

**A POSTMODERNIST REWRITING OF HOMER'S PENELOPE:
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD***

RALUCA-ANDREEA PETRUȘ
West University of Timișoara

Abstract: The article analyses Margaret Atwood's reinterpretation of the Ithacan queen, Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, taking into consideration the silence-voice interplay between the original female character and her postmodernist re-representation, *Penelope 2.0*, the protagonist of *The Penelopiad*. In the Canadian writer's novel, Penelope's voice gets empowered through narrative means. Her voice reaches its peak or highest degree of expression in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, namely due to its main character and narrator, *Penelope 2.0*. Considering that a female first-person narrator elaborates the novel's narrative, the article demonstrates how *Penelope 2.0* expresses her feelings and thoughts regarding a series of events which occurred in the original text of *The Odyssey*, events which she elucidates by offering direct, well-developed insight, without any constraints.

Key words: Atwood, rewriting, postmodernism, *The Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad*.

1. Introduction

Some of the foundational texts of Western culture and their characters have acquired archetypal stature over the course of time. Even when they have never read the texts themselves, people might still recognise some references. They might, for example, understand the reference to the Trojan horse, Achilles' heel, the circles of the inferno, for instance. Penelope, the wife of the celebrated hero of *The Odyssey* is probably one such case as well. How she is dealt with in the epic poem has turned her into a paragon of marital devotion and expedient cunning. The current article is part of an extended study which follows Penelope through three distinct epochs, starting from antiquity, then shifting to modernism and continuing with postmodernism, and will try to examine the specific ways in which the archetypal almost figure of Penelope changes over time. The broad study includes analyses of the original depiction of the Ithacan queen, Homer's Penelope in *The Odyssey*, and the modernist reinterpretation of Penelope, as depicted by James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1920), i.e. Molly Bloom. More specifically, this present paper will focus on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005).

Having in mind Penelope's character from *The Odyssey*, one can observe that she does not have a powerful voice to express herself in the male-dominant world of Homer's epic poem. The writers who exploited what is understated or not stated at all in the original text in connection with Penelope are James Joyce and Margaret Atwood. The existence of the already-mentioned absences and ambiguities from the *Odyssey* invite modernists and postmodernists to reveal what the language has previously hidden or to contradict what is stated as categorical so as to portray degree of empowering of a previously-marginalised voice, the one belonging to the Ithacan queen, Penelope.

My research has the purpose to emphasise how postmodernists recover the voice of the previously-marginalised character, Homer's Penelope, rewriting her character and highlighting the degree of power of the new, given voices. The analysis will focus on answering three questions as follows: In what way is Penelope reinvented in Atwood's perspective? Is the newly-shaped voice strong enough to express what has not been conveyed in the original work? Moreover, my analysis will also structure itself on portraying the paradoxical implications that come along with the recovery of Penelope's voice: in this sense, I will illustrate how the empowering of a voice can be, at the same time, misleading, ambiguous, and contradictory,

because of certain paradigms. In this sense, another question ought to be asked: If the postmodernists also desire to recover silenced voices and dismiss the existence of a singular truth, how can we interpret, understand, and believe the image of Penelope 2.0 from her first-person narrative storytelling in which she is, deliberately misleading, at times?

This article will focus on portraying how Margaret Atwood uses postmodernist devices to reconstruct the image of Penelope in her novel *The Penelopiad* to recover the silenced voice of the Ithacan queen. Some of the literary devices and techniques that the Canadian postmodernist writer employs are: the pastiche, intertextuality, playing with perspectives, transforming marginalised characters into protagonists of the creation, the subjectivity of time and place, the complexity of characters, historiographic metafiction, or, as Monica Bottez names it, mythographic metafiction (2012:50). Moreover, this article will highlight the purposes and objectives for which the Canadian writer constructs her narrative as it is portrayed in the novel, purposes such as: exploiting the abundance of meaning that may be re-interpreted from previous works, deconstructing the idea of a story and the authority of the storyteller in order to empower the female characters, previously marginalised: in this case, Penelope.

2. Margaret Atwood and the postmodernist novel *The Penelopiad*: Penelope 2.0

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer who has been influencing postmodernist literature since the second part of the twentieth century, influence which has lasted into contemporary times. The female author is known for her novels *The Circle Game* (1964), *Surfacing* (1972), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1968), *Cat's Eye* (1989), and *The Penelopiad* (2005), *MaddAddam* (2013) *Scribbler Moon* (2014), *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), *Hag-Seed* (2016), and *The Testaments* (2019), to name a few. In her literary works, she highlights multiple facets of reality and characters, offering the subtle observation that the surrounding world and the people who inhabit it attract different "interpretations of truth" (Raymond 2017:1). In other words, Atwood is a postmodernist writer who adheres to Lyotard's post-structuralist preference for little narratives (which exploit the diversity of meaning and do not claim themselves as univocally true) and refuses the limiting perspective of the grand narratives (Sim 1999:5) by constantly questioning and approaching her pieces of writing with an auto-ironic sense. One such creative work is the novel *The Penelopiad*, published in 2005, a novel which follows the destiny and journey of the Ithacan queen, Penelope, but in different contexts and images than the ones depicted in Homer's epic poem: i.e., from a postmodernist perspective.

As portrayed above, Margaret Atwood uses Penelope's traditional image of Odysseus' wife, deconstructs it, and re-writes her story by using a series of postmodernism devices, attitudes, and processes, such as: irony and auto-irony, pastiche vs. parody, intertextuality, parodic self-reflexiveness (Hutcheon 2004:45), voicing silenced categories of the past (female characters), establishing a conversation author-reader through the text (Raymond, 2017, p.ii), the deconstruction-reconstruction process (in the selected novel, the author re-writes traditional mythological aspects). Atwood's endeavors are highlighted by Kapuscinski, in the following quote: "*The Penelopiad* redrafts the story of Homer's *Odyssey* from the point of view of Odysseus' wife, Penelope, whose influence under both ancient and modern notions of justice places her in a position to imagine a unique form of 'narrative justice'". (Kapuscinski 2007). Thus, Penelope 2.0 tells her story as means of achieving "narrative justice" (Kapuscinski 2007), as she was not given a powerful voice in *The Odyssey*.

Focusing on the nature of the text, it is essential to specify that *The Penelopiad* is a "hybrid of several genres" (Bottez in Nunes 2014:232), in comparison with the text of the *Odyssey*, marked by fixed, formulaic structures. Although *The Penelopiad* has a preponderantly epic narrative in the shape of Penelope's narration and is regarded as a novel, Atwood's book also incorporates sections in which drama and poetry are combined, namely in the interventions of the twelve maids. The purpose of this transformation is to challenge the fixed structure of

the primary text and that of the regular epic itself by giving it an updated and “invigorating” version (Khalid 2010:43) characterised as a complete creative work because it included all the above-mentioned genres.

Moreover, *The Penelopiad* is a text that trains its readers to develop upon the essence of the presented events and characters, considering that every aspect of the novel may be understood differently. This way of re-interpreting Homer’s characters and conveying new messages throughout the text is a way in which “the reader can never know the truth, being tied up in the utterly puzzling indeterminacy of meaning” (Bottez 2012:49). In this sense, the text does offer a series of clues regarding the nature of the characters, it provides the readers with reasons why the characters are acting in a particular manner, it fills a series of gaps and elucidates events and actions (regarding Homer’s Penelope) that will be developed upon in the following pages, but all these details are still reviewed with a sense of scepticism, a typically postmodernist attitude (Khalid 2010:42), and filtered by the questions: Can one of these aspects be considered as a possibly valid truth? Is this a grand narrative or a little narrative? What are its purposes? Is this a typical story and is the storyteller credible?

To avoid confusion between Homer’s Penelope and the postmodernist re-representation of the female character reconstructed by Margaret Atwood, I will be referring to the latter as Penelope 2.0. I opt for this choice by the fact that the female character and the protagonist of *The Penelopiad* is an updated version of Homer’s Penelope, represented in *The Odyssey*.

Taking into account the author’s title choice offers an important piece of information regarding who the protagonist of the story is. In a suggestive manner, this choice points out the fact that Margaret Atwood titled her work in the same way as in the case of *The Odyssey*: in Homer’s epic poem, the narrative follows the adventures of the Ithacan king, Odysseus, while in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, the narrative depicts the story of its central character, this time a female one, Penelope 2.0. Atwood is a postmodernist and a feminist writer, features that explain her decision to dedicate the novel to the purpose of recovering Penelope’s original voice as: a *queen* and a *mother* (in the original epic poem, these features are contoured only in connection with her son, husband, and suitors) and a *woman* whose feelings, thoughts, impressions, and desires were not highlighted in the age of Homer in a developed manner, but briefly, since the protagonist of the story is the hero of Troy, Odysseus. Penelope 2.0 is not the only character who gets a voice in Atwood’s novel: the twelve maids hanged by Odysseus after the slaughter of the suitors manage to utter their part of the story as well, giving the readers an insight that may possibly answer a series of questions such as: Why did the twelve maids get hanged? Was it because of their maltreatment shown to Odysseus, who dressed as a beggar? If that is the case, was the punishment so severe?

As mentioned, Penelope 2.0 is the main character and narrator of the novel. The first-person narrative gives a close insight into the mind of the character but can also be misleading, considering that first-person narrators may be regarded as unreliable. To contextualise, both Homer’s Penelope and James Joyce’s Molly Bloom (the modernist representation of Penelope) did not have a strong voice to communicate their thoughts and feelings in a free, developed manner. While Joyce gives Molly a moment in the novel in which she becomes the teller of her own story/*herstory* (Molly’s storytelling/interior monologue may be described as just the flow of her thoughts, and it is not addressed to a certain someone, while Penelope 2.0’s thoughts and impressions have their pre-established addressees: the readers of the contemporary age). Atwood constructs the whole creative work from the perspective of Penelope 2.0: she is the storyteller since the beginning. Atwood’s intentions can be explained by the fact that postmodernists aim to highlight the perspectives of marginalised characters and give them the opportunity to speak for themselves. In this sense, Atwood centres her novel on a female character and employs a first-person narrator who is also a character in the book. Penelope 2.0

has the role of a minstrel (Atwood 2005:4), telling her story in an effort which she considers as a duty for her personal being, something that she “owes to [her]self” (Atwood 2005:3).

As portrayed above, Atwood’s Penelope is unreliable as a narrator, since the author has the purpose of questioning the narrator’s reliability. In order to surprise the readers, Atwood makes the readers empathise with the narrator, thus familiarising them with her feelings and thoughts just so she can afterwards defamiliarise the given image of Penelope 2.0 by re-representing her from a different perspective. In order to do so, the Canadian writer offers a counter-opinion, “another story” (Atwood 2005:147), one of the maids, female characters that did not have any sections in *The Odyssey* to express themselves (they belong to a marginalised category: they are women and maids, having less authority than men and than Penelope as well, because the latter has the status of a queen). In this sense, the parts in which the maids directly intervene also offer a valid point of view of the story, the maids portraying their struggle and need of obtaining justice: the maids appear to have been oppressed and killed without a valid reason and they claim that they did not deserve to die, but only carried the blame for their female master, the queen, as they claim (in the voice of Melanthis) claims in the following verses, belonging to the chorus: “Blame it on the slaves. Blame it on the sluts” (Atwood 2005:152). The purpose of the familiarisation-defamiliarisation process is observed by Hutcheon, who illustrates one role of the postmodernist writer: the postmodernist writer “installs and then subverts traditional concepts of subjectivity” (Hutcheon 2004:118) to keep the readers continuously active in understanding the message of the text.

The protagonist of the novel “addresses 21st century readers” (Bottez 2012:50) and confides herself to them by exposing her innermost thoughts and feelings. To be more explicit, Penelope 2.0 stands in front of the contemporary readers (now in the roles of the expected audience), performing her act as if she were on the stage of a theatre. The direct manner of communicating with the readers and transmitting her message is justified by Penelope 2.0: she considers that the gossips she had endured during her lifetime (her being laughed at because of Odysseus’ infidelities, for example) could not be counter-attacked until all the ones involved in them were no longer alive, thus she “waited some more” (Atwood 2005:3). This claim makes the readers understand that the result of her waiting and patience for centuries (which reminds the reader of Penelope’s display of patience while she waited twenty years for Odysseus) transfigured in the form of the current novel, which gets the feature of a sort of a long awaited confession: Penelope 2.0 tells her story and the contemporary readers are the most capable of understanding her in a better than the people she met during her lifetime: “Now that they are all out of air, it is my turn to do a little story-making” (Atwood 2005:3). It is essential to specify that Penelope 2.0 narrates her story from her memory (Hutcheon 2002:118) after centuries of patience and lack of expression, fact that may induce the forgetting of how certain events happened: her perception may be altered by the passing of time. Although the female character knows best what happened during her lifetime and not only, the reader must keep in mind that Atwood’s character is, indeed, a master of words who can manipulate (see, for example, how the main image of Penelope subtly convinces the suitors into giving riches into the Ithacan kingdom so that Odysseus would be more powerful): her story is something that she “makes” (Atwood 2005:3) and performs on the stage, meaning that what she narrates may not be the truth, but a series of impressions filtered by subjectivity and the need of being viewed in a more positive way than before.

Considering the fact that postmodernists establish connections with the past in order to explain it (Hutcheon 2004:118) and also to celebrate the present (Hutcheon 2004:105), as previously highlighted, by using pastiche and intertextuality, postmodernists also construct their narratives by adopting a subjective time and space approach. In this sense, Atwood intends to build a narrative which ties the past (which she reshapes) with the present, with contemporaneity. To analyse how Atwood constructs these aspects, it is essential to highlight

the world in which Penelope 2.0 lives and how her character developed compared to Homer's central image of Penelope.

The author manages to construct a past-present connection by choosing the place from where Penelope 2.0 tells her story- Hades- but also by having her narrate different episodes that took place in Sparta and Ithaca. As mentioned, Penelope 2.0 is no longer alive and finds herself in Hades, the land of the dead. Since she entered the lands of Hades, Atwood's Penelope is stripped from her human, physical body: she is dead, therefore she is a shadow and wanders in the land of the dead with other shadows, i.e. people she met during her lifetime in Ithaca or before getting married. Therefore, Penelope 2.0 claims that she has taken up a new "state of bonelessness, liplessness, and breastlessness" (Atwood 2005:1). Since she has "no mouth" (Atwood 2005:4), the female narrator declares that her story may be unheard or misheard by the people living in the present-days (she re-established a connection with her listeners-readers), the people who live in a world of "bodies, of tongues, and of fingers" (Atwood 2005:4). In comparison with Homer's Penelope who spends most of her time in the house, always being attended by maids, Atwood's character, in her spirit form, can freely move in Hades with no one else attending her and following her every move. This aspect highlights that Atwood intends to give Penelope the independence to think, act, and move wherever she wants in the manner she desires, which is the autonomy that Homer's Penelope did not have.

Atwood's Penelope – in the role of a representative of the past – manages to see the world of the contemporary readers she wishes to communicate with: she is conscious of how the world of the twentieth-century looks like, as she is able to peek into what she names as "limited keyholes" (Atwood 2005:186). Moreover, she describes that any spirit that wishes to return to the world of the living can do so by drinking from the Waters of Forgetfulness (dangerous since they can function as Waters of Memory as well) and then reincarnating themselves in a new body (Atwood 2005:186-187). Examples of characters that do so include Helen, Odysseus, and Telemachus: all of these characters return from Hades and go on journeys in the world of the living, rediscovering the concept of the initiation journey that Odysseus went on in *The Odyssey*. Moreover, the narrator explains that what she will reveal may be heard by the ones who are able to decode her "odd whisper", which can be confused "for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats at twilight, for bad dreams" (Atwood 2005:4). The previous quote unveils the fact that the nature of her storytelling has the purpose of a (bedtime) story: to heal, to relax, and, possibly, to entertain its listeners with its unusual and surprising content.

To be more explicit, the time in which the action unfolds is not specified but can be deduced in an approximate way due to the mention of a series of characters that marked the twentieth-century, such as Marilyn Monroe and Adolf Hitler (Atwood 2005:186), discoveries in technology and science such as the light bulb and matter-into-energy theories (Atwood 2005:19) and due to the several mentions of objects that interest the people who live in the twenty-first century, such as fashion items which Penelope 2.0 becomes aware of due to Helen's reincarnations into the world (Atwood 2005:187). In other words, this web of cultural references breaks the boundaries suggested in the epic poem and connects the past and the present in both real places and fantastic ones: *The Penelopiad* incorporates the initial frame of *The Odyssey* and includes historical and cultural elements of the twenty-first century.

As illustrated above, Atwood uses intertextuality and pastiche in an original manner in order to celebrate the diverse manners in which meaning can be rendered to the readers (Nunes 2014:228) by reshaping not only a new version of Homer's Penelope but by reconstructing other characters who are a part of *The Odyssey* as well, such as the updated version of the Ithacan queen, the twelve maids, Odysseus, and Helen. In addition to this, the narrative features other characters and moments which were not individualised or mentioned in *The Odyssey* to offer a broader and more complete version of the epic poem in a postmodernist manner, thus revealing elements and covering absences such as Penelope's childhood, Penelope's parents,

her relationship with Helen, how she meets and marries Odysseus, how her life in Ithaca is (with her having the roles of a married woman, daughter-in-law, and mother), what does she feel when Odysseus leaves for the Trojan War, how her life changes with the suitors and how does she keep them away, her attitude towards being viewed as faithful or not, the truth about the maids, and the time Odysseus returns to Ithaca. All these aspects are conveyed by the protagonist throughout her first-person narrative, with some sections in which the twelve maids assume the focus of unveiling the novel's message. In other words, *The Penelopiad* may be understood as a mythographic metafiction (Bottez 2012:50), because it portrays all these aspects regarding Penelope, her story following the events from her childhood until her time spent in the land of Hades.

Absent in the original epic poem and briefly mentioned in Joyce's *Ulysses* (Joyce 1920), Penelope 2.0's childhood is described as being problematic in *The Penelopiad*: she is the daughter of a Naiad who did not show her affection for king Icarius of Sparta, who tried to kill her by throwing her in the sea (Atwood 2005:7). Penelope 2.0, now in the form of a shadow, explains her father's deeds ironically, claiming that his intentions are understandable: he believed he would live forever (Atwood 2005:8) if Penelope did not weave his shroud (the shroud that Penelope weaves is for Odysseus' father, Laertes). The end of this episode did not have Penelope 2.0 being rescued by people, but by a flock of purple-striped ducks –a fantastic element which may have three roles in the text: to explain the reason or which Penelope distrusts people, to highlight the fact that people are mischievous and bad-intentioned, and to explain her nickname, mostly used by Helen: “duck” (Atwood 2005:153).

The relationship with Helen is also essential for giving the initial figure of Penelope a chance to speak to her cousin, the one responsible for Odysseus' journey to Troy. Their relationship is also depicted as problematic, but homely as well since the two women talk to each other in a manner that reminds the reader of a normal relationship between relatives: Penelope 2.0 blames Helen for taking Odysseus away from her (she is the reason for which the War of Troy begins), and the two call each other nicknames and try to criticise what they did while they were alive. Considering that Helen is “much in demand” (Atwood 2005:20) even after passing away in the land of Hades (she is summoned by people from outside of the land of the dead, and spirits also follow her in Hades), Penelope 2.0 expresses her jealousy for both the past and present, of her admirers and her beauty, criticising Helen by making the following remark: the way in which Helen can “wash the blood [of the suitors] off her hands” is by showing them her “bare naked-tits and ass” (Atwood 2005:155). The quote illustrates the fact that Helen cheats with Prince Paris while alive and keeps her habits in Hades as well, even in her spirit form. To counter-attack Penelope 2.0's opinion, Helen is ironic. She highlights her cousin's modesty by mentioning the fact that she believes she took baths while not being naked and that the slaughter of the suitors. However, they are few compared to the people who died in Troy for her, making Penelope 2.0 feel better about herself (Atwood 2005:154). After this discussion, Penelope 2.0 criticises the gods' ways of punishing people's wrong deeds: she has a sense of justice and she questions the authority of the gods, wondering why her cousin was never asked for her mistakes made during her life when others found a tragic death (Atwood 2005:22). This criticism of the gods and of the oracles (who misinformed Icarius about her weaving the shroud for him, not for Laertes) is portrayed in order to deconstruct the image of the all-powerful deities: the gods and the oracles did not have the incontestable power of entirely knowing the truth of predicting the future.

In the following sections of the novel, the readers are given an insight into how her marriage with Odysseus was arranged. In comparison with the marriages and weddings of today, Penelope 2.0 declares that in her time marriages were used as a way of preserving a wealthy family's inheritance and for making children, who will have the role of “vehicles” (Atwood 2005:24) used in order to transmit a series of elements from generations to

generations, be they kingdoms or fortunes. These confessions offer insight into the social life of the people in Homer's age, which is a social habit that Penelope disagrees with in her spirit form. Although she considers the fortune trash or a "pile of glittering junk" (Atwood 2005:29), her fortune convinces Odysseus to run in the race to win Penelope's hand.

Further, the readers find out that Odysseus won Penelope 2.0's hand in marriage by cheating: he had a deal with Tyndareus, Helen's father. Odysseus, (portrayed in a non-heroic manner and ironical manner by the maids and by Helen, contrasting with his initial Homeric image - the women laugh at Odysseus' short legs) acted like he cared for Penelope in the same manner as she did, but did not: he enjoyed the presence of women and the absence of his wise wife for twenty years. Along with her fortunes, Penelope 2.0's gift of being a good listener, perfect for hearing Odysseus' stories about his heroic events also ties the two together at the beginning: considering that Odysseus is viewed as a trickster and a liar, his stories are unreliable, therefore they contain false pieces of information added in order to make the story better than the actual unfolding of the events. Atwood's intention, as a postmodernist, is to deconstruct these heroic events and features by giving them a more realistic shape (Bottez 2012:53). While lying with Penelope 2.0 in the marital bed, Odysseus shares noble versions of what happened: he discusses "monsters and goddesses rather than innkeepers and whores" (Atwood 2005:172). In the same manner, Penelope 2.0 also shares her struggles with the suitors and her wise idea of weaving the shroud. The following quote represents both characters: they believed themselves to be "proficient and shameless liars of long standing" (Atwood 2005:173). The quote highlights that neither of the characters is to be trusted due to their untrustworthy nature.

Although the action of the novel portrays an overall sense of humour and well-being meant to make the readers "chuckle" (Khalid 2010:42), due to the use of irony and the deconstruction of some heroic events and characters into everyday, real-life events and figures, some sections from *The Penelopiad* depict actions that are not humorous, but on the contrary, portray tragic events. These sections offer the counter-perspective, already mentioned above, of the twelve hanged maids. Their search for justice in the afterlife portrays the fact that the social class distinction is cruel and leads to injustice and death. As Nunes argues, Atwood uses the twelve maids in order to highlight the fact that people from lower classes - the maids- may be mistreated and may not enjoy the same rights as the ones who are higher positioned – Odysseus who is a kind and Penelope who is a queen- not even when they concern seeking the truth and justice (Nunes 2014:224). To be more explicit, the author uses the issue of class distinction in order to deconstruct the faithful image of the original Penelope and to explain why the twelve maids, who were so close to the Ithacan queen all the time, were hanged mercilessly by Odysseus (a detail which is not rendered in the initial text).

As indicated before, Penelope 2.0's distrust in people (caused by her father's murder attempt in her childhood) makes her use the maids to spy on the suitors and hear news of Odysseus. Penelope 2.0 instructs the girls to display a bad attitude towards Odysseus, Telemachus, and herself to discover more about what the suitors are thinking. Moreover, the maids know the secret behind the weaving of the shroud and are forced to sleep with the suitors, considering that they belong to the court, just as they feast and use other objects from it in the absence of the master of the house. Looking at the initial epic poem, it is suggested that the maids are killed because they had maltreated Odysseus (while he is dressed as a beggar) and had indulged themselves in pleasures with the suitors. On the contrary, while hearing the maids' point of view, the situation is different than it appears to be on the surface: Penelope 2.0 is a master of strategies (just like the original model) and plots with Eurycleia to keep them silenced: the two women have the Ithacan king kill them so that Penelope's affairs would not come to light (Nunes 2014:224). Melanthe of the Pretty Cheeks utters the following quote, and it illustrates the manner in which Penelope did indeed enjoy the presence of the suitors and did

not avoid them, as claimed throughout *The Odyssey* and in the first person narrative sections in *The Penelopiad*:

*Some said with Amphinomus she was sleeping
Others, that each and every brisk contender
By turns did have the fortune to upend her
(Atwood 2005:147-148).*

The consequences of these acts make Penelope 2.0 feel sorry for employing such strategies and not telling her intentions to the maids themselves, whom she considered to be her “helpers, her snow-white geese [and] doves” (Atwood 2005:160). Although she presented disbelief in gods and oracles, Penelope 2.0 prays to the gods and makes sacrifices for the maids' souls in order to receive forgiveness for what she did, adding that she would have never tried to cause them harm (Atwood 2005:115), but does these rituals without being observed by her husband: she wants to avoid him finding out that she had lied to him. In this sense, Penelope hides her true intentions and does not entirely assume responsibility for what she did during her lifetime, both in the case of her personal life and with the maids.

In other words, Penelope 2.0's narrative is deconstructed by the maids: the purpose of this act is to challenge the very nature of the storyteller, and the events depicted throughout the story. It is essential to highlight that the ones who are given a voice in this novel by Atwood are female characters, contrasting with the male-dominant narrative, which is found in *The Odyssey*, a fact that portrays Margaret Atwood's intentions of challenging the male perspective of storytelling.

3. Conclusions

Margaret Atwood empowers previously marginalised female characters by illustrating their points of view, namely the ones of Penelope and the maids. This possibility of expression is an aspect that was not rendered in a developed manner in *The Odyssey*, but was touched upon by James Joyce's reinterpretation of Penelope in *Ulysses*, i.e., Molly Bloom. Moreover, the contrasting re-representation of their points of view makes Atwood's Penelope 2.0 and the maids annihilate each other's opinions regarding some key moments of the story: the reader is left with the role of interpreting the events which are rendered by the characters and, most importantly, the reader can *choose* what to believe, considering the given clues and that there is no singular, valid truth, but just perspectives of the same events, filtered by the human consciousness and by the purposes of its storytellers. In addition to this, although Penelope's voice is empowered to a more robust degree than in the case of her modernist adaptation, James Joyce's Molly Bloom, the paradigm of postmodernism questions its postmodernist recovery of the voice: paradoxically, claiming that one story is true annihilates its validity because postmodernists believe in a plurality of truths and dismiss the works which claim to be specific and to hold the unquestionable truth. Moreover, the recovered voices of the maids also assume a categorical position in connection with Penelope's 2.0, as illustrated in the analysis section. It is noticeable that Penelope 2.0's narrative and the narrative of the maids annihilate and deconstruct each other's discourses, and the postmodernism paradigm contradicts them both. There is no such thing as a singular truth.

The Penelopiad represents a postmodernist empowerment of Homer's Penelope: the Ithacan queen's voice is reconstructed by a postmodernist and a female writer: Margaret Atwood. As demonstrated, Atwood's rewriting intends to offer an “inherently corrective and political pursuit” (Kapuscinski 2007) regarding the silences depicted in *The Odyssey*.

References:

- Atwood, Margaret. 2005. *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Bottez, Monica. 2012. "Another Penelope: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*", *University of Bucharest Review*, vol. XIV (vol. II – new series), no. 1, pp. 49-56.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2004. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History and Theory Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Joyce, James. 1920. *Ulysses*. Dublin: Shakespeare and Company.
- Kapuscinski, Kylie. 2007. "Ways of Sentencing: Female Violence and Narrative Justice in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*". *Essex Human Rights Review*, 4(2). ISSN: 1756-1957, 1756-1957.
- Khalid, Saman. 2010. "Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* as Postmodern Fiction", in *Explorations*. vol.21, pp.41-54.
- Nunes, Ruan. 2014. "Looking into Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*: Appropriation, Parody and Class Issues", in *UERJ*, no. 18, pp. 228-240.
- Raymond, Maggie. 2017. *Postmodern Puzzles: Creating Versions of Truth and Identity in Margaret Atwood's "The Robber Bride" and "The Blind Assassin"*. PhD Thesis, The University of Texas at Tyler.
- Sim, Stuart. 1999. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

The publication of this article was supported by the West University of Timișoara with funding from the *Start* Grant project.

Notes on the author

Raluca-Andreea Petruș, PhD, has a BA in English Philology and a MA in American Studies. She was awarded a PhD in Philology by the West University of Timișoara; her research explored civil rights and identity in Japanese American incarceration literature written after World War II and based on the imprisonment of the Nikkei and Nikkei Amerikajin. She currently teaches English for practical purposes and contemporary English language at the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, WUT. Her research interests include Japanese American literature, semiotics, and gender studies. In 2023, she published an article titled "Hisaye Yamamoto's Silence-Voice Interplay in Japanese American Imprisonment Camps", in *Gender Studies*, available here: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Raluca-Andreea-Petrus>.