their suffering. As narrators of their own objectification, the maids expose the contradictions embedded in their execution. They articulate the central irony of their punishment: they were victims of male violence, not its perpetrators. Their poignant refrain— "We were just girls… we were not spoils of war. We were your children; you should have protected us"—reveals both their youth and vulnerability. They identify Penelope and Odysseus not only as figures of mythic grandeur but as

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caretakers who failed them, choosing instead to uphold patriarchal codes of honour over empathy or justice. In voicing this accusation, the maids reverse their position in the mythic structure—they are no longer the "polluted" who must be cleansed, but the casualties of a system that punishes the powerless for the violence inflicted upon them.

Atwood also highlights the intersectional nature of the maids' oppression. As female slaves, they are doubly subjugated—economically, as labourers without autonomy, and sexually, as bodies exploited by the suitors. Their position at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy renders them inherently vulnerable, and yet it is they who are ultimately blamed for what they endured. Within a system that offers them no choice, no protection, and no agency, their so-called "betrayal" becomes a misrecognized act of survival. The punishments they face are not based on justice, but on the maintenance of a patriarchal order that demands the control of female sexuality, particularly that of enslaved women. The maids articulate their erasure and dehumanization in one of their most haunting refrains: "We had no voice / We had no name / We had no choice / We had one face / One face the same." (Atwood, 159). This refrain conveys not only their lack of autonomy, but their reduction to interchangeable, faceless beings—denied identity, agency, and individual subjectivity. Atwood uses this poetic structure to dramatize the systemic silencing of marginalized women, revealing how mythic traditions preserve power by flattening the lives of the oppressed into background tragedy. The maids' voices, revived through chorus and repetition, expose the myth's complicity in patriarchal violence, and assert the right to be seen not as a group of indistinguishable servants, but as girls with names, faces, and stories unjustly denied to them. In this way, Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad operates as a deliberate counter-myth—one that not only questions the glorification of epic heroism but also dismantles the ideological structures that uphold it. Rather than reaffirm the Homeric version of events, Atwood reorients the narrative around those historically silenced: the twelve maids whose deaths were treated as incidental, even necessary, to the restoration of patriarchal order. By giving these maids space to speak—through choral refrains, ballads, parody, and courtroom satire—Atwood destabilizes the authority of the original epic and exposes the myth's dependence on selective memory and narrative exclusion. The multiplicity of forms in which the maids speak reflects the fragmentation of their identity under a system that denied them individuality, justice, and choice. Their chorus becomes not only a reclamation of voice, but a haunting reminder of those sacrificed to uphold heroic ideals. In

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challenging the assumptions of purity, loyalty, and retribution embedded in classical myth, The novella further compels its readers to confront the ethical consequences of storytelling itself—particularly when such stories are constructed atop the suffering of the powerless and preserved through their silence. Atwood's retelling does not offer resolution or redemption; instead, it insists on restoring complexity to those reduced to symbols, and on disrupting the myths that justify violence by calling it order.

Atwood's The Penelopiad further challenges one of the most enduring elements of classical mythology: the treatment of low-status women as narrative devices rather than as full human subjects. Within structuralist frameworks, myths like The Odyssey operate through binary oppositions and symbolic functions—heroes and traitors, order and chaos, loyalty and betrayal. Within this framework, poor, enslaved women are not characters with agency but figures who serve the plot's moral and ideological structure. The twelve maids are used as moral markers of defilement, punished to restore purity, and then erased from the story once their function has been fulfilled. This mythic mechanism of disposability reveals how ancient narratives embed and normalize violence against marginalized women. The maids are simultaneously hyper-visible—as symbols of disorder needing correction—and utterly invisible—as individuals with voices, histories, and humanity. Their erasure reinforces not only gendered power dynamics but also class divisions, as their low status justifies their expendability. Within this framework, their execution is not an anomaly but a narrative necessity—a structural sacrifice to uphold patriarchal order. Atwood, however, refuses this closure. She refuses to resolve their deaths, either morally or narratively. The maids do not disappear after their execution; instead, they haunt the text, returning again and again in choric songs, dream sequences, and posthumous accusations. Their persistent presence disrupts the myth's structure by denying it the comfort of a neatly restored order. They demand not just justice, but remembrance, challenging the reader to reckon with the lives and stories that myths so often suppress. In doing so, The Penelopiad critiques the myth of the disposable woman—the recurring cultural pattern in which women, especially those marked by poverty, servitude, or sexual transgression, are instrumentalized and then silenced. Atwood transforms the maids from background casualties into symbolic figures of resistance, whose enduring voices expose the violence required to sustain heroic mythologies. Their afterlife in the

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narrative is not one of peace, but of unresolved witness—a reminder that no myth is neutral, and no erasure is without consequence.

In the eponymous novella, Margaret Atwood further dismantles the epic's portrayal of justice by exposing the ideological machinery behind it. Rather than accepting the execution of the twelve maids as a righteous restoration of social order—as it is framed in Homer's Odyssey—Atwood interrogates the very meaning of justice in a patriarchal and class-based society. The maids are not judged through any fair or transparent system; instead, their deaths serve to reinforce a hierarchy that protects male authority and punishes female vulnerability. Their fate becomes a lens through which Atwood asks: can justice exist within a system that structurally silences and disposes of the powerless? This critique culminates in one of the novella's most striking episodes: the mock trial, staged in a surreal, postmodern form. In this parodic courtroom, the maids themselves become both prosecutors and witnesses, re-enacting the absurdity of their own judgment. The performance mocks the supposed rationality and impartiality of legal systems, especially when applied retroactively to acts rooted in historical injustice. It is a dark, theatrical satire, one that undercuts any notion that their deaths were inevitable or morally justified. As the maids declare with ritualistic fury:

"We demand justice! We demand retribution! / We invoke the law of blood guilt, / We call upon the Angry Ones!" (Atwood, 147)

This invocation fuses ancient legal codes with the language of myth and vengeance, asserting that their execution was not a rightful punishment, but an unatoned crime. The maids' call upon the "Angry Ones" — the Furies — underscores the gravity of their accusation and the spiritual weight of their suffering. Justice, in this context, is not shown as a system of reasoned judgment, but as a performance of dominance, selectively enforced to preserve male power. Atwood turns the sanitized epic of Odysseus into a tale of vengeance masquerading as virtue. This inversion is not merely moral; it is structural. She dismantles the binary oppositions on which the original myth rests—loyalty versus betrayal, justice versus punishment, hero versus villain—and reveals them as unstable categories that obscure the lived realities of the powerless. In collapsing these oppositions, The Penelopiad stages a deconstructive intervention into classical mythology, asking not simply what justice means, but who gets to define it—and at what cost.

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This haunting re-enactment reminds readers that myths are not timeless truths but constructed narratives that often erase inconvenient voices to secure ideological coherence. Atwood's framing of the maids' posthumous trial as an absurd spectacle exposes how the ancient epic's claim to moral order rests on the silencing of those deemed expendable. The maids, once marginal figures, thus return as unsettling witnesses who disturb the heroic closure that the Odyssey demands. By giving them a ghostly, accusatory agency, Atwood compels her audience to confront the ethical hollowness at the heart of mythic justice. In doing so, The Penelopiad does not merely retell an old story; it calls for an unending reckoning with the hidden casualties of canonical narratives.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad reimagines Homer's Odyssey through the long-overlooked eyes of Penelope and her twelve maids, radically shifting the narrative from epic valour and masculine conquest to the entangled injustices of gender, class, and silencing. This paper situates the twelve maids as more than peripheral casualties of mythic justice—they stand as emblematic figures of disposable womanhood within a patriarchal and class-stratified social order. Drawing from feminist materialist theory and structuralist/ deconstructionist frameworks, the analysis traces how Atwood reconfigures these minor characters into haunting voices that question the ideological machinery of Homeric myth. In the Odyssey, their deaths serve to reaffirm Odysseus's heroism and social restoration; the maids' bodies become sacrificial tokens for a moral order premised on punishing perceived sexual transgression and disloyalty. Atwood's The Penelopiad disrupts this canonical silencing by giving the maids a collective, choric voice that exposes the brutal contradictions at the heart of the myth—loyalty and betrayal collapse under the weight of gendered double standards, and purity is recast as an unattainable ideal weaponized to control women's labour and sexuality. The maids, enslaved and sexually exploited, become a potent reminder of the cost borne by those at the bottom of mythic hierarchies. Their spectral chorus functions as both testimony and indictment, forcing readers to confront how myth naturalizes violence against marginalized women while elevating male heroism.

By resurrecting the maids' suppressed story, Atwood enacts a postmodern intervention that resists narrative closure and canonical authority. The maids' unresolved lamentations transform them from voiceless victims into subversive commentators who break the binaries of silence and speech,

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guilt and innocence. In so doing, The Penelopiad insists that we read myth not as static inheritance but as an evolving discourse that must be interrogated, reclaimed, and complicated. This paper argues that through this reframing, Atwood compels contemporary audiences to reckon with the structural injustices woven into even the most celebrated stories—reminding us that who is heard and who is erased shapes not only myth but the moral imagination of culture itself.

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