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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Rewriting *The Odyssey*:

Margaret Atwood´s *The Penelopiad*

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Abstract:

The purpose of this essay is to show how Margaret Atwood´s *The Penelopiad* gives voice to those unheard in the original work (*The Odyssey*) by means of the creation of a revisionary and postmodern rewrite of the classic myth of Odysseus and Penelope. In order to prove this, I will go from the theoretical to the social. Firstly, I will provide an explanation of relevant literary concepts, such as rewrite and revisionary fiction, as well as their relation to feminism. Secondly, I will describe the major transformations of *The Penelopiad* with regard to *The Odyssey*. Finally, I will focus on how women are depicted and its relevance in our current society.

Keywords: *The Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad*, rewriting, revisionism, feminism, postmodernism.

Resumen:

La finalidad de este trabajo es mostrar cómo la obra de Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, da voz a aquellas mujeres ignoradas en el trabajo original (*La Odisea*) mediante la creación de una reescritura revisionista y postmodernista del mito clásico de Ulises y Penélope. Siendo este el principal objetivo, trataremos de ir de lo más teórico a lo más social. En primer lugar, explicaré conceptos literarios importantes, como el de reescritura y ficción revisionista, así como su relación con el feminismo. Después, describiré las principales transformaciones de *The Penelopiad* en comparación a *La Odisea*, para finalmente centrarme en la representación de las mujeres y su relevancia en la sociedad actual.

Palabras clave: *La Odisea*, *The Penelopiad*, reescritura, revisionismo, postmodernismo, feminismo.

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1. Introduction

As Atwood states in the short text preceding the title page of *The Penelopiad*, "[m]yths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives –they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human." Indeed, mythology has always been important in human history. We are told tales and legends about powerful heroes since we are children; we dream to become one of them, to go on adventures and to be known because of our courageous deeds. They shape our consciousness: they help us understand the feelings and emotions we experience in our daily lives. And, in a way, they also tell us how the world is or should be. That is why myths are considered universal. But, are they really so? What about those people who are excluded or marginalised from these tales just because of their race, gender or class? As Sander states, "[t]he central problem with any tradition is the ability to recognize not only those who constitute that tradition but those who are ... excluded from it, ... consigned to its margins" (10).

Usually, myths have dealt with white male heroes and their point of view, but these stories have been rewritten throughout history so that everyone could identify with them. As part of this process which transforms a story into a myth, in recent times, some authors have decided to take a feminist approach by rewriting these tales from a female point of view. Thus, what would happen if we read *The Odyssey*, one of the core legends of Western civilisation, from a female perspective? Would our reality be exactly the same? Or would our perception of the world change? Those are the questions Margaret Atwood poses in *The Penelopiad*, which rewrites the myth of *The Odyssey* from Penelope´s perspective.

Before addressing this issue, however, we need to understand what a rewrite is, so we should depart from a working definition. According to Pardo, "la reescritura [es] una forma

de hipertextualidad consistente en la transposición de un texto en otro que lo repite al tiempo que lo transforma, con una intención seria –y no cómica– que puede ir desde la actualización y la reivindicación a la crítica y la oposición" (48). Therefore, we need a source narrative, known as the hypotext in Genette's terminology, which is going to be transformed into a new one, known as the hypertext –with both texts sharing certain recognisable elements. This relation between hypotext and hypertext could be also considered as a fidelity-in-betrayal, as Connor explains: "[I]n its attention to its rewritten original, its fidelity-in-betrayal, the rewritten text must always submit to the authority of an imperative text" (qtd. in Sanders 51).[1]

Furthermore, when rewriting a text, there are many different transformations that need to be considered and have been categorised by Genette and Pardo. Firstly, there are formal transformations, which are those that change the external form of the text or the way in which it is written (from prose to verse; from a written work into an audiovisual one…). Secondly, there are thematic changes, that can either maintain the original diegetic world, by simply expanding or complementing it (homodiegetic rewrites); or those that transform it changing the temporal and/or spatial setting of the original story, the age or sex of the characters, etc. (heterodiegetic rewrites). Finally, semantic transformations can be either affirmative –those that want to honour a literary work–, or corrective –those that try to criticise it.

We should also consider the idea of revisionary fiction, which is rewriting with a corrective purpose, something characteristic of postmodernist works. According to Widdowson, revisionary fiction implies that "a hitherto one-way form of written exchange, where the reader could only passively *receive* the message handed down by a classic text, has now become a two-way correspondence in which the recipient *answers* or *replie*s to ... the

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[1] In *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood herself affirms in the short text preceding the title page that myths in general are relative, and that there is more than one version to *The Odyssey*. However, and related to Connor´s fidelity-in-betrayal, she may have chosen this work because of its importance and authority within literary history. By making this decision, she is admitting the great impact of this myth in our current society but also criticising the exclusion of women in canonical literature.

version of things as originally delineated" (501). In other words, revisionary fiction consists of looking back to canonical or widely-known works in order to re-tell the same story; it gives voice to silenced perspectives so as to tell the untold story and fill in the blanks: "A view from the margin differs markedly from a view from the centre" (Widdowson 501).

Feminism is one of the movements that makes use of revisionary fiction, giving voice to women, who were usually in the margins of literary tradition. Adrienne Rich has studied this issue in detail: "[w]e [females] need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (19). This is one of the essential ideas in corrective rewrites: changing the perception of past works to reflect a change in our current society. Since women have normally been marginalised in canonical works, there appears to be a need to revise those texts in order to create a story that favours females´ perspectives. In Adrienne Rich´s words:

> Re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, ... –is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival ... [We could] take the [source] work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see –and therefore live– afresh. (18)

This is exactly what we can find in *The Penelopiad*: a new way of looking back at *The Odyssey* so that we can see it with new eyes; it is conceived as a fresh start for the women of that narrative, and maybe also for women in general, as we can now imagine the other version of the story. Atwood´s *The Penelopiad* is a clear example of a feminist rewrite, whose chief goal is to give voice to those unheard in the original work, *The Odyssey*, by means of the creation of a revisionary and postmodern rewrite of the classic myth of Odysseus and Penelope.

2. *The Penelopiad* as a Feminist Rewrite

Considering all that has been explained in the introduction, it is time now to analyse *The Penelopiad´*s main differences with the original work, *The Odyssey*. Firstly, there are some formal transformations, such as the stylistic one, changing the epic, serious tone of the hypotext, into an ironic and light-hearted one in the hypertext: "[T]he gods couldn´t seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other" (20). Nonetheless, the most important transformation regarding form, is undoubtedly the change in the voice of the narration: it is now Penelope´s version of the story, as we can perceive when she declares: "[I]t´s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself" (3). As a consequence, this change in the voice affects the focalisation: we read the tale of *The Odyssey* but now from Penelope´s point of view –we only need to take a look at the title, imitating Homer´s, but now with the name of Odysseus´ wife. This major change in voice and focalisation is going to create many thematic transformations, as I am going to explain now.

Within this type of transformations, we need to distinguish between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic changes, as we have seen in the introduction. Homodiegetic transformations are those which maintain the original spatial-temporal coordinates, whereas heterodiegetic transformations change these coordinates using a spatial or temporal approximation, changing the sex or age of the characters, etc. Despite the fact that there is a temporal approximation in *The Penelopiad* –since Penelope is now telling her story in the 21st century-, this only affects the narration, not the coordinates of the original world, as she is telling the same tale as Homer, so the transformations are basically homodiegetic. For instance, there are certain passages where we clearly see the parallelism with the original work, but this time the narrator specifies certain passages of *The Odyssey*: "Helen ... had run away with a prince of

Troy [Paris] ... It was love at first sight" (77); now, instead of an abduction, we seem to be talking about true love. Moreover, secondary characters are turned into protagonists, as Atwood herself announces in the introduction: "I´ve chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (xxi). There is also a certain amplification in relation to the original diegetic world. We get to know episodes that took place before the story narrated in *The Odyssey*, such as Penelope´s childhood (chapter 3) and more importantly, her marriage to Odysseus (chapter 6). Now we get to know her own opinion, how she has had to marry a man she did not love and –if this was not enough– how she has had to wait faithfully and patiently for him for twenty years.

The *Penelopiad* also narrates events that occurred after *The Odyssey*´s story, like the dwelling of most of the characters in Hades (chapters 5 and 27). There is a curious passage in chapter 27 when the protagonist explains life in her new home: she states that they can return to the living world if they drink from the Waters of Forgetfulness, where they are supposed to forget their past lives and, in so doing, get ready to live new adventures (186). As a matter of fact, Telemachus is now a member of Parliament and Odysseus "[has] been a French general, ... a Mongolian invader, ... a tycoon in America ... [and] a headhunter in Borneo" (189), giving a comic twist to Homer´s epic male heroes.

As a result of the change in voice and focalisation, there is now a new way of perceiving the main characters, particularly Odysseus. The great hero is no longer the hero, but he is rather seen as the antagonist of Penelope and especially of the maids: "Why did you murder us? What had we done to you that required our deaths? You never answered that" (193). His honourable deeds are radically undermined in Atwood´s work, where the Cyclop may just be "a one-eyed tavern keeper"; the cannibals are possibly a few men fighting; and

Circe may not be a goddess but a woman working in a whorehouse (83-4).[2] In Penelope´s opinion, "the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably" (84), thus suggesting that Homer´s *Odyssey* is a mere falsehood whose purpose is to mythologise the figure of Odysseus.

Finally, all these changes contribute to the decisive transformation: the semantic one, which in this case is corrective. Atwood questions those supposedly fabricated aspects of *The Odyssey* that mythologise the masculine so as to contest the legitimacy of the source work, and in turn, of masculine authority. Besides that, the change in focalisation also implies a corrective intention on behalf of Atwood, since moving females from the margins to the centre also entails a strong ideological subversion: that they should *not* be in the margins. However, *The Penelopiad* is not purely militant in its subversion, for it gives quite a different depiction of female characters, as I will try to demonstrate in the following section.

3. The Representation of Women in *The Penelopiad*

As I have already explained, Atwood´s work focuses on Penelope as protagonist, focalizer and narrator, thus placing her and the gender question at the centre of the narrative. But there is another important addition, which is the issue of class. As the author herself affirms, "I´ve always been haunted by the hanged maids" (xxi), and thus she decides to give them the opportunity to tell their story. It is important to acknowledge that they have suffered a double oppression: "social oppression as slaves and gender oppression in a patriarchal society. By acquiring a narrative voice, they are empowered and are able to seek justice ... even if after over 3000 years" (Bottez 55). In this sense, throughout the novel they act as a Greek chorus, whose collective voice denounces social hypocrisy, or as Suzuki argues, "the

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[2] These references may remind us of James Joyce´s *Ulysses*, where the Cyclops´s cave seem to be Kiernan´s pub and Circe may be embodied by the character of Bella Cohen, the owner of a brothel.

sexual double standard that condones his [Odysseus´] adultery while finding their [the maids´s] liaisons deserving of deadly punishment" (5). When reading *The Odyssey*, some may think that the murder of the maids is *reasonable* according to the main hero´s opinion, but in fact he is killing them for a *crime* he himself has committed. Atwood tries to criticise this injustice through the voice of the maids, so that the readers realise the cruelty and inequity of Homer´s male heroes. Thanks to this collective voice, we can perceive how much they have suffered throughout their lives: "We were animal young, to be disposed of at / will, / Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, / discarded when bloomless ... He [Telemachus] saw us rightfully his, for whatever / purpose / He chose" (67-8).

The maids, however, are not helpless victims: they try to seek justice. In fact, chapter 36, entitled "The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids," is entirely dedicated to the search of this justice. The maids send Odysseus to a twenty-first-century trial, but the crime being judged is not exactly that the suitors raped the maids, but that they did it without Odysseus´ permission: "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" (181). To sum up, in Suzuki´s words, "[Atwood] re-envisions the maids not merely as silent victims sacrificed to the interests of patriarchy and the ruling class, but as energetic satirists of the dominant order, who literally put Odysseus on trial" (7).

But the maids show their disagreement not only with Odysseus´s decision, but also with Penelope: after all they still are her servants. They give us different versions of the same story, so we do not really know the truth or whom to trust. On the one hand, Penelope could be responsible for the maids' deaths, as she honestly admits: "I told my twelve young maids … to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent … In retrospect I can see that my actions were ill-considered, and caused harm" (115, 118). However, she did not do this on purpose, as she really loved the maids and did not blame the

girl who betrayed her in relation to her weaving of the shroud. And, on the other hand, the maids consider that Penelope wanted them dead from the very beginning. They think she told Eurycleia that they were "feckless and / disloyal ... / and not fit to be / The doting slaves of such a Lord as he [Odysseus]!" (150).

These tensions go beyond the maids. Throughout the whole story, for instance, Penelope does not get along with her mother-in-law Anticleia, who is "a prune-mouthed woman" (60), or with Eurycleia, Odysseus´ nurse, who is very bossy (79). Furthermore, Penelope cannot stand her cousin Helen because she has ruined her life, as the title of chapter 11 shows. When referring to the Trojan War the protagonist says: "[D]isaster struck. It was because of Helen, as all the world knows by now" (76), and she even calls her "a septic bitch" (131). They have a very competitive relationship, representing two different types of women, the beautiful and the intelligent one. As Penelope affirms, "I was a kind girl –kinder than Helen ... I knew I would have to have something to offer instead of beauty. I was clever, everyone said so" (29).

Bearing all of this in mind, it may be argued that "[the] feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny" (Nunes 238). Not a single woman in this story can be considered as innocent; all of them seem to be at war with each other. Therefore, what we have here may be thought of as sororophobia, which literally means the female fear of or hatred for her sister, that is, for other women. If, as Michie has pointed out, "feminists [in general] are trapped in a model of sisterhood which denies differences among women" (qtd. in Cramer 240), Atwood seems to have gone further, depicting the tensions among the different females present in her story. Atwood does not want to portray an ideal and collaborative female community, but rather a more realistic society, where women criticise instead of supporting each other.

After having analysed *The Penelopiad*, we become aware of all the injustices Penelope and the maids have had to suffer, although their versions of the story are ambiguous. It is up to us to decide which side we support, but, in so doing, we will be not just questioning the master narrative provided by *The Odyssey*, but even the well-established feminist rewriting of it provided by Penelope.

4. Conclusion

After describing the major transformation in Atwood´s *Penelopiad*, it is evident that it is a feminist rewrite well attuned to the approaches and concerns characteristic of Postmodernism. A remarkable aspect of this literary movement is its multiplicity of styles, juxtaposing the three major genres: prose, poetry and drama. This combination is what Bottez has defined as "a new postmodern hybrid structure" (50). There is also polyphony in point of view, something that establishes "alternative possibilities for construction of truth" (Khalid and Tabassum 17). And besides stylistic hybridity and narrative polyphony, there are also elements of reflexivity, yet another postmodern feature.[3]

However, *The Penelopiad* is not just a postmodern feminist rewrite, as I claimed before: its portrayal of sororophobia and a non-supportive female community makes it transcend mainstream feminist works. Atwood gives voice to the most marginal women of the story, the maids, and she decides to represent a world in which women´s behaviour towards each other is not as perfect as we could think it would be. This is clearly an evolution in feminist rewriting, but it also leads us to think in the problems of rewriting: when a writer privileges certain voices, he/she usually tends to silence other voices. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood is letting the maids express their point of view. Nevertheless, Penelope is the

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[3] Although it has not been addressed in this paper, reflexivity is central to the first chapter, "A Low Art," which is used by Penelope (and Atwood) to set forth her ideas about story-telling, which she describes as a harmful means for gossiping but still as her opportunity to express herself.

protagonist of the story, a white rich woman, whereas the maids appear as a collective voice; they are not individualised and, although their interventions are important, they seem to be again in the margins. Apparently, every time an author tries to depict the other version of the story of some masterpiece, he/she forgets someone in the way. Could we ever find a rewrite that is just and equal for everyone?

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