

Reessencing the sign: creating alternative realities through counter-discourse as represented in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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*This study explores the ideological nature of language through Slavoj Žižek's reinterpretation of Heidegger's concept of "essencing" and its role in shaping discourse. It examines how language constructs and reinforces social hierarchies, particularly gender-based inequalities, by analyzing Homer's *Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Using Critical Discourse Analysis and Rachel DuPlessis's feminist narrative strategies—"changing the sentence" and "changing the sequence"—the study highlights Atwood's subversion of male-dominated narratives. By engaging in revisionist mythmaking, *The Penelopiad* challenges hegemonic structures, reclaims female agency, and envisions an egalitarian discourse free from patriarchal constraints.*

Keywords: *essencing, critical discourse analysis, revisionist mythmaking, Margaret Atwood, *The Odyssey**

1. Introduction

Basing his arguments on Heidegger's concept of 'wesen der sprache', Slavoj Žižek highlights the 'essencing' quality of language. According to him language has the power to attribute a quality to an object that is indeed external to it. He proposes that when we call the metal 'gold', we automatically attribute our material desires concerning power, wealth and luxury to it, violently ripping it off its real meaning, which is originally just a kind of a metal. This is a solid epitome of the fact that language, by nature, is far from being an objective and disinterested set of signs. It's rather ideologically encoded through various aspects, and it should be decoded from gender-inspired, race-inspired and class-inspired points of view to break its ideological hold on the individuals. This basic tenet of Critical Discourse Analysis will be the basic tool of analysis for this paper which aims to make a gender-

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inspired comparative analysis of the Homeric epic, *The Odyssey* and its revisionist rewriting *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood. Atwood, in her brilliant novel, has rewritten the elitist and the hegemonic male discourse of the Homeric epic by subverting it so as to create a more egalitarian and embracing narrative discourse that epitomizes *écriture féminine*, through narrative techniques such as “changing the sentence” and “changing the sequence” that were conceptualized by Rachel DuPlessis in her *Writing Beyond the Ending*. In brief, this paper will be revolving around the possibility of creating a kind of discourse free from the imposition of social hierarchies that are deeply embedded in language through a critical discourse analysis of Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* in comparison with Homer’s *The Odyssey*.

2. The Heideggerian essencing

Slavoj Žižek provides a critical analysis of the concept of violence in his work *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*, elucidating the underlying mechanisms of power and the ideological frameworks that inform even the most personal manifestations of violence. He engages with Jean-Marie Muller’s assertion that the speech act serves as the foundation of socialization and the structuring principle of human interaction, arguing that through speech, individuals renounce violence. Muller contends that the coherence and validity of moral values, predicated on principles of non-violence, certain beliefs, and a sense of responsibility, constitute the essence of humanity, which is made possible through the human capacity for language (Žižek 2008b, 61).

However, Žižek challenges this claim by positing that language may, in fact, be the very factor that heightens human propensity for violence compared to other species (2008b, 61). He argues that non-violence is measured against assumed standards of normality, and that the imposition of such standards constitutes the most fundamental form of violence (Žižek 2008a, 2). Further, he explores the inherent potential for violence within language itself, drawing upon the Lacanian concept of the symbolic order and Heidegger’s notion of language as “the house of Being,” which he reinterprets as “language as a house of torture” (2008a, 3). Citing Lacan’s assertion in *Écrits*, according to which individuals are imprisoned within language and subjected to its constraints, Žižek argues that violence operates on multiple levels. Firstly, language violates the integrity of objects by reducing them to specific meanings, fragmenting their organic unity into discrete attributes. This process ultimately displaces the object into an external semantic field that is detached from its original reality. To illustrate this point, Žižek employs the example of ‘gold,’ which, within linguistic constructs, is extracted from its natural

meaning as a metal and is instead imbued with symbolic connotations of wealth, power, and spiritual purity, which are entirely extraneous to its material essence (Žižek 2008b, 61). This argument underscores the paradoxical nature of language: while often perceived as the primary medium of non-violence, its very structure renders it inherently violent, a quality Heidegger refers to as *Wesen der Sprache*.

In this regard, Žižek highlights a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of Martin Heidegger's philosophy: the dynamic nature of "essencing" (*Wesen* as a verb). Traditionally, essence (*Wesen*) has been understood as a static and defining property of an entity; however, Heidegger reconceptualizes it as a dynamic and unfolding process. This perspective is evident in his works *The Question Concerning Technology* and *On the Essence of Truth*, where he asserts that essence is not a fixed state but an ongoing historical emergence. He explicitly articulates this idea stating, "Essence is the prevailing [unfolding]" (1977, 31). Heidegger extends this idea to language asserting that "language essences as the house of Being" (1998, 239). Language, in his view, is not merely a communicative tool but a phenomenon that unfolds and reveals Being. It "essences" by enabling the emergence of meaning; thus, without language, human beings would be incapable of conceptualizing or experiencing Being. For instance, when a poet writes about a mountain, they do not merely describe it but rather reveal its deeper ontological reality, thereby "essencing" it through external attributions of meaning.

Žižek reinterprets this Heideggerian notion of language's essencing quality as a form of violence. He argues that, beyond explicit manifestations of violence such as crime, terrorism, civil unrest, war, forced migration, racial discrimination, and gender-based violence, even the very capacity for speech that defines humanity is intrinsically violent. This makes it imperative to analyze the concept of violence in its full complexity. In addition to the structural violence inherent in language, discourse itself gives rise to violence, as exemplified by racism, hate speech, and discrimination. This dynamic can be understood within Emmanuel Levinas's conceptualization of the asymmetrical structure of intersubjectivity, which operates along a master-slave axis (Žižek 2008b, 62). Susanne Kappeler also critiques the divisive quality of language at the societal level, arguing that even seemingly neutral linguistic constructs, such as the pronoun 'we,' are problematic due to their implicit delineation of inclusion and exclusion (1995, 20). In this view, discursive structures are inherently anthropocentric, phallogocentric, and Eurocentric, positioning the Western male as the primary subject (1995, 22). Those relegated to the status of 'others' are dehumanized, thereby facilitating their subjugation to violence.

From this perspective, the notion of egalitarian dialogue within language is ultimately illusory. The 'I' in the subject position does not genuinely engage with

the 'other' but instead addresses itself through the other. When individuals positioned outside the dominant subjectivity are confined to the status of 'others,' it signifies an inherent refusal of genuine communication or dialogue. Thus, anthropocentric discourse becomes a monologue among those in power about marginalized groups rather than with them. Similarly, Eurocentric discourse constitutes a self-referential dialogue among those at the geopolitical center about those on the periphery. The real source of violence in this context is the claim to universality made by these hegemonic monologues. The exclusion of marginalized groups from the dominant discursive structure is covertly reinforced by the inherent ambiguity of language and the mechanisms through which it sustains social hierarchies. This dimension of covert violence operates symmetrically to maintain the master-slave axis, rendering it invisible and dissociated from any identifiable perpetrator. As a result, this form of violence becomes an effective means of pacifying populations, producing obedient, unquestioning, and one-dimensional individuals.

2.1. Literature as playground for essencing

Literature has always been a playground for this kind of subtle violence that is utilized to bring out language's potential of essencing, therefore serving as a fundamental instrument for embedding and perpetuating dominant ideological structures. With origins as ancient as humanity itself, literary traditions—beginning with fairy tales, myths, and epics—utilize recurring patterns that profoundly shape individual perceptions of both the self and the world. Consequently, the inclusion of literary work within the canon is often contingent upon its alignment with the prevailing ideology, the most ancient one being the patriarchal ideology. Dilek Direnç critiques the literary canon, characterizing it as a powerful and influential institution that upholds the dominant ideology (2008, 3). The canon shapes individual perspectives by perpetuating a male-oriented worldview in which women are denied the agency to tell their own stories. Instead, they are reduced to secondary, stock characters within male-driven narratives that center on heroic quests, adventures, and judgments. Throughout history, women have been marginalized and excluded from key social, economic, political, religious, and intellectual spheres. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, asserts that men and women have never shared equal standing in society (1956, 19). She further argues that marginalized groups, including those defined by race, caste, class, or gender, are systematically relegated to an inferior position through religious, scientific, and philosophical justifications, thus positioning them as 'the Other' (1956, 22). Similarly, Judith Butler contends that women remain perpetually defined by

exclusion, existing only in relation to dominant structures of difference (1990, 25). These perspectives underscore the historical silencing of women and their lack of representation within social and literary structures. Within canonical literature, this marginalization manifests through the portrayal of female characters as either passive and silent or, conversely, as active yet monstrous figures.

Therefore, a gender-based analysis of canonical literature reveals its role in reinforcing male-dominated ideologies by constructing normative representations of the "ideal" man and woman. Historically, women have been systematically excluded from authorship, education, and active participation in literary discourse. Within the canon, female characters have frequently been categorized, stripped of narrative agency, and stereotypically depicted, or 'essenced' as either virtuous and submissive figures or monstrous and transgressive entities.

3. Revisionist mythmaking as a counter narrative strategy

This persistent exclusion and misrepresentation led, in the mid-twentieth century, to the emergence of feminist literary revisions, wherein Western feminist authors sought to reinterpret canonical texts from a female perspective. These literary revisions deconstruct existing narratives, reconstructing them through the perspective of marginalized female characters. This practice, known as revisionist mythmaking or feminist rewriting, operates within the framework of feminist literary criticism. Feminist rewriting exposes the extent to which traditional narratives contribute to the construction of gender roles and the marginalization of women. By repositioning women from the periphery to the center and incorporating their long-neglected experiences, this approach highlights alternative modes of existence beyond conventional patriarchal structures. As a result, female characters are no longer confined to passive roles or solely depicted as objects of male desire; instead, they gain narrative agency and the ability to articulate their own experiences. This rupture in the literary tradition signifies a critical challenge to the male-dominated canon.

Revisionist mythmaking is a powerful literary strategy that reinterprets, reconstructs, and reimagines established mythologies - in the sense that Roland Barthes uses the term - challenging their traditional narratives and ideological foundations. This approach challenges entrenched gender stereotypes and offers alternative narratives that empower women's voices and experiences. By offering alternative perspectives, it challenges traditional narratives and subverts hegemonic ideologies. In response to myths, historically recorded and transmitted by male writers and historians, revisionist approaches provide contemporary

authors with an opportunity to amplify the voices of characters who have been misrepresented or marginalized. This approach holds particular significance in gendered readings of mythological texts, as it foregrounds female voices that have been historically overshadowed by male protagonists.

This practice amplifies the voices of characters who have been marginalized, suppressed, or relegated to the background, thereby offering alternative perspectives and interpretations. It allows for a critique of historical gender norms, offering alternative perspectives that empower female characters and subvert traditional narratives. The literary canon, as a vehicle for hegemonic ideology, comprises works deemed valuable within dominant cultural frameworks, thereby reinforcing existing structures of authority. This canon frequently marginalizes characters based on gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, necessitating efforts by revisionist writers to disrupt and transform these established narratives. Through rewriting canonical texts, these writers amplify the voices of the marginalized and alter conventional storytelling, thereby subverting traditional power dynamics and offering alternative perspectives. Revisionist writers challenge the male-dominated canon by presenting alternative narratives that dismantle hierarchical structures and reconfigure power relations. Their works seek to give voice and representation to the marginalized, the silenced, and the invisible, thereby reshaping the storytelling landscape. Additionally, they alter narrative structures and perspectives to provide a more inclusive and multifaceted portrayal of traditionally overlooked characters.

Through this method, authors challenge and destabilize traditional narratives shaped by patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies. In classical mythology, female characters are frequently assigned secondary roles, depicted as passive figures, or entirely omitted from the narrative. For instance, within Homeric epics, women occupy subordinate positions. Revisionist mythmaking seeks to dismantle this imbalance by reimagining female roles, bringing their inner thoughts, agency, and desires to the forefront. Consequently, female characters in revisionist texts reclaim their suppressed identities and assert their voices, which had long been marginalized (Sharma 2019, 36). Through this approach, mythological narratives are not only reinterpreted but also function as a critique of the socio-cultural and historical systems responsible for the marginalization of women.

As Alicia Ostriker explains, in *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, feminist revisionist mythmaking is “an act of survival” that enables women writers to reclaim myths in ways that reshape cultural memory (1987, 211). She describes this practice as an invasion into “the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are stored; to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for

meaning" (1987, 211). By revising these myths, writers aim to "subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit" (1987, 211). So, Alicia Ostriker asserts that revisionist women writers should "steal the language", and that traditional narratives ought to be "appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible" (1987, 211). She challenges the authority of canonical works and encourages revisionist writers to reinterpret these texts from a new perspective. Adrienne Rich, in her seminal essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," emphasizes the importance of this process:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive o self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society. (1995, 18)

Through revisionist mythmaking, feminist writers rework existing narratives by shifting the focus from male-dominated perspectives to female agency, thereby resisting the historical silencing of women. By doing so, they seek to "overturn traditions in which women have been objectified, erased, or demonized" (Ostriker 1987, 212). This act allows women to reclaim and reessence the discursive texture of the narratives that have historically marginalized or misrepresented them.

Authors employ various methods in feminist revisionist mythmaking, such as retelling myths from the viewpoint of female characters, reconstructing stories to challenge portrayals of women as passive objects, and using feminist narrators to satirically critique the original texts' flawed depictions of women. For instance, Angela Carter's collection "The Bloody Chamber" reimagines classic fairy tales, examining "the messages about adolescent sexuality in stories like 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Snow White,' overturning the sexual mythology of simple fairy stories" (McNeill, 2000). Through this revisionist strategy, feminist writers not only critique patriarchal narratives but also offer transformative visions that redefine women's roles and identities within cultural myths.

3.1. Strategies of feminist revisionist mythmaking

Feminist writers employ several key strategies to subvert patriarchal myths. One of the most common strategies is retelling a myth from the perspective of a female character who was originally marginalized, silenced, or villainized. By doing so, the

revised myth presents an alternative viewpoint that exposes gender bias in the original story. Feminist revisionist mythmaking also seeks to reconstruct traditional female archetypes—such as the virgin, the witch, or the femme fatale—by giving them depth, agency, and complexity. This transformation of a traditionally passive character into an empowered protagonist exemplifies feminist mythmaking's resistance to reductive gender roles. Another key function of feminist mythmaking is to critique the ways in which traditional myths reinforce patriarchal ideology. This is often done through satire or subversion of the original myth's themes.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis' theory of *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (1985) conceptualizes these strategies, asserting that feminist writers must not only critique existing narratives but actively reconfigure them, altering both the sentence (language and structure) and the sequence (plot and narrative logic). DuPlessis argues that "changing the sentence" is about disrupting the syntactic and linguistic structures that have historically framed women's experiences within a patriarchal order (DuPlessis 1985, xiii). This means rejecting traditional narrative conventions that confine women to silence, passivity, or male-defined roles which is enabled by the subversion of the male-dominated discourse, the language of possession and power by employing richly symbolic, overtly sensual, and ironic language. By exposing the objectification of women through such language, the norms of patriarchal storytelling are destabilized, making the implicit explicit and confronting the reader with the violent reality behind traditional romantic narratives. The strategy of "changing the sequence," on the other hand, involves altering the traditional linear progression of stories, particularly those that reinforce marriage, sacrifice, or female submission as inevitable resolutions. DuPlessis describes this as rejecting the closure that silences women, instead crafting open-ended or radically different narratives that allow for new possibilities. To explain in her own words through a reference to Woolf:

Breaking the sequence is a rupture in the habits of narrative order, that expected story told when "love was the only possible interpreter" of women's textual lives (AROO, 87). In her study of Life's Adventure, Woolf notes that the novelist Mary Carmichael alludes to "the relationship that there may be between Chloe and Roger," but this is set aside in favor of another bond, depicted, "perhaps for the first time in literature" (AROO, 84,86). "Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together," begins Woolf (AROO 87). [...] So, breaking the sequence can mean delegitimizing the specific narrative and cultural orders of nineteenth-century-fiction – the emphasis on successful or failed romance, the subordination of quest to love, the death of the questing female, the insertion into family life. (DuPlessis 1985, 34)

To put it simply, changing the sequence refers to the breaking of the cycle that imprisoned women to romance narrative structure which as DuPlessis argues is the most effective trope for gender formulation (1985, 43).

4. Reessencing the myth: Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) provides a rich example of subverting the essencing process and undermining the discursive texture of the traditional myth by utilizing Rachel Blau DuPlessis' concepts of "changing the sentence" and "changing the sequence" in feminist revisionist mythmaking. Margaret Atwood is a prominent figure in revisionist mythmaking, critically engaging with the literary canon and reinterpreting classical myths within contemporary contexts. In *The Penelopiad*, she reconstructs the narrative of Homer's *The Odyssey*, shifting the focus to Penelope and the twelve maids—figures traditionally overlooked or silenced within the epic. By altering the plot and foregrounding these marginalized female characters, Atwood challenges the patriarchal foundations of the original text through a transformation of myth, her critique of male-centered heroic narration, and the ways in which the novel foregrounds the perspectives of marginalized women. Instead of following the linear, hero-centered arc of *The Odyssey*, Atwood restructures the narrative, centering it on Penelope and the twelve maids executed by Odysseus. This shift destabilizes Homer's glorification of Odysseus and exposes the gaps in male-centric storytelling. Furthermore, not only does Atwood rewrite the old myth of *The Odyssey* from other perspectives, but she also disrupts the traditional form and structure of Homer's epic. In contrast to the glorified heroism of Odysseus in the original epic, Atwood highlights Penelope's resilience and the unjust execution of the maids, challenging the patriarchal values embedded in the Homeric myth: "Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little storytelling. I owe it to myself" (Atwood 2005, 3). Atwood reimagines Penelope as an active and introspective figure who critically engages with her frustrations, personal growth, and desires. This reessenced Penelope challenges the traditionally idealized portrayal of the loyal wife, questioning the construction of female roles in classical narratives and exploring their broader implications for feminist discourse.

The *Odyssey*, composed in the late eighteenth or early seventeenth century B.C., is one of the oldest written texts in human history. It narrates the journey of Odysseus as he strives to return home following the Trojan War. Guided by Athena, he faces numerous obstacles, largely due to the wrath of Poseidon, yet ultimately overcomes these challenges through his heroism. While Odysseus is depicted as a

quest hero, Penelope is portrayed primarily in a passive role, awaiting his return. His journey serves as a means of constructing his identity as a man, whereas female characters are largely confined to the roles of wives, witches, or seductresses, often isolated in remote islands and palaces. These women are not granted fully developed identities and are instead presented as one-dimensional figures. Moreover, female characters in *The Odyssey* are represented through a male-oriented perspective, lacking the opportunity to narrate their own experiences. As Heilbrun observes, women's stories are restricted to a singular narrative structure: "Theirs has been the marriage plot, the erotic plot, the courtship plot, but never, as for men, a quest plot" (1990, 108). Within these narratives, female characters exist only insofar as they serve the development of male protagonists. They are primarily depicted as "mothers, wives, guides, seductresses, witches, and victims" (Powers 1991, 4). Penelope exemplifies the archetype of the ideal wife and mother, relying on her wit and patience to fulfill this expectation. The epic largely excludes other female experiences, focusing solely on those related to Penelope's devotion and endurance. Although Penelope is frequently referred to as "wise Penelope" throughout the epic, "her intelligence is confined to the domestic sphere" (Smit 2008, 394), and her wisdom is recognized only as long as she remains patient, submissive, devout, and faithful qualities that align with the ideal wife. Her loyalty is explicitly praised by Agamemnon's spirit when he tells Odysseus, "What a fine, faithful wife you won!" (Homer 1996, 474), contrasting her virtue with the betrayal of Clytemnestra, who murders her husband. Obviously, Penelope occupies a secondary yet significant role, symbolizing loyalty and patience. Over the course of twenty years, she awaits Odysseus's return while simultaneously resisting numerous suitors seeking her hand in marriage. In this context, she embodies the ideal of feminine virtue. Despite the passage of time and the wealth offered by these suitors, she remains steadfast in her fidelity. Although she is characterized as intelligent and resolute, her identity is primarily defined through her relationship with Odysseus. She is remembered for her loyalty and patience, yet her emotions, thoughts, desires, and personal struggles are largely absent from the narrative. Moreover, the original text offers minimal exploration of Penelope's emotional depth. She is primarily depicted as a passive figure who endures suffering, prays, and waits patiently, thereby confining her to the roles of wife and mother. Her individuality, emotions, and complexities are overlooked in favor of reinforcing traditional gender norms. Her voice lacks depth, and like many female figures in ancient Greek literature, she is defined primarily through her connection to a male hero. Her intellectual and emotional autonomy is largely disregarded. While her unwavering loyalty is celebrated as a virtue, it also serves to reinforce an ideal of

passivity, emphasizing self-sacrifice and devotion as the hallmarks of feminine virtue.

The twelve maids—Penelope’s obedient servants—, on the other hand, are ultimately executed by Telemachus and Odysseus for their perceived betrayal of the household. Judith Fletcher explains the motivation behind their punishment, arguing that “it is the sexually active maids, lacking restraint in both the body and voice, who reveal to the suitors the secret of Penelope’s chambers, that she is unraveling the shroud of Laertes to forestall her remarriage” (2008, 78). Their execution serves as a punishment for resisting the expectation of passive and silent womanhood, effectively rendering them abject figures.

In *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood reinterprets the discourse of the original narrative by granting a voice to both Penelope and the twelve maids, who are doubly marginalized—not only as women but also as lower-class individuals. Therefore, Atwood enables three levels of subversion, Penelope’s subversion of Odysseus’ text and the maids’ subversion of Penelope’s. Thus, Atwood’s narration provides “multiple intertwined voices within highly composed extensive structures” (Ostriker 1987, 88). Atwood tells the childhood, marriage and parentage of Penelope from a first person point of view through an in *ultimas res* narrative structure from Hades wherein the narrative opens. Thus, she lets the silent obedient wife tell her own story.

Through this revisionist approach, Atwood challenges the traditional representation of female characters in *The Odyssey*, offering an alternative perspective that foregrounds their experiences and agency. Embodying DuPlessis’ idea of “changing the sentence” that refers to the disruption of traditional literary styles and linguistic structures that reinforce patriarchal narratives, Atwood employs a colloquial, modern, and self-aware tone, breaking away from the elevated, heroic language of Homer’s epic. Penelope’s narration is filled with wry humor, irony, and conversational speech, contrasting sharply with the solemn, grandiose, authoritative, monologic tone of *The Odyssey*. This casual, almost sardonic introduction subverts the authoritative voice of Homer, establishing Penelope as an active and reflective narrator rather than the passive wife waiting at home. Her language is deeply personal, breaking away from the conventional heroic discourse of classical epics. In *The Odyssey*, Penelope is silent and obedient, with her emotions largely inferred through male perspectives. In contrast, *The Penelopiad* gives her a sharp, witty, and self-aware voice – which she embraces as “Low Art” – undermining the heroic rhetoric of Homer’s epic.

Penelope’s narrative in *The Penelopiad* becomes a story of survival, transforming her into a complex and multidimensional character. No longer confined to the image of the angelic, faithful wife, she is instead portrayed as a

fully developed individual with both strengths and flaws, neither entirely virtuous nor wholly flawed. This complexity may explain her placement in Asphodel, the liminal space between Tartarus and Elysium. Additionally, Atwood exposes the ideological framework underlying Penelope's characterization as the ideal wife in *The Odyssey*, unveiling the discursive structures that contribute to the subordination of women. Atwood's Penelope is acutely aware of this dynamic, acknowledging that she had been "a stick used to beat other women with" (Atwood 2005, 2). Penelope reflects on her role in mythic storytelling pointing out that she has "been trying to put the record straight for years, but who could [she] talk to? All the versions of [her] story, sung by the poets, leave out some of the most interesting parts" (Atwood 2005, 3). This metatextual self-awareness disrupts the grandiose, authoritative tone of *The Odyssey*. Instead of the expected tragic or noble storytelling, Atwood makes Penelope's speech colloquial and sardonic, creating a sense of intimacy with the reader closing the epic distance of the discourse of the original narrative. This aligns with DuPlessis' argument that feminist writing must challenge the sentence structures that reinforce male-centered narratives (DuPlessis 1985, xiii).

Additionally, Atwood's use of fragmented perspectives (Penelope's first-person monologue alongside the choral interjections of the hanged maids) challenges the unified, singular voice of epic poetry. Atwood's use of fragmented, shifting perspectives and the maids' Greek-chorus-style commentary actively deconstructs the epic's structure, refusing to grant Odysseus the narrative authority he traditionally holds. This is a direct application of DuPlessis' theory, showing how feminist writing doesn't just challenge content but reconfigures form itself. The maids' commentary is especially represented through either poetic or dramatic forms both of which are traditionally upper-class discourses topsy-turvyng the ideological texture of the form. Furthermore, their tone is irreverent and accusatory, further deconstructing the patriarchal language of the original myth:

*We are the maids,
The ones you killed,
The ones you failed.* (Atwood 2005, 5)

By breaking the formal sentence structure and employing poetic interjections, song lyrics, and courtroom satire, Atwood destabilizes *The Odyssey's* authoritative narrative voice, a key example of "changing the sentence" as DuPlessis describes it. Unlike Homer's continuous, linear narration, Atwood fragments the structure by incorporating Penelope's first-person reflections from the Underworld, chorus sections from the hanged maids, written in poetic, song-like, and even satirical

forms, and interjections of Greek drama, mock trials, and ballads, breaking up the narrative's traditional coherence. For example, one of the maids' interjections takes the form of a bawdy folk song as can be seen in the following extract:

*We danced in the air,
Our bare feet twitched,
It was not fair.* (Atwood 2005, 89)

This genre-blending and structural fragmentation challenge the idea of a fixed, singular truth, reinforcing feminist critiques of history as a male-constructed narrative. DuPlessis argues that women's writing should reject syntactical and formal constraints (1985, 35), and Atwood exemplifies this by making the novel polyphonic rather than monologic.

As for DuPlessis' concept of "changing the sequence" which refers to the restructuring of traditional storylines, particularly those that enforce patriarchal resolutions (such as female sacrifice, marriage, or male heroism), as opposed to *The Odyssey*, in which Penelope is portrayed as the loyal, passive wife, waiting faithfully for Odysseus while fending off suitors, the characterization of Penelope in Atwood's narrative disrupts this narrative order by making Penelope a self-aware, reflective, and at times, unreliable narrator. Atwood revisits the Homeric myth and endows Penelope with a voice characterized by agency and desire. In doing so, Atwood presents a feminist critique of the character's portrayal in the original text. Instead of simply admiring Odysseus, she expresses skepticism about his legendary status: "The man was endlessly clever, but it was the sort of cleverness that only works when the audience is gullible enough" (Atwood 2005, 85). Rather than glorifying Odysseus as the ultimate hero, Penelope subtly undermines his achievements, casting doubt on his supposed cunning and questioning the truthfulness of the myth itself. This narrative inversion challenges the sequence of heroism and male dominance that *The Odyssey* promotes. While *The Odyssey* follows a hero's journey centered on Odysseus, *The Penelopiad* reshapes the myth's structure by shifting focus to previously silenced voices and disrupting traditional storytelling closures and resolutions. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is the cunning trickster-hero, and Penelope is the faithful wife waiting for him. Atwood inverts this sequence, turning Odysseus into a morally, mentally and even physically ambiguous figure, while Penelope becomes the true strategist. She describes Odysseus not as a glorious warrior but as a compulsive liar who "was always so plausible. Atwood also breaks the epic distance by depicting Odysseus as rather a liar, a thief, a murderer, a scoundrel undermining the reliability of the original myth. Atwood defines his "short legs," (2005, 33) besides his "wrinkles and

baldness" (2005, 136) as opposed to his depiction in the original epic. The rumours surrounding Odysseus's adventures, as depicted in Atwood's text, further contribute to dismantling the epic distance. While some claim that "Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted island," others argue, "no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the madam" (2005, 84). Similarly, while some believe Odysseus had "been to the Land of the Dead to consult the spirits," others counter that "he'd merely spent the night in a gloomy old cave full of bats" (2005, 91). Furthermore, in Atwood's retelling, Penelope emerges as the more skilful trickster, positioning herself as the true master of deception. By challenging Odysseus' credibility, Atwood forces the reader to reconsider whether the events of *The Odyssey* are even "true" or merely part of Homer's elaborate self-mythologizing, thus destabilizing the imposed truths of the discourse of the original text.

Atwood also challenges the discourse of the original myth by representing Odysseus' identity as rather fluid and performative. Atwood recasts Odysseus as a figure who constantly reinvents himself—coming back to life repeatedly through different identities. This concept not only deconstructs Odysseus' heroic narrative but also exposes the fluidity and performative nature of identity in both myth and history. In Atwood's version of the myth, Odysseus is not just the singular, heroic figure from *The Odyssey*, but a man who constantly sheds and takes on new identities depending on the situation. This fluidity, in which Odysseus seemingly "comes back to life" in different forms, undermines his traditional role as the stable, heroic patriarch, revealing him instead as someone who hides behind masks to manipulate the world around him. "He's been a French general, he's been a Mongolian invader, he's been a tycoon in America, he's been a headhunter in Burneo. He's been a film star, an inventor, an advertising man" (2005, 189-90). Odysseus reinvents himself so often that his identity is hard to pin down: "He could slip into any role, any guise, with so much ease that it was impossible to know where the truth ended and the lies began" (2005, 58). Penelope is both captivated and repelled by this constant shifting of identities, but she also sees through it. She recognizes that his multiplicity of identities is a tool of power, allowing him to manipulate others, including her, while concealing his true self. Rather than one cohesive identity, Odysseus is depicted as a person who constantly wears a mask, allowing him to evade accountability and responsibility for his actions. This, of course, contrasts with Penelope's own identity, which is largely fixed within the myth of the loyal, passive wife. In Atwood's revision, Penelope's awareness of Odysseus' ability to transform and reinvent himself highlights the limitations of the fixed roles women are often forced into by society. Penelope's voice becomes the counter-narrative, allowing her to critique the male-dominated mythic structures

that confine women to one narrow identity, while men like Odysseus can take on countless roles. "Odysseus was never just one man. He was a series of men, layered on top of one another, like the layers of a shroud. He could shed one version of himself and take up another at will" (2005, 125). This metaphor of layers suggests that Odysseus is never a singular, unified character but rather a collection of competing selves. His "deaths" are a continuation of his ability to reinvent and change, whether through his role as a father to Telemachus, a lover to Circe or Calypso, or a king to Ithaca. Odysseus is a shapeshifter who refuses to stay in one place, evading any permanent identity. In *The Penelopiad*, Odysseus' repeated "returns" are not final—they are ongoing transformations, always further complicating his role as the male hero. Atwood's revision highlights the endlessness of male dominance and how, by constantly taking on new identities, Odysseus avoids confronting the consequences of his actions, particularly regarding his mistreatment of women like Penelope and the maids.

One of the most striking ways Atwood "changes the sequence" is by amplifying the voices of the twelve maids—a detail that is mentioned briefly in *The Odyssey* but never explored. While in Homer's version, the maids are executed without much justification, in *The Penelopiad*, they become a central, recurring chorus, demanding justice for their fate:

*We did as we were told,
We cleaned, we cleaned,
We scrubbed, we scrubbed,
We carried, we carried,
We fetched, we fetched,
But when the time came,
You did not stand with us.* (2005, 146)

By making their voices a constant refrain, Atwood disrupts the traditional closure of *The Odyssey*. Instead of ending with Odysseus' triumphant return, the maids' unresolved accusations haunt the narrative, leaving the reader with a sense of unfinished justice. In Atwood's revision, the maids assert their voices, demanding both justice and vengeance. They express emotions such as anger, which are traditionally denied to women in canonical texts. Their narrative is also conveyed through poetic and dramatic forms—genres historically regarded as high art and typically associated with the upper class and male authorship. Notably, they are even given the platform to deliver an academic lecture at the conclusion of the text. Through this narrative repositioning, the maids—who were doubly marginalized and silenced in the original epic—are empowered and granted one of

the most authoritative and respectable roles in Atwood's retelling. While Penelope subverts Odysseus's narrative, the maids challenge the accounts of both Penelope and Odysseus, offering a multilayered representation that incorporates diverse perspectives.

Moreover, the maids are depicted as fully developed characters who are given the opportunity to share their own stories, beginning with their difficult childhoods. In doing so, they critically examine the entrenched class and gender hierarchies that persist within society even today. This is a clear example of DuPlessis' idea of "refusing closure", where feminist writers challenge the traditional endings that erase or silence women's suffering. In *The Odyssey*, the maids are executed for supposed disloyalty, and their deaths are merely a footnote in Odysseus' restoration of order. Atwood, however, places the maids at the heart of the novel. Their repeated choral interruptions serve as a haunting refrain, refusing to let their deaths be forgotten. In Atwood's version, the maids are not just collateral damage but victims of systemic misogyny, turning their deaths into an open question of injustice rather than a resolved plot point.

Another point is that in many classical myths, the fate of women is tied to marriage, sacrifice, or obedience. Atwood rejects this narrative resolution by allowing Penelope to reflect critically on her own legend from the afterlife. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus reclaims his home, reasserts his dominance, and the story ends in male triumph. However, *The Penelopiad* rejects this resolution—instead of closure, we are left with Penelope's dissatisfaction with her own myth—she questions whether she was truly "faithful" and mocks how male poets have shaped her image, the maids' lingering cries for justice—in the Underworld, they continue to haunt Odysseus, preventing him from resting in peace, an unresolved trial in the afterlife, where the maids attempt to hold Odysseus accountable, but the system remains rigged against them. Atwood does not allow a traditional epic or romance resolution. Rather than embracing the idea of marital fidelity as her defining virtue, she acknowledges the ambiguity of truth and storytelling when she says: "I was a stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as wise, as thrifty, as devoted as Penelope? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners. Don't follow my example, I wanted to scream in your ears—yes, yours!" (2005, 2). This metatextual awareness forces the reader to question the entire sequence of mythmaking, how stories are told, who tells them, and how women's voices are controlled in history. Atwood refuses to grant *The Odyssey* the authority to define Penelope's character, instead offering a polyphonic, revisionist counter-narrative reessencing the word.

4.1. An anthropology lecture

The section entitled “An Anthropology Lecture” deserves a separate section of discussion within this study because it is a highly critical moment in the text where Atwood uses a satirical academic format to deconstruct and reinterpret the execution of Penelope’s twelve maids employing Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ concepts of both “changing the sentence” and “changing the sequence” by both subverting conventional storytelling methods and challenging the patriarchal logic behind the maids’ deaths. Unlike the personal, intimate tone of Penelope’s narration or the lyrical, tragic voices of the maids, this section adopts the detached and authoritative tone of an academic lecture. Atwood mimics the language of anthropology, complete with references to hypothetical “research” and speculation about the maids’ fate. They mock the so-called “objective” academic tone, showing their frustration at how their suffering is turned into an intellectual exercise rather than recognized as an atrocity. The passage opens with a of the maids’ hanging questioning why it happened in the first place (2005, 151). This rhetorical question, posed in a seemingly neutral, scholarly manner, signals Atwood’s critique of how history often treats violence against women as an abstract subject of study rather than an atrocity demanding justice. The impersonal, academic voice allows Atwood to highlight how real-world scholars have historically rationalized and justified violence against women rather than condemn it outright. By framing the discussion as an “anthropology lecture,” Atwood critiques the way patriarchal institutions intellectualize and depersonalize female suffering. DuPlessis argues that feminist writing must disrupt authoritative, patriarchal discourse, including academic language that often upholds oppressive ideologies (DuPlessis 1985, 35). Atwood does exactly this by mimicking and subverting the rigid, rationalist tone of academia, exposing how scholarship can serve as a tool of oppression rather than enlightenment.

The lecture also presents multiple theories for why the maids were hanged, parodying how academics offer speculative and abstract explanations for acts of violence, rather than address their ethical dimensions. The first one is the theory of ritual sacrifice according to which the maids were sacrificed as part of an ancient fertility rite ensuring a good harvest or the success of Odysseus’ rule as a cultural necessity. On the other hand, the Scapegoat theory argues that the maids were killed to purge societal guilt after the war, drawing from anthropologist René Girard’s idea that societies maintain order by sacrificing an “expendable” group. This theory is specifically parodied to highlight how women are often blamed for societal crises and then erased from history. And finally, according to the cultural contamination theory, the maids were executed because they had been “tainted”

by contact with the suitors; this fact exposes how patriarchal societies police women's sexuality, punishing them for male transgressions. Each of these theories satirizes real academic approaches to myth and history that often focus on symbolism and tradition rather than the lived experience of women. Instead of condemning the injustice of the maids' deaths, these interpretations reduce their suffering to an intellectual puzzle.

By presenting multiple, conflicting explanations, Atwood denies the reader a single, authoritative truth which aligns with DuPlessis' idea of "changing the sequence," where feminist writers refuse linear, definitive storytelling and instead present competing perspectives that expose the instability of patriarchal narratives (DuPlessis 1985, 42). Rather than reinforcing the traditional "closure" found in *The Odyssey*—where Odysseus restores order and the maids' deaths are simply a part of this process—Atwood leaves the truth unresolved. The reader is forced to confront the unsettling ambiguity surrounding their deaths, much like how history often obscures and distorts women's experiences. Rather than accepting their fate as a resolved part of history, the maids' voices continue to demand justice. They haunt the narrative, much like how history continues to be haunted by the silenced voices of women who were erased or misrepresented. Instead of ending with resolution, *The Penelopiad* ensures that the maids' deaths remain an open wound—a question that neither history nor academia has properly answered.

In brief, through this section, Atwood aims to make a powerful critique of how history and academia rationalize violence against women, reducing real suffering to a mere subject of study. By using satire, she forces the reader to critically question the authority of traditional narratives. Rather than providing a clear-cut explanation, Atwood leaves the truth open-ended. The competing interpretations challenge the notion that one perspective (usually the male-dominated one) should define history. By allowing the maids to interject into the formal "anthropology lecture," Atwood ensures that their voices disrupt and challenge the authoritative male perspective. Unlike *The Odyssey*, which closes the chapter on the maids' deaths, Atwood refuses to let the reader forget them. The maids continue to demand justice from beyond the grave, embodying feminist resistance against historical erasure. As a result of their fight for justice, they transform into Furies, representing everlasting quest for justice which is another form of empowerment.

5. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* provides a perfect example of the reessencing of language employing Rachel Blau DuPlessis' concepts of "changing the sentence" by making use of conversational, ironic, and modern language instead of epic grandeur, introducing polyphonic storytelling with interjections from the maids and employing poetic fragments, satire, and choral laments instead of linear narration; and "changing the sequence" by shifting the narrative focus from Odysseus to Penelope and the maids, undermining the hero's legendary status, presenting Odysseus as a flawed manipulator, refusing to grant closure—the maids' accusations linger unresolved and exposing the patriarchal mythmaking process, where women's suffering is erased. Through these techniques, Atwood transforms *The Odyssey* from a tale of male heroism into a feminist critique of power, gender, and storytelling itself, 'filling the old vessel with new wine'. Through this radical and brilliant rewriting of an ancient myth, Atwood not only reclaims Penelope's story but also questions the myth-making process itself, forcing the reader to recognize how women's voices have been manipulated and erased in history.

Clearly Feminist revisionist mythmaking is not merely a literary exercise; it is a political act, an act of survival that allows women to reclaim the stories that shape their identities and cultural legacies, challenges historical narratives and offers alternative cultural models by dismantling narrative structures that reinforce patriarchal values. By rewriting myths, feminist writers question the authority of male-centered historical narratives and propose new ways of understanding gender, power, and agency. By rewriting these scripts, feminist authors disrupt the transmission of patriarchal ideology and reessence these narratives to validate women's experiences. In this respect feminist revisionist mythmaking continues to be a powerful tool for literary and cultural transformation. Whether through the reclamation of marginalized female voices, the reconstruction of female archetypes, or the critique of patriarchal ideologies, this strategy remains essential in the fight for gender equality in literature. As Adrienne Rich asserts, re-vision is more than an academic exercise—it is an act of survival, one that allows women to reclaim the stories that shape their identities and cultural legacies. Through strategies conceptualized as changing the sentence (rewriting language and narrative structure) and changing the sequence (altering storytelling logic) by Rachel DuPlessis, feminist writers radically reessence the myth and the word. Whether by reclaiming marginalized female voices, reconstructing female archetypes, or exposing patriarchal ideologies, revisionist mythmaking remains a crucial strategy that aims to transform discourse.

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