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"No Love like a Mother's Hate": Navigating Internalized Misogyny and Inter-Generational Trauma in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

Nora Júlia Levická

Motherhood represented one of the pinnacles of female existence throughout the distinct periods of ancient Greece. The socio-cultural importance of women lay in their innate ability to produce citizens for the city state, or *polis*, thereby linking their status to their nature as perpetuators of society. However, a mother's bond with her children was deemed essentially immaterial in the phallocentric democracy of ancient Athens. This was paralleled by laws demonstrating disinterest in women as mothers and the bonds between mothers and their children (Pepe 2018, 154). Therefore, my interest will lie mainly in exploring how Margaret Atwood manages to portray these relationships through both a feminist and female perspective in her novella *The Penelopiad* (2005). By providing both Penelope and the Maids with narrative voices of their own, Atwood's retelling of the *Odyssey* offers an angle on the story that was inaccessible and often unrelatable to ancient Greek audiences due to societal norms at the time. The writers, narrators and heroes of these tragedies were men, and the female perspective was not the focus of the stories they told. By foregrounding her female characters, Atwood not only balances the focus, she also challenges the sanctity of the most vital role women fulfilled at the time – motherhood – unveiling the depressing reality of the consequences of the internalization of sexism and patriarchal notions of gendered violence and misogyny. *The Penelopiad* will be approached as a case study of these issues, employing both the contemporary feminist theory and trauma theory, as well as providing the cultural and historical context necessary for the understanding of the roots of the issues Atwood addresses in her novella, namely Homer's *Odyssey*, and ancient Greek myth-inspired tragedies from the Classical period.

Since *The Penelopiad* is a feminist retelling of one of the most renowned myth-based ancient Greek literary works, which in turn shaped the social and cultural expectations of the time due to its ubiquitous status in the ancient world, we must explore these very same norms and expectations first. As Northrop Frye remarked, "[t]he word myth is used in such a bewildering variety of contexts that anyone talking about it has

to say first of all what his chosen context is" (1990, 3). Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore the wide spectrum of distinct flavours of traumatic events that happen to and are perpetuated by the protagonists of Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. It aims to find links from her own suffering, internalized misogyny, and the (passively) violent acts she commits, to the binary notions of gender perpetuated by mythological narratives and ancient Greek drama, and the role motherhood plays in all of them. Myth will, therefore, serve as a dominant narrative against which Atwood writes her novella, as well as a cultural background reflecting the ideas perceived as real by the people whose lived experienced was shaped by it. Homer's works represent a mirror of Greek society (Cantarella 1987, 25) and since they often leave the female characters with limited to "no scope for effective action" (Farron 1979, 26), a rewriting of the *Odyssey* gives us an opportunity to observe how much from the ancient tradition we can still notice in the mirror's reflection today.

When Aristotle contemplated the elements of great art in 335 BCE, he wrote on the crucial elements defining good tragedy in his highly esteemed *Poetics*. Throughout his text, Aristotle does not forget to mention Homer as the pioneer of this artform, mentioning the importance of the genius of the epic poet numerous times: 21, to be precise. The heavy focus on Homer reflects his importance and the reverence with which later generations treated his works as the most respected source (Finley 1954, 4). Homer's works serve as objects of study for current feminist critics, Atwood's work being an example of this. According to Aristotle, a great tragedy should tell a story that is either terrible or pitiable (Aristotle 2013, 68). As he states, "[w]hat should be looked for are cases where the sufferings occur within relationships, as between brother and brother, son and father, mother and son, son and mother – where one kills, or is on the point of killing, the other, or is doing something else horrible" (2013, 71). Despite the complexity of the relationship family dynamics mentioned by Aristotle, one in particular seems to be missing – the mother–daughter bond. A good tragedy, a story that would move the reader and/or the audience member, should not concern itself – at least according to Aristotle – with relationships between women. Instead, he repeatedly reinforces the importance of the ties between a son and his female progenitor, mentioning it twice, as seen above. The decision not to include parental relationships with daughters might be interpreted as an oversight, but only if one does not look at the societal norms of ancient Athens and the societal expectations of women from the time.

The proof of the deeply and firmly embedded nature of these can be found precisely where Aristotle directs us: in the often myth-inspired ancient Greek tragedy. It is crucial to emphasize that the Athenian tragedy presented a rather conflicting portrayal of women, allowing the female characters much more agency and freedom of trans-

gression of the rigid societal norms than the Athenians would grant to flesh-and-blood women. Many scholars, such as Nancy Rabinowitz, Victoria Wohl, and Kirk Ormand, use multiple literary models to discuss the role of women in Ancient Greek tragedy, employing women as symbols to uphold the coetaneous system of gender norms, and emphasizing that these women should be treated as such. "Greek tragic women seem to form a sort of paradox: they must be based in reality, and yet they do not seem to represent their real-life counterparts very well at all" (Hoyt 2013, 2). Their portrayal in these tragic narratives was in turn inspired in their depictions in myths like the epics of *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, the same myths against which Atwood writes her own story. The purpose of this paper is not to explore the level of correspondence between the real lived experience of ancient Athenian women and their versions portrayed in tragedies, so for the purpose of this analysis, the treatment of the female characters in tragedy will be employed for the purpose of demonstrating the art being retold by the contemporary authors.

One of the best examples of the edifying practice of minimizing the importance of female involvement in the process of procreation is Aeschylus's trilogy of tragedies known as the *Oresteia* (458 BCE). In the trilogy, Orestes is confronted by an impossible choice: either to bear the burden of avenging his father's murder at the cost of becoming a matricidal criminal, or to turn his back on the tradition dictating the need to spill his own mother's blood to cleanse that of his father. He chooses the former over the later. When the deed is done, Orestes is faced with the wrath of the immortals for the matricide he committed, despite the fact that he was urged to murder his own mother by Apollo himself. Having killed Clytemnestra for the murder of his father Agamemnon, he is put on trial in Athens in front of the most ancient court in the polis, the Areopagus. The defence of his crime of matricide is performed by the same deity who initially incited Orestes to commit the crime through the oracle: Apollo, son of the great Zeus himself. In his speech, the sun god attempts to convince the jury that in killing his own mother, Orestes had not committed a deed against the social order:

> The *mother* of what's called her offspring's *no parent* but only the nurse to the seed that's implanted. The mounter, *the male's the only true parent*. She harbours the bloodshot, unless some god blasts it. The womb of the woman's a convenient transit.
>
> (Aeschylus 1989, 658–61, emphasis mine)

To reinforce his notion of the elimination of the parental status of mothers, Apollo provides the goddess Athena as a prime example of a purely masculine birth since the protector of the city of Athens sprung directly from her father's forehead. In oth-

er words, she was not born out of a woman but a man, thus completely disregarding the maternal power of women. However, not even Zeus is truly able to perform such a feat since Apollo is lying – Zeus is only able to "give birth" to Athena due to him swallowing her mother Metis while pregnant with Athena, thus proving that not even he was able to create life without a woman. In a similar act of castration induced by a male deity, Orestes both has his revenge and satisfies the patriarchal need to punish his mother's transgression of the societal norm: "Orestes kills his mother because the rule of the God – Father and his appropriation of the archaic powers of mother-earth require it. He kills his mother and goes mad as a result" (Irigaray 1999, 37). The fact that Clytemnestra murdered her husband in revenge for her daughter Iphigenia's sacrifice by Agamemnon's own hand is never mentioned in defense of her crime, emphasizing the discrepancies in the importance of the gendered relationships between parents and their children.

Nonetheless, at the end of the play, Orestes is acquitted of his crimes, which, according to Pepe, "confirms that the god (Apollo) is expressing a widespread view" (2012, 268). In her article "Pregnancy and Childbirth, or the Right of the Father" from 2012, Pepe draws a link between the notions represented in the theatrical pieces and scientific explanations that have been created to confirm the subordinate role of women in the process of procreation. She mentions Aristotle's complex theory developed in order to prove the marginal function of women in childbirth itself. He describes women as passive and cold recipients, while men are portrayed as their perfect counterparts, bearers of warmth and providers of life (Pepe 2012, 269). Thus, he relegates women to a passive position in the life-creating process, since even the birth they give has to be initiated by the foetus.

It is especially important to reiterate the importance of motherhood in the whole equation here. Despite the continuous and repeated attempts to limit access to abortion and contraceptive methods, an approach that seems to be on the rise in the last few years, the crucial role women play in the process of procreation, birth and parenting remains unquestioned in the countries of the global West. However, the same cannot be said regarding the approach towards pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood in Ancient Athens. Thus, as Pepe emphasizes, according to Aristotle, the same philosopher who did not deem the relationship between mothers and daughters as worthy of such a genre as tragedy, women are "'strangers', 'guests' to their children" (2012, 269). The philosopher thus stripped Athenian women of their life-giving power and diminished them to the position of mere carriers of their husbands' progeny, reduced to vessels of future generations without any rights to decide whether to carry the foetus to term or to

rear the child: the right to make both of these decisions was reserved for Athenian men (Pepe 2013, 42; Pepe 2012, 256).

The inferior position of women in art is, therefore, a reflection of the societal approaches towards them in general. As Nancy Demands claims in her book *Birth, Death and Motherhood in Classical Greece*, at the time, "the problems inherent in being female were believed to begin with conception" (1994, 4). Women were therefore placed below their male counterparts at the very moment of being conceived. This rather patriarchal and misogynistic outlook can, yet again, be confirmed by pieces of art enjoyed by a segment of the population – overwhelmingly men – who lived in the era. As Fox-Genovese remarks, "it is now at least acknowledged that while men were […] busying themselves with those activities we are wont to call history, women were invariably doing something – if only bearing more men to make more history and more women to permit them to do so" (1982, 6). This misogyny, as Pomeroy adds, "taints much ancient literature" (1975, 10). This is where we should link the ancient Greek – or, more precisely, Athenian – notions of femininity and their portrayal in the myths, epic narratives and tragedies with the contemporary rewritings produced as both a reaction to and a continuation of the tradition of these stories today. The failure to represent intimate relationships between women thus stems not only from sexist notions about the female sex, but also simply from a lack of knowledge regarding the female existence behind closed doors.

The fear of *miasma*, a spiritual soiling of the individual due to their exposure to the realities of life, such as death, blood, menstruating women or childbirth (Pepe 2012, 246–50) was one of the main reasons for a divide between the male and female spheres in the Archaic and, in this case, Classical period. Therefore, the lacuna of mother–daughter relationships may be explained by the male ignorance of the real dynamics in relationships between mothers and their daughters, since, as Strong remarks, "from antiquity to the present day, Western literature and historical texts […] tend to be male authored" and these texts, due to the nature of their authorship, "tend to depict dialogues between mothers and daughters as both hostile to males and focused on the female manipulation of male relatives and lovers" (2012, 121). If these authors were not acquainted with the nature of these relationships, lacking any kind of experience with them due to the partly gender-segregated society they inhabited, they compensated for their own lack of knowledge with assumptions which, nonetheless, still invariably centre men.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to emphasize that the issues regarding mother–daughter relationships were not completely ignored. Some of the works focusing on this issue include, for instance, the Classical period tragedy *Iphigenia at Aulis* from 405 BCE by Euripides, where the touching relationship between Clytemnestra and

Iphigenia is explored, and the focus on the two women presents a stark contrast to the aforementioned *Oresteia*. Furthermore, Homer's much older *Hymn to Demeter* dating to the Archaic period, also narrates the loss of a daughter due to an unjust decision made by Kore's father at the expense of both mother and daughter. However, it needs to be emphasized that both of these writings, separated by centuries, are tragedies resulting in the rupture of the maternal bond through death, and most dialogues between the women revolve around men. Both Iphigenia and Kore (later named Persephone) are removed from the safety of their home due to their fathers' decision to satisfy the greed and lust of their male relatives, since it was not within the parental right of the mother to question decisions made by the father. The maternal bond is therefore cut by the patriarch, with the mother and daughter remaining separated, excluded, removed; the bodily encounter with the mother forbidden by the father (Irigaray 1999, 39). Thus, the absence of the mother–daughter dynamic and the lack of its inclusion in Aristotle's concept of a good tragedy should be viewed as yet another symptom of the general approach towards women rather than a mere oversight: it is an intentional choice, made time and time again.

From what has been stated above, the conclusion is that being a woman in ancient Athens was not an empowering experience. Women were expected to adhere to the expectations connected with their gender and rewarded for their compliance with a semblance of power due to the biologically imposed need for their existence: after all, the sole parents of the children could not have carried the foetuses themselves. Not that they did not dream of a world without women. It is in Euripides' *Medea*, the first version of the myth of the Golden fleece in which it is Medea who kills her sons (in the other versions of the story, the young boys are murdered by a mob of furious Corinthians), where Jason expresses the wish for a world completely devoid of women: "Mortals ought, you know, to beget children from some other source, and there should be no female sex. Then mankind would have no trouble" (573–75, in Pepe 2012, 264). Jason is not the only Euripidean hero who echoes the desire to be rid of women altogether. Hippolytus says, "If you [i.e., Zeus] wished to propagate the human race, it was not from women that you should have given us this. Rather, men should have put down in the temples either bronze or iron or a mass of gold and have bought offspring, each man for a price corresponding to his means, and then dwelt in houses free from the female sex" (Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 618–24, in Pepe 2012, 265). He criticizes Zeus for cursing humanity with the gift of women represented by the very first one, Pandora. Since this dream remains unfulfilled, motherhood remains in the hands and loins of women.

This, however, does not mean that misogynistic ideas did not take root and were not propagated through the upbringing provided by the very same mythological women

who were being subjugated by the patriarchy. In the aforementioned tragedies, Euripides portrayed motherhood as both an empowering and threatening act, emphasizing the power it holds and the potential danger it poses to the established social hierarchy. Therefore, the issue of motherhood and its role in perpetuating the status quo which women were (and often still are) expected to follow the cultural diktats of the patriarchy will be further explored in *The Penelopiad*.

What Atwood examines is not only how the narrative changes with the shift in perspective from which it is being told but also how the original notions are preserved and challenged. The mere act of handing over the metaphorical lens from one gender to another does not entail a change in and on itself: the story was written and the biases it helped create are still standing strong. As Gubar argues, "[a]s a genre, feminist expository prose inevitably embeds itself in the misogynist tradition it seeks to address and redress" (1994, 462). In other words, it is impossible to tear internalized notions regarding female gender away from the general subconscious simply by narrating the story from a woman's point of view. As Larrington emphasizes in the introduction of her work *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*: "For Westerners, our interpretation of our mythological heritage conditions the way in which we think about ourselves. Myth has been appropriated by politicians, psychiatrists and artists, among others, to tell us what we are and where we have come from" (1992, 9). As Korkmaz emphasizes in her work *Rewriting Myths*, the mythological narratives as well as the tragedies they inspired, and which were, in turn, in a dialogue with the society at the time, "are not simple, innocent stories about old gods and goddesses, but symbols and images, which bear political, social, historical and cultural meanings and codes" (2011, 1). Ancient Greek mythology occupies a crucially significant position in this self-identificatory process of Western culture, including the process of formation of gender identity and the biases connected with it.

Thus, that it became an object of scrutiny for contemporary female authors and feminist critics can hardly be viewed as surprising. However, what needs to be emphasized is the approach Atwood has opted for in her retelling of the *Odyssey*. She employs her protagonists – Penelope and the Maids –, as well as the other female characters in her novella as tools to explore how these deeply entrenched gendered biases seep through the consciousness of the characters and present themselves in the narrative. In other words, the fact the story is narrated by women does not imply that they are void of rampant acts of gendered violence fuelled by generational trauma and internalized misogyny. The patriarchal trap cannot be evaded completely simply due to the fact these works are being written under its rule, since "we cannot escape how culture makes us know ourselves, we need to understand that even as our own theorizing engages with

the social relations of femininity and masculinity, it is fashioned by them" (Gubar 1994, 469). The notions perpetuated by the mythological narratives are hard to escape due to their omnipresent nature in our socio-cultural awareness, both conscious and not, and women are no exception. As Luce Irigaray emphasizes, "we are all imbued with many Greek […] traditions, particularly through art, philosophy, and myths without our realizing […] they remain bound to a patriarchal mythology which hardly ever questions itself as such" (1993, 23). In this sense, women are not immune to the bombardment of patriarchal messages, and their gender identity does not serve as protection. On the contrary, they inevitably learn to accept these notions as a part of their lived experience and reality. Thus, the act of writing back is, in its essence, empowering and therapeutic, since it allows women to revisit their own suffering on their own terms.

This exploration will be analysed through a theory of trauma which will draw from the issue of internalization and Webster's concept of mother wound (Webster 2021), drawing on the works of Adriene Rich, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Jung, among others. Internalization, as defined by Ryan and Connell, "is the process in which social norms and values established by the society are adopted as one's own" (1989, 73). Thus, as a result of the influence of the ideas of womanhood created by patriarchal notions and transmitted – albeit not exclusively – via mythologies, women internalize these notions, (sub)consciously accept them, and perpetuate them. Millet focuses on the issue of the internalized patriarchal and sexist ideas in her work *Sexual Politics*. One of her main concerns is the issue of rivalry between women caused precisely by the aforementioned process of internalizing the patriarchal hierarchy of the society they inhabit. As she remarks, "one of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife" (1970, 38). This establishment provides men with the privilege of a superior social and economic status in the patriarchal systems, therefore giving women the shorter end of the stick, leading to "play(ing) the estranged women against each other as rivals" (ibid.). Millet identifies myths as one of these kinds of devices used to achieve the disruption of female relations. In her opinion, "the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. The image of women as we know it, is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs" (1970, 46). Thus, she is confirming the idea of womanhood as a creation of the patriarchy, transmitted from one generation to another via the symbolical language of the *mythos*: "The two leading myths of Western culture are the classical tale of Pandora's Box and the Biblical story of the fall. In both cases […] concepts of feminine evil have passed through a final literary phase to become highly influential ethical justifications of things as they are" (Millet 1970, 51).

It is no coincidence that both of these myths narrate the origin story of the woman who later becomes the first ever mother.

Adriene Rich reflects on this issue through the scope of her own lived experience, struggling against the tightness of the mould she felt pushed to fit, especially in relation with the issue of motherhood: "I had no idea what *I* wanted, what *I* could or could not choose. I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to 'be like other women'" (1995, 25). She reflects on her desire to belong, to fulfil the societal expectations she felt, paying little to no attention to her own true desires, not even able to formulate them, to name them, to give them any form. This uncertainty regarding one's femininity and identity is not lost on Cixous, who explores the need to discover one's body thorough writing and self-expression, the things previously impeded by the system of patriarchy employing myths, among others, as weaponized tools. As a result of the constant influence of the expectations established in and transmitted by mythology, the woman is "kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism" (1991, 335). Since the phallus represents "the privileged signifier" (Lacan 2001, 581), women are defined in the terms of the phallocentric discourse present in the myth-inspired narratives. The concept of their subordination due to their portrayal in the Greek mythology could be viewed, as Jung emphasizes, as a "projection of the collective unconscious" (1969, 152). The myths and the culture formed and shaped by it influence each other, maintaining the phallocentric binary dichotomy of the weak feminine and dominant masculine (Levická 2022, 34). As Korkmaz points out, "Western metaphysics is built on the idea that the phallus, or people who have the phallus, are more rational, stronger and worthier" (2011, 15). The mother as a being of power of her own does not fit the codependent dynamic of myth and Athenian society, but serves merely as a means to an end: she earns respect as a producer of new citizens, but has to keep her power behind closed doors. Her importance as one of the cornerstones on which patriarchy is built is the reason for her presence and the need for her subjugation.

In the ancient texts, the idea of a perfect loving mother is represented by Demeter, whose tragic relationship with her daughter and the lengths to which she was willing to go to protect her is one of the key representations of divine motherhood in Greek mythology. The importance of the mother goddess is not lost on Adriene Rich, who marvels at the power of a mother's love and the daughter's desire to be protected by a strength so fierce that it could "undo rape and bring her back from death. And *every mother*," she adds, "*must* have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self" (1995, 240, emphasis mine). The notion of all mothers' de-

siring the liberation of their daughters from patriarchal shackles does not always match reality: as the following analysis will demonstrate, the exact opposite is often true.

The Penelopiad by Atwood offers complex portrayals of mother–daughter dynamics influenced by the issue of societal pressure and internalized sexism. We will first delve into how Penelope experiences this injustice first as a daughter, being doubly victimized by patriarchal notions, and her own mothers' indifference at best, vindictiveness at worst. Afterwards, these will be contrasted with her role as a mother, demonstrating the lasting influence of the internalization of misogyny.

One of the recent comprehensive definitions of the mental wounds suffered in childhood caused by the emotional unavailability of mothers was put forward by psychologist and writer Bethany Webster in her successful work *Healing the Inner Mother* (2021). There, the author identifies four kinds of mother wound: personal, cultural, spiritual and planetary, of which the first two, personal and cultural, are employed in the analysis of the mother–daughter relationships tainted by internalized sexism present in *The Penelopiad*. In her own writing, the *personal* mother wound refers to a "set of internalized limiting beliefs and patterns that originate from the early dynamics with our mothers that causes problems in many areas of our adult lives, impacting how we see ourselves, one another, and our potential" (Webster 2021, 24). On the other hand, the *cultural* mother wound delineates "[t]he systemic devaluation of women in most aspects of patriarchal cultures, rooted in colonization, that has come to dominate much of the world, and the dysfunctional imbalance in the world as a result" (ibid). In her article on a popular and popularizing platform *Psychology Today*, American psychologist Sherry Gaba outlines the concept of the mother wound as "a deficit in the mother–daughter or mother–son relationships that is passed down through generations, and is a reflection on how we have experienced parenting and how we parent" (Gaba 2019). Among other issues, she identifies the general emotional aloofness and diminished attentiveness towards their offspring in mothers as one of the root causes of their children's struggle with mother wound. She asserts that adults who are dealing with a "mother wound" often look back on their childhood and can identify issues such as concerns about not being loved by their mother, difficulties in relating emotionally to the mother, and attempts to gain the mother' attention, acceptance and approval (Gaba 2019). The way in which these tendencies tend to manifest in the novella will be explored in the following.

In *The Penelopiad*, a novella taking place in Asphodel millennia after the end of the Trojan war, Atwood gives the central character of her story, Penelope, a voice to offer her own perspective on the events happening throughout Homer's *Odyssey*. Thus, Penelope, the proverbial angel of the house whose fierce loyalty to her long-absent

husband Odysseus earned her a highly esteemed position in the mythical narratives of Homer, takes the centre stage of the narrative, shifting the focus from the adventures experienced by her husband outside of the home to her very own struggles taking place inside it. Atwood paints a picture of a woman who possesses a deep resentment towards such a portrayal, since, as Penelope herself sees it, her very real and emotionally exhausting experience has simply been reduced and turned into "[a]n edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with" (Atwood 2005, 2). However much she seems to protest this portrayal, she admits to her own failures, since every time she opens her mouth, she "sounds like an owl" (Atwood 2005, 3). Atwood's subversion of the *Odyssey* emphasizes the multifaceted aspect of any story, and "stresses the importance of myths as a medium which organizes individuals' behaviours and roles around it" (Korkmaz 2011, 31). The role ancient Greek mythology played in both shaping the coetaneous and the contemporary notions of gender has been proven to be significant, and its influence has taken root in the consciousness of both women and men, and resulted in ideals which, for a very long time, have been seen as the truth. Penelope's relations with multiple women in *The Penelopiad* serve as a starting point for the exploration of how the constant reminders of one's inferiority can result in the internalization of these notions, and how they can lead to her alienation from the other women, resulting in the absence of community.

Atwood's Penelope does not suffer from a lack of mother figures: varying from her own dryad mother, through Odysseus' mother Anticleia and his nurse Eurycleia, we discover a plethora of distinct women who played a directing role in her life; nonetheless, none of them can be described as maternal. Penelope's mother, who remains intentionally nameless throughout the novella, is a naiad, a being who in Greek mythology is a lesser goddess tied to a body of water. Penelope blames her mother's divine nature for her emotional unavailability and lack of empathy for her own very mortal struggles. Penelope had never experienced a warm maternal embrace, either literal or emotional. As she herself states: "My mother, like all Naiads, was beautiful, but *chilly at heart*. She had waving hair and dimples, and rippling laughter. *She was elusive*. When I was little I often tried to throw my arms around her, but she had a *habit of sliding away*. … she preferred swimming in the river to the care of small children, and *I often slipped her mind*" (Atwood 2005, 10–11, emphasis mine). The above perspective of the now adult – and long dead – Penelope provides us with a window into the soul of her own hurt inner child; painting a picture of a young girl whose emotional needs were not met, a girl-child who never knew her mother's love and kindness.

The two women do not seem to be able to connect on any level, they are separated both by the mortality of the daughter and the eternality of the mother, unable to connect

due to Penelope's mother's failure to fulfil the mother role and meet the societal expectations. One of the principal skills any respectable woman at the time had to acquire was weaving, since it represented a proof of her virtue. Penelope has been long deemed a prime example of the ingenuity and skill necessary to stall the suitors' attempts to marry her in Odysseus's absence: she tricked them into waiting until she had woven the shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. What she deftly wove during the day she undid during the night. The importance of weaving is proven by the frequency of its depiction on objects from the era. By far the most recurrent image is of a mother and daughter weaving together, with the mother being responsible for teaching her daughters the intricacies of the skill (Reboreda Morillo 2018, 144), transmitting the ability to weave from one generation to the next. The notion is supported by written records as well: Reboreda Morillo mentions Xenophon's proclamation that learning about wool was the most meaningful task in the upbringing of young women (2018, 145). The fact that Penelope did not share this experience with her mother who, being a Naiad, could not herself have provided the necessary knowledge, emphasizes the depth of the personal tragedy she experienced. Not only has her mother failed to teach her the craft, she expressed her disdain for it: "she had no use at all for weaving and spinning. 'Too many knots. A spider's work. Leave it to Arachne,' she'd say" (Atwood 2005, 86). By comparing her work of passion to the woman transformed into a spider for her crime of besting the goddess Athena, she proclaims her contempt for the activity that is so important for her daughter's self-fulfilment. As a result, the two women never found common ground, and Penelope had to learn self-reliance from early on since she "could hardly count on family support" (Atwood 2005, 11). Thus, the "mother wound" she experiences as a result of her mother's emotional unavailability and disregard for her child's needs and interests, which were too aligned with stereotypical femininity, came to be.

Unfortunately, the cycle of disregard for Penelope's emotions and her need of self-actualization from her mother figures does not end after her departure from Sparta. After Odysseus wins Penelope's hand – and more importantly, her dowry – he takes both back to Ithaca. There, Penelope meets two women who could be described as mother-figures: her mother-in-law Anticleia, and Odysseus' nurse, a slave woman named Eurycleia. Both of them antagonize Penelope due to unresolved issues fuelled by internalized sexism. "My mother-in-law was circumspect. She was a prune-mouthed woman, and though she gave me a formal welcome I could tell she didn't approve of me. She kept saying that I was certainly very young" (Atwood 2005, 60). On top of the antagonism seemingly caused by the age difference between the two women, Anticleia refuses to provide the new queen with guidance regarding local customs, rendering Penelope's position at court vulnerable; instead, she "was content

to sit silently and say nothing while I made a fool of myself, a tight little smile on her face. She was happy that her adored son Odysseus pulled off such a coup … but I think she would have been better pleased if I'd died of seasickness on the way to Ithaca and Odysseus had arrived home with the bridal presents but no bride" (Atwood 2005, 62). Anticleia's cold approach to Penelope could be explained as jealousy. In her case, she seems to envy Penelope's youth and the spousal relationship she had with her son. The role of the mother, as was previously discussed, was the most highly valued female role in ancient Greek society – the loss of such a position by being 'replaced' by a younger woman who still possesses the ability to give life might have been the cause of Anticleia's feelings of antagonism.

In contrast to Penelope's absent birth mother, Anticleia and Eurycleia both seem to embody the archetype of the "dark mother," described by Jung as "anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (Jung 1969, 82). Traits of possessiveness, manipulation and control over their children (Mahmood 2024, 140) are typical of this behaviour, and Anticleia's fear of loss of control over her son leads her to openly antagonize the embodiment of the threat – Penelope herself. The wetnurse Eurycleia is another example of this possessive nature. At first, she attempts to take Penelope under her wing, acquainting her with the local customs, thus serving as a stand-in for Anticleia in a process that seems innocuous at first. However, her tendency to assume most of Penelope's responsibilities proves traumatizing and alienating to Penelope: "Nobody but she must give him his baths, oil his shoulders, prepare his breakfast, lock up his valuables, lay out his robes for him, and so forth. She left me with nothing to do, no little office I might perform for my husband, for if I tried to carry out any small wifely task she would be right there to tell me that wasn't how Odysseus liked things done" (Atwood 2005, 62–63). Eurycleia's care proves to be a thinly veiled attempt to maintain any semblance of control over her master, smothering Penelope's own attempts to find her place, resulting in further feelings of inadequacy. Eurycleia goes even so far as to scrutinize Penelope's weaving, a skill which had already alienated her from her own mother: "too light, too heavy, too sturdy, too flimsy. 'It will do well enough for a steward,' she would say, 'but surely not for Odysseus'" (Atwood 2005, 63). The quality of her weaving serves as a metaphor for Penelope herself: she is never deemed a good enough match for the idealized king of Ithaca. Even when she is to become a mother herself, Eurycleia feels bound to remark that "'We will have to fatten you up,' she would say, 'so you can have a nice big son for Odysseus! That's your job, just leave everything else to me.'" (Atwood 2005, 63). This way, she strips Penelope of any form of agency in her own motherhood, apart from the pregnancy and childbirth themselves.

This "kindness" results in Penelope's isolation and inability to fulfil her role as a wife and mother, thus rendering her worthless according to the societal standards of the day. Anytime she attempts to gain agency and fulfil her role, Eurycleia impedes her: "'You are barely more than a child yourself,' she would say, snatching my baby out of my arms. 'Here, I will tend the little darling for a while. You run along and enjoy yourself.' But I did not know how to do that" (Atwood 2005, 72). The little authority she could have in the household as a mother of the heir to the throne was barred by Eurycleia's good intentions. In fact, with the two women – Anticleia and Eurycleia – "running all domestic matters and making household decisions" (Atwood 2005, 71) Penelope is left without purpose and aim. Only through her mother-in-law's passing, and Eurycleia's failure to attend to all the needs at the court after Odysseus's departure, does Penelope emerges as the matriarch of her own house.

Ultimately, Penelope discovers a way to gain some semblance of power: by choosing to rear and raise a dozen female slave children. As demonstrated earlier, the protagonist did not have any positive maternal figure in any part of her formative years, and this lack, along with the social difference between the queen and the slaves, paved way for the ultimately destructive end of her so-called daughters. The Twelve Maids represent the other focal point of the novella, and it is through them that we are allowed to explore Penelope in the role of a mother to daughters. Unlike Penelope, they do not present their own version individualistically, but as a group, "nameless and faceless", creating a "collective linguistic effect, bearing the words of others and their story endlessly circulated" (Dimock 2015, 323). Despite the fact that the Maids occupy a significant portion of the novella, they continue to be pushed to the margins, their remarks reduced to oppositions to and comments on both the original narrative of the *Odyssey* and the story woven by the protagonist of *The Penelopiad*. Their inferior position is reinforced by the attitude of their mother figure, Penelope herself. As Visel puts it, "[a]lthough she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt" (1988, 39) of those who have been silencing women. According to Suzuki, Atwood's choice to provide both sides of the mother/daughter coin with a narrative voice "foregrounds hierarchies of class as well as gender" (2007, 275). While Penelope's status allows her a certain level of agency due to her privilege as a member of the aristocracy, despite being a woman, the cards are stacked against the Maids on both fronts.

Penelope's possessive and haughty attitude towards her slave wards serves as a reflection of her very own internalized sexist and classist patriarchal views, as well as a perpetuation of her own suffering. From the very beginning, she regards the Maids as mere property: "The male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones, not without permission. This could be a tricky issue. They sometimes fell in love … But

if a pretty child was born of these couplings, I would often keep it and rear it myself, teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant" (Atwood 2005, 87–88). With her typical tongue-in-cheek humour, Atwood makes the Maids address the issue themselves, claiming: "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" (2005, 168). If viewed as mere objects or tools employed to accomplish her goals, Penelope's attitude towards women about whom she claims to feel as if they were her own daughters (Atwood 2005, 180) seems to stem from her own feeling of inadequacy and powerlessness. In order to feel empowered, she employs her "daughters" as pawns; she describes her Maids as women with "lovely voices, all of them, and they had been taught well how to use them. They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace" (Atwood 2005, 113–14). In her attempt to protect Odysseus's household from the cohort of suitors, Penelope orders her "twelve young maids – the loveliest, the most beguiling – to hang around the suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent" (Atwood 2005, 115). Despite the fact that the queen is aware of the young women's vulnerability due to their social status, and contrary to her claims regarding the realness of her affection for them, she employs them as tools for her own protection. It comes as no surprise that, as a result of their forced closeness with the greedy suitors, "several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than resist" (Atwood 2005, 116). Their social status makes the Maids much more vulnerable to the violence which Penelope never attempts to stop, sacrificing their own well-being in order to protect herself. Atwood is thus representing the Maids as sacrificial victims and surrogates for her protagonist (Suzuki 2007, 274).

Penelope accepts this reality matter-of-factly, as the (ab)use of the host's servants was deemed a normalized practice, though not without the permission of the master of the house: "They were like daughters that I never had (*Starts to weep*.) I felt so sorry for them! But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life. It wasn't the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission" (Atwood 2005, 181). More than a great transgression of the bodily autonomy of her "daughters", she views the rape of the Maids as an affront to her husband, and, by proxy, to herself. Since she is well aware of the source of her power, borrowed for the duration of her husband's absence, she is unable to empathize with the Maids, going as far as to purposefully put them in the harm's way in order to protect herself, thus perpetuating abuse and the cycle of emotional unavailability from mother to daughter(s). Chute argues that trauma

can be viewed as repetition (2010, 182), a vicious circle of unhealed wounds and cycles of abuse: in the case of Penelope, hurt simply switched sides.

The ultimate display of her disregard for the Maids' wellbeing is the absence of any reaction to their brutal murder at the hands of her own son, Telemachos. Once Odysseus returns, slays the suitors and learns about their rape of the slave women, he orders them to be hanged, since their crime of being abused was viewed as an affront to the patriarch of the house. Penelope does not defend her so-called daughters: "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. Dead is dead, I told myself" (Atwood 2005, 160). Once the usefulness of the twelve slaves runs its course, she discards them, protecting herself at the expense of other, more vulnerable and less privileged, women. As she herself claims, "happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during rampages" (Atwood 2005, 3). Which is what she did, thanks to a sleeping potion administered by her own mother figure, Eurycleia, who harboured a deep resentment towards the twelve young maids, slandering them as "notorious whores" and, in the end, helping to facilitate their murder in order to "retain her inside position with Odysseus" (Atwood 2005, 169). Thus, the queen of Ithaca is not the only maternal figure willing to sacrifice the wellbeing of her "daughters" to secure her own position in the hierarchical system of patriarchy whose values she has internalized. Penelope seems to be acting from pain caused by her own mother wound, this time both cultural and personal. Drawing on Webster's (2021) theory, Penelope is exhibiting a disdain for her self-proclaimed daughters due to both the internalized sexism of society as a whole, and because of her disillusionment with her own mother figures.

Atwood manages to portray female antagonism in a multi-layered prism, skilfully employing the archetypal notions of femininity to lift the curtain covering the ideology hiding behind the mythical narrative (Levická 2022, 72). *The Penelopiad* serves as a quite critical representation of motherhood, driven by internalized sexism and misogyny. These feelings of vindictiveness towards the younger and more vulnerable daughter figures result in the perpetuation of the patriarchal and hierarchical notions of womanhood, of which Penelope is the best example: a child formerly neglected by her own mother, who is later denied her role of mother by another woman and, as a result, fails to protect other women from the patriarchal norms she herself internalized in the process. In the arduous journey towards self-actualization and empowerment, the previously unheard and unseen daughter who felt like she was never good enough seeks any semblance of power through further subjugation of other women whom she labels as her own daughters. In her failure to acknowledge her own complicity in perpetuating the cycle of abuse from mother to daughter under patriarchy, Atwood echoes the words

of Germaine Greer: "our mothers blackmailed us with self-sacrifice" (1971, 175). Except, in the case of Atwood's Penelope, the sacrifice is of her daughters' lives as a representation of her own innocence, youth and fertility she herself places on the altar of patriarchy. Her inability to understand her own shortcomings and blame in regards to her daughter figures, whom she blames for chasing Odysseus away from Hades, paints a picture of a woman who would rather keep the victims silent than acknowledge her own share of blame. In doing so, she represses not only her guilt, but also her role as a mother and a woman.

At the same time, the interplay between Penelope and the slave girls transforms their original subjugation to forms of resistance (Keck 2024, 7). Atwood forces the readership to confront internalized issues, making us sensitive to the proliferation of sexual ideologies, to the significance of who is deploying them – and to what political effect – even as it breeds a healthy self-scepticism born of an awareness of our own inexorable embeddedness in history (Gubar 1994, 469). Atwood's protagonist presents two of Webster's (2021) four mother wounds: the personal and the cultural, where the first one causes her deeply-insecure self-image, while the other leaves her unable to relate to the suffering of other women due to the cultural and social notions deeply imbedded in her own psyche. The fact that the raising of daughters was a little explored topic for Homer created space to delve deep into it in contemporary mythical rewritings. And Atwood's trip into the depths of the wounded psyches of both daughters and destructive mothers challenges the chances of female community, shedding light on the deeply ingrained issue of internalizing patriarchal notions. Alternatively, the reason for the examination of the mother wound is due to the impossibility of suturing it, for "there is no indifference or cruelty we can tolerate less than the indifference or cruelty of our mothers" (Rich 1995, 231). And there are no daughters less forgiving than "the ones you killed" (Atwood 2005, 5).

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