

# “WE HAD NO VOICE”: CLASS INEQUALITY THROUGH ÉCRITURE FEMININE IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE PENELOPIAD*

## “NO TENÍAMOS VOZ”: LA DESIGUALDAD DE CLASES A TRAVÉS DE LA ÉCRITURE FEMININE EN *PENÉLOPE Y LAS DOCE CRIADAS DE MARGARET ATWOOD*

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### Abstract

In Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), Penelope is associated with Artemis, the female-goddess cult leader, and the twelve maids, with her followers. These mythological figures belong to the Minoan matrilineal culture that was eradicated by the patriarchal civilization of Greece. Margaret Atwood’s intention, rewriting a feminist version of Penelope’s myth, is used as a response to patriarchal myths that have influenced readers through generations. *The Penelopiad* retells the Odyssey events from the *Other’s* view—the women servant’s experience. This article explores the consequences of class difference between Penelope and the maids from the Marxist feminist perspective of Charlotte Perkins (1899). The maids’ chorus language will be compared to *écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous (1976) and Bracha Ettinger’s *Matrixial Subjectivity* (2020) with the aim of finding out how the text raises the voices of forgotten, marginalized and invisibilized women.

**Key words:** Margaret Atwood, Marxist feminism, *Écriture Feminine*, Matrixial Subjectivity, Rewriting, Myth.

### Resumen

En *The Penelopiad* (2005) de Margaret Atwood, se asocia a Penélope con Artemisa, una diosa líder, y a sus doce criadas, con sus seguidoras, haciendo alusión a la cultura matrilineal minoica que fue erradicada por la civilización cretense patriarcal. En este artículo, la intención de Margaret Atwood de reescribir un mito será razonada como una respuesta a los mitos patriarcales que han influido a lectores a través de generaciones, relatando, con su novela, eventos extraordinarios desde el punto de vista de las *Otras*, las sirvientas en este caso. Las consecuencias de la diferencia de clase en la relación entre Penélope y las criadas será considerada desde una perspectiva de feminismo marxista de Charlotte Perkins (1899). El lenguaje del coro de las criadas será comparado con el de la *écriture féminine* de Hélène Cixous (1976) y la subjetividad matricial de Bracha Ettinger (2020) con el objetivo de definir en qué modo el texto eleva las voces de las olvidadas, marginadas e invisibilizadas.

**Palabras clave:** Margaret Atwood, Feminismo marxista, *écriture féminine*, subjetividad matricial, reescritura, mito.

## Introduction

In *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood offers a feminist version of Homer's *Odyssey* portraying Penelope as a possible female-goddess cult leader. As Hilde Staels asserts, Penelope is associated with Artemis, and the twelve maids, with her followers, alluding to the lost matriarchal culture and female-centered religion that belongs to the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization of Crete before the patriarchal civilization of Greece. "Penelope's maids [...] interpret themselves as companions of the moon goddess Artemis, as twelve Amazons or moon-maidens who are victims of fertility cults" (Staels, 2009: 104). Although the intention of this rewriting was probably providing a story that supported women roles, the abuse of power from Penelope of not avoiding the killing of the maids could be interpreted as loyalty to the patriarchal normativity. In the novel, men's privilege is represented by Ulysses (symbolizing leadership and authority) and the judiciary system in the trial chapter. The author clearly criticizes men's privilege in Ancient Greek society, but not only men's privilege is denounced, but also upper-class women's privilege over low class women with the mockery of Penelope's narrative voice and a defense on the maids. Hypotheses from recent research have shown the imitations of patriarchal modes in Penelope's behavior (Rodríguez, 2015). However, the perpetration of the abuse from those who are in a privileged position is not only the product of patriarchy in the novel, class, accompanied by gender hierarchy make possible the legalization of murdering the maids violently. Mihoko Suzuki (2007) highlighted how gender and class hierarchies are displayed in the maids' chorus and our present study is going to examine the maids discourse connecting it with feminist theories.

After reading Margaret Atwood's postmodernist feminist rewriting of the myth of Ulysses and Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, reflecting on the function of the maids of the story, who become the protagonists of it, reading recent research already done of this novella by Mihoko Suzuki (2007), Hilde Staels (2009) and Gerardo Salas Rodríguez (2015), this article provides a new comparative analysis of the maids discourse focusing on Marxist feminism (Charlotte Perkins Stetson, 1899), *écriture féminine* (Hélène Cixous, 1976) and the matrixial gaze (Bracha Ettinger, 1948). In this article we will study the reasons why Atwood chose myth criticism (Durand, 1979) to compose her feminist rewriting, and we will offer an innovative analysis of the novel that has not been provided before: an inquiry into its Marxist feminist criticism relying on Perkins (1899), to finally show, through an analysis of maids' interventions in the novel, how their transcendental message intends to have an effect on readers in order to change from focusing on the protagonists of the *Odyssey* as Homer wrote it, to pay more attention to the forgotten ones, the maids, the representatives of the lowest social class: the female servants.

*The Penelopiad* is not only told from Penelope's point of view, but also from the maids' perspective. Penelope's narration unveils a story that from centuries was told centering on Homer's feats and only mentioning the role of Penelope as a passive faithful wife. At the beginning of the novel readers may believe that the main theme of the novel is going to be the revelation of Penelope's real identity far from Ulysses accounts. However, as the plot advances, readers discover the most important theme

of the novella: the assassination of the maids though they did not have committed any crime. Penelope's maids were women whose condition was much worse than hers, and it is significant to notice that they were more in number (they were twelve and she was only one), and, besides, they were servants. This makes clear how, lower classes are higher in number and their possibilities of being raped and murdered, in the case of women, are much more. From this view, *The Penelopiad* is highlighting, not only the fact that women have been discriminated in myths and legends, which has affected historically from the ancient times to present day, but, Atwood denounces, more specifically, the fact that the vast majority of women in these myths were servants and slaves, who were never supported, not even by their female mistresses. In order to analyze men's privilege over women in the novel we will use Marxist feminism.

## Methodology

In order to understand the feminist criticism of classical myths of the novel, it is necessary to answer to a relevant question: What may be the objective of Margaret Atwood rewriting a myth dealing with women condition? Why a myth? Myths show universal human emotions, experiences, virtues and defects. Gilbert Durand, considered the first theorist on myth criticism recognized the presence of archetypal symbols in literary works. For him, people have always been plagued by questions about their identities, ancestry, the afterlife, and the origins of evil. These questions have persisted until present day (1979: VII). The evil side of men and women can be seen in *The Penelopiad*, in the lack of freedom of a semi-goddess to choose her husband. Odysseus is a liar, Penelope a traitor, her maids, the victims. However, even if the unreliable narrator of *The Penelopiad* and the maids acting as secondary narrators telling the story through poems and plays try to convince the readers that they are telling the truth, a myth does not have any historical document to show evidence of its veracity. As José Manuel Losada explains: "A myth is a functional story, symbolic and thematic of extraordinary events with sacred transcendent supernatural referent, lacking, in principle, historical testimony" (Losada, 2022: 193). History is mainly studied following Western patriarchal thought, accounting events emphasizing the superiority of men over women, and in a similar way, in myths women from the lowest classes are invisibilized and excluded. In myth criticism recurrent mythemes are often studied. The concept of the mytheme was in the first place defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) and widened by Durand in *De la mitocrítica al mitoanálisis* by redefining it as a "mythical atom [that] inherently has an 'archetypal' [and] schematic structure, in a Jungian sense [according to Durand], and its content can indifferently be a 'motive', a 'theme', a 'mythical decorate' [...] and emblem, a 'dramatic situation' [...]" (2013: 344). Also, in *Mitos y sociedades* (2003), Durand explained that the mythemes can be manifested as actions conveyed by "verbs [...] by kinship relationships, kidnap, homicide, incest [...] or even emblematic objects: staff, trident, axe, a dove [...]" (Durand, 2003: 163). Rape of women and punishing them after being raped is a constant mytheme in Greek mythology, rape and punishment are as normalized in myths as in real life. A good example of punishment after rape can be Medusa's myth in which, as Faith

Roush defends, the myth of Medusa is still important in modern day as it highlights issues of sexual assault and its twisted repercussions for both the perpetrator and the victim (Roursh, 2019: 1).

In Greek mythology we find a high number of rape cases. Many female princesses are raped, such as: Alcippe, Alcmene, Callisto, Demeter, Europa, Hera, Persephone, Philomela, etc. Male characters are also raped: Adonis, Endymion and even Odysseus, to name a few. Rapes took place in myths and there was no punishment for the rapist in many cases, something that happens often in different parts of the world.

Probably, for this reason, Margaret Atwood chose to rewrite a Greek myth, to show how patriarchy is perpetrated through myths and future generations can be influenced by a retelling in which the empathy and identification is focused on the raped and murdered servants, instead of exclusively on the smart and brave male hero, his patriarchal counterpart Athena and the faithful Penelope. The reason why Margaret Atwood chose feminist mythmaking shows a clear attempt to report extraordinary events from the *Other* experience, the women experience in this case. As Simone de Beauvoir stated: "A myth is the projection of the Subject, its hopes and fears, through the *Other*" [...] "Any myth implies a subject that projects its hopes and fears to a transcendental heaven" (Beauvoir quoted in Losada, 2022: 127). This is the case of Atwood's maids myth, after dying they are believed to be able to fly, they have been released from pain in the end of the novella: "The Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls" (Atwood, 2005: 196). Feminist rewriting can clearly criticize gender issues: "Myth has always been a platform for discussing and criticizing social issues and problems. Myth exemplifies these social concepts and personifies them to make them more accessible" (Zehren 2016: 6). As Katabasis is a mytheme in Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus descends to the underworld. Similarly, in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Penelope descends to hell where she finds *the fields of Asphodel* (15). There is a shocking contrast in the way Penelope describes with humor her experience of living in hell at the beginning of the novel with the tragical way she describes her suffering at the end. In the fifth chapter entitled "Asphodel" she explains how it feels living in the dark death, some dead people are summoned by mediums and magicians, however, Penelope admits that she never got summoned much by the magicians, whereas her cousin, Helen, "was much in demand" (Atwood, 2005: 20). The light tone of the "Asphodel" contrasts with the last chapter "Home Life in Hades" in which she blames Helen of Troy for the people who died in the war she provoked, and also, Penelope describes her hell as a place in which she will not forget the maids she betrayed, they will haunt both Odysseus and her.

It is important to highlight the fact that the main problem we find in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is the never-ending story of women competitiveness. Penelope feels jealous of her cousin Helen of Troy, does not get on well with her nurse and betrays her maids. In our analysis, we agree on Gerardo Rodríguez's applying of Janice G. Raymond's hetero-reality and gyn/affection theories to explain Penelope and the maids' behavior (Rodríguez, 2015: 20). For Rodríguez, the murdered maids stand for Raymond's gyn/affection, a term Raymond uses as "a synonym for female friendship" whereas Penelope is unable to escape from Raymond's hetero reality: "the world view that woman exists always in relation to man" (Raymond quoted in Rodríguez, 2015: 20). Apart from the way women are raised to place love over all the other important matters, there is a social

class issue that cannot be denied in the novel, and it is that, even if the maids show a positive example of female friendship, their circumstances cannot be compared to those of princess Penelope.

The lack of equality due to social class difference demands connecting the relation between Penelope and the maids with Marxist feminism. The maids, working in precarious conditions become profitable for Penelope and Ulysses as well as for the noble men who rape them and for Penelope's suitors who seduce them. The maids live under the most extreme abuses of Capitalism. The use of maids as in *Women and Economics* (1899), Charlotte Perkins Stetson explained how the human race developed in a way in which men could control the economy while women could only depend on men and their labor as house workers and mothers did not give them the chance to be economically independent. For Perkins: "The women whose splendid extravagance dazzles the world, whose economic goods are the greatest, are often neither houseworkers nor mothers, but simply the women who hold most power over the men who have the most money" (Perkins, 1899: 21-22). From a sociological point of view, Perkins highlights how "when man began to feed and defend woman, she ceased proportionally to feed and defend herself" (Perkins, 1899: 61). This explains why Penelope, instead of saving the lives of her servants, she saves her own life by accusing them, as in the patriarchal period in which they live, women depend on men.

With regards to the style in which the novella is written, there is a connection between the writing style used for the chorus of the twelve maids with *écriture féminine* concept created by Hélène Cixous, not only for the way their chorus songs and speeches is written, but also for the intentions behind it: uncovering the reality of poor women. Their speech is feminine as it reflects women situations that men do not live in a similar way: being treated as prostitutes by noble men, nursing and spoiling a male child and being punished for being raped without permission as it is established in the trial at the end of the novel. Sofía Varino has highlighted the feminist strategy of this type of feminine writing. According to Varino:

Hélène Cixous used the concept of the 'feminine' in her plays as a container for heterogeneity, liminality and difference, mobilizing it to animate feminist strategies that interrupt male, white and/or hegemonic forms of subjectivity. If, for Cixous the practice of feminine writing is fundamentally characterized by the desire to create a mode of expression in which (gendered, embodied, racial) difference and otherness would retain their alterity (Sofía Varino, 2018).

The classic story of *Odysseus* takes the place of a conflation in Atwood's novel, a literary account which was far away from the truth but everybody believed. It is a metaliterary work in which the events are told as if they could have been real, whereas everything is fiction, the patriarchal as well as the feminist version. However, in Atwood's novel the testimonies of the maids work to show how art can be used to transport trauma, a method we can explain through Bracha Ettinger's psychoanalytical theory, from the chapter "Art as the Transport-station of trauma" from *Matrixial subjectivity, aesthetics, ethics* (1948). The twelve maids uncovering the truth story functions as what Bracha Ettinger called transgenerational transmission of memory (Bracha Ettinger, 1948: 329).



The concept of transgenerational transmission of memory that Bracha Ettinger defended is compared to the author's ability to transmit through a literary work a message that will be received through different generations of readers, and as it will be kept in their memory, their account of Penelope and Ulysses myth could include a perspective in which the most powerful ones are the agents of injustice and the maids were the victims of their irresponsibility and egoism. The maids will tell future generations their memories as female servants to show that there is no possible female empowerment while there are privileged classes.

Penelope betrays her "daughters" following patriarchal ideas. Margaret Atwood's story transmits to present day and future generations the tragical and transcendental consequences of the lack of sisterhood. The lack of sisterhood can remain in women bodies and psychologies. Bracha Ettinger explains that there is a web of connections in the individual limits:

This web, which is not only a feminine beyond-the-phallus web but also an *originary matrixial web*, is tragic in many senses, but it is not melancholic, hysterical or psychotic [...] Such realization of encounter via the artwork penetrates into, impregnates and creates further encounters between the artist and the world, the artist and the object, the artist and the *Other*, artists and viewers. The realization of such an encounter transforms the *tableau* [painting or artwork] and is transformed by it into a transport-station of trauma" (Ettinger, 1948: 331).

In *The Penelopiad* the maids tell their trauma and, therefore, through the Chorus (artwork/song) their trauma is transported to the readers, who are addressed by the maids at the end of the novel: "but now we're here, we're all here too, the same as you" (195). The traumatic, for Ettinger, becomes Beauty and redefines it. In our comparative analysis the maids are considered artists who use -in Ettingerian terminology- their *Matrixial Gaze*, because their language has its origins in a feminine-maternal sphere of encounter that begins in the most archaic (pre-maternal-prenatal) humanized encounter-event and they are able to transmit ethic questions, "to raise questions and doubts" and compassion to the readers (Dina Abd Elsalam, 2023: 39).

## An analysis of *écriture féminine* in *The Penelopiad* through a Marxist Feminist perspective

Margaret Atwood chose two quotations from Homer's *The Odissey* as a prelude to the novel to highlight the ironical tone of her novel. In the first one, Penelope's faithfulness is glorified, showing how women's virtue was based on her loyalty to her husband, leaving no other possibility of a woman's self-development than providing her husband a clean public image: "...Shrewd Odysseus!..You are fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope [...] The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope" (*The Odissey*, Book 24 (191-194)

quoted in Atwood n/p). The second quotation makes reference to how the maids were tortured: “he took a cable [...] so that their feet would not touch the ground. [...] so the women’s heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks (*The Odyssey*, Book 22 (470-473) quoted in Atwood n/p). These quotations anticipate the clear difference between how high class and low class women are treated as it is stated in intersectional theory. High class women were expected to be loyal and faithful like Penelope, while servants were slaves and their lives did not have any value. In both cases patriarchy gives men the right to dominate women’s lives. In the second quotation it can be seen how violence is normalized in myths and those who are victims of the murders from the heroes are described without any sense of compassion.

In the introduction Odysseus excellent fame is summarized. He is described as a “disguise artist” (Atwood, 2005: xvii). Interestingly this makes reference to the way he kills the maids in the novel, through a performative act in which he is disguised as a beggar to pretend to belong to the lowest scale in society, an underclass person. The ones who tell stories traditionally have been the rich men, but here, Margaret Atwood provides a rewriting of the story giving voice to the silenced victims who are assassinated in a “play” in which, as if it were a Renaissance tragedy like Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* or William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, there is a performance prepared before a revenge murder.

It is remarkable to emphasize the fact that “his divine helper is Pallas Athene, a goddess who admires Odysseus for his ready inventiveness” (xcii). Athene is the bravest and most masculine of Greek goddesses, she always works in favor of patriarchy. Ancient goddesses from Western and Eastern cultures previous to ancient Greek were worshipped by their femininity, motherhood, beauty and also fighting abilities, but they did not fight only for men interests as Athena does. Athena, who punished Medusa after having been raped, accompanies Odysseus, representing the archetype of the woman who betrays her own female nature through destroying other women. Penelope “weaves a shroud that she unravels at night, delaying her marriage decision until its completion” (xviii). As Gerardo Rodríguez points out: “This initial image points at Penelope’s potential to weave an alternative version that simultaneously unweaves or discredits the patriarchal one” (Rodríguez, 2015: 23). She was not really desiring to marry soon, she tried to avoid an arranged marriage as much as she could regarding other possibilities.

In the first chapter entitled “A Low Art”, the title refers to the art of storytelling. “Only children or old people have time for them”, the narrator (Penelope) explains, and adds: “I have no mouth through which I can speak” (Atwood, 2005: 4). As a dead person she cannot speak, this is ironical and paradoxical. The novel is full of irony and paradox. Only those who are dead here can raise their voices. Penelope’s narrative is written in a surprisingly informal way, imitating a colloquial present-day chat with the aim of getting close to the contemporary readers. The use of contractions gives the text a feeling of reading some kind of joke or mockery. From the second page of the novel the feminist message can be perceived in the rhetorical questions that Penelope uses to defend herself and justify her actions: “Hadn’t I been faithful? Hadn’t I waited, and 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”. (Atwood, 2005: 2). The feminist approach is

clear here, Penelope was faithful to her husband, as it is told in the *Odyssey* and in this rewriting, and at the end of this novel we learn that he murdered Penelope's maids, his act was considered justified because those maids were raped without his permission and Penelope did not protect them. For the narrator, Penelope, she has a referent that makes other women suffer. She decides that she is going to become a storyteller, to tell the hidden truth. She states: "I'd tried to play the minstrel" (4), the word chosen here, "minstrel" is remarkable from our Marxist feminist analysis, because the art of storytelling is considered to be something that lower classes are good at. Like the minstrels from the Middle Ages or the players of the Renaissance who were storytellers, actors or jugglers. Art has been considered as servants work. This is the reason why Penelope affirms: "there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts" (4). In this novel, we have two storytellers, on the one hand, Penelope, as an aristocrat, and the maids, as artist servants who recite poems, sing songs and perform.

The first time the maids appear is in 'The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme'. The author's choice of calling this poem "A Rope-Jumping Rhyme" must be a way to show how stories from the past were transmitted from one generation to another through children's nursery rhymes. The language used by the maids is completely different from the colloquial style of Penelope, maids' speeches are written in a poetical form, using only small letters and absence of punctuation. In their song they introduce themselves and directly address Penelope to blame her for betraying them:

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

we danced in air  
our bare feet twitched  
it was not fair  
(Atwood, 2005: 5)

We can consider that the maids speech is a manifestation of *écriture féminine*, because of the use of small letters, the use of "we" as representing women, the gaps and the silences. For Hélène Cixous, *écriture féminine* was an act that "was marked by woman's seizing the occasion to a uniquely feminine style of writing characterized by disruptions in the text, such as gaps, silences, puns" (Mambrol, "Écriture féminine"). With regards to the form of the text, it is important to pay attention to the exclusive use of small letters, a technique commonly used by contemporary feminist writers such as the hyperfiction writer Francesca da Rimini or the confessional Insta poet Rupi Kaur. In the maids chorus the reason why only small letters are used can be because of their intention to avoid hierarchies and lack of equality of importance from some letters to others. It can also be to show that they feel small or inferior because of the treatment they have received since their childhood, and this is why Atwood chooses to write the whole poem only using small letters.

As far as style is concerned, *écriture féminine* was described as eccentric, incomprehensible and inconsistent, and the difficulty to understand it was attributed to



centuries of suppression of the female voice, writing is considered an act in which the woman is able to speak: “hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (Cixous, 1976: 188). The maids raise their voices because their whole communication and life has been suppressed:

With every goddess, queen and bitch  
From there to here  
You scratched your itch  
(Atwood, 2005: 5)

This chorus is vindicating how lower-class people —women in this case— are sacrificed, even to death, so that those who belong to high class do not lose their divine power. In the lines “we scrubbed the blood of our dead paramours from floors, from chairs” (2005: 5) it makes clear that they had to clean after the killing of Penelope’s suitors. Their poem includes rhymes (air/fair, bitch/itch) and stylistic devices such as alliteration with “feet”, “fair” and “fear”, and anaphora in the repetition of “the ones, the ones” in the last verses: “the ones you failed, the ones you killed” (Atwood, 2005: 6). Penelope’s childhood was harsh and traumatic as she survived his father attempt to kill her. Despite the fact that she was the child of a Naiad, her father ordered her to be thrown into the sea, probably because an oracle told him she was going to weave his shroud. Fortunately, we did not die because being the daughter of a Naiad, she was able to float: “It was stupid of Icarius to try to drown the daughter of a Naiad, however. Water is our element; it is our birth right” (2005: 9). From a feminist myth critical view, it is often found in mythology that women are connected to water, like mermaids, this assumption has its origins in the idea of the beginning of the world as a vast ocean from which life started, a similar sea like the amniotic liquid inside of a mother’s womb. Women are connected to water for the water they contain inside of their bodies. Women’s relationship to water can be found in myths from Assyrians, Mesopotamians, and Sumerians. According to Sumerian reliefs, the world was born as Abizu, the bisexual, primordial sea. Barbara Mor and Monica Sjöö explained that earth started with a female sea and the ocean womb contained all organic life. “Charles Darwin believed that the menstrual cycle originated here, organically echoing the moon-pulse of the sea” (Mor and Sjöö, 1987: 2). “In the course of evolution, the ocean -the protective and nourishing space, the amniotic fluids, even the lunar-tidal rhythm-was transferred into the female body” (Mor and Sjöö, 1987: 2). In *The Odyssey* mermaids fail to seduce Odysseus, and as a counterpart, Penelope’s father fails to kill her daughter as she can float because of being the daughter of a Naiad, and, also, because she is rescued by a flock of ducks. In the end of the novel the maids become owls, also Penelope explains that every time she tries to scream from the underworld in which she lives since she is dead she can only make an owl cry. Also, Athena is represented as an owl in Greek mythology. Probably, the fact that both Penelope and the maids become owls is a symbolic way to explain the wisdom they have acquired from their experiences as well as a reincarnation in a bird so that they can experience the freedom they never experienced during their lives.

During Penelope’s childhood, she accounts that her parents did not love her, so she learnt self-sufficiency at an early age. Her first days are contrasted with those of

the maids, accounted by them in “iv. The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mour, A Lament by the Maids” in which they explain that they were not demigods, they were servants and they had always been the ones to sacrifice for the gods. They did not have parents and had to suffer from the sexual abuse of noblemen. From an early age they learnt to repress their sadness, it was useless to cry as nobody would give them any comfort: “It did us no good to weep, it did us no good to say we were in pain” (14). Janice Raymond calls this attitude protective mechanism, allowing victims of prostitution to separate themselves from the humiliation, violence, and degradation experienced (Raymond, 2013: 70). The maids in *The Penelopiad*, like prostitutes in the real world from the studies by Janice Raymond, learn strategies to avoid their own recognition of being degraded and humiliated. Instead of crying, they realized that the only comfort they could find was in mischievous actions like meeting boys behind the pigpens or drinking the wine left in the wine cups. “As we grew older we became polished and evasive, we mastered the secret sneer”; “We drank the wine left in the wine cups. We spat onto the serving platters...We laughed together in our attics” (Atwood, 2005: 14). According to Gerardo Rodríguez “The final image connects the maids together through the mad woman in the attic, with a clear wink to Jane Eyre and Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal study about literary sisterhood in Victorian times” (28). They laughed together and shared secrets, their complicity and gyn/affection helped them to survive.

In “viii. The Chorus Line: If I was a Princess, A Popular Tune” the maids sing with their ironical humor a song in which a maid wishes to be a princess to marry a hero and be always happy, this metanarration is directly connected to Penelope’s forced marriage. The chorus sing that they have no hero and hard work and death is their destiny. At the end, they pass a hat providing humor to the scene, as if they were singing on the street to get some coins. This song is performed, which is what jugglers and minstrels used to do to entertain the court. While all Penelope’s chapters are in direct speech, with a first person narrator, the maids sing and perform just like the way servants had to do it, begging for money at the end of their show.

In “ix. The Trusted Cackle-Hen” Penelope shows her attitude of competitiveness with other women as she shows that she feels jealous of how much Odysseus former nurse, Eurycleia loves her child and is able to communicate with him: “The woman who gave me most trouble at first was Odysseus’s former nurse, Eurycleia [...] if there was one thing she knew -as she kept telling me-it was babies. She had a special language for them” (Atwood 2005: 60-64). Penelope has an inferiority complex with her nurse, as a mother without any previous experience, instead of feeling grateful, she feels jealous. It could be said that the language Eurycleia uses with the baby can be connected to Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminine* and Bracha Ettinger’s matrixial space as it is a language that belongs to a pre-linguistic stage that only the mother -in this case the nurse- and the baby share.

In “x. The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll” the maids look after Penelope’s baby singing: “nine months he sailed the wine-red seas of his mother’s blood” (65)”. In his study, Gerardo Rodríguez focuses on maternal body theories by Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Grosz. According to Rodríguez: “The poem is a reproduction of the maternal realm driven by instincts, corporeity, irrationality, lack of language and vulnerability, thus connecting with Kristeva’s semiotic phase” (Rodríguez, 2015: 28). Rodríguez relate

the maids' mothers in Atwood with the abjection and female jouissance. Corporeity is enhanced to present the woman's (maternal) body as a body of signification (Grosz, 1990 quoted in Rodríguez, 2015: 29). Then, as a flashforward, the maids realize that if they had known he was going to kill them in the future they may have drowned him instead of playing with him on the beach. Here it is shown the female ability to both create and destruct.

In "xiii. The Chorus Line: the Willy Sea Captain, a Sea Shanty" the maids satirize Odysseus figure calling him a liar and highlighting the fact that he became Circe's lodger and in the end he was found naked on the beach by Nausicaa's maids and they were scared of him. Here, again they are using humor as a defense mechanism.

In "xvii. The Chorus Line: Dreamboats, A Ballad" the maids find relief when they dream because in their fantasy they do not have to clean floors anymore nor going to bed with nobles, but when they wake up they have to let the noble men having sex with them without any complaint. Here, it is another example of the prostitutes of defense mechanism of Janice Raymond explained before.

In "xxi. The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama" the maids uncover the truth about Penelope and how she had sex secretly. Eurycleia tells Penelope that the only ones who know she has not resisted to her suitors are the twelve maids. She recommends Penelope to send them to Hades so that they will not confess.

"xxiv. The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture" is the most important intervention from the maids from an anthropological perspective. Here, prose substitutes poetry to denounce that the twelve maids could have been moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal goddess of the moon. They report that: "our rape and subsequent hanging represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians." (Atwood, 2005: 165). The feminist speech denounce how patriarchal Greek society finished with the Minoan religion that worshipped a female goddess.

In "The Trial of Odysseus, As Videotaped" Odysseus murder of the maids is justified by his Attorney of the Defense because they were his slaves. When Penelope is asked by the judge if she punished them, at the beginning there is a light of sisterhood in her speech and she expresses her distress for them: "They were like the daughters I never had. (Starts to weep)" I felt so sorry for them!" (181), but later, she normalizes rape as it is generally done: "But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life" (181). And to finish, she admits that the problem for Odysseus is that the maids were raped without permission. At that moment, readers realize that Penelope explains the situation but do not separate from Odysseus, even knowing that he is a rapist and a murderer, instead of leaving him, she justifies him and stand up for him. She is following the hetero reality narrative from Janice Raymond described above.

In "We're walking Behind you, A love Song" the maids are even more ironical and angry as before and they address Odysseus asking him why he killed them. "We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you" (193). In "xxix. Envoi" they denounce "we had no voice" (195) and they finish with an onomatopoeia imitating the sound of birds: "to wit to woo" (196) and they fly as owls. Their metamorphosis shows that they are finally free, their souls fly.

## Conclusion

Neoliberal feminism is criticized in the novel. The poorest women are sacrificed for the benefit of the rich ones. The supremacy of the power of a hero in Greek mythology allowed him to finish with the lives of women and this is how ancient matrilineal cultures and goddesses' cults disappeared completely.

Atwood rewrites a myth to tell the other part of the story that was experienced by the servants, women whose lives are considered of less value than those of their mistresses. In the maids' discourse, it is shown how the artists, through the artwork, create encounters between the artist and the world, between artists and viewers, like in an *originary matrixial web* (Ettinger, 2000: 331) as Bracha Ettinger calls it. The maids' feminine contribution does not need to be understood simply as a masquerade, parody or irony, it reflects how those who may have been invisibilized, exterminated and forgotten in the past can inspire future readers.

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