

## **PENELOPE AND HER *KLÉOS* IN THE NEW *ODYSSEY* BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to analyse ancient epic poetry used by (and in) contemporary literature for its own historical-fictional tradition of the womanhood. Such analysis intends to uncover one case of reception and the way it works, as reception is a procedure that covers a vast field. Here, it takes place within feminist literature focusing in Penelope – a character that could be seen as an allegory of reception theory as suggested by Vanda Zajko (2011: 195) – in the retelling of the *Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood (2005). Atwood uses a well-known story to examine the evaluation that Penelope herself makes of her own behaviour in relation to her fame. Desirous of a good reputation, the woman who waits patiently for her husband seems to be still afraid of her voice and her *kléos*.

### **Keywords**

*Odyssey*; Penelope; reception of classics; feminist reception.

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*Heródoto*, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.7, n.1 - 2022.1. p. 75-89.

DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2022.v7.14816

## Resumo

Este trabalho analisa a poesia épica antiga utilizada pela (e na) literatura contemporânea para a constituição de uma tradição histórico-ficcional da feminilidade. Tal análise pretende desvendar um caso de recepção e a forma como ele funciona, uma vez que a recepção é um procedimento que cobre vastas possibilidades. Aqui, ela se dá dentro da literatura feminista com foco em Penélope - uma personagem que poderia ser vista enquanto uma alegoria da teoria da recepção como sugerido por Vanda Zajko (2011: 195) -, na releitura da *Odisseia*, *The Penelopiad* de Margaret Atwood (2005). Atwood usa uma conhecida história para examinar a avaliação que Penélope faz do próprio comportamento em relação à fama. Desejosa de uma boa reputação, a mulher que espera pacientemente por seu marido parece ainda ter medo de sua voz e de seu *kléos*.

## Palavras-chave

*Odisseia*; Penélope; recepção de clássicos; recepção feminista.

## Introduction

For the last years, many signals show that classical culture is in the crosshairs of the call-out culture. Ancient sources were indeed mobilized in contemporary world to justify from slavery to fascism, from colonization to the idea of whiteness supremacy, and to delete them has being believed, for some, as the best solution for erasing their potential of legitimating persistent kinds of violence. Recently, the department of classics of Howard University, the only historically Black university of the United States of America with a department of classics, was dissolved. Even inside departments of classics, classics is threatened. Professor of Ancient Rome in Princeton, Dan-el Padilla Peralta has been openly talking about the damages caused by classics throughout the last two millennia (2019; 2020). For similar reasons, Homer has been cancelled several times in social medias.

In that regard, as a response for the removing of the very department in Howard, one of its professors, Cornel West, alluded to how inspired by ancient thought of freedom were Frederick Douglas and Martin Luther King Jr on their own fight for liberty (2021). In the same line, the work of Rosa Andújar (2020) about the theatre of Luis Alfaro must be mentioned. The chicano writer updated Sophocles' Electra and Oedipus as well as Euripides' Medea putting at the center of Los Angeles' and New York's stages an immigrant and invisible population to give life to ancient drama illuminating the modern.

Therefore, if the destruction of classics is a possibility and has always been, the reception of classics can be effective to show how classical culture is still needed, not to keep alive a heritage which crossed generations, but, foremost, because as says Friedrich Nietzsche in the second *Untimely Meditations*:

For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge (...). (Nietzsche, 2012: 76)

Without denying the fact that ancient sources have been truly used several times to authorize heinous practices, to confront them could be better prevention for the repetition of these practices. In short, I am assuming here together with my references that the use already made of Greek thought – even if the result of its use has been a consolidation of an unfair tradition –, *Heródoto*, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.7, n.1 - 2022.1. p. 75-89.  
DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2022.v7.14816

cannot be changed, although our attitude regarding this tradition might be a new one.

In this very sense, observing how classics had, with few exceptions, been clearly anti-feminist, it is reasonable to say that the field has been changing in the last decades. Feminists in the field are truly developing the study of women in Antiquity and, face to the apparent silence of ancient sources about female perspectives, innovative collections have been published on the subject. Since the 80s, works such as *Women in the Ancient World* by John Peradotto and John Patrick Sullivan; *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* by Helene Foley, and *Images of Women in Antiquity* by Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt demonstrate that feminism makes the area change (Rabinowitz and Richlin, 1993). These cited works, among many others, are able to attest that the silence of ancient women is far away to be total. That is what a second wave of feminist works on Ancient World and on Ancient Greece demonstrate even more. From new titles such as *Women in Ancient Greece* by Sue Blundell or *Pandora. Women in Classical Greece* by Ellen Reeder to a *Women in Ancient Greece: a sourcebook* by Bonnie MacLachlan the challenge of rescuing female voices made way to new inquiries.

Together with these works, there is a feminist perspective or, even better, a feminist strain in Odyssean works – beginning with Samuel Butler's *Authoress of the Odyssey*, according to Mihoko Suzuki, 2007: 263 – that updates the comprehension of ancient women in epic poetry through retellings or receptions.

For these reasons, this paper aims to investigate, on the one hand, the potential of classics to participate in traditions that would not be imagined as the ambiance for receiving classics, which reinforces the relevance posed by the Antiquity into the present. Besides, in a more striking aspect, it aims to map ancient materials used by (and in) contemporary literature for its own historical-fictional tradition of the womanhood, characterized in ancient epic poetry not only from a hierarchical perspective, but also from its silence. Such a mapping intends to uncover the kind of reception it depicts and the way it works, as reception is a procedure that covers a vast field. Here, it takes place within feminist literature focusing in Penelope – a character that could be seen as an allegory of reception theory as suggested by Vanda Zajko (2011:

195) – in the retelling of the *Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood (2005).<sup>2</sup>

### Penelope in the *Odyssey*

In epic poetry, heroism is if not an exclusively masculine dimension, at least a usually masculine dimension. Men could access a superior state, gods could be stronger than ever, but women would not be entitled to change their ordinary nature. As Moses Finley (1978: 25) concludes, in the age of heroes (the word and the idea of) hero has no other gender than male. Women are depicted usually sitting at their looms, spinning or weaving, such as Penelope, Andromache, Arete and even Helen (*Il.* 3.125-128 and 6.323-324). So as to, in the *Odyssey*, weaving is the essential activity for women capable of defining them as such, according to Effimia Karakantza (1997). Working with the loom and with their distaff in hand inside is what women would be supposed to do.

On the other hand, it could be remarked that, still, the a Penelopeia is also suggested by Agamemnon in the *Odyssey*, when he declares that the queen's *kléos* – the Greek word for gloria, meaning both the fame as well as the song that spreads the hero's fame – will become an immortal song which will glorify her forever. He says to Penelope's husband:

Lucky you,  
cunning Odysseus: you got yourself  
a wife of virtue – great Penelope.  
How principled she was, that she remembered  
her husband all those years! Her fame will live  
forever, and the deathless gods will make  
a poem to delight all those on earth  
about intelligent Penelope.  
(*Od.* 24.194-201)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood's retelling of the *Odyssey* uses the first person to narrate Penelope's story through her own eyes. *The Penelopiad* was published as a novel in 2005 for Canongate's series 'The Myths' (modern rewrites of mythology), challenging the masculine hegemony of some myths along with other retellings crafted by female authors. Two years later, the novel was adapted by Atwood for the stage and published by Faber and Faber in 2007 (Braund, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The translation of the *Odyssey* adopted in this paper is by Emily Wilson (2017).

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Penelope's behaviour is not entirely typical of Homeric women, as remarks Judith Fletcher (2012: 77) in accordance with the commentary by De Jong (2001: 35). In fact, her inertia contrasts to other women's attitude. If Penelope is silent, female speeches occasionally threaten men throughout the *Odyssey*. Calypso (*Od.* 1.56-58), Circe (*Od.* 10.220-228), the Sirens (*Od.* 12.39-46) have powerful voices capable of changing male destinies as well as human female voices do. Helen in the *Iliad* is clearly shown to adopt traditionally male roles and speech-patterns (Blondell, 2010; Roisman, 2006; Worman, 2001; Elmer 2005). Clytemnestra chooses to face her husband as well. This remark could be useful to depict Penelope as an intentional and odyssean example to be followed.

This wife of virtue, whose fame will live forever, enters the epic scene strongly representing the image of the chaste wife. In the scene, her first appearance in the poem, she will be reminded of her duty to be silent, rebuked by her son, after asking the bard of the palace to stop singing the return of the Greeks, suggesting that he had mentioned the death of her husband (*Od.* 1.337-344). Telemachus says to his mother:

Go in and do your work.  
Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves  
to do their chores as well. It is for men  
to talk, especially me. I am the master.  
(*Od.* 1.356-359)

Sent to her room, she recovers the typical behaviour of a powerless and obedient female. Helpless and submissive to her fate, Penelope must be in the restricted area of her house or in the more restricted area where she engages her activities and domestic duties.

The same happens when Penelope intervenes during the contest of the bow. That is why the quotation with its special recommendation could be identified more as formula than a simple passage from the epic poems. Late in the *Odyssey*, the son again orders his mother, in almost identical terms, to return to her room, attesting now that the bow is work for men (*Od.* 21.350-3). Indeed, these two passages are different just in one point: from the first, *μῦθος* meaning speech or word, translated by 'to talk', is in the second replaced by

τὸξον, translated by bow. In both cases, is clear that the woman is seen as an outsider in the scene.<sup>4</sup>

### Penelope in the *Odyssey* by Margaret Atwood

The main characteristics of Penelope's expected conduct in life, to be silent and obedient, will be the reasons for Margaret Atwood to retell her story in *The Penelopiad*, a relecture of the *Odyssey* published in 2005. Now, Penelope is dead. That condition, which is precisely what makes her able to know and report her own odyssey, has been given since the first line.

*Now that I'm dead I know everything.* This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before. Death is much too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say. (Atwood, 2005: 8)

In *The Penelopiad*, the atmosphere of silence in the past is alluded several times. Penelope's acts and reactions sign how unvoiced she used to be. Always having something in her hands to help herself to pretend that she did not hear any inappropriate remark and, in consequence, that she did not need to have an answer (Atwood, 2005: 12); often weeping and hiding her crying face with veils, Penelope by Atwood introduces herself as who has never told her own stories or made her own decisions, without frustrating someone else's intentions even when she wanted and acted in the opposite way. That is exactly what happens when she covers her face in the moment she leaves home to go to Ithaca, with the new husband. She hides the fact that she was laughing on the suppliant father who once tried to toss his child into the sea. Answering the hero's request of choosing to stay with her father or go with her husband, she would have pulled down her veil, people guess, because of her so very modesty to announce in words her desire of leaving (Atwood, 2005: 25-26). She acts in silence, as required, being told what she needs to do. Briefly, this Penelope is more a woman who does not show disagreement.

In this hybrid genre made of chapters in first person narrative as others delivered by a chorus of the maids (for the first time, they have a voice!), the subject of retelling a story, revealing what has not yet been told, is the main focus. Penelope tells her own story whereas the twelve maids give a picture

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Fletcher (2012: 79) shows a third one in the *Iliad* using this very formula, now related to Hector's objection to Andromacha (*Il.* 6.490-3).

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DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2022.v7.14816

of their lives (and death) by her side. Margaret Atwood, in other words, has chosen to retell the story of Penelope alongside the story of the twelve hanged maids, exploring two types of silence from the official plot sang by the poet. As Emily Hauser says, Atwood explores Penelope's consciousness of her belatedness in her *Odyssey*, whilst at the same time creates an instability of the text itself through the subtle unravelling of her maids' voice, which throws doubt upon the reliability of Penelope's voice as a narrator – actually, she could be preserved as the model wife in the *Odyssey* because the maids were assassinated and remained unvoiced until now. '*The Penelopiad* thus both reaffirms and undercuts the Homeric *Odyssey*, in a move that presents the importance (and difficulty) of engaging with classical texts and, at the same time, refutes traditional models of monodirectional influence' (Hauser, 2018: 110-1).

The maids knew what Penelope did during the absence of the complicated man who was her husband, to use the funny and precise translation for πολύμητις by Emily Wilson (2017). They were aware of the eventual Penelope's lovers and her misconduct. As a matter of fact, this question points out two aspects to be analysed in the *Odyssey*: the first one would be the adultery and the second and most important the fame it generates. Both of them are already present as problems in the *Odyssey*, where Penelope presents a defence of Helen's infidelity:

I felt a constant dread that some bad man  
would fool me with his lies. There are so many  
dishonest, clever men. That foreigner  
would never have got Helen into bed,  
if she had known the Greeks would march to war  
and bring her home again. It was a goddess  
who made her do it, putting in her heart  
the passion that first caused my grief as well.  
(*Od.* 23.219-226)

Like numerous Homeric characters, Penelope in the *Odyssey* excuses Helen, by assuming that the gods put in her heart the passion, even if she, such as other victims of the Trojan War, highlights the grief her cousin caused. In Penelope's words, Helen would have not done what she did if she knew a war would happen. That she ran away with Paris Alexander, with whom she fell in love, was not her crime, or at least was not her worst crime, since love and the desires of the body are in the nature of a human being and can come out by the divine intrusion. Helen failed, from Penelope's perspective, to imagine that a consequence of her act of love could be the tragic and long *Heródoto*, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.7, n.1 - 2022.1. p. 75-89.  
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conflict. In short, the lacedaemon would act differently if she had known the price to be paid to have her back home again.

For Karakantza, 'the proof that Penelope is not monolithically chaste, as the traditional view wishes her to be, is her curious defence of Helen's infidelity' (1997: 177). Indeed, Irene de Jong (2001) points out how Penelope, in the above quoted passage from the *Odyssey*—where she is face to face with her husband—fears that the gods could have been doing the same that they did to Helen twenty years before: putting the passion for a stranger in her heart. Helen here is thus used as a parallel for Penelope herself. This parallel is reenforced by the Odyssean scene where Helen herself guesses the bad fame she would acquire (Il. 6.354-358)—the fame also as a result for woman's conduct.

According to Hauser again (2018: 119), in *The Penelopiad* by Atwood, Penelope's image of chastity can be related to the *Odyssey* itself. Each refutation of her infidelity is prefaced by a literary reference: 'the songs say...'; 'the more outrageous versions', 'such a monstrous tale'; 'some songs aren't worth the breath expended on them'; 'various commentators have cited'. In other words, expressing her marital fidelity to Odysseus, this Atwood's Penelope is claiming her textual fidelity to the ancient poem.

### **Penelope's reputation: news, gossips, songs**

Thinking what generates and spreads the fame is certainly one of the subjects of *The Penelopiad* by Atwood. Dead, in Hades, sometimes she wants to show that she thinks otherwise, saying 'who cares about public opinion now?' (Atwood 2005: 9), but it is difficult to be convicted of her update. She is still worried with her image and aware of the various stories which travelled the world for the past two or three thousand years despite her efforts for cultivating a good fame.

Some of the stories alleged that she made private and fake promises to some of the suitors and used her encouragement to get important gifts. Some alleged also that she slept with one of the suitors, the politest, with more agreeable conversation, and, then, others that she slept with all of the suitors, one after another. 'Who could believe such a monstrous tale? Some songs aren't worth the breath expended on them' (Atwood 2005: 57). Her will to be seen as the virtuous wife—no lovers, stay inside, be quiet—did not prevent

the gossip about her conduct. In other words, her settlement of being an exemplary woman, of good conduct, is neither enough to make her fame splendorous as Helen's fame or to clip the wings of the other stories. All in all, she is still compromised to save her *kléos* and to find out how it could be made.

Penelope reveals the fear she had of scandalous gossip traveling the world, making her fame, her *kléos* and the pleasure of songs in her praise. 'Everyone does; we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don't believe them' (Atwood, 2005: 44). At the same time, she knows of what is made a good plot:

If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul, would you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed, instead of a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames? Neither would I. (Atwood 2005: 16-17)

And she understands that songs have power:

And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners. Don't follow my example, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours! But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl. (Atwood 2005: 8)

In epic poetry, the hero, even though worried with his fame, rarely speaks of his fame or 'my glory', ἐμὸν κλέος, in the first person (Segal, 1983: 25). He knows what he needs to do to accomplish it and that what matters. The *kléos* is a measure of one's own value, as analysed by R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), in a shame-culture like the world of Homer. This is why warrior's *kléos* is the most important to him and a hero should never hesitate choosing his fame instead of his life.<sup>5</sup> Precisely based on this system, in which esteem depends on how one is viewed and talked by his peers, the hero's *kléos* lives in the mouth of the bard, not of the hero himself (Segal, 1983: 25) and the Odyssean Penelope trusts this logic:

If we are cruel, everyone will curse us  
during our life, and mock us when we die.  
The names of those who act with nobleness  
are brought by travellers across the world,  
and many people speak about their goodness.  
(*Od.* 19.331-335)

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this topic, see: Vernant (1989) and Assunção (1994-1995).  
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DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2022.v7.14816

Used by the poet to designate songs in praise of gods and men as well as the imperishable fame or the objectification of the hero's personal survival, the word *kléos* shows a close relation between the fame of the hero and the song which promotes his gloria (Nagy, 1974: 248). In a simpler way, the essential meaning of the word *kléos* in the Homeric poems is 'oral report' about an event, and thus 'gossip' or just 'news', as affirms Douglas Olson in *Blood and Iron* (1995). In that regard, the Odyssean Penelope is the woman who maintains the memory of her husband, fighting against the desired oblivion of him by the suitors before his return, and also who has to show a good behaviour, because she believes that, despite the difficulties, her fame could be controlled.

In the new *Odyssey*, the plot alludes mentions 'news' (news of Odysseus), 'gossips' (gossips of betrayals), 'songs' (songs about the Trojan War) revealing a plural semantics inspired by the Homeric *kléos*. Combined with her doubts about the nature of songs about herself, Penelope observes with the same interest how rumours disseminate almost all species of news, confirming the Homeric perspective, in which *kléos* could designate both the poetic glory and the song that celebrates and generates the fame. Even the new Odysseus is not immune to rumours – that is what observes Shannon Collins: 'The island of the Lotus flower is reinterpreted as a mutiny by his drunken crew; the victory over the Cyclops as a financial disagreement with a one-eyed tavern keeper' (2006: 61).

Atwood's Penelope finds *kléos* in all versions. 'Any rumour was better than none, however, so I listened avidly to all. But after several more years the rumours stopped coming altogether: Odysseus seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth' (Atwood, 2005: 40). And she is specially interested in her own *kléos*.

Asked about the rapes of the maids in the final trial of the hero (all of them present in souls), she answers that she was asleep during their assassination: 'I was asleep, Your Honour. I was often asleep. I can only tell you what they said afterwards' (Atwood, 2005: 70). She says nothing again, equally she has said nothing after their assassination:

What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It's a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years. (Atwood, 2005: 64)

Mihoko Suzuki is right when affirms that Atwood 'eloquently critique the ideology of the dominant order that normalized their slaughter by condemning them as unchaste and disloyal' (2007: 272) and, more than that, makes the critique goes deeper when literally puts Odysseus on trial in a twenty-first-century court of justice (2007: 275), judging the *Odyssey* as well. Penelope though, who is present, sees everything and is sorry for the maids' fate, is again not capable of defending them in order to protect her own reputation, still not capable of freedom in order to protect her reputation.<sup>6</sup> Even in Hades, she is a victim of the power of *kléos*, fearing a bad fame for the eternal life and being silent one more time.

This retelling of the *Odyssey* makes Penelope witness of the power of *kléos* not just in our world but also in the world of the dead. She identified her silence here and there, the consequences of it, and yet she is still afraid of facing male voices or the official story.

### Brief conclusion

Face to nowadays common allegation that classics is a conservative field and the challenge of updating the research of classics with a new agenda, I aimed to show in the present paper that the reception of them could be a new strategy to dispute the area. My proposal then was to present reception of classics as one way to cope with this demand, firstly, believing that some retelling of classic tradition is able not just to rescue the muted voices from ancient sources but to reinvent and illuminate them. Secondly, I aimed to show that what concerns the ideal women behaviour in ancient sources could not be abandoned at all in the modern source, given Penelope's behaviour depicted in this new *Odyssey*. This explains what Margaret Atwood says about myths in an essay of 2005: 'Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings' (Atwood *apud* Hauser, 2018: 115). Atwood reveals a new Penelope in the ancient one and, because of that, she calls her play 'an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo' (2007: v),

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<sup>6</sup> Shannon Collins goes further: 'To protect her own reputation, she cannot openly mourn for the young women, for whose deaths she is indirectly responsible' (2006: 65).

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pointing out both that we are far away from a Homeric Penelope and that, ironically, she is still alive among (or even in) us.

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