

Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, a revisioning of the *Odyssey*, provides authorial voices for the characters of Penelope and the twelve serving maids who are strung up like thrushes or pigeons at the end of *Odyssey* 22. Penelope herself is the main author of this text, narrating her life in prose form from Hades. The maids also address the audience from the afterlife, in a series of choral passages which are a “tribute to” (Atwood 198) the choral sections of ancient Greek drama. The contrast between the orderly prose of Penelope and the wildly promiscuous generic textual variety of the maids graphically illustrates the tension which Atwood creates between the mistress of Odysseus’s house and her slaves. Atwood’s rendering of the contrapuntal voices of the maids and Penelope in *The Penelopiad* produces an extreme interpretation of the politics of gender, sex and status in the household of Odysseus.

In both Homer and Atwood, Penelope’s maids enact a sexual betrayal of the household of Odysseus. In the sexual and status economy of the *Odyssey*, Thalmann notes that the morality of the free and enslaved females is mutually dependent and exclusive: “in order for Penelope to be perceived as innocent, a slave must be guilty” (Thalmann 31). In Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, however, the moral polarity is reversed: Penelope is guilty and her maids are innocent. Atwood’s Penelope describes her maids’ initial control over their own sexuality, reflecting the situation in the *Odyssey* (Thalmann 30): “They were ever-flowing fountains of trivial gossip: they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angles, they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them as much as they pleased: no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs” (Atwood 30). This Penelope, however, exerts her own control over her maids by herself stage-managing their riotous, offensive activities with the suitors (Atwood 105-106). Atwood’s maids are on a spying mission for Penelope which becomes fatal as a result of Penelope’s sinister, ambiguous negligence in sharing her plot with Eurykleia (Atwood 117). *The Penelopiad* implies that Penelope’s behaviour is an act of revenge for the maids’ frequently degrading speech towards Penelope, and most especially, for their betrayal of her trick of the shroud. Atwood’s Penelope, who unquestionably recognizes her returning husband, takes her place alongside Odysseus and Telemachus as they all fashion the noose around the necks of the twelve girls.

Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* paints a sharp picture of the women who inhabit Odysseus’s house while he is absent. Any solidarity between Penelope and the other women of her household, all her slaves after the death of Anticleia, is a mirage undercut by envy and betrayal. Atwood’s narrative, which toys suggestively with the maids as Penelope’s sacrificial victims, challenges us with the figure of a murderous Penelope. By giving voice to the slaughtered maids and Penelope, Atwood forces us to consider a toxic mixture of sex and status which our text of the *Odyssey* obscures, or avoids, through its focus on, and articulation of, the myth of Odysseus’s return.



