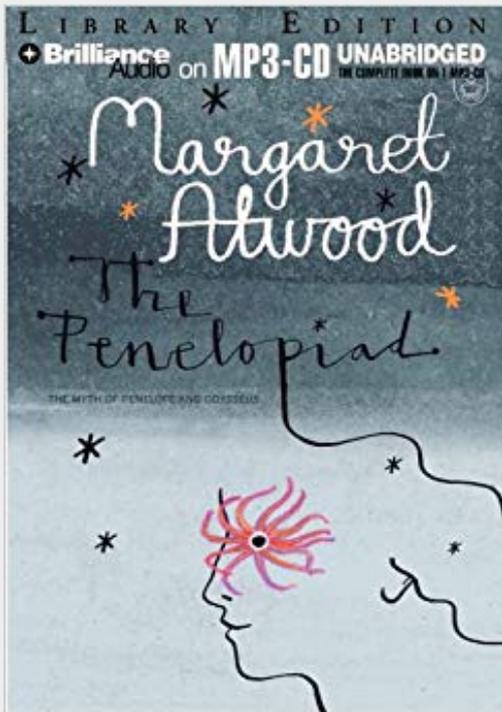


The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus (The Myths Series) by Laural Merlington, Margaret Atwood



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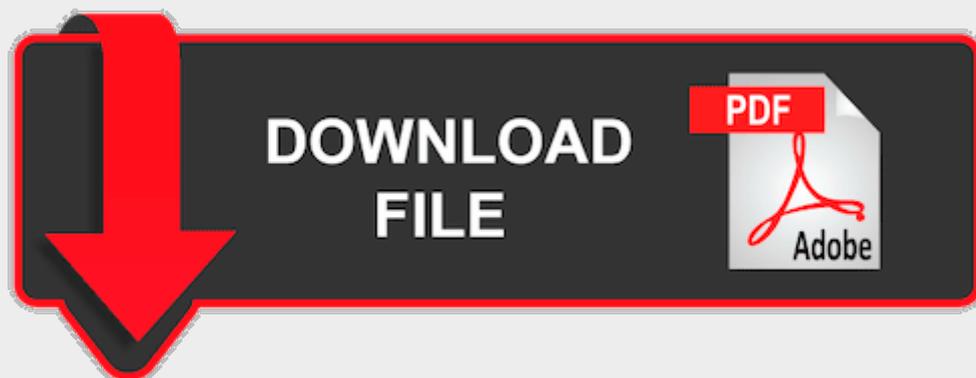
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In Homer's account in The Odyssey, Penelope - wife of Odysseus and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy - is portrayed as the quintessential faithful wife, her story a salutary lesson through the ages. Left alone for twenty years when Odysseus goes off to fight in the Trojan war after the abduction of Helen, Penelope manages, in the face of scandalous rumours, to maintain the kingdom of Ithaca, bring up her wayward son, and keep over a hundred suitors at bay, simultaneously. When Odysseus finally comes home after enduring hardships, overcoming monsters and sleeping with goddesses, he kills her suitors and - curiously - twelve of her maids. In a splendid contemporary twist to the ancient story, Margaret Atwood has chosen to give the telling of it to Penelope and to her twelve hanged Maids, asking: "What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" In Atwood's dazzling, playful retelling, the story becomes as wise and compassionate as it is haunting, and as wildly entertaining as it is disturbing. With wit and verve, drawing on the storytelling and poetic talent for which she herself is renowned, she gives Penelope new life and reality - and sets out to provide an answer to an ancient mystery.



Reviews of the **The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus (The Myths Series)** by Laural Merlington, Margaret Atwood

1. Tto

Penelope"... is how Homer invariably described the wife of Odysseus. I recently read and reviewed *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction*. Among the numerous takeaways, the author, Helen Morales, stressed that the myths are variable over time, often to fit the particular needs of the teller in a later era. Different aspects of the myth are stressed or changed.

Margaret Atwood is a prolific Canadian writer whom I have regrettably never read before. I do recall seeing her work, *The Blind Assassin: A Novel* on the convenient dining room table of one of the Canadians that I knew in Riyadh, who read serious books, way back in the year 2000, when Atwood was awarded the Man Booker Prize for that work.

Sure, the focus has always been on the soldier, Odysseus, who went away to a foreign war, took a long time to get back home due to numerous pleasant and unpleasant distractions, and received the classic "bad homecoming" when he arrived. With a bit of gender-empathy, it was only natural for Atwood to reflect upon that "ever-faithful" wife, as well, as the author says, the fate of the 12 maids that Odysseus hanged - the "collateral damage."

In the introduction, Atwood calls her work an "echo" to the sixth power... an "echo of an echo of..." etc. First, you had the original event... the siege of Troy, somewhere in the 12th or 13th century BCE. Then you have Homer's telling of the story, some four centuries later... Atwood says: "Penelope is perhaps the first desperate housewife to appear in art." Atwood's "Penelopiad" is a play, an additional four "echoes" later, that was first performed at The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, in 2007.

Penelope is in Hades, with the Maids that have been hanged. Ah, the truth can now come out. Indicative of Atwood's more modern, "hip" style, she has Penelope declare early on: "For hadn't I been faithful? Didn't I wait, and wait, despite the temptations - almost the compulsion - to do otherwise? And yet what have I amounted to, now the official version has gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why can't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I was? That's the line they take, the singers, the yarn-spinners. Don't follow my example, I want to scream in your ears..." It's brilliant. "A stick used to

beat..."

There were aspects of my reading of *Odyssey* that I had forgotten, perhaps because at the time they seemed like minor points. Penelope was the daughter of King Icarius, of Sparta, who feared that she might kill him when she grew up, due to a prophesy, so he ordered her drowned, which did not, obviously work out. Penelope was a cousin of Helen, yes, the face that launched those proverbial 1000 ships, and Atwood plays on that relationship. "They were all staring at Helen, who was intolerably beautiful, as usual. Like every other man on earth, Odysseus had desperately wanted to win her hand. I was at best only second prize." Atwood empathetically describes the lives of the Maids, who are only "deep background" for Homer.

Indeed, what is the appropriate conduct for an "ever-faithful" wife when she knows her husband has been servicing the goddess Calypso for several years? Atwood hints at the answer towards the end. "The two of us were now 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."

A 5-star spin of a classic myth.

2. Clodebd

As part of the Canongate Myth Series, Margaret Atwood's "The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus" draws upon the Rieu translation of "The Odyssey" and Robert Graves' "The Greek Myths" to retell the narrative of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" from the perspective of Odysseus's wife, Penelope. Atwood begins with Penelope's childhood in Sparta and her father Icarius' attempt to kill her along with her conflict with cousin Helen, who later started the Trojan War. From there, Atwood follows Penelope to Ithaca and tells how she recruited maids as her informants during the period of Odysseus' odyssey. These maids helped spur Atwood's version of events, as Odysseus executed them upon his return and Atwood sought to give them a story and, by extension, some measure of justice.

Atwood sets the story in Hades, where Penelope tells it to the reader and explains some of the mechanics of the Greek underworld. The maids act as a traditional Greek chorus, interjecting between chapters to give their input into events using modern forms of media, such as a college lecture,

a show tune, and a transcript from a courtroom video. By granting Penelope the ability to witness our modern world, Atwood frees herself from the limitation of trying to fully recreate Greek settings, but also gives herself the freedom to interject humor and a cosmological worldview in which the Greek gods' power has waned and a new afterlife was set up near Hades, but it's full of suffering and torment. Fans of Atwood's work will find plenty to enjoy and her use of Greek mythology will entertain those interested in the classics.

3. Went Tyu

An excellent companion and retelling of "The Odyssey" from Penelope's perspective. The writing is quick, witty, and thought-provoking; I gobbled it up in a few hours. I plan on using this text with my high school students during our study on myth. Atwood does a sublime job at bringing the strong, female voice to a genre dominated by men. In many ways it does what C.S. Lewis does with "Till We Have Faces", but in a much more contemporary voice. Any student of mythology will enjoy this or will learn to consider the world of myth from a different perspective.

4. Adrierdin

Note that Amazon has linked the play version of this book as the main Kindle link for The Penelopiad, instead of the novel version. For the novel, you need to click the little plus sign next to Kindle versions and get the one from 2007. Make sure it doesn't say "the play" on the photo of the cover. I bought the wrong one...will have to see if they will refund me.

5. Neol

In *The Penelopiad* Margaret Atwood gives us a satirical view of the events of *The Odyssey*. Penelope and her twelve hanged maids speak to us from Hades in our own time, which allows the author to present her work with the convenience of modern perspectives on sex, class, and the gods. The tone remains light and unlabored throughout, even while implicating the patriarchal values of the Homeric world. Penelope speaks from her position as an elite woman, burdened beneath the role her society has forced upon her, while the hanged maids expose the raw inequality suffered by female servants.

That Atwood is a gifted writer is obvious, however *The Penelopiad* seems a rather short and fast work on these themes. I could imagine them drawn out and explored in much greater detail, though perhaps not while maintaining the lightness of tone. The chorus sections, those of the hanged maids, provide a verse burlesque complimenting and contrasting against the prose of Penelope. These chapters provide a welcome counterpoint, and often heighten the impact of the satire. But the verses, themselves, sometimes seem unpolished and dashed off.

The Penelopiad is a slight novel by a great writer, and perhaps re-reading will reveal the novel as something grander and richer than petite four that it appears to be.

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