

**'CLOSE AS A KISS': THE CHALLENGE OF THE MAIDS'
GYN/AFFECTION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD***

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) seemingly celebrates Penelope's agency in opposition to Homer's myth in *The Odyssey*. However, the twelve murdered maids steal the book to suggest the possibility of what Janice Raymond calls *gyn/affection*, a female bonding based on the logic of emotion that, in Atwood's revision, verges on Kristevan abjection, the sinister and the fantastic, and serves a cathartic effect not only in the maids but also in the reader. This essay aims to question the generally accepted empowerment of Atwood's Penelope and celebrates the murdered maids as the locus of emotion, where marginal aspects of gender and class merge to weave a powerful metaphorical tapestry of popular and traditionally feminized literary genres that, in plunging into and embracing the semiotic realm, ultimately solidify into an eclectic but compact alternative tradition of women's writing and myth-making.

KEYWORDS

Margaret Atwood, *Penelopiad*, Myth, *Odyssey*, Female friendship, gyn/affection, hetero-reality.

**'CERCANAS COMO UN BESO': EL DESAFÍO DE LA AFECTIVIDAD FEMENINA
DE LAS DONCELLAS EN *THE PENELOPIAD* DE MARGARET ATWOOD**

RESUMEN

La novela de Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (2005), celebra en apariencia la agencia de Penélope frente al mítico personaje femenino de la versión de Homero. Sin embargo, las doce doncellas asesinadas se convierten en las verdaderas protagonistas del libro al sugerirse la posibilidad de lo que Janice Raymond denomina *gyn/affection*: un vínculo entre mujeres basado en la lógica de la emoción que, en la revisión de Atwood, conecta con la abyección de Kristeva, lo siniestro y lo fantástico, y sirve como efecto catártico no sólo para las doncellas sino también para el lector. Este ensayo pretende cuestionar el empoderamiento de la Penélope de Atwood y celebrar,

de este modo, el papel de las doncellas como receptáculo emocional. En ellas los aspectos marginales de género y clase se funden para tejer un poderoso tapiz metafórico de géneros literarios populares, tradicionalmente etiquetados como femeninos que, al sumergirse dentro del orden semiótico, solidifican una ecléctica pero compacta tradición alternativa de escritura de mujeres y creación de mitos.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Margaret Atwood, *Penelopiad*, Mito, Odisea, amistad femenina, afectividad femenina, hetero-realidad.

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1. INTRODUCTION: A NEW PENELOPIAN METAPHOR

Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) has been the source of multiple critical studies that mostly highlight its parodic revision of Homer's *Odyssey*, and particularly of the myth of Penelope from a feminist standpoint.¹ Nonetheless, the haunting presence of the murdered maids and the centrality of women's interpersonal relations in Atwood's novella inevitably call for the gynocritic model of female friendship, an aspect that has been mostly overlooked by critics. Considering Janice G. Raymond's distinction between *hetero-reality*—"the world view that woman exists always in relation to man"—and *gyn/affection*—"a synonym for female friendship" (1986: 3, 7)—, this essay aims to question the generally accepted empowerment of Atwood's Penelope in her relationship with the rest of the female cast in the novella, since all of them epitomize Raymond's *hetero-reality* as the ultimate trap for women. The murdered maids are the only exception: they stand for Raymond's *gyn/affection* since, in spite of their apparent victimization, these characters emerge as a powerful impersonation of literary female friendship, where marginal aspects of gender and class merge to weave a powerful metaphorical tapestry of popular and traditionally feminized literary genres that ultimately solidify into an eclectic but compact alternative tradition of women's writing. Atwood's seeming intention to rewrite the myth of Penelope from a feminist and ironic standpoint ultimately sacrifices the protagonist's agency in favour of the apparently secondary maids, who steal the novella and

¹ See Suzuki (2007), Đlapkauskaitė (2007), Shastri (2008), Wilson (2008), Florby (2009), Staels (2009), Nischik (2009), Korkmaz (2011), Rousselot (2011), and Braund (2012), among others.

offer a potent example of female literary bonding —strongly connected with emotion, the sinister and the fantastic, or the abject, in Kristeva's terminology—, while the clever Penelope of Atwood's story condemns herself to domestic imprisonment due to her replication of patriarchal patterns and her inability to escape Raymond's *hetero-reality*.

Atwood's novella updates the traditional debate on female friendship that perceives an almost essentialist specificity and autonomy in female bonds as depicted in literary works by women. In addition to Raymond's *gyn/affection*, Auerbach defines the "communities of women" as "emblems of female self-sufficiency which create their own corporate reality" (1978: 5); Abel argues that "identification replaces complementarity as the psychological mechanism that draws women together" (1981: 415); and, in spite of her biological essentialism,² Friedman (1989) sets the basis, yet superficially, for modern female friendship. Atwood's novella apparently contradicts this communitarian effort, as the female characters invariably replicate Raymond's *reformed* hetero-relations. Hetero-reality comes in with the disruptive presence of the man, who normatively breaks the female dyad and prevents women from inventing alternative relations. The result is female competition and a pessimistic indication that, in opposition to Simone de Beauvoir's early claim, man invents woman and she does not exist apart from his inventiveness (1953: 174).

In spite of one of the obstacles for female friendship—"the fiction that women never have been and never can be friends" (Raymond 1986: 6)—Atwood ultimately offers a literary community of women that epitomizes Raymond's *gyn/affection* and aptly revisits the Penelopian metaphor of (un)weaving that is not only attributed to Penelope, but to the polyphonic discourse of the maids, thus providing "an interesting combination of complicity with, and critique of, master narratives" (Darias-Beautell 2012: 5).³ Although the present study aims to deconstruct Penelope's agency in Atwood, it ultimately perceives her as an indispensable piece of the feminine, emotional, pseudo-marginal literary mosaic elaborated by the maids.

² She openly associates women with care, nurturance and relatedness (276) and, together with other feminist theorists, she considers the highly individualistic, competitive, aggressive personality type as characteristically male (279).

³ Darias-Beautell summarizes the numerous interpretations in the twentieth century of the enigmatic mythical weavers and their post-structuralist potential as a critical methodology: Walter Benjamin's "The Image of Proust", J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread*, Nancy Miller's "Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic", Susan Stanford Friedman's *Penelope's Web*, and Barbara Clayton's *A Penelopian Poetics*. He concludes that "readings of the (un)weaving act abound that put forward the intertwining of remembrance and forgetting, writing and reading, presence and absence" (2012: 4).

2. HETERO-REALITY: PENELOPE AND THE FEMALE CHARACTERS

Atwood conveniently begins her novella with two quotations from *The Odyssey*: one describing Penelope and the other the maids. In the first one, the one-dimensional image of Penelope as “faithful”, “flawless”, “loyal”, and “constant” contrasts with the fluid and slippery identity of the protagonist that we find in Atwood’s version. The first chapter sets the metafictional tone that offers the key to understand Atwood’s textual revision. Not only does she provide an alternative image of the myth of Penelope, but she concentrates on the storytelling process to generate an alternative tradition of women’s writing. In her post-mortem testimony, she is presented as an omniscient yet unreliable narrator, who is aware of her gendered writing. In spite of her status as a spirit, her discourse ironically highlights her corporeity and woman condition which seems inseparable from her identity. Although as a ghost she apparently negates her corporeity and femaleness —“this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness” (1)— the gradation is highly indicative of the change from human to specifically woman status.

She begins the book showing her awareness of the artificial construction of female myths by patriarchy, particularly her own myth:

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. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty. So I waited some more. (3)

The myth of Penelope as patient is suddenly deconstructed as her eternal waiting is justified in the present effort to narrate her own story. Storytelling becomes the central motif, and it is materialized with tangible images to emphasize the lasting effect on women: “everyone arrives with a sack full of words – words you’ve spoken, words you’ve heard, words that have been said about you ... a lot of words in it concern my eminent husband” (1-2). The myths of women are presented as a burden for them, as if words were as heavy as stones, and the official version of patriarchy is “an edifying legend, a stick used to beat other women with” (2).

In opposition to the official record, she states that her version (“tale-telling”) is “a low art” that she openly attributes to marginal figures such as “old women”, “strolling beggars”, “blind singers”, “maidservants” and “children” (3-4). This is indeed an anticipation of the link that will be forged between her story and that of the murdered maids as an alternative, marginalized literary tradition of women writers. In addition, Penelope’s domestic motif of weaving is strategically used by Atwood to suggest the

liberating potential of women's writing through Darias-Beautell's Penelopian metaphor of (un)weaving. The connection between weaving and writing is made clear later, when Penelope's thread becomes the metaphorical shroud of men,⁴ and

The shroud itself became a story almost instantly. Penelope's web, it was called ... If the shroud was a web, then I was the spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies: on the contrary, I'd merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself. (119)

This initial image points at Penelope's potential to weave an alternative version that simultaneously unweaves or discredits the patriarchal one. Rather than the innocent and gullible wife in *The Odyssey*, this Penelope begins her story problematizing her origins and presenting herself as a textual construction of patriarchy: "Do I remember the waves closing over me, do I remember the breath leaving my lungs...? Not in the least. But I was told the story" (9). Penelope epitomizes the concept of "mimicry" or "masquerade" theorized by critics such as Joan Rivière, Luce Irigaray, or Mary Ann Doane. According to Irigaray (1985: 101), "mimicry" is a strategy used by women to consciously reproduce the traditional role that patriarchal models have repeatedly imposed on them, what she labels "femininity". In playfully mimicking this patriarchal construct, women finally expose its artificiality: "in fact that 'femininity' is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity" (1985: 84). Irigaray's mimicry is her particular version of the psychoanalytic "masquerade", coined by Joan Rivière in her 1929 article "Womanliness as a Masquerade". Rivière concludes that womanliness "could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (1991: 94). For her, there is no distinction between masquerade and the realness of women, so that her strategy works to expose the construction of artificial femininity by patriarchal models.⁵

⁴ The symbolic threat of Penelope's weaving for men is obvious with her own father: "I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud. Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would live forever" (7-8).

⁵ This same idea is developed by Mary Ann Doane, who considers women's masquerade as "an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask – as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity" (1991: 25), and Homi Bhabha with his "metonymies of presence" (1994: 86, 90).

In Atwood's version, Penelope is the epitome of this intentional mimicry or masquerade. In spite of the myth of acquiescence and domesticity articulated by patriarchy, she, who already as a child is described as "self-sufficient" (11), learns from Odysseus to be a real confidence trickster. When they marry, she is still presented as naïve in opposition to Odysseus' performativity—"I myself had developed friendly feelings towards him ... and he behaved as if he reciprocated them" (48). This "natural" ability to spin falsehood (137) is clearly presented in the novella as running in the male members of the family —Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachus—, but Penelope cleverly learns the art of imitation and her skilled performance of the devoted wife allows her to control the patriarchal system around her, thus becoming the invisible spider.⁶ The novella is full of mimicry, but the following example is revealing: "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. This was not an appropriate thought —it was trivial and silly, and it made me want to giggle" (38).⁷ This description is metaphorical of Penelope's empowerment, since she is able to break the solemnity represented by patriarchy and thus discovers its vulnerable spot, which is symbolically reflected by Odysseus' physical flaw. Contrary to her initial friendly feelings for Odysseus, in Chapter xxv Penelope is depicted as a more experienced trickster than Odysseus. The very title ("Heart of Flint") indicates Penelope's strategy and her lack of real feelings with anyone; she has become a cold actress —which contrasts with the maids' gyn/affection that will be developed in the next section— and the whole chapter is a display of her performativity, where she "pretends" and "disguises" her true feelings (169). While in *The Odyssey* Odysseus pretends to be an old beggar and nobody knows except Eurycleia —who is prevented from telling Penelope by Athena— in Atwood's revision Penelope is fully aware of Odysseus' plan and pretends not to know just to tease him: she even went through "the business of recognizing him. I shed a satisfactory number of tears, and embraced him" (171). Both of them are finally presented as "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" (173).

⁶ Her description as linked with water metaphorically summarizes her mimicry: "Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone... remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does" (43).

⁷ Other examples: "if someone makes an inappropriate remark, you can pretend you haven't heard it. Then you don't have to answer" (8); the veil becomes "a practical help for disguising red, puffy eyes" (10); "through my veil, I studied the young men" (30).

Penelope thus emerges as a manipulative figure, just like Odysseus, or even worse, since she ultimately supersedes and deceives her master. The myth is broken but, rather than offering an alternative model, she playfully imitates the patriarchal mold and ends up being engulfed and imprisoned by the imitation. Raymond's hetero-reality explains Penelope's failure in spite of her undeniable potential. Although she temporarily performs "a man's business" while Odysseus is away (89), her role is always dependent on her husband ("always for him", 89), which explains her obsessive jealousy with Helen of Troy and her constant need for reassurance. Women like Penelope are responsible for the transmission of patriarchal models, rather than opposing them, as when she indoctrinates Telemachus: "I'd tell him stories of Odysseus: what a fine warrior he was, how clever, how handsome, and how wonderful everything would be once he got home again" (90).

The novella is marked by Sedgwick's *homosociality*: men's homosocial bonds perceived as antisocial homosexuality and the survival of patriarchy through the control and use of women (1985: 88-92). Comradeship is the predominant note among these men, since they cleverly join forces to maintain their power and status quo, even if they compete for women, as is the case with the suitors: "We're in this together, do or die. You do, she dies, because whoever wins has to fuck her to death, hahaha" (106). Homosocial pressure is the result of the heteronormative pattern that men are forced to perform: "Not one would back down for fear the others would jeer at him and call him a coward" (107). Homosociality becomes a constant value in the novel,⁸ which contrasts with women's lack of sisterhood. Telemachus stands for the young boy who comes out of age and "proclaim[s] his manhood" (127) in an act that highlights women's excessive emotion and marks the path that will be followed by the twelve maids: "He claimed his father would have been proud of him for showing some backbone and getting out from under the thumbs of the women, who as usual were being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment" (128). Indeed, Telemachus even teases his own mother by comparing her with her rival Helen (132).

In contrast with this solid homosocial bond among men, women are invariably presented as disarticulated. The accepted and generalized violence on women is clearly reflected in the description of Penelope's wedding night:

The gatekeeper had been posted outside the door to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door

⁸ "If you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you could have grandsons" (25); "If you had an enemy it was best to kill his sons, even if those sons were babies. Otherwise they would grow up and hunt you down" (24-25).

and rescuing her when they heard her scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood. (44)

Rather than joining forces to escape oppression, women's rivalry as theorized by Raymond is the predominant note in a novella where woman exists always in relation to man. Odysseus' mother, Anticleia, is a good example. Even when she shares the passive role of Penelope — "his mother had not yet died, worn out by watching and waiting for Odysseus to return" (60)—, she openly decides not to help Penelope. In the rivalry between Penelope and her cousin Helen of Troy, Atwood shows how patriarchy promotes enmity among women as a way to keep them under men's control and not to form a solid coalition. The relational topos among women is hetero-reality, since their rivalry is explained in relation to men and as mere decorative objects. In chapter v, where this rivalry is introduced for the first time, Helen is described as a femme fatale while Penelope is the devoted wife, but both of them are ontologically understood in relation to men: "If you were a magician" would you prefer "a plain but smart wife" or "a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust?" (21-22). In spite of Penelope's undeniable wisdom, she is unable to overcome her insecurity with Helen, which is strengthened by patriarchy, particularly by Penelope's own son. Even when Telemachus is aware of his mother's throbbing obsession and insecurity with Helen, he teasingly replies to his mother's questions about her rival's present beauty with the following answer: she is "[a]s radiant as golden Aphrodite" (132), and then Penelope loses control and becomes hysterical. In spite of Helen's seeming agency with men —even after death, the gender distinction remains and she keeps enchanting men: "she was followed by her customary horde of male spirits (153)—, both she and Penelope are ultimately victims of hetero-reality and are unable to escape gender encapsulation.

Eurycleia, Odysseus' former nurse, is the most interesting case of female rivalry. Although friendly with Penelope, she replaces her in marital roles except in procreation, where Penelope is used as a mere commodity —"you can have a nice big son for Odysseus! That's your job, you just leave everything else to me" (63). Nonetheless, when Penelope gives birth to Telemachus, Eurycleia also replaces her in the maternal role. Eventually they become friends, but, in the case of Penelope, just out of necessity: "As she was the nearest thing there was to something I could talk to ... I came to accept her in time" (63). Chapter xxi is the answer to this lack of female friendship. In the

form of drama, thus suggesting that the revelation about Penelope's infidelity in this chapter might be just another rumour, the seeming friendship between Penelope and Eurycleia is presented as artificial for the sake of safeguarding Penelope's reputation as a good wife and, particularly, the stability of the patriarchal system and Odysseus' reputation. These two women plot the murder of the maids, who become scapegoats for the sake of patriarchy. Rather than the homosociality of men, women become open rivals in their hetero-realistic model, always in relation to men. This false sisterhood is clarified in Penelope's following words to Eurycleia: "Oh then, dear Nurse, it's really up to you to save me, and Odysseus' honour too! ... You are the only one of us he'll trust. Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal ... Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be the doting slaves of such a Lord as he!" (150). They are responsible for propagating the myth of the femme fatale in the maids: "We'll stop their mouths by sending them to Hades – He'll string them up as grubby wicked ladies" (151). This fake sisterhood ultimately solidifies the stability of patriarchy, as represented by Odysseus, and condemns Penelope to the prison of that myth. She proves to be the fly rather than the spider that gets entangled in her own hetero-realistic web.

3. GYN/AFFECTION: THE MAIDS

Penelope's task of creating an alternative literary tradition fails, but it is completed by the apparently secondary characters of the novella, the murdered maids, who prove the viability of Raymond's gyn/affection. Penelope pretends to be part of the maids' literary sisterhood: "We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes ... We were *almost like sisters* ... we'd exchange smiles of complicity ... as if neither they nor I could take their servile behaviour seriously" (114; my emphasis). This momentary connection with the maids transcends gender and class frontiers through storytelling, but Penelope's unreliable narrative ultimately engulfs its narrator due to the hetero-realistic model that it is unable to overcome. Instead of joining forces with the maids in this pseudo-friendship, she ends up betraying them for her own survival: "In retrospect I can see that my actions were ill-considered, and caused harm. But I was running out of time, and becoming desperate, and I had to use every ruse and stratagem at my command" (118).

Although Penelope begins the novel spinning a thread of her own, it is the maids who progressively weave a kaleidoscopic literary tapestry, made up of traditionally feminized literary genres—all popular and low, just like Penelope's claimed "low art"—, which they vindicate, and unweave canonical

patriarchal artifacts, thus being the true perpetrators of the Penelopian metaphor. The truth, if any, of this novella does not come from the solemnity of epic poetry, but from the marginal voices that merge class and gender laceration. Chapter ii begins presenting an obvious case, where a rhyme for children is tainted with the murder of the maids and sexual undertones to set them in stark contrast with Penelope's seeming purity within marriage. The maids' sexualization and mistreatment because of their inferior social status—which is highlighted in chapter iv (a lament, another example of a typically feminized genre)—, is linked with their agency and potential to control men.⁹ The final image connects the maids together through the madwoman in the attic, with a clear wink to *Jane Eyre* and Gilbert and Gubar's seminal study about literary sisterhood in Victorian times. Chapter viii presents a popular tune that the maids consciously sing to a male audience. Although the title suggests a fairy tale ("If I Was a Princess"), the description of the noble Penelope gives way to the harsh condition of the maids, who playfully use metanarration to speak about their dark fate, an idea that is elaborated in the ballad of Chapter xvii. Chapter xiii introduces a sea shanty, a work song sung to accompany the labour on board large merchant ships. Once again, it appears to be the song about a hero, Odysseus ("The Wily Sea Captain"), but the real protagonists are the sailors. It is another example of how gender and class join hands in the book, thus enhancing the notion of performativity as the maids "perform" the role of male sailors in "sailor costumes" (93).

The turning point in the chorus line is Chapter x. Although the title is "The Birth of Telemachus", the focus is not this prototypical hero, but the maids again. The genre is an idyll, a short poem that describes rustic life in the style of Theocritus' pastoral poems. Unlike Homer, Theocritus did not engage in heroes and warfare, thus a perfect counterpoint to the epic *Odyssey*. The poem is a reproduction of the maternal realm driven by instincts, corporeity, irrationality, lack of language and vulnerability, thus connecting with Kristeva's semiotic phase and Bruzelius' and Shepherdson's problematizations of the maternal drive. Kristeva theorizes the image of maternity as fabricated by one of the most powerful institutions of patriarchy, the Church, and associated with the concept of femininity that, for her, is an empty signifier (1989: 114). She speaks of the absorption of femininity by the maternal and wonders whether such a reduction is no more than a masculine appropriation of maternity in line with the phantasmagoric reality of femininity. Illustrating Kristeva's theory on maternity, Bruzelius concludes that motherhood involves

⁹ "As we grew older we became polished and evasive, we mastered the secret sneer"; "We drank the wine left in the wine cups. We spat onto the serving platters ... We laughed together in our attics" (14).

a 'catastrophe' of identity associated with femininity, the absence of language and body (1999: 226, 228). The result of patriarchal control on the mother figure is the distinction between "pleasure" and "*jouissance*", which Charles Shepherdson links with "the maternal" and "the imaginary" respectively; that is, "*jouissance*" is a destructive drive that leads to feminine hysteria and the disobedient figure of the *femme fatale*, while "pleasure" involves the mediation of the runaway force of the *jouissance* through the symbolic order of patriarchy, which ends up limiting female expectations to avoid women's rebellion against the system (2000: 71-2).

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva develops her notion of abjection, which can be easily applied to female *jouissance*, and, particularly, to Atwood's exploration of a grotesque maternity. The marginality of the abject, which Kristeva articulates as the opposite pole to a fully recognized subjectivity, or I, serves as the connective device to illustrate the outsider condition of the female. Kristeva locates the abject in a semiotic stage prior to the separation from the mother: "[a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (1982: 10). The abject marks what Kristeva terms a "primal repression", a primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal: "by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (Ibid.: 12-13). Inasmuch as it is connected to the most primitive and instinctual in human nature, the abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Ibid.: 4).

The description of the maids' mothers in Atwood's Chapter x responds to this abjection and female *jouissance*. Corporeity is enhanced to present the woman's (maternal) body as a body of signification (Grosz, 1990): "nine months he sailed the wine-red seas of his mother's blood" (65); the womb and the mother are presented as a dark cave, Kristeva's abject as a source of fear for men: the "cave of dreaded Night"; "through the dangerous ocean of his vast mother he sailed" (65). In this chapter the motif of weaving is linked with female superstition and witchcraft and the potential of women's control of men: "From the distant cave where the threads of men's lives are spun ... by the Three Fatal Sisters, intent on their gruesome handcrafts" (65). This chapter is central as Atwood suggests that the solution to women's subjugation lies in their sisterhood —as in the maids— rather than their rivalry —Penelope and the rest of women. In the case of Telemachus, the maids would have stood a chance if they had gotten rid of him when they were

superior in number: “If we had known that, would we have drowned him back then? ... Twelve against one, he wouldn't have stood a chance” (68-69). Atwood suggests that women should defend the semiotic, the link with the maternal, and use their superstitious power to join forces and change fate: “Ask the Three Sisters, spinning their blood-red mazes, tangling the lives of men and women together” (69).

Chapter xxi, where the chosen genre is tragedy, is climactic. In this case the protagonist seems to be Penelope, but once again the real protagonists are the maids and their tragic fate. Atwood uses a solemn genre to discover the truth about Penelope, and yet its theatricality and the fact that it is described like a dream suggest that it could be another rumour. The maids invite us to “take a peek behind the curtain” (148) and discover the true Penelope “the Prissy”, who, “when it came to sex” was “no shrinking sissy” (147). The dialogue between Eurycleia and Penelope is presented as a performance, so that it is not necessarily true. It might be just an enactment of the “slandering gossip” of the previous chapter, just for fun, or maybe the real story, as the maids were supposed to know the real Penelope (“Only the twelve, my lady, who assisted, know that the Suitors you have not resisted”, 150). If this is so, they were loyal to Penelope while she betrayed them by allowing their death. This is the chapter where the previously discussed hetero-reality in Penelope becomes clear, an idea that is further developed in the figure of Eurycleia, when an alternative version is forwarded that supports female rivalry after all: “What if [Eurycleia] singled them out and had them killed out of resentment at being excluded and the desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus?” (161).

The next two chapters by the maids epitomize their unweaving of canonical discourses. Chapter xxiv is an Anthropology lecture that develops a feminist discourse to counteract patriarchal truths. With this chapter devised as a lecture, Atwood introduces academic discourse and complements female genres with a masculine realm that has been progressively appropriated by women, hence the direct insertion of a feminist discourse in the novel. The maids become a feminist voice —“No, Sir, we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap” (166)— and address an audience of men in order to extend feminist ideas in a patriarchal readership. The topic of this chapter is how matrilineal societies were replaced by the patriarchal system with the use of violence. In addition, Chapter xxvi epitomizes the highest criticism of patriarchal models with the introduction of a trial. Justice is presented as a patriarchal institution, the best example of what Althusser meant by “Ideological State Apparatuses” and the process of interpellation and misrecognition. While this is a trial to judge Odysseus, as a reputable

patriarch and hero, he is supported by the institution, even when he has committed a crime. As usual in the novella, what seems to be a patriarchal focus changes to concentrate on the maids. The patriarchal bias is present through the trial: Odysseus is regarded as “a legendary hero of high repute” (175); “our generally esteemed client Odysseus was merely acting in self-defence” (177); the Judge concludes: “I am inclined to agree” (177), which reveals the corruption of the system even when there is evidence of murder. As a powerful patriarchal figure, the Judge controls the present women: “What’s the commotion in the back? Order! Ladies, stop making a spectacle of yourselves! Adjust your clothing! Take those ropes off your necks” (177). Even when they are asking for justice, there is a final animalization and commodification of women: “these were his slaves” (178), “the youngest maids, the best-looking and the most beddable” (179). The chapter reaches a textual level when *The Odyssey*, which in the course of Atwood’s novella is presented as Odysseus’ manufactured and false version, is ironically presented by the Judge as the Bible to follow, as law and official testimony (179). In this chapter Penelope supports patriarchal discourse again against the maids, justifying their rape (181) and behaving as a crafted actress. The chapter reaches an extremely grotesque level when the Judge dismisses the case in order not to be accused of anachronism (182).

The last two chapters by the maids return to a popular format to highlight the literary coalition of women. The title of Chapter xxviii enhances the maids’ haunting presence, justified after their unfair murder and trial: “We’re walking behind you”. They use now a “Love Song”, a lyrical genre that contrasts with the masculinist trial. The chapter is marked by the use of apostrophes at the beginning and at the end to mock the epithets of Greek epics: “Yoo hoo! Mr Nobody! Mr Nameless! Mr Master of Illusion! Mr Sleight of Hand, grandson of thieves and liars!” (191). There is a parodic presentation of the hero, who is ultimately reduced to nothing: “Yoo hoo, Mr Thoughtfulness, Mr Goodness, Mr Godlike, Mr Judge!” (193). Although the maids are presented as symbolic in order to highlight the concept of female friendship,¹⁰ in this chapter the emphasis lies on their corporeity to enhance their female condition that is real after all: “bums, mouths, tits, feet” (191). The chapter develops some images of the maids to mark the injustice of their murder, but also their power as haunting ghosts in the conscience of patriarchy: “dangling like clothes on a line” (192); “like a trail of smoke, like a long tail, a tail made of girls” (penis envy is replaced with phallic control of

¹⁰ “dear educated minds. You don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the sordid part. Consider us pure symbol. We’re no more real than money” (168).

women over men); “heavy as memory, light as air” (192); “close, close by, close as a kiss, close as your own skin” (193), with a repetition of “close” to mark the impossibility to get rid of them together with corporeal images to mark their reality, even more real now after death: “we’ll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue” (193).

Finally, Chapter xxix is an envoi, a short, closing stanza in certain verse forms (eg. Ballad, sestina) dedicating the poem to a patron or summarizing the main ideas. This poem is the conclusion to the book, maybe ironically dedicated to a patron, Odysseus. Penelope’s voice has been superseded by the maids. It was heard at the end of Chapter xxvii for the last time, just to support Odysseus. This chapter insists on the negation of their identity with anaphora and repetition —“we had *no* ...” (195)—, probably as a way to mark their execution, but then the poem highlights their haunting presence that pursues the reader. The use of enjambment reveals their haunting presence: “and now we follow/you, we find you/now, we call/to you to you/too wit too woo/too wit too woo/too woo” (195-6), like an echo that keeps coming back in a mocking way. The maids turn into owls, thus appropriating Athene’s identity as new war-like figures beyond classical patriarchy. Even though Penelope is a traitor to this female tradition, the composition of the novella with the alternation of Penelope’s and the maids’ chapters suggests the weaving process where threads are intertwined to produce the final fabric. Penelope cannot be separated from this literary experiment that combines the hetero-realistic and gyn-affective models in women’s writing.

CONCLUSION: MYTH AND EMOTION

In spite of Penelope’s obvious limitation as a convincing heroine for feminism, she metaphorically supersedes her hetero-normative limitation through the metaphor of weaving. Although it is the maids that eventually weave an alternative, postmodern, feminine narrative based on gyn/affection,¹¹ Penelope’s fabric and her own story end up nicely accommodating themselves to the feminine communitarian model provided by the maids, thus somehow incorporating women’s hetero-realistic experience, which has marked them for millennia. This gyn/affective model does not exclude Penelope but rather vindicates her potential as a clever woman, who needs the right milieu to transcend Irigaraian mimicry and produce an invigorated and alternative feminine discourse aptly generated by the semiotic and emotional bond of the maids.

¹¹ Darias-Beutell concludes that the maids are re-envisioned “not merely as silent victims but as energetic satirists of the dominant order” (2012: 4).

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