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# Trapped in the Web of Texts: Margaret Atwood's "The Penelopiad"

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# Contents

## Abstract

The present paper focuses on the intertextual and postmodern aspects of Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad*. The attention falls heavily on the use and interaction of various intertexts in Margaret Atwood's process of rewriting Homer's *The Odyssey* while employing postmodernist techniques such as parody, irony, pastiche and metatextuality. Following from this, the main aim of the paper is to provide a sufficient intertextual analysis of Margaret Atwood's text *The Penelopiad* considering its postmodern context. The purpose of this analysis is to provide answers to such questions as – is Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* really a postmodernist novella? How do the notions of intertextuality and postmodernism relate and interact with each other in the text? What is the function of the intertexts in the narrative? How is the narrative of the novella constructed? What is the function of the character of Penelope in this text? To achieve this goal, the method of close reading of the text was employed. The novella is discussed in the light of theory of intertextuality proposed by Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette and Graham Allen. The analysis shows the presence of particular intertexts in the novella, discusses Penelope's, as the female character's, voice and place in the narrative as well as the influence the maids' parts have to the meaning of the narrative.

# 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood, one of the most famous Canadian authors, boasts a literary career of nearly fifty years, having gained renown for her works such as *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and many others. Her novella *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus* (2005), the object of this thesis, is one of the first books in the series *The Myths*, published by Canongate Press. In her foreword to *The Penelopiad* Margaret Atwood writes: 'Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story <...> I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids <...> I've always been haunted by the hanged maids and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself' (2005:xx-xxi). As Howells states in her essay *Five Ways of Looking at The Penelopiad*, 'it seems that Atwood is using Penelope's story to tell another story within it: the story of the hanged maids' and in doing so, she is 'giving a voice to this group of powerless silenced women' (2008:6). In the-fashion of a postmodern novel, *The Penelopiad* subverts the myth, to use Linda Hutcheon's terms, being, in its own right, 'a critical reworking' of the past (2003:4). *The Penelopiad* could be called historiographic metafiction, as something that is 'rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past' (ibid. p. 5). Postmodernism in fiction, according to Hutcheon, is what 'uses and abuses the conventions of realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as a discourse, as a human construct' (ibid. p. 53).

Although this work of Atwood's is relatively recent, there is an extensive body of criticism written on Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Notable works include texts by Šlapkauskaitė (2007), Howells (2008), Staels (2009), Suzuki (2010), Khalid (2010), and others. As evidenced by Howells' essay mentioned above, there are several ways of looking at and reading *The Penelopiad*, and several approaches can be taken when analysing the text. Howells (2008) describes these five ways in different sections: the first, entitled *Negotiating with the Dead*, describes focusing on the portrayal of the Underworld, the ghosts, and the Uncanny space in Atwood's novella; the second, called *Revisioning Myths*, discusses the aspect of the rewriting, reinventing, recreating and subversion of the myth in Atwood's text; the third, *Penelope's Tale*, casts focus on Penelope's narrative and the analysis of her fictive autobiography; the fourth, named *Handmaids' Tales*, describes

focusing on and analysing the alternative to Penelope's narratives, their fluidity and multi-facetedness; and finally, the fifth, titled *Penelopiad as Performance*, focuses on *The Penelopiad*'s features as a play or an imitation of a play, as evidenced by the maids' narrative parts being dubbed "Chorus Lines", invoking ancient Greek drama. These five ways of looking at *The Penelopiad* were the start of this thesis; the analysis was strongly inspired by the second and third sections, *Revisioning Myths* and *Penelope's Tale*, which are the aspects in focus. However, the paper has come to incorporate some discussion of the aspects discussed in the fourth section of Howells's article.

On the other hand, several other critical works should be mentioned. For example, Khalid's 'Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* as Postmodern fiction' (2010) was helpful in discussing the postmodern aspects of the text, while also giving valuable information for the intertexts. Another extremely useful source for postmodern aspects was Šlapkauskaitė's 'Postmodern Voices from Beyond: Negotiating with the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*' (2007); the work examines the book in the light of postmodernism, craftily describing Atwood's experimentation with narrative. Suzuki's essay 'Rewriting the "Odyssey" in the Twenty-First Century: Mary Zimmerman's "Odyssey" and Margaret Atwood's "Penelopiad"' (2007), as the title suggests, analyses two rewritings of the myth, focusing on female characters and the critique of the ancient text. Suzuki's essay features an in-depth discussion of the chorus of the maids and the voices they are given in Atwood's novella. Yet another important critical source was Renaux's essay 'Margaret Atwood and the re-invention of myth in *The Penelopiad*' (2011), which examines the novella in the light of Genette's theory of transtextuality. It is an in-depth analysis of the different features of transtextuality, which was very useful for the analysis. Lastly, there needs to be mention of Braund's study '"We're here too, the ones without names." A study of female voices as imagined by Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, and Marguerite Yourcenar' (2012), focusing on female characters in the rewriting of myths, especially the power of being given a voice.

Taking an intertextual approach to analyse Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, as this thesis sets out to do, is not unheard of; the title of the book itself sets an expectation to be read as a rewriting of Homer's myth which, to quote Bottez, 'is precisely what the author does in order to enrich it with new interpretations' (2012:44). However, taking a look at the most prominent works written on *The Penelopiad*, it appears that many authors focused more on the feminist aspect of the novella in their analyses, and the intertexts themselves have been little investigated. The focus indeed falls on the female

characters/voices of the novella, in particular Penelope herself and the twelve maids. On the other hand, looking at the intertexts used, like the texts of Robert Graves, Herodotus, Pausanias, Apolodorus, Hyginus and other works accredited to Homer, as indicated by Atwood herself in the notes of *The Penelopiad*, is not given as much attention. This research paper analyses how Margaret Atwood uses intertextuality to retell and rewrite the myth of Odysseus through the lens of a female character in the context of postmodernism focusing on different intertexts: ancient and modern. Thus, intertextual theory lends itself conveniently for the analysis, which is done with the method of close reading and by employing the works of Graham Allen, Gérard Genette and Julia Kristeva. Since the analysis incorporates postmodernism as a context, the theoretical framework includes the theories both on postmodernism and intertextuality. The analysis of the novella is divided into two major parts, the first discussing the postmodern aspects of *The Penelopiad*, and the second focusing on the intertexts of the novella.

There is an issue to be addressed while discussing *The Penelopiad*, namely, why the term 'novella' was chosen to be used in the thesis rather than 'novel'. The problem seems to be that 'short fiction terminology is extremely varied and often inconsistent' (Good 1977:197), which still applies to contemporary times. There is the general argument, though, that the main difference is of length: a novel is anything longer than 200 pages; yet even works as short as 200 pages or shorter are still called novels. Perhaps the term novel is handily versatile and broad. It felt natural to refer to *The Penelopiad*, which is one page short of 200, as a novella, for its conciseness. The main reason, however, is that the majority of the articles found at the start of research used the term 'novella', the particular authors being Staels (2009), Khalid (2010), Bottez (2012) and later Neethling (2015). Another term used to refer to this novella in this thesis is 'text', which, considered its postmodern context, is highly appropriate, as well as more neutral. As Good summarises, a novella has novelty elements and 'the novella's story has not normally been heard before' (ibid. p. 209), while it also is 'the written imitation of a live "telling" and has retained stronger oral characteristics than the novel' (ibid. p. 210); these two claims seem the most fitting to describe *The Penelopiad*.

## 2. Conceptualising the Postmodern Context and Intertextuality

This section sets out to establish a proper theoretical framework for the analysis of Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* which has been chosen pertaining to the object and the specific aspect of the analysis so as to help understand the major concepts and theories behind them. The analysis relies on two major notions, namely, postmodernism and intertextuality; the first provides a context for the text as well as is closely linked to the aesthetic sensibility of the text and highlights its certain features, while the latter is the main focus of the analysis. Thus the current part is divided into two main sections which discuss postmodernism and the theories of intertextuality respectively. Both of these sections explain the origins, features, contexts, and other details concerning these two notions in more detail.

### 2.1. Postmodernism

To begin with, the first core notion of this thesis is postmodernism, which provides a context for the analysis of the novella. However, postmodernism is a complex and multifaceted term to describe – nothing about this term, according to Brian McHale (1987), is unproblematic. There are numerous accounts and various works written on the subject, yet a unanimous agreement between all of the perspectives is yet to be reached – or may never be reached at all. Postmodernism can refer both to a certain period in time – roughly the last four decades of the 20$^{th}$ century – and to a set of artistic strategies and procedures in various arts, a sort of a style or thought. The latter applies to literature as well, which is the main focus of the thesis. Thus the following subsections attempt to define postmodernism and to summarise the main theories concerning this notion.

#### 2.1.1. The definition of postmodernism

The term postmodernism was like a buzzword throughout the last decades of the 1990s and well into the 2000s – everything was *postmodern*: postmodern art, postmodern architecture, postmodern literature, postmodern culture, etc. Thus, Linda Hutcheon says, 'any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions' (1993:1), as it has many aspects and has been rendered differently by various authors and critics. For this multiplicity of perspectives, following McHale, it could be said that there are many "postmodernisms":

> *there is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of*

> *knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on (1987:4).*

McHale goes as far as to suggest that postmodernism does not exist; it is merely a literary-historical fiction (ibid.). In any case, that is not to say that postmodernism is undefinable per se; rather, it has many aspects and facets which are in constant flux, therefore, postmodernism cannot be unanimously defined. On the other hand, if postmodernism is to be considered as something that comes after modernism, there needs to exist a difference between them, and indeed, the two have a remarkably different ethos.

Hutcheon offers a start of defining postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon, 'fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political' (2003:4). Postmodern art for Hutcheon is 'marked primarily by an internalized investigation of the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the language or discourse on art' (1986:179). According to Hutcheon, the most important trait of postmodernism is doubleness or double-coding. This doubleness is not unique to the postmodern era, but there are two important differences with the previous epoch: the attendant irony of postmodernism, and the fact that 'it does what previous fiction has done at an extreme level' (Nicol 2009:32). Nicol writes that 'for Hutcheon, postmodern fiction is both referential and self-reflexive, at the same time a preservation of some realist values and a shattering critique of them' (ibid.).

The question of what postmodernism is does not have quite a definitive answer. There is no textbook definition that one can go by. In the simplest way, postmodernism in literature can be defined as a style, a set of literary strategies, which existed in the second half of the twentieth century; even so, it is not completely accurate. Perhaps it is best to consider postmodernism as a certain cultural and/or literary phenomenon which could serve as a context to various literary and artistic works. Thus it is possible to speak more precisely about certain areas within postmodernism, or in the postmodernist context – such as the narrative.

### 2.1.2. The postmodern narrative

A tendency of literary postmodernism was its focus on narrative fiction; the move from poetry to fiction could be said to be one of the characteristics of postmodernism (Connor 2008). In Connor's words, 'if modernism means the assumption that literature approaches to the condition of poetry, postmodernism means the tendency to assume that literature is intrinsically narrative' (2008:63). Postmodern narrative theory interested many prominent writers who wrote and theorised about it, namely, Linda Hutcheon, Frederic Jameson, and

Brian McHale. Yet speaking about narrative, it is important to mention the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), he made a point of the society moving from what was there before to, in general terms, a post-industrial age, and in cultural terms the postmodern age. It was Lyotard who coined the notions of the "grand narratives" and "little narratives" (*grands recits* and *petits recits*, respectively), while pointing out the waning of what he called *metanarratives* – the same as grand narratives – which referred to any theory or work that relied on universal truths or values to provide a totalising account of historical events, experiences, and social and cultural phenomena. Postmodernism is marked by a lack of these "grand narratives". Postmodernism rejects these grand narratives: there is no grand insight or meaning to be found. In connection with the demise of the grand narratives, Heise (1997) suggests the prevalence of fragmented narrative plots. Fragmentation occurs in many postmodern novels, as experimentation with narrative technique. Fragmentation was already in use in modernism, yet while interpreted as negative in modernist works, it is embraced by postmodernist writers and used to create playful narratives relating to a chaotic contemporary world.

On the other hand, Currie (2010) begins his discussion of the postmodern narrative from defining the postmodern novel: postmodern novels are metafictions; postmodern novels are intertextual; postmodern novels represent issues of identity and cultural difference. Although he does not specify what a postmodern narrative actually is, he stresses that the possibilities and problems of the narrative are better to be understood as a result of extensive narrative experimentation, and that 'the postmodern novel is highly self-conscious, engaged in its own analysis of these possibilities and problems' (ibid. p. 4-5). Thus, a postmodern narrative is naturally self-reflexive, as far as being self-aware; it is a narrative that is conscious of being, following Hutcheon (2003), a reworking or rewriting of sorts. In the postmodern context, Hutcheon's *historiographic metafiction* could be interpreted as a term which connects the past and the present, almost as far as actual rewriting of the past, history (2003:5). For Hutcheon, postmodernism is 'intensely self-reflexive and parodic' but also tries to 'root itself in the historical world' (Hutcheon 2003:5). Hutcheon considers this connection with the past, "the presence of the past", as one of the core features of postmodern literature – a postmodern ironic *rethinking* of history. *Re*thinking, *re*writing, *re*inventing – this recurring relationship, connecting something pre-existent with the existent, seems to be the marker of postmodern literature. Following Jameson's argument that 'in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead style', it seems that when no individual creation is possible, what is left for postmodern writers is imitation, working with what

already exists and rethinking, reworking it (1991:115). That is why postmodern literature is so self-reflexive: it is self-aware, thus becoming highly meta-commentary. The self-conscious property of the postmodern text had already been written about by Derrida, and Hutcheon describes and comments on this self-reflexivity in large detail. Thus the postmodern narrative always works with itself, giving rise to unreliable narrators, subversiveness and discontinuity.

Parody and irony have been used in literature a long time before modern and postmodern literature came around. However, in the case of postmodernism, these narrative techniques were largely employed. For example, Nicol (2009) argues that the whole postmodern attitude is largely ironic; irony, he says, 'is a non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant (either deliberately or unwittingly) or what is said is subverted by the particular context in which it is said' (ibid. p. 13). Irony works because we as language speakers are aware of words having many possible meanings; irony requires a certain knowledge of how reality is constructed, and how the world and language work. It should be stressed that in postmodern writing irony is interconnected with parody, which, on the other hand, has a 'critical, satirical impulse, a commitment to making viewer or reader laugh' (ibid p. 10). Parody was also a major concept in Hutcheon's works: 'parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it, but without being totally recuperated by it' (2003:35). To Hutcheon, parody is 'a perfect postmodern form', 'a privileged mode of postmodern self-reflexivity' which creates a dialogue between identification and distance (ibid.). The paradox of parody – which makes it so useful – is that it both incorporates and challenges the object it parodies.

In addition to irony and parody, pastiche, although related – and often confused – with parody, is one of the more distinguishing features of postmodernism. Frederic Jameson's concept of pastiche is conceptually contrasted to Linda Hutcheon's understanding of postmodern parody. According to Jameson (1991), parody has, in the postmodern age, been replaced by pastiche:

> *Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter* (1991:17).

However, Jameson claims, 'this omnipresence of pastiche is not incompatible with a certain humor'(ibid. p. 18). On the other hand, Jameson sees this turn to "blank parody" as a falling off from modernism, where individual authors were particularly characterised by their individual, "inimitable" styles, for example, the Faulknerian long sentence or the Lawrentian

nature imagery punctuated by colloquialism. Parody, irony and pastiche are all interrelated; these narrative techniques all have to do with making fun of something, being playful. Playfulness, it is argued, is a remarkable feature of postmodern fiction (Nicol 2009; Hutcheon 1993; McHale 1987); it is also one of the dividing elements between modernism and postmodernism – while modernism usually takes on a more serious note, postmodernist narratives are usually more playful.

All of these features put postmodern texts in relation with other texts, whether by way of narrative techniques or their awareness of the past and the present, and itself. Thus postmodern literature is inherently intertextual, which brings the discussion to the second part of this section.

## 2.2. Intertextuality

The second theoretical core notion and the backbone of this thesis is *intertextuality*. The beginnings of intertextual theory lie in theories of the Swiss author Ferdinand de Saussure and the Russian literary theorist Mikhail M. Bakhtin. The major theories of intertextuality are based upon Saussure's notion of the differential sign (Allen 2007); alternatively, Bakhtin suggested that meaning is inseparable from the social aspect language, and his terms of heteroglossia and dialogism inspired many future theorists, including Julia Kristeva, who coined the term intertextuality. Intertextuality, as maintained by Julia Kristeva, is 'a permutation of texts', or a transformation of texts; where texts interact with each other, intersect and neutralise each other (1980:36-63). In other words, texts refer to multiple other texts in their space of writing; texts may also refer to other sources, for example, paintings, songs, theatrical works, etc. In the intertextual theory, it is generally maintained that all texts have meaning in relation to other texts, i.e., no text has meaning alone, by itself. Thus, as Graham Allen states, reading becomes 'a process of moving between texts', adding that 'meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext' (2007:1). Therefore, it can be argued that intertextuality is one of the major features of texts; and, when analysing such texts as *The Penelopiad*, it is crucial to have an understanding of intertextuality so as to see how various texts and intertexts relate to and interact with each other in the main body of the text in order to create the meaning.

### 2.2.1. Intertextuality in the structuralist context

Structuralism was a philosophical movement developed by French academics in the 1950s. Structuralism in linguistics is defined by 'the desire to study the life of cultural sign-systems' (Allen 2007:95); in other words, structuralism is concerned with providing a system to any of the aspects of language. Structuralist theories attempt to fixate and/or locate literary meaning, and in this case, it is done by the means of intertextuality. These theories attempt to stabilise a text's significance – in this case, concerning relations between texts. To quote Allen, 'placing a text back into its presumed system [for these theorists] produces a form of knowledge and of stable reading which is unavailable in poststructuralist theories of intertextuality and text' (ibid. p. 97). One of the most famous voices of structuralist ideas was the French literary theorist Gérard Genette; some of his ideas and concepts prove to be useful in this paper.

Gérard Genette's main concern is 'intended and self-conscious relations between texts' (Allen 2007:108), the way texts can be read in relation to other texts. Genette's work on intertextuality is actually what he calls a study on paratextuality. For Genette, the broader meaning of intertextuality coincides with his own definition of transtextuality: 'all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts' (1997:1). Intertextuality in Genette's writing has a different meaning than the one established previously, namely, the one by Kristeva; Genette writes:

> *The first type was explored some years ago by Julia Kristeva, under the name of intertextuality <...> For my part I define it, no doubt in a more restrictive sense, as* ***a relationship of copresence*** *between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as* ***the actual presence of one text within the other*** *(ibid. p. 1-2).* [Emphasis in bold added]

The "types" he is referring to in this excerpt are the types of transtextuality he recognises; there are five, and intertextuality is one of them. However, in this paper, the term intertextuality will be used in its broad sense, with its basic reference to one text's relationship with another text, whether it be through quoting, direct or indirect referencing, allusions, etc.

Coming back to Genette's transtextual theory, the four more types of transtextuality (or what he also calls "textual transcendence") recognised in his study are, namely, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality. Of course, these five types of transtextuality must not be viewed as separate and absolute categories without any reciprocal contact or overlapping. In any case, these terms may be useful in the analysis as all

of them refer to one or another kind of relationship between texts. Paratextuality, then, refers to a 'less explicit and more distant relationship that binds the text properly speaking, taken within the totality of the literary work, to what can be called its paratext' (ibid. p.3). Paratexts can be titles, subtitles, prefaces, postfaces, notes, illustrations, book covers, and any other kinds of what Genette calls "secondary signals". Metatextuality is 'the relationship most often labelled "commentary"' (ibid. p.4). According to Genette, it is the critical relationship which exists between texts where one evokes another without even 'necessarily citing it <…> in fact sometimes not even naming it' (ibid.). Then, architextuality is 'the entire set of general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text' (ibid. p.1); in other words, it refers to the study of literature in terms of formal categories such as tragedy, novel, etc. Perhaps the most important type to Genette is hypertextuality; this type of transtextuality refers to a relationship that unites one text (a text B) to an earlier text (text A), which Genette calls the hypertext and the hypotext, respectively. Text B relates to text A in a way that it is "grafted" upon it 'in a manner that is not of commentary' (ibid. p.5). To put it more simply, it is a text that derives from another text, which has already existed previously. Genette's study is mostly concerned with how 'hypertextual transpositions are made of specific hypotexts' (Allen 2007:109). There are various ways in which texts can be transformed according to Genette, for example, self-expurgation, excision, reduction, etc., but perhaps only one dimension of it should be mentioned in more detail here, namely, transmotivization. This notion refers to the 'transformation of motivation' that happens in hypertexts. Genette gives examples of *Prince of Egypt* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Giving – or eliding – characters of their motivations is at the heart of transmotivization; and this transtextual (intertextual) relationship between a hypotext and a hypertext is quite important when analysing *The Penelopiad*.

### 2.2.2. Intertextuality in the poststructuralist context

As a reaction and criticism to the structuralist ideas there was a rise of a different set of ideas which later became known as poststructuralism. In general, poststructuralist theory maintained that the notion of a stable relationship between the signifier and the signified is a part of the dominant ideology which thus represses revolutionary thought (Allen 2007). Poststructuralists denied the ability of any procedure to arrange a text's elements into signifying relations (ibid.). Some of the more notable contributors to intertextual theory whose works are considered to be poststructuralist are the Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, and Roland Gérard Barthes, a French literary theorist, critic, philosopher and linguist.

Julia Kristeva was the first to attempt to combine Saussurian and Bakhtinian ideas into a comprehensive and concise theory, which was first discussed in her essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel*, written in 1966. Kristeva's work is largely written in the context of semiotics, deriving from Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory. Intertextuality, as defined in the essay above, is, to Kristeva, 'a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another', continuing that 'the notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double' (1986:37). Using Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, Kristeva suggests 'a new approach to poetic texts' (ibid. p. 42). Deriving from Bakhtin is also the insistence on texts being inseparable from their 'cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed' (Allen 2007:36). In her 'new semiotics' Kristeva, according to Allen, incorporates 'Bakhtin's dialogism, his insistence on the social and double-voiced nature of language' (ibid p. 38). Alfaro argues that 'both in Bakhtin and Kristeva, the subject is conceived as composed of discourses, as a signifying system, a text understood in a dynamic sense' (1996:271); the critic claims as well that while Kristeva introduces Bakhtin's ideas to the linguistic scene of France, at the same time she 'transforms Bakhtin's concepts by causing them to be read in conjunction with ideas about textuality that were emerging in France in the mid-sixties' (ibid. p.276). Kristeva paraphrases Bakhtin as such: 'each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read'; she also suggests that this 'textualization' of Bakhtin changes his ideas just enough for a new concept of intertextuality to emerge (Kristeva 1980:66). Indeed, Kristeva prefers using more abstract terms, text and textuality, to express the more complex points made by Bakhtin, especially with reference to language employed in social situations (Allen 2007). It should also be mentioned that Bakhtin's and Saussure's ideas were not the only theories behind Kristeva's works; she was also influenced by the works of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, as evidenced by Alfaro (1996).

Overall, postmodernism appears to be inherently intertextual – with its rewritten texts, subversiveness, and pastiche. Through its parody and reinvention postmodernism inevitably establishes a dialogue between different products of culture. It is quite evident that these two notions – postmodernism and intrertextuality – overlap, given that both developed in the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century. Clearly, these are two very different notions, yet they coexist and interrelate; the subsequent section attempts to give proof of this peculiar relationship between postmodernism and intertextuality.

## 3. Untangling the Web: an Intertextual Reading of *The Penelopiad*

In postmodern narratives, it is often a trend to subvert and reinvent various, often canonical, works and ideas. While the previous section showed the close relationship between intertextuality and postmodernism in the theoretical light, the actual relationship in the object of the research is yet to be seen. The main focus of this analysis is the intertextual properties of the work, or, more precisely, how Margaret Atwood uses various intertexts to rewrite *The Odyssey* and how these intertexts interact. This includes, of course, a necessary discussion on the postmodern context of this novella. The following two sections of the analysis are there to answer the questions set forth at the beginning of this paper. The first section explores some of the postmodern features and aspects of Margaret Atwood's novella, namely, rewriting, fragmentation, and irony, parody and pastiche; the second section discusses the intertexts found in *The Penelopiad* in more detail. It is yet to be seen whether this web of texts can be disentangled – or will get one trapped even deeper in them.

### 3.1. The postmodern aspects of *The Penelopiad*

To start with, considering the postmodern context of the novella, there is an array of certain postmodern features to be discussed. Although the answer seems relatively easy and clear, the question still stands: is *The Penelopiad* a postmodern novel or not? Therefore, this section looks at some significant features and narrative techniques that have often been attributed to postmodern fiction and postmodern narratives in general to provide a credible answer to this question.

'Now that I'm dead I know everything. This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true' – thus begins Penelope's narrative in the book (Atwood 2005:1). At the very base level, *The Penelopiad* is a rewriting of *The Odyssey*. While *The Odyssey* has been used as a source for many works throughout history – perhaps, most notably in Western culture, for instance, in James Joyce's *Ulysses* – *The Penelopiad* is unique in its focus on the female voices of the story. As Suzuki suggests, *The Penelopiad* 'focalizes and reinterprets *The Odyssey* through Penelope' (2007:269). There is no doubt that this reworking, rewriting, reimagining of the Homerian myth is done deliberately and purposefully – not only because the novella was commissioned, but also because it places the focus on a completely different narrative, subverting the original myth. Together with being a rewriting, the novella's subversiveness is one of its major postmodern aspects, in line with other postmodern works. The ancient grand narrative is subverted on many levels, for

example, by challenging the patriarchal order of the mythical epic by giving voice to the females. The classic power roles in the novella are subverted: men, who dominated the narrative until this point, are silent, while the women, especially the maids, a repressed group, get a certain power – as Suzuki (2007) states, Atwood reverses "the many" and "the one" from those in the original. Now, the maids have a voice and can talk, thus being able to tell their story.

One of the most interesting and captivating parts of this novella is the fragmented, non-linear retelling of story – a non-linear narrative. It is possible to distinguish between two non-consecutive parts of the narrative: one part as told by Penelope and the other one as told by the maids. Penelope's narrative is a more continuous, comprehensive first person narrative; sometimes it goes on for a few chapters uninterrupted, and suddenly the voice of the maids breaks through, reminding us of their existence. Although it could be claimed that Penelope's part of the narrative is the more important one – the one considered to be the "true" story – the novella would not be complete, or have the desired effect, without the interceptions from the chorus of the twelve maids. What these intermissions do, in effect, are several things; while Penelope's narrative is mostly preoccupied with the unveiling of the mysteries in the myth, especially the hanging of the twelve young maids, the maids' narrative acts as an alternative to comment on – or to challenge – Penelope's tale. In Chapter IV, *The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids*, the chant seems to be mocking the story of Penelope's dreary childhood told in the previous chapter:

> ***We too were children***. *We too were born to the* ***wrong parents***. *Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not gods, they were not demi-gods, they were not* ***nymphs or Naiads*** *<...>* ***If we wept, no one dried our tears*** *<...> We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault.* ***We were the dirty girls.***
>
> *If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse. It did us no good to* ***weep****, it did us no good to say we were in pain.* ***All this happened to us when we were children*** (Atwood 2005:13-14). [Emphasis in bold added]

Often, the maids' parts have an accusatory, bitter tone to them; this chapter is no exception. The maids' tales are more interactive – they sneer and mock, their comments are direct, references are easy to recognise. The above passage clearly shows that: "wrong parents" refer

to Penelope's neglectful parentage, although their parents were "wrong" for different reasons. Their parents were not "nymphs or Naiads", like Penelope's mother. While Penelope said how much she wept, the maids reticulate: no one dried their tears; it did them no good to weep. In the narrative, the chorus of the maids takes on the function of commentary. These parts not only act as meta-commentary, but also as a parody of Penelope's narrative. In addition, their burlesque-like intermissions erase the divide between high and low literary genres, as suggested by Staels, who writes that the myth appears as an intertext 'in a generically hybrid text that parodically disrupts the hierarchy between 'high' and 'low' literary genres' (2009:100). It has been noted that *The Penelopiad* is structured similarly to a Greek epic or drama, especially with the invocation of the different genres by the chorus (Šlapkauskaitė 2007; Suzuki 2007; Staels 2009; Braund 2012). According to Staels, for example, the appearance of a parodied comic hero – in this case, Odysseus – signifies *The Penelopiad*'s likeness to ancient satyr drama, which 'primarily parodied the tragic heroization of epic heroes by creating a comic double" (2009:102). The opening chapter already presupposes an audience – Penelope speaks directly to the reader: 'you think you'd like to read minds? Think again' (Atwood 2005:1).

Atwood employs a mixture of narrative, poetic, and dramatic styles: *The Penelopiad* becomes an amalgamation of genres, especially highlighted by the maids' parts. They are all of a different form: poetry (Chapter ii: *The Chorus Line: **A Rope–Jumping Rhyme***; Chapter x: *The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, An **Idyll***; ***Envoi***); song (Chapter viii: *The Chorus Line: If I Was a Princess, A **Popular Tune***; Chapter xiii: *The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain, A **Sea Shanty***; Chapter xvi: *The Chorus Line: Dreamboats, A **Ballad***; Chapter xxviii: *The Chorus Line: We're Walking Behind You, **A Love Song***); prose (Chapter iv: *The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A **Lament** by the Maids*; Chapter xxiv: *The Chorus Line: An Anthropology **Lecture***); drama (Chapter xxi: *The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A **Drama***) and a videotape recording of a trial (Chapter xxvi: *The Chorus Line: The **Trial** of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids*). The multiplicity of genres is not only a meta-commentary device; the maids' parts imitate the high and low genres, as well as Penelope's imitates an epic prose. To quote Khalid, *The Penelopiad* is 'like a typical postmodern parodic version, depth is replaced by a multiplicity of surfaces, presenting a pastiche of the sacred and the mundane' (2010:48). This both parodies *The Odyssey* and provides a playful take on the story, adding an architextual layer to the novella. Architextuality, as an "abstract" and "silent" relationship (Genette 1997), is evident in the structure of text, with different genres intersecting with each other within it. Every genre has its own structure, and these mythical

and literary structures can be traced in the text (Khalid 2010). As Renaux argues, 'Atwood amplifies the notion of genre as architext, as she uses it again in *The Penelopiad*' by reformulating the rules, the characterisation and structure of the epic (2011:89). Atwood's myth is not only a parody of The Odyssey; it is also a pastiche, an imitation of a grand narrative.

Speaking of parody, Staels (2009) points out the parodic quality of *The Penelopiad* while arguing that parody is one of the main ways in which the novella transforms the ancient myth of Odysseus. Parody within the novella creates a double-coded text, open to both an ironic and literal interpretation; recalling Hutcheon, the text's doubleness is one of the most important traits of postmodernism. The concept relates as well to intertextuality (cf. Kristeva's double character of language). In the novella, a lot of parody and irony arises from Penelope's rocky relationship with her cousin Helen, who famously caused the Trojan War. According to Suzuki, 'Penelope's vexed relationship with Helen in Atwood's *Penelopiad* is anticipated in her novel *The Robber Bride* (1993), which playfully rewrites the *Illiad* and reflects upon three women's relationship to Zenia, a shadowy Helen-like character' (2007:267). Thus to Atwood, the figure and the character is not new, as well as rewriting of a canonical myth. In any case, *The Penelopiad* is marked by Penelope's negative attitude towards Helen; she does not understand how her cousin 'did not get punished, not one bit' when gods punished people for 'far lesser things' (Atwood 2005:22). Penelope insists on defining herself against Helen, emphasising cleverness over beauty, kindness over sexual attractiveness. The following excerpt is an example of Penelope's irony towards Helen: 'she tilted her face towards me, looking at me whimsically as if she were flirting. I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice' (Atwood 2005:33). Neethling (2015) provides an in-depth analysis of Penelope's relationship with Helen, pointing out that Atwood subverts the myth by engaging in mythopoesis which provides more depth and complexity to Penelope's character. Neethling suggests as well that Helen acts as Penelope's double: both juxtaposed and compared (ibid.). However, in this juxtaposing relationship, Penelope's irony is not only a narrative technique; as she is given a power through her voice, irony becomes her weapon. As much as Helen taunts Penelope, she gives an often ironic rebuttal. However, Helen is not the only one to receive an ironic comment – Penelope addresses her relationship with her mother-in-law, Anticleia, like thus: 'When I tried to speak to her she would never look at me while answering, but would address her remarks to a footstool or a table. As befitted conversation with the furniture, these remarks were wooden and stiff' (Atwood 2005:71-72).

Despite Penelope being given a voice in this story, her character still seems to be veiled in a shroud of mystery. She tells of her childhood; she tells of her marriage; she tells of her life in the Underworld; she tells of the Suitors, the maids, her son. Yet she still appears elusive and ambiguous, her story concerning not as much herself as the world around her. Margaret Atwood presents Penelope as a clever, cautious woman; Penelope characterises herself as 'a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed' (ibid. p. 21), but on the other hand, together with Odysseus, as 'proficient and shameless liars of long standing' (ibid. p. 173). Combined with the tale of the maids which challenges the veracity of Penelope's story, Penelope is never allowed to have the final say. According to Suzuki, Atwood refuses 'to resolve the question of whether we are to believe Penelope's self-defense or the maids' accusation' (2007:274). Considering all of the above, it is safe to say that Penelope is an unreliable narrator. The reader must then choose whom to believe: the apparently legitimate story of Penelope's, who admits herself to be a liar, or the maids, who have no immediately recognisable motivation to lie. To recall Allen (2007), the process of reading is the process of moving through texts: the reader of *The Penelopiad* is either lost in their labyrinth or trapped in their web.

With respect to all that has been discussed in this section, it is safe to say that *The Penelopiad* bears many postmodern features, which make it a postmodern novella. Although Penelope's tale provides the text with an unreliable narrator, a certain playfulness and parodic and ironic parts, the chorus of the maids provides the novella with most of its postmodern aspects: fragmentation, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity and subversiveness. It fits to say, then, following Šlapkauskaitė (2007), that *The Penelopiad* is yet another postmodern experiment of Atwood's – an experiment dealing specifically with narrative.

## 3.2. The intertexts

To quote Roland Barthes, 'the plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric)' (1977:169). Margaret Atwood's texts seem to be exactly that: a weave of various intertexts, sources, influences, etc. Mythological nuances and motifs are not uncommon in the author's works. According to Wilson, Margaret Atwood has 'used mythology in the same way she has used other intertexts, or texts within texts' (2000:215). *The Penelopiad* is no exception; through the paratextual clues of the title, the epigraphs and the foreword, the content of the book is established:

Homer's myth as retold by Penelope and her twelve maids, who were mercilessly hanged at the hands of Odysseus and Telemachus, thus being a clear reference to both Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, both of them being patriarchal texts (namely, epopees). It is necessary to stress the importance of the title, as it is constructed from two parts: "Penelope", a female name, and the suffix *–iad*, which is used to refer to epopees about male heroes; Atwood subverts the patriarchal discourse by making the female character the hero(ine) of her text. Thus it can be inferred that *The Penelopiad* is in a sense a hybrid text, which is an aspect represented on the formal level of the text (e.g. the title's heteroglossic reference to both female and male; the text's appropriation of variety of genres). It goes without saying that the title is constructed in such a way that the reader immediately gets the impression of what to expect from this book: it is a gate leading to a certain reading. However, the above mentioned epic works are not the only texts Margaret Atwood (2005) uses in her work – the author herself provides us with some of these other intertexts, mentioning the fact in both the Introduction and Notes of the book. Some allusions to contemporary works can be detected as well, as will be shown in the following subsections.

### 3.2.1. Ancient

First of all, there are obvious references to certain ancient texts – to reiterate once more, the book is a rewriting of *The Odyssey* – thus the basis of the novella is already largely intertextual. Thus this section will not focus that much on analysing the relationship between *The Penelopiad* and *The Odyssey*, but rather on the other intertexts which are not as apparent and/or transparent. However, it is important to note that *The Odyssey* is, employing Genette's terms, the hypotext of *The Penelopiad*, the latter being its hypertext. Following Genette's ideas, hypertexts come to being by the process of transformation, and this transformation can happen differently. The process of transformation clearly seen in the text is that of transmotivisation. As Atwood writes, 'I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and the two hanged maids' (2005:xv), and she too focuses on two issues: what led to the hanging of the maids and what Penelope was really up to. Clearly, Margaret Atwood here is exploring an alternative story of a character providing her with motivations which were seemingly absent in the original epic. Furthermore, the paratextual relationship with *The Odyssey* is rather evident, not only in the title, but also considering the epigraphs included at the front of the book (however, them being direct quotations of the translation, they become not only paratexts, but very direct intertexts in Genette's terms). One of them specifically mentions the hanging of the twelve maids:

> *… he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare… so the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long* (*The Odyssey*, quoted in Atwood 2005: viii).

This sole episode with barely any description became the inspiration of the novella. It is very important to note the comparison of the maids to thrushes and doves; this is echoed by Penelope later in the novella: 'my helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow-white geese. *My thrushes, my doves*' (ibid. p. 160) [Italics added for emphasis]. The maids are often compared and compare themselves to various birds throughout the novella: doves; sparrows; owls. In general, *The Odyssey*'s events are invoked frequently in the novella; without discussing the references in great detail, some examples should illustrate the point. In Chapter xii, *Waiting*, Odysseus's travels are invoked through rumours Penelope hears from soldiers and minstrels; in the following Chapter, *The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty*, the events of *The Odyssey* are retold by the maids from the point of view of Odysseus's men. Chapter xiv speaks of the Suitors, Chapter xv – the weaving of the shroud. There are other details mentioned across the book, such as their bed with a tree bedpost (ibid. p. 73-74), Odysseus's trying to avoid going off to Troy (ibid. p. 76-80), Penelope's prophetic dreams (ibid. p. 123-124), and the famous recognition by the scar (ibid. p. 140).

Atwood uses Greek mythology in *The Penelopiad* extensively; for example, in Chapter vii, *The Scar*, Penelope comments on the gods' desire for meat and recalls the tale of Prometheus deceiving Zeus with bad cow parts (ibid. p. 39-40). The invocation of such intertexts creates a connection between Penelope as a character and her homeland of Ancient Greece, as well as providing a background which is familiar and recognisable. *The Odyssey* itself contains mythical material, so by using this material as sources, Atwood adds to a more realistic – as much as it can be applied to a story of a ghost speaking from the Underworld – feel of the text. Penelope describes her existence in the Underworld in Chapter v, *Asphodel*, which is teeming with intertextual references. There are peaceful places in the Underworld; however, there is also torture:

> *the torture is mental torture, however, since we don't have bodies any more. What the gods really like is to conjure up banquets – big platters of meat, heaps of bread, bunches of grapes – and then snatch them away. Making people roll heavy stones up steep hills is another of their favourite jests* (ibid. p. 16).

The excerpt above clearly references two of the most well-known Greek myths: the punishment of Tantalus and the punishment of Sisyphus. Although their names are never expressed, the descriptions alone evoke the myths in the mind of the reader. Punishment by gods is a topic that interests Penelope, who says that sometimes she is drawn to visit the parts of the Underworld where those punishments are carried out. At the end of the chapter, Penelope comments on how Helen never got punished, and in just a couple of sentences makes references to an array of punishment myths: 'Other people got strangled by sea serpents and drowned in storms and turned into spiders and shot with arrows for much smaller crimes. Eating the wrong cows. Boasting. That sort of thing' (Atwood 2005:22). 'Strangled by sea serpents' refers to the myth of Laocoön and his sons, who met their demise in Troy; 'drowned in storms' possibly refers to the myth of Ceyx and Alcyone, a couple who got along so well that they playfully called themselves Hera and Zeus, which is why the gods punished them; 'turned into spiders' clearly refers to Arachne, who is mentioned in other parts of the novella; 'shot with arrows' could refer to Niobe's myth, with her children shot dead by Artemis; 'eating the wrong cows' is a reference to an event in *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus's men ate Helios's cattle. 'Boasting' may refer to a number of myths, as there are many Greek myths telling of gods punishing mortals for boasting about their work, comparing themselves to gods or even claiming to be better than them. Such was the fate of both aforementioned Arachne and Niobe; Cassiopeia as well, who boasted of her daughter Andromeda being more beautiful than Nereids, and Medusa, who was turned into a monster after pronouncing she was more beautiful than Athene herself, etc. Another Greek myth evoked in this chapter concerns the birth of Helen, which Penelope describes: 'Of course she was very beautiful. It was claimed she'd come out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who'd raped her mother in the form of a swan' (2005:20). Such myths of gods impregnating women in the guise of other forms are myriad in Ancient Greece. In addition, this chapter features a possible Biblical intertext, referencing hell; it could also be linked, 'through subtle allusions' as Khalid argues (2010:50), to Dante's *Inferno*:

> *No living people went to the underworld much any more, and our own abode was upstaged by a much more spectacular establishment down the road – fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks – a great many special effects* (2005:18-19).

In Chapter xx, *Slanderous Gossip*, Penelope addresses the issue of her fidelity. She briefly mentions one disputed version of her as the mother of Pan:

> *the more outrageous versions have it that I slept with all of the Suitors, one after another – over a hundred of them – and then gave birth to the Great God Pan. Who could believe such a monstrous tale?* (ibid. p. 144)

This version is quoted again in the following chapter, *The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama*:

> *Others that each and every brisk contender*
> *By turns did have the fortune to upend her,*
> *By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan*
> *Was then conceived, or so the fable ran* (ibid. p. 148).

This version of Penelope's fidelity – or infidelity, rather – is first quoted in Herodotus' *Histories* and later taken over by Apollodorus, making these antique texts intertexts of the novella. This turn of events, however, does not seem to be endorsed neither by Penelope nor by the maids; and it is most likely the cause of confusion between the Arkadian nymph Penelopeia and Odysseus's wife Penelope; seemingly, various ancient writers invented their own stories how Penelope became the mother of Pan. This version is also mentioned in Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*. What Graves writes in connection with the myth of Pan's creation is quite relevant: 'the name of his reputed mother, Penelope ('with a web over her face'), suggests that the Maenads wore some form of war paint for their orgies, recalling the stripes on the *penelope*, a variety of duck' (1960:103) [italics original]. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope decides to start her story from her childhood, and what seems to heavily preoccupy her throughout the book is the fact that, when she was very young, her father Icarius had ordered her thrown into the sea – but she was rescued by a flock of ducks: 'A flock of **purple-striped ducks** came to my rescue and towed me ashore. After an omen like that, what could my father do? He took me back, and renamed me – ***duck* was my new nickname**' (Atwood 2005:9-10) [italics original; bolded for emphasis]. As Atwood states, 'I have drawn on material other than *The Odyssey*, especially for the details of Penelope's parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours circulating about her' (2005:xiv), it seems unlikely for this reference to a 'striped duck' and Penelope's name and nickname to be a coincidence. Indeed, there is an Ancient Greek word pēnĕlops (πηνέλοψ), meaning 'a kind of duck, also called Meleagris' (Perseus Digital Library 2016). Graves later writes:

> *Odysseus married Penelope, daughter of Icarius and the Naiad Periboea <...> Penelope, formerly named Arnaea, or Arnacia, had been flung into the sea by Nauplius at her father's order; but a flock of* ***purple-striped ducks*** *buoyed her up, fed her, and towed her ashore. Impressed by this prodigy, Icarius and Periboea relented, and Arnaea won the* ***new name of Penelope, which means 'duck'*** (1960:641). [Emphasis in bold added]

Penelope's name, then, not only invokes a reference to a web or veil – as mentioned in the first extract from Graves – but also creates a beautiful intertextual connection with its mythical origin. While it is not an invention of Atwood's, it is still an example of a craftily integrated source material into the postmodern narrative.

A further ancient intertext that can be seen in *The Penelopiad* is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Having already been depicted as birds (doves, thrushes, sparrows) throughout this postmodern web of texts, the maids take on another bird figure: the owl. This connection with *Metamorphoses* – of becoming something else – is evidenced in the *Envoi*:

> and now we follow you
> you, we find you
> now, we call
> to you to you
> too wit too woo
> too wit too woo
> too woo
>
> *The Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls.* (2005:195-196) [Italics original]

Another way in which this metamorphosis relates to Ovid's work is the story of Minerva's (who is the equivalent of Athene in Greek mythology) favourite birds: first it was a crow, a transformed princess, later her favourite became an owl – also a transformed princess (Anderson 1997). It is significant to note that owls were not only symbols of knowledge and wisdom, but also of the goddess Athene herself, who was Odysseus's patron deity; it was Athene who helped Odysseus throughout the epic, and helped in his murdering the Suitors. It seems that, by turning into owls, the twelve maids mock Odysseus's wits, for which he was admired greatly by Athene. The owls may also symbolise that only the maids possess true knowledge and hold the truth of everything that happened, yet with them flying away – an act of liberty and freedom – we, as readers, shall never find out the truth. Another mention of metamorphosis is in Chapter xvi, 'Bad Dreams': it starts with Penelope's words 'I cried so much I thought I would turn into a river or a fountain, as in the old tales' (Atwood 2005:121), an obvious allusion to some of the metamorphosis myths, especially of Naiads. The myths of metamorphosis were popular throughout Ancient Greece, and were taken over by the Romans. While not obvious, it is still an allusion – if not to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, then to the overall mythical material; in Genette's terms, this is exactly a case of intertextuality. According to Staels, the imagery of metamorphoses 'foregrounds the narrative process of

mythologizing and demythologizing thanks to parody and burlesque travesty, mechanisms that essentially honour past texts by renewing them' (2009:110).

### 3.2.2. Modern

Because Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a recent book, it is bound to contain contemporary intertexts and references. "Modern" here refers to texts (or other works) created in the 20th century and the five years of the 21st century preceding the production of the novella. A contemporary myth, undoubtedly, would not only use contemporary sources but a contemporary method of telling it as well. For example, the way the maids present their side of the story resembles a contemporary show: through song and dance, performance and lectures, even a video tape recording; there is a glimpse to the world Penelope sometimes sees – with its light bulbs, illuminated "domestic shrines" and "ethereal-wave system" (Atwood 2005:19).

To begin the discussion of modern intertexts, one of the less obvious of them is Margueritte Yourcenar's 'Clytemnestra, or Crime', published in the book *Fires* in 1935, which features nine monologues based on classical Greek stories. These monologues rely on ancient Greek myths to create a work that shows them in a different light. Braund calls both Atwood's and Yourcenar's stories as being 'an imaginative focalization on the fate of a woman left behind while her husband wages war far away' (2012:202). In Yourcenar's story, Clytemnestra is haunted by the ghost of the husband whom she killed; in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope is haunted by the hanging and, even more so, by the betrayal of her young maids, while her husband Odysseus is quite literally haunted by the ghosts of the young women, never being able to stay in the Underworld for long and having his life always end tragically (Chapter xvii). The most obvious parallel is the twelfth chapter of *The Penelopiad*, aptly called 'Waiting'. Penelope's waiting for her absent husband to come back echoes Clytemnestra's:

> *I waited for this man before he even had a name, a face, when he was still only my distant misfortune <…> He went away toward new conquests and left me standing like a big deserted house filled with the ticking of a useless clock <…> Drunken soldiers on leave told me of his life <…> somewhere on the sea, a man bedecked with gold was leaning his elbows against the prow, letting each circling of the propeller bring him closer to his wife and absent home <…> Gentlemen of the jury: ten years is nothing to sneer at; it's longer than the distance between the city of Troy and the castle of Mycenae <…> I started waiting for him again: he came back* (Yourcenar 1994:103-111).

The similarities are evident when compared to some excerpts from the correspondent chapter in *The Penelopiad*:

> *What can I tell you about the next ten years? Odysseus sailed away to Troy. I stayed in Ithaca <…>Minstrels sang songs about the notable heroes – Achilles, Ajax, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Hector, Aeneas, and the rest. I didn't care about them: I waited only for news of Odysseus <…> Day after day I would climb up to the top floor of the palace and look out over the harbour. Day after day there were ships, but never the ship I longed to see <…> Any rumour was better than none, however, so I listened avidly to all. But after several more years the rumours stopped coming altogether: Odysseus seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth.* (Atwood 2005:81-92)

There are several distinct parallels: two women who were waiting – for ten years – for their absent husbands to come back, relying on rumours and songs brought by other ships, soldiers, or minstrels for any news on them. There is more evidence for the connection between these two women: in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus meets Agamemnon's ghost in the Underworld, who compares his wife Clytemnestra to Penelope, praising the latter's loyalty. An excerpt from his speech is even included in an epigraph at the beginning of the novella:

> *… Shrewd Odysseus! … You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! 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 Odyssey*, as quoted in Atwood 2005:viii).

Whether by chance or intention, *The Penelopiad* echoes 'Clytemnestra, or Crime' in a certain way. To Braund (2012) this particular chapter is enough to be a clear reference. Indeed, both of these stories retell ancient epic myths from the perspective of a woman; both deal with the issue of a woman's role in the absence of their husbands; both emphasise the issue of being a virtuous wife. In *The Penelopiad*, the lines between the "perfect, virtuous wife" and the "bad, disloyal" wife become blurred: by putting Penelope in relation with Clytemnestra via this intertext, Atwood shows these two women not as opposites, but as women suffering the same fate, victims of the patriarchal order imposed on them. This is one of the ways in which Atwood's text criticises the social order presented in The Odyssey; the combination of intertexts, which function as parody, creates a metatextual relationship between *The Penelopiad* and *The Odyssey*. To quote Renaux, who concisely and usefully summarises it,

> *metatextual relationships – always in dialogue with the other transtextual relationships – thus constitute the neuralgic point from which the Atwoodian conflict as well as creation start, as they give us the chance – by*

> *way of the critical outlook that her epic reinvention throws on Odysseus' and Penelope's myth – to re-evaluate Penelope's story, and, behind it, to re-evaluate the hierarchical and patriarchal nature expressed by the Homeric vision in The Odyssey* (2011:94).

Staels (2009) points out an intertextual reference to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is also in itself a parody of *The Odyssey*. Margaret Atwood, while debunking Odysseus's feats, invokes particular scenes from *Ulysses*: from chapter 12, "Cyclops", when Leopold Bloom goes to a tavern run by an aggressive one-eyed landlord, and chapter 15, "Circe", where Bloom visits Mrs Bella Cohen's brothel, which stands for Circe's – Zoe's in Ulysses – palace. In *The Penelopiad*, the allusions can be clearly seen: 'Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern-keeper, said another <...> Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some <...> no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam' (Atwood 2005: 83-84). While Joyce does not seek to ridicule or mock the ancient myth, Atwood does so very much consciously. As Staels comments, '*The Penelopiad* alludes to these scenes in juxtaposing noble versions from *The Odyssey* with indecent versions, or literal interpretations and profanities appropriated from Joyce's *Ulysses*' (2009:107). On the other hand, Šlapkauskaitė juxtaposes the Penelopes of Joyce and Atwood: 'While Molly is a swelling travesty of Penelope's marital fidelity, Atwood's Penelope seems to echo the Homeric vision of female loyalty' (2007:143). Yet the portrayal of both of these women is parodic with respect to their hypotext, *The Odyssey*. Nevertheless, what this intertextual relationship with *Ulysses* does, in essence, is both providing a modernist backdrop to the reading of *The Penelopiad* and also establishing a connection to yet another grand narrative, a grand narrative of the modernist 20th century literature. These intertextual references can also be read as a slight parody of *Ulysses*. In any case, Atwood uses Joyce's text not only as inspiration, but also as a tool to parody and mock the myth of Odysseus itself.

It is worth mentioning that the play based on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* bore the subtitle 'the untold story of the original desperate housewife' (2011). Although it is not the original play staged by Phyllida Lloyd in connection with Margaret Atwood, it still bears an inference that there is a possible intertextual reference to *Desperate Housewives*, the television series. By the time *The Penelopiad* was published, in October 2005, only two seasons had aired – yet a connection still can be made with the narrator of the series, Mary Alice Young, who had committed suicide in the first episode of the series and had been the narrator since. Thus there are two characters speaking to us from the (figurative) land of the dead, narrating not only their own stories, but also the stories of others. Some implications

comparing *The Penelopiad* to Desperate Housewives have been made in several reviews, while Maver (2014) explores female voice empowerment and the concept of oikos in his article 'Penelope as a Desperate Housewife: Margaret Atwood's Retelling of the Penelope Myth in *The Penelopiad* and Some Other Modern Penelopes'. Thus, while it is unclear whether Atwood consciously used the television series as an intertext in the novella, there are outward sources pointing out the possible relationship and connection between them.

To speak of intertexts in *The Penelopiad* is to speak of a vast network of texts and works present in the novella. There are intricacies and references that slip past the eye, and sometimes it is difficult to separate, in clear categories, the ancient and the modern intertexts. With the sole exception of the *Desperate Housewives* (which is not a text), all these intertexts are intertextual themselves. Depending on the readers' knowledge, they are either able to catch on the threads of textual references or only see the surface of the text. Speaking of the text itself, in combining all of these different sources, it is possible to say that 'the end result is a new postmodern hybrid structure' (Bottez 2012:50). Recalling what has been said in the beginning of this section – the title of the novella and the coalescence of genres being features which point to the text's hybridity – it seems clear that *The Penelopiad* is not only an intertextual, but also a hybrid text. To quote Allen,

> *intertextuality seems such a useful term because it foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life. In the Postmodern epoch, theorists often claim, it is not possible any longer to speak of originality or the uniqueness of the artistic object, be it a painting or a novel, since every artistic object is so clearly assembled from bits and pieces of already existent art* (2007:5).

While writing *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood seems to be aware, recalling Kristeva's expression, of this mosaic-like property of texts and that this self-awareness is foregrounded in the book. All intertexts are employed to work together, to come together in a complete weave, all the while being the parodic tools of the novella.

## 4. Conclusions

To briefly recap the purpose of this thesis, it was attempted to show the importance of intertextuality and Penelope's character in the text within the postmodern context of the book. It is concluded that *The Penelopiad*, as a work of art, is indeed assembled from "bits and pieces" of pre-existent texts and sources, self-consciously parodying and challenging those works. What is typically postmodern in *The Penelopiad* is the genre play, experimentation with storytelling modes, fragmentation, and its meta-commentary character. Consecutively, it is evident that *The Penelopiad* is, in fact, a postmodern, multi-layered and multi-faceted novella. Every postmodern work, or text, is inherently intertextual, precisely because of its self-reflexivity and pastiche; a pastiche, or a parody, can never stand alone; and a rewriting always implies a pre-existing text or work. The intertextuality present in *The Penelopiad* functions not only as space to create a background for the novella, but also to emphasise the irony and parody of the text and issues discussed within it. The intertexts act as sources and inspiration to create a new story. By giving Penelope a voice and a chance to tell her side of the story, Atwood provides the reader with a unique intertextual experience in reading the novella, cleverly setting up expectations and still never giving a concrete answer. With the appearance of the twelve hanged maids, the novella gains another layer of narrative, structured in such a way that it foregrounds the subject matter. The maids' chorus acts as a postmodernist commentary, a parodying tool within the text and outside the text, while imitating, in the fashion of a satyr play, the ancient Greek drama. On the level of the novella, it is a play with genres; within the structure of the text, it is a parody of those genres, a contemporary burlesque. Lastly, *The Penelopiad* with the focus on the female character challenges and subverts *The Odyssey*, which is a patriarchal text; it is a critique and a parody of the epic. *The Penelopiad* marks the emergence of the new myths, an imitation of the ancient metanarratives for the contemporary world.

While it is evident that this thesis is in no way a conclusive work on the intertextual aspect of the novella, it has attempted to provide a sufficient analysis supported by a rather considerable body of theory and criticism. Clearly, intertextuality in the novella is an area that deserves more critical and analytical attention. In sum, considering the novella's postmodern context and aspects, intertextuality is an indispensable feature of *The Penelopiad*; truly, the novella is a web of texts, much like Penelope's web, doing and undoing itself in the eyes of the reader.

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## 6. Summary in Lithuanian

Margaret Atwood – viena garsiausių Kanados rašytojų, pelniusi įvairių apdovanojimų bei premijų. Jos novelė „Penelopiada“ perpasakoja gerai žinomą Homero epą „Odisėja“, įkvėpusį daugybę kūrinių. Šiame bakalauro darbe dėmesys skiriamas novelės analizei intertekstualumo teorijos ir postmodernizmo šviesoje. Darbe analizuojama intertekstų vartosena bei jų ryšiai tarpusavyje, taip pat įvairių postmodernizmo bruožų – parodijos, ironijos, pastišo, fragmentiškumo, metakomentarų – buvimas tekste. Pagrindinis šio darbo tikslas – pateikti išsamią Margaret Atwood novelės „Penelopiada“ intertekstualinę analizę postmodernizmo kontekste. Analize siekiama atsakyti į tokius klausmus kaip: ar tikrai Margaret Atwood novelė „Penelopiada“ – postmodernus kūrinys? Kaip postmodernizmo ir intertekstualumo sąvokos susijusios bei sąveikauja tarpusavyje? Kokia yra intertekstų funkcija naratyve? Kaip sukonstruojamas naratyvas? Kokia Penelopės, kaip moteriškos lyties veikėjos, bei jos dvylikos tarnaičių funkcija tekste? Šiems tikslams pasiekti buvo pasitelktas teksto analizės metodas. Analizė remiasi teoriniu pagrindu, kurį sudaro Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette ir Graham Allen darbai. Darbe naudojama J. Kristevos intertekstualumo samprata, tačiau remiamasi ir G. Genette pasiūlytais terminais. Teorinėje dalyje taip pat labai svarbūs Linda Hutcheon teoriniai darbai, ypač parankūs apibrėžti bei apibūdinti postmodernizmo kontekstą. Apibendrinant darbą, galima teigti, kad „Penelopiada“ yra postmoderni, daugialypė novelė, kurios kontekstas suteikia jai unikalią parodinę erdvę, kurioje rašytoja sukuria intertekstų tinklą. Kūrinyje yra apstu nuorodų į kitus tekstus, o Penelopės pasakojimas suteikia skaitytojui išskirtinę skaitymo patirtį laviruojant tarp tų interktekstų. Jų naudojimas tekste pabrėžia novelės ironiškumą, sukuria naują, alternatyvų pasakojimą, ir metą iššūkį ne tik epinei struktūrai, bet ir pačiame epe vyraujančiai patriarchalinei santvarkai.