

The Penelopiad

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In Homer's "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. 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.

Nominated for the inaugural 2005 Man Booker Prize International Prize, Margaret Atwood is the author of more than forty internationally acclaimed works of fiction, poetry and critical essays. Her numerous awards include the Governor General's Award for *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the Giller Prize and Italian Il Premio Letterario Internazionale Mondello for *Alias Grace*. *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *Alias Grace* and *Oryx and Crake* were all shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, which she won with *The Blind Assassin*. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, has been awarded the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit and the French Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and is a Foreign Honorary Member for Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She lives in Toronto. @MargaretAtwoodA Low Art

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. It's much too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say. Since being dead - since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness - I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again.

Down here everyone arrives with a sack, like the sacks used to keep the winds in, but each of these sacks is full of words - words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you. Some sacks are very small, others large; my own is of a reasonable size, though a lot of the words in it concern my eminent husband. What a fool he made of me, some say. It was a specialty of his: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away.

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me. Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation - almost the compulsion - to do otherwise? 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.

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his - how can I put this? - his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep. I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages.

But after the main events were over and things had become less legendary, I realized how many people were laughing at me behind my back - how they were jeering, making jokes about me, jokes both clean and dirty; how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty. So I waited some more.

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to it: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children - folks with time on their hands. Once, people would have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel - there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts - but who cares about public opinion now? The opinion of the people down here: the opinion of shadows, of echoes. So I'll spin a thread of my own.

The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak. I can't make myself understood, not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues and fingers; and most of the time I have no listeners, not on your side of the river. Those of you who may catch the odd whisper, the odd squeak, so easily mistake my words for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats at twilight, for bad dreams.

But I've always been of a determined nature. Patient, they used to call me. I like to see a thing through to the end.

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The Chorus Line:

A Rope-Jumping Rhyme

we are the maids
the ones you killed
the ones you failed

we danced in air
our bare feet twitched
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch

from there to here
you scratched your itch

we did much less
than what you did
you judged us bad

you had the spear
you had the word
at your command

we scrubbed the blood
of our dead
paramours from floors, from chairs

from stairs, from doors,
we knelt in water
while you stared

at our bare feet
it was not fair
you licked our fear

it gave you pleasure
you raised your hand
you watched us fall

we danced on air
the ones you failed
the ones you killed

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My Childhood

Where shall I begin? There are only two choices: at the beginning or not at the beginning. The real beginning would be the beginning of the world, after which one thing has led to another; but since there are differences of opinion about that, I'll begin with my own birth.

My father was King Icarius of Sparta. My mother was a Naiad. Daughters of Naiads were a dime a dozen in those days; the place was crawling with them. Nevertheless, it never hurts to be of semi-divine birth. Or it never hurts immediately.

When I was quite young my father ordered me to be thrown into the sea. I never knew exactly why, during my lifetime, but now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud. Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would live forever. I can see how the reasoning might have gone. In that case, his wish to drown me came from an understandable desire to protect himself. But he

must have misheard, or else the oracle herself misheard - the gods often mumble - because it was not his shroud that was at issue, but my father-in-law's shroud. If that was the prophecy it was a true one, and indeed the weaving of this particular shroud proved a great convenience to me later on in my life.

The teaching of crafts to girls has fallen out of fashion now, I understand, but luckily it had not in my day. It's always an advantage to have something to do with your hands. That way, if someone makes an inappropriate remark, you can pretend you haven't heard it. Then you don't have to answer.

But perhaps this shroud-weaving oracle idea of mine is baseless. Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better. So much whispering goes on, in the dark caverns, in the meadows, that sometimes it's hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside of your own head. I use head figuratively. We have dispensed with heads as such, down here.

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