Threads of Oppression: Class, Gender and the Politics of Voice in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Threads of Oppression: Class, Gender and the Politics of Voice in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*** is a record of the studies carried out by **MEERA JYOTHI**, at the Department of English, T.K.M. College of Arts and Science, Kollam under the guidance of **Dr. Muhammadali P. K.** and submitted to University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature.

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Meera Jyothi

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Preface

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) invites and demands feminist literary inquiry, compelling renewed attention to the voices that classical tradition has long suppressed. This project traces the structures of silencing the novella exposes, with particular focus on the twelve hanged maids whose suffering Atwood refuses to sentimentalize or resolve. Rather than asking whether women can speak within patriarchy, it asks whose speech is recognised as authoritative and just. Synthesizing Marxist feminist theory with the *écriture féminine* of Cixous and Irigaray, this project argues that narrative authority is simultaneously a gendered as well as a class privilege and this intersection determines the possibilities of representation and justice for both Penelope and the maids.

The research is organised into four distinct chapters. The first chapter, "Introduction," establishes the theoretical and contextual boundaries of the study. The second chapter, "Invisible Labour, Silenced Voices: Class and Gender in *The Penelopiad*," applies a Marxist feminist lens to analyse the material and ideological dynamics of class and gender between Penelope and the maids. The third chapter, "Stylistic Resistance and Écriture Féminine in *The Penelopiad*," examines the maids' choric interventions as a sustained enactment of *écriture feminine*, illustrating how their bodily, stylistic resistance disrupts phallocentric containment. The final chapter "Conclusion," synthesizes these threads and reflects on the broader implications of Atwood's narrative intervention.

Chapter One

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's novella, *The Penelopiad* (2005) is a significant postmodern retelling of Classical mythology that revisits and reinterprets the figure of Penelope from *The Odyssey*. Classical Greek mythology particularly, *The Odyssey* attributed to Homer is often seen as one of the founding myths of Western literature. Within its domestic frame, the character of Penelope occupies a position of immense symbolic weight as the faithful wife awaiting her husband's return on the island of Ithaca, Penelope is celebrated in the Homeric tradition as an epitome of female loyalty, patience and chastity. In Homer's narrative Penelope is someone whose identity is largely defined in relation to Odysseus, she functions as the stabilizing force of his domestic world and the ultimate reward for his heroic journey. While Odysseus's narrative is marked by adventure, endurance, and agency Penelope's story is confined to waiting, silence and invisibility. This conventional representation reflects the gender norms embedded within Classical Greek mythology, where female voices are often marginalized or suppressed.

It is from within these silences that Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) emerges as a feminist counter narrative that restores voiceless and interrogates the myths we have inherited about women's role in Greek antiquity. By retelling the myth from her perspective, Atwood challenges the patriarchal assumptions underlying the canonical text, and reimagines Penelope as a passive symbol of fidelity but as a complex, self-aware figure. The novella also gives voice to the twelve hanged maids whose absence

in the original epic underscores the systematic silencing of marginalized figures within dominant narratives.

This revisionist approach is closely aligned with the principles of postmodernism, a cultural and philosophical movement that questions universal truths and challenges the authority of grand narratives. As articulated by French philosopher and famous postmodernist, Jean François Lyotard, postmodernism is characterized by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Lyotard defines metanarratives as large, overarching frameworks that legitimize knowledge and social practices, these dominant narratives often suppress diversity by enforcing a singular, unified perspective, thereby marginalizing alternative voices and experiences. In contrast, postmodernism is marked by a rejection of such totalizing structures and an embrace of plurality, fragmentation, and localized perspectives.

Postmodern literature often seeks to amplify the voices of those historically marginalized, such as women, colonized individuals and the working class. Jean Baudrillard, one of the most radical postmodernists, writes that we must come to terms with the second revolution: "that of the Twentieth Century, of postmodernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. Whoever lives by meaning dies by meaning" (qtd in Salbey et al.). From this perspective retelling classical myths becomes a political act rather than a creative endeavor. When authors reinterpret myths from the viewpoint of marginalized female characters, they actively challenge the authority of traditional narratives and expose the ideological structures that sustain them. It is through these reinterpretations such authorities get questioned and previously suppressed perspectives are brought to light.

When a writer like Atwood chooses to retell a myth from the perspective of its marginalized female characters, she is enacting precisely the postmodern critique that Lyotard theorized: she is challenging the metanarrative of the Homeric epic, exposing its gender politics, and restoring the heterogeneity that the original text suppressed. The canonical text, Homer's *The Odyssey* becomes in this framework, itself a kind of metanarrative, a story told from a position of cultural authority that has been naturalized over millennia. Atwood's retelling defamiliarizes this authority, making its assumptions visible and therefore contestable.

Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" is especially relevant in this context. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. Thus, this narrative form simultaneously constructs and critiques historical understanding, emphasizing that both history and fiction are shaped by discourse and power. Through techniques such as irony, parody and intertextuality such texts question the objectivity of historical truth. *The Penelopiad,* narrated retrospectively from the afterlife exemplifies this approach by allowing its character to reflect critically on how their stories have been told and remembered. In this light, Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad*, can be seen as a deliberate attempt to question and subvert the grand narrative of *The Odyssey.*

As in the novella Atwood points out, "I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (xv). Woven into Penelope's first-person narrative are the interventions of the twelve maids, who appear in the form of a Greek dramatic chorus and serve to disrupt the linear authority of Penelope's account while simultaneously articulating a more radical critique. The maids who were hanged by Odysseus upon his return for their supposed infidelity with the suitors, refuse to let their

deaths be forgotten or minimized. They insist on their own victimhood, their lack of agency and the injustice of their punishment. In doing so they raise many questions that the original epic entirely suppresses.

Therefore, the dual narrative structure becomes a distinctive feature of this novella. While Penelope offers a retrospective account of her life from the underworld, the twelve hanged maids interrupt her narration to present their own perspectives through choric interludes that take the form of songs, ballads and dramatic performances. Thus, Atwood aligns the text with the postmodern concerns of plurality and narrative fragmentation. The novella took shape as a tragedy with Penelope narrating her story from the underworld where she is eternally haunted by the maids and her role in their rapes and murders.

Published in 2005 as part of the Canongate Myth Series, a project that invited contemporary authors from around the world to retell Classical myths exploring what is understood by myth today and how mythology remains relevant for a twenty-first century audience. Atwood's novella, *The Penelopiad* traces Penelope's childhood, her marriage to Odysseus and her long years of waiting during his absence. It also highlights her intelligence and strategies such as the famous weaving ruse to delay remarriage while maintaining control over her household. At the same time the narrative exposes her loneliness, vulnerability and limitations imposed on her as a woman. This novella can be roughly divided into the narrative chapters of Penelope and the choral interludes of the twelve maids through the use of chorus, they reveal how they were used, exploited and ultimately executed by Odysseus and Telemachus, thereby foregrounding issues of gender injustice and class oppression.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is an internationally known, read, translated, critiqued and most distinguished contemporary Canadian literary figure. Atwood is not only an acclaimed literary personality known for being vociferous on social, political and moral issues but her writings also highlight the heart of the issues that marginalized women faces. In the London Review of Books, Patrick Parrinder has claimed her as 'the most distinguished novelist.... currently writing in English'. George Woodcock, the eminent Canadian critic and founding editor of Canadian Literature avers: "No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so a wide command of resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use of Margaret Atwood" (327). Her works has been published in many different languages across the world and are widely known for her feminist engagements with myths and history, reimagines Classical texts through contemporary lens.

Atwood's major works were produced during the second and third waves of feminism and it clearly engages with feminist concerns. However, Atwood herself has often resisted categorizing herself within any specific theoretical or political framework. Instead of aligning with a singular ideology her work reflects a broader and more complex engagement with evolving feminist discourses. *The Penelopiad* also forms part of a broader tradition of contemporary mythological retellings that seek to reinterpret classical narratives from marginalized perspectives. By foregrounding female voices and questioning canonical authority, such retellings shift the focus from hero-centric narratives to more inclusive and critical reinterpretations, reflecting both postmodern and feminist literary concerns.

This project deals with Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005), and how it not only reconstructs Penelope's character as more complex and self-aware but also

foregrounds issues of gender, power and injustice. The novella briefly recounts Penelope's life, her marriage to Odysseus and her experiences during his long absence while simultaneously giving voice to the maids who were executed upon his return. This dual narrative structure exposes the silences and gaps within the original myth. Furthermore, Atwood's work forms part of a larger tradition of feminist mythological retellings that challenges the patriarchal interpretations of Classical texts. Her rewritings of Greek mythology have influenced contemporary literature, encouraging other writers to revisit and reinterpret canonical narratives from the marginalized perspectives.

Atwood's feminist retellings often reclaim sidelined women's voices, expose how official stories naturalize patriarchy and experiment with narrative form to imagine more complex, resistant female subjectivities that speak directly. Across genres, Atwood shifts focus to silenced women, multiple narrative voices and destabilizes official versions of the events. She deploys multiple perspectives, nonlinear structure and genre hybridity to unsettle any single authoritative narrative and foreground women's agency and ambiguity. This retelling of Classical myths from a postmodern feminist perspective is therefore not merely a literary exercise, rather it is a political act. *The Penelopiad,* set in the mythological past but narrated from an afterlife that permits retrospective, irony, embodies the historiographic metafictional impulse perfectly. Thus, the novella, *The Penelopiad* has become a key origin text for Twenty-first century feminist myth retellings and revisions of Classical stories.

Atwood's approach to myth is simultaneously respectful and combative. She does not discard the Homeric tradition but inhabits it critically, working from within the gaps and silences of the original to expose what has been suppressed. This method

which the critic Adrienne Rich once called as, "re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35), is central to the feminist literary project and is enacted with particular sophistication in *The Penelopiad.*

Following the publication of the novella, *The Penelopiad* there has been a significant rise in contemporary Greek mythological retellings that seek to reinterpret Classical narratives from the marginalized perspectives. Margaret Atwood's novella, *The Penelopiad* published as part of the Canongate Myth Series alongside works by writers such as Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith and A.S. Byatt, played a crucial role in popularizing this genre by foregrounding female voices and questioning the authority of the canonical texts. In this novella, Penelope narrates from Hades, aware of how her story has been told and insistently reframes the official account. Thus, the novella, *The Penelopiad* has been recognized not merely as a significant individual work but as a catalyst within the broader cultural project of feminist mythological retelling.

Contemporary mythological retellings such as Madelline Miller's *Circe* (2018) and *The Song of Achilles* (2011), Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and *Stone Blind* (2022), and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) similarly re-examine Greek myths by centering alternative voices, particularly those of women and other previously silenced figures. These works collectively demonstrate a shift from the traditional hero-centric narratives to more inclusive and critical reinterpretations aligning with postmodern and feminist approaches to literature. In this sense, Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* serves as a prototype for modern retellings that seek to question established and cultural norms. Thus, the novella *The Penelopiad* didn't just retell a myth, rather it helped create a literary trend.

This project examines that Margaret Atwood's novella, *The Penelopiad* as a text that foregrounds the intersections of gender, class and narrative authority. By critically examining the role of class in shaping narrative credibility and the possibility of justice. As the novella demonstrates that female agency is unevenly distributed across different class structures, thereby influencing whose voices are heard and validated. While the novella attempts to recover marginalized perspectives, it simultaneously exposes the inherent difficulty of representing subaltern subjects within the dominant narrative frameworks. In doing so, the text raises important critical questions regarding the narrative authority and legitimacy: who has the authority to tell stories, whose voices are legitimized. Furthermore, it interrogates whether lower-class women can attain narrative justice within storytelling structures that are predominantly shaped by elite perspectives. These concerns highlight the intersection of class and gender in determining both representation and recognition.

The central objective of this study, therefore is to examine the class-based dynamics between Penelope and the twelve hanged maids, with particular focus on how these dynamics influence the operation of narrative justice within the novella. By analyzing their differing positions, the study seeks to reveal how power, voice and authority are unequally distributed ultimately shaping the possibilities of justice and representation. This study is grounded in Marxist feminist theory alongside the concept of *écriture féminine* as these frameworks together illuminate the intersection of class, gender and language. By combining these perspectives, the analysis seeks to understand how social hierarchies and modes of expression shape women's experiences and representation.

Marxist feminism expands upon traditional feminist criticism by foregrounding the material and economic conditions that underpin women's oppression. It contends that patriarchy does not function in isolation, rather it operates in conjunction with class hierarchies. Together these structures produce varied and unequal experiences of marginalization among women. According to Madhavi and Rao, the findings suggest,

> The commodification of women's bodies and labour is a central theme in Marxist feminist critiques. This includes not only waged labour but also the ways in which women's reproductive capacities are commercialized and controlled. The economic value of unpaid domestic labour, which is disproportionately carried out by women is essential for the functioning of capitalist economies but remains largely invisible and undervalued. (15)

Thus, this integration of feminist and Marxist critiques exposes the mutually reinforcing nexus between capitalism and patriarchy, highlighting how their interdependence structures inequalities of gender and class.

In *The Penelopiad,* this intersection becomes particularly evident through the contrasting positions of Penelope and the maids. While both are subject to patriarchal control, they do not share the same social standing. As an aristocratic woman, Penelope occupies a relatively privileged position within the constraints of patriarchy. Although her agency is limited, it is nonetheless strategic and significant. She exercises control over resources, directs the labor of her servants and retains authority over the narrative itself. In contrast, the maids who belong to a lower class experience a far more severe and direct form of marginalization, highlighting how class intensifies gendered oppression.

The concept of *écriture féminine* associated with French feminist thought further illuminates the text's narrative strategies. "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing .... Women must put herself into text as into the world and into history by her own movement" (Cixous 875). Luce Irigaray posits a 'woman's writing' which evades male monopoly and the risk of appropriation into the existing system. 'Woman's writing' draws not upon the monolithic phallus, but upon the diversity, fluidity and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure and the functions of female sexual experiences. Thus, this mode of writing disrupts phallocentric logic through non-linear expression, multiplicity and fluidity. Rather than adhering to rigid, hierarchical and rational narrative structures, it embraces fragmentation, corporeality and collective modes of articulation. This form of writing resists fixed meaning and instead foregrounds plurality, openness and the embodied experience of women.

In *The Penelopiad*, these contrasting narrative strategies are clearly evident as Penelope's prose narration is structured, coherent and explanatory mode of story-telling. This stylistic choice indicates her partial alignment with dominant patriarchal discourse as her voice seeks order, justification and authority within an already established narrative framework. In contrast, the maids' choric interventions introduce a radically different narrative form. Their sections incorporate songs, rhymes, courtroom drama creating a dynamic and stylistically diverse narrative texture. This multiplicity of forms disrupts the stability of the text and resists singular authorship. By speaking collectively, the maids challenge the idea of a unified, authoritative voice and instead foreground a shared, marginalized perspective. The fragmented and experimental structure of these sections can thus be understood as an embodiment of *écriture féminine*.

This study is structured into four chapters, each addressing a crucial key dimension of the text, *The Penelopiad* in order to establish a comprehensive understanding of class, gender and narrative authority. The first chapter establishes the thematic and theoretical framework of the study, it aims to establish the sexual context of the text, outline the relevance of feminist orientation and present the central argument. By situating the novella within the feminist and socio-political discourse, this chapter prepares the ground for a deeper exploration of how power operates within the narrative.

The second chapter examines the intersection of class and power particularly in relation to the negotiation of female agency. Drawing on Marxist feminist theory this section examines how agency in *The Penelopiad* is not solely determined by gender but is significantly shaped by material and class hierarchies. The analysis highlights that women's experiences are not uniform instead they are deeply influenced by their socio-economic positions. This aligns with the broader thematic concern of the text which demonstrates that class plays a decisive role in structuring women's lives and opportunities. In this context the relationship between Penelope and the maids becomes central to understanding the unequal distribution of power. While both are subjected to patriarchal control their experiences differ drastically due to class distinctions. Penelope, as an aristocratic woman is able to exercise a degree of strategic agency, whereas the maids belonging to a lower class are subjected to more direct forms of exploitation and violence. Their marginalization harsh realities of class-based oppression where lower-class women are denied both autonomy and dignity.

The third chapter shifts explore narrative authority and the stylistic experimentation analyzing how the text destabilizes traditional storytelling through

multiple perspectives. By using the concept of *écriture féminine,* this section examines how the voice, style and textual form contribute to power dynamics within the novella. This chapter analyses how Margaret Atwood employs innovative narrative techniques to destabilize the traditional story telling structures. The primary aim here is to demonstrate how narrative authority is not fixed but contested through stylistic experimentation and multiple perspectives. Particular attention is given to the contrast between Penelope's controlled, linear narration and the maids' fragmented, multi-vocal expressions. While Penelope's voice reflects an attempt to assert coherence and authority within a patriarchal narrative framework, the maids' choric interventions disrupt this stability. Their use of diverse forms like songs, ballads and dramatic performances introduces multiplicity and challenge the idea of a singular, authoritative narrative voice. This formal contrast finds its theoretical grounding in Hélène Cixous's work *The Laugh of the Medusa* where she issues her famous call: "Women must write herself". The maids' choric voice her in the novella enact what Cixous terms *écriture feminine*. This aligns with the novella's broader thematic preoccupation with storytelling and textual authority where Atwood systematically questions the reliability and dominance of established narratives.

Finally, the concluding chapter of this study brings together the central arguments developed throughout the analysis, synthesizing the insights gained from both thematic and stylistic perspectives. It reiterates how the novella, *The Penelopiad* functions not merely as a retelling of a classical myth, but as a critical intervention into the structures of power that shape narrative authority, gender relations and class hierarchies. By revisiting the core concerns of the study, the conclusion reinforces the significance of examining literature through multiple theoretical lenses. This project

will establish that Atwood's novella questions patriarchal and class-based systems through a combination of thematic depth and formal innovation.

Chapter Two

Invisible Labour, Silenced Voices: Class and Gender in *The Penelopiad*

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* reimagines the classical narrative of Homer's *The Odyssey* by foregrounding questions of voice and authority through a dual narrative structure. This chapter examines how narrative authority is constructed, contested and destabilized within the text by applying a Marxist feminist lens. By dividing narration between Penelope and the chorus of the twelve hanged maids, Atwood transforms storytelling into a political space where issues of class and gender intersect. The central argument of this chapter is that narrative authority in *The Penelopiad* is not neutral but deeply embedded within hierarchical power structures that determine whose voices are legitimized and whose are suppressed. Crucially, these hierarchies do not operate merely as background conditions; they actively shape the possibilities of narrative justice, determining who is permitted to speak, who is believed and whose version of events achieves the status of truth.

This chapter proceeds from the premise established in this study's central objective: that class-based dynamics between Penelope and the twelve maids are the primary mechanism through which power, voice and authority are unequally distributed in the novella. This unequal distribution, in turn, structures the possibilities of justice and representation for both groups of women. While Penelope and the maids both are subject to patriarchal control, they do not occupy the same position within the system.

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As an aristocratic woman, Penelope retains strategic agency over resources, the labour of subordinate women and most significantly over the narrative itself. The maids belonging to a lower class experience a far more severe and direct form of marginalization. Hence, this chapter proceeds as follows. The opening section establishes the theoretical framework of Marxist feminism and outlines its application to *The Penelopiad*. This is followed by an examination of the material conditions of class division in Ithaca, which sets Penelope's privileged position in pointed contrast to the servitude of the maids. Subsequent sections interrogate the contradictions of Penelope's class position, exploring how she extracts surplus value from the maids while simultaneously framing their exploitation as an expression of care and domestic duty. The analysis then turns to the execution of the maids, reading it as the brutal culmination of class violence rather than a mere narrative convenience. From there, the chapter addresses the question of narrative justice investigating how class privilege determines the authority to tell one's own story, how the maids' choral interventions constitute a sustained counter-narrative to the dominant mythological account, and how the novella ultimately resists any possibility of impartial or redemptive justice for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. A concluding section draws these threads together and reflects on the broader implications of Atwood's Marxist feminist critique.

Marxist feminism expands upon traditional feminist criticism by foregrounding the material and economic conditions that underpin women's oppression. It contends that patriarchy does not function in isolation rather, it operates in conjunction with class hierarchies to produce varied and unequal experiences of marginalization among women. As Madhavi and Rao observe,

> the commodification of women's bodies and labour is a central theme in Marxist feminist critiques. This includes not only waged labour but also

> the ways in which women's reproductive capacities are commercialized and controlled. The economic value of unpaid domestic labour, which is disproportionately carried out by women, is essential for the functioning of capitalist economies but remains largely invisible and undervalued. (15)

This integration of feminist and Marxist critiques exposes the mutually reinforcing nexus between capitalism and patriarchy, highlighting how their interdependence structures inequalities of gender and class.

The theoretical foundations of this approach lie in Marx's central insight articulated in "The German Ideology" that it is not consciousness which determines life, but life which determines consciousness: human ideas are shaped by material and lived experiences. Building on this, Marx posits that the 'superstructure' comprising ideology, politics and culture is built upon the 'base' of socio-economic relations, so that the class which governs the economic order determines the whole cultural life of society, including its legal and educational systems. As Bressler notes, as an economy grows more complex, "the actual process for producing, distributing and consuming goods" gives rise to distinct social classes with conflicting interests, leading to class conflict (212). The ruling class maintains control over both the economic base and the ideological superstructure, consolidating inequality while presenting that inequality as natural and inevitable.

Marxist feminism, which emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s partly to address traditional Marxism's neglect of women's experiences, extends this class analysis into gender relations. As Selden et al. note, Marxist feminism seeks to incorporate the analysis of gender into Marxist social theory. Eisenstein argues that capitalism and

patriarchy are interdependent systems, linked through the sexual division of labour, which together sustain women's oppression both economically and socially. She further contends that the dominant class is responsible for spreading false consciousness, the belief that male superiority and female subordination are natural rather than historically constructed.

Applied to *The Penelopiad*, this framework reveals a deeply stratified system of power in which gender oppression is inseparable from class hierarchy. Crucially, however, the Marxist feminist lens also makes visible something that purely gender-focused approaches would miss: that oppression is not uniform across women. Penelope and the maids both suffer under patriarchy, but they do so from radically different positions within the class structure, and these positions determine not only their material conditions but their access to voice, narrative and justice. The following sections trace these differences through the specific dynamics of the text.

The class-based dynamics between Penelope and the twelve maids are grounded first and foremost in their divergent material conditions that determine the scope of their agency and the degree of their vulnerability within Ithaca's patriarchal economy. Penelope describes her responsibilities with a clear sense of managerial authority: "I made inventories… planning the palace menus and wardrobes… my swineherd would come to me for advice" (Atwood 85). Her role is not one of physical labour but of supervision and administration; she functions as what might be termed the bourgeois manager of a slave economy. She frames her achievements in terms of accumulation for Odysseus's wealth, 'more sheep, more cows, more pigs, more fields of grain, more slaves' a quintessentially capitalist logic dressed in the language of wifely devotion.

Her labour translates into social and material capital: property, status and, most importantly, the authority to narrate.

In direct contrast, the maids' labour translates into nothing: no property, no inheritance and no protection. As Charlotte Perkins Stetson explained in *Women and Economics*, the development of a system in which men control the economy while women are confined to domestic and reproductive labour renders women entirely economically dependent. This structural condition defines the maids' existence absolutely. The maids' chorus in "Kiddie Mourn" makes their material situation inescapable: "parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen... If our owners or the son of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse" (Atwood 13). This statement encapsulates their total lack of autonomy their bodies commodified, exchanged and exploited in a system that treats them as property rather than persons. In Marxist terms, this constitutes extreme alienation: they are estranged from their own labour, their own bodies and the value they produce.

This class divide is nowhere more starkly rendered than in the chapter titled "The Birth of Telemachus", where the language itself enacts the dehumanization of the maids:

> His birth was longed-for and feasted, as our births were not. His mother presented a princeling. Our various mothers / Spawned merely, lambed, farrowed, littered, / Foaled, whelped and kittened, brooded, hatched out their clutch. We were animal young, to be disposed of at will, / Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, discarded when bloomless. (Atwood 66)

This deliberate use of animal imagery reduces the maids to breeding livestock, stripping them of the humanity that would make their deaths morally legible. From a Marxist feminist perspective, this language is not incidental rather it is ideological, performing what the ruling class requires: the naturalization of inequality, the presentation of class hierarchy as biological destiny, and the pre-emptive justification of the maids' expendability.

This divergence in material conditions directly shapes the divergence in narrative possibilities. Penelope's class position affords her education, social influence and the leisure necessary for retrospective self-narration. The maids are confined to marginal cultural forms like songs, choral performances and fragments precisely because the dominant order has denied them access to authoritative modes of speech. The contrast in their material conditions is therefore not merely a social background detail; it is the structural precondition for the unequal distribution of narrative justice that the novella stages and interrogates throughout.

Atwood's narrative refuses to position Penelope as a straightforward victim. Instead, it exposes her dual role as both an oppressed subject within patriarchy and a complicit agent within the class hierarchy; a contradiction that is central to the novella's Marxist feminist critique. As a woman, Penelope is objectified and exchanged within patriarchal structures; she describes herself as being traded like "a package of meat in a wrapping of gold" (Atwood 39). Yet as a queen, she holds substantial class power over enslaved women. This double position of the oppressed above and oppressor below is precisely what Marxist feminism identifies as a contradictory class position, and it is the moral and political engine of the novella.

When the Suitors assault the palace, Penelope cannot protect her household through traditionally male forms of power like that of the military force or the political authority. Instead, she mobilizes the only resources available to her: the labour and bodies of subordinate women. She conscripts the maids into her intelligence network: "I told my twelve young maids the loveliest, the most beguiling to hang around the Suitors to spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent" (Atwood 117). This conscription is performed without the maids' full consent, without disclosing the danger and without any means to protect them from the consequences. The maids are not partners in the scheme; they are instruments of it.

This dynamic reveals the novella's core Marxist feminist insight: the extraction of surplus value from subordinated women by those in relatively privileged positions. Penelope extracts surplus value information, political cover and bodily risk from the maids, while framing the arrangement as mutual and even affectionate. Her instructions expose the logic of this extraction plainly:

> You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they'll confide in you and we'll know their plans. It's one way of serving your master, and he'll be very pleased with you when he comes home. (Atwood 117)

The phrase 'serving your master' is telling it underscores that no amount of intimacy between Penelope and the maids can dissolve the hierarchical relation that structures their interactions. Penelope cannot offer the maids freedom, legal protection or personhood; she can only reframe exploitation as duty. This reframing is itself an act of ideological power: it makes the extraction of surplus value appear as loyalty and service rather than compulsion.

The Shroud of Laertes is the novella's most concentrated symbol of this contradictory class position. In Penelope's hands, weaving a form of domestic labour becomes an instrument of political resistance, enabling her to delay remarriage and assert a form of agency within a restrictive system. However, this resistance is not achieved independently. Penelope relies on the labour of the twelve maids: "the most trusted eyes and ears in the palace and it was they who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night" (Atwood 113). While Penelope describes these moments with intimacy "almost like sisters… smiles of complicity" the power imbalance remains structurally unchanged. Penelope chooses; the maids are chosen. Their labour is essential to the scheme's success, yet they receive neither recognition nor protection. When the shroud's secret is eventually betrayed, Penelope attributes the failure to the maids' carelessness: "I'm sure it was an accident: the young are careless and she must have let slip a hint or a word" (Atwood 115). This is a textbook ideological manoeuvre: the ruling class displaces the costs and risks of its strategies onto subordinate workers and attributes failure to their inadequacy rather than to the structural conditions of their exploitation.

What emerges from this analysis is that Penelope's resistance to patriarchy is inseparable from her exploitation of the maids. Her agency is purchased at the cost of their safety. This is not an accident of character but a structural feature of the class dynamic the novella maps: within a system that denies women autonomous power, those with relative class privilege can only preserve their position by leveraging the bodies and labour of those below them. The possibilities of narrative justice, therefore, are already constrained at this level. Penelope's survival strategy ensures that the maids have no advocate within the household, and no protection from the consequences of a scheme they were never fully informed about.

The treatment of sexual violence in *The Penelopiad* further illuminates the intersection of gender oppression and class exploitation, and crucially the role of Penelope's class position in shaping how that violence is acknowledged, managed and ultimately obscured. Penelope's narration of the maids' experiences is marked by language that simultaneously acknowledges and diminishes their suffering: "Several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (Atwood 115). The words 'unfortunately' and 'hard pressed' soften the brutality of sexual violence into a kind of regrettable inconvenience. This linguistic softening reflects the ideological distancing of the elite from the lived realities of the oppressed they acknowledge harm while refusing to name it fully or act against it, because full acknowledgement would require confronting their own complicity.

Penelope's response to the raped maids further underscores her class-inflected complicity. She comforts them, has them bathed in her 'very own perfumed olive oil', and then instructs them to continue their deception: "Never mind... you must pretend to be in love with these men" (Atwood 117) From a Marxist feminist perspective, this constitutes reproductive labour in its most disturbing form. The emotional and physical care Penelope provides is not oriented toward the maids' wellbeing rather it is oriented toward restoring them back to a functional state so that their productive utility can continue. As Madhavi and Rao note, the reproductive capacities and emotional labour of women are systematically undervalued and exploited within patriarchal capitalist structures. Penelope's management of the maids' bodies and feelings exemplifies exactly this pattern, her care towards the maids becomes a mechanism of maintenance and continued exploitation, not an expression of genuine solidarity.

Penelope also condescends toward the maids who developed emotional attachments to their abusers: "Several of them did fall in love with the men who had used them so badly… I forgave them, however. They were young and inexperienced" (Atwood 116). This paternalistic response assumes that the maids lack the very capacity for the critical self-understanding, a hallmark of bourgeois ideology, which infantilizes the working class while justifying its domination. According to Penelope, the maids are merely children who cannot fully comprehend their own conditions, an assumption that conveniently absolves her of the responsibility to take their perspectives seriously or to act in their interest. The practical consequence of this paternalism for narrative justice is significant: it means Penelope never genuinely consults the maids, never treats their judgement as authoritative and never grants them the kind of moral agency that would make their testimony count. Their voices are pre-emptively disqualified at the level of class assumption, long before they are silenced by execution.

The execution of the twelve maids marks the political and moral climax of the novella and represents the culmination of its exploration of class-based violence. After Odysseus's return, the maids are first ordered to clean the blood of the slain Suitors from the floors, performing their domestic labour in the immediate aftermath of massacre before being executed: "he told Telemachus to chop the maids into pieces with his sword. But my son… hanged them all in a row from a ship's hawser" (Atwood 158). Stripped of mythic grandeur, this passage reads as nothing other than the state-sanctioned murder of working-class women for crimes they were structurally compelled to commit. They were positioned by Penelope among the Suitors; they had no means of refusal; they bore the consequences alone. The scene is the logical endpoint of the class dynamics the novella has been tracing throughout: the most vulnerable

women are the most expendable, and their expendability is the precondition of everyone else's survival.

Penelope's response exposes both recognition and evasion in equal measure. She names the maids through the functions they served in her scheme: "My eyes and ears among the Suitors... My helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves" (Atwood 160). Even in grief, her language retains a grammar of possession. She then delivers what appears to be an admission: "It was my fault! I hadn't told her of my scheme" (Atwood 160). Yet the admission is carefully circumscribed, she identifies a tactical omission, not a structural failure. The entire arrangement, from sending the maids into danger to withholding the stakes to failing to intercede when Odysseus returned, was Penelope's design. Yet she does not confront it and this partial confession functions as a rhetorical strategy: by acknowledging a lesser failure, she deflects recognition of a greater one. This pattern is what Kapuscinski identifies as the narrative of dominant individuals who manipulate truth to preserve authority is central to how Penelope exercises narrative control over the question of justice.

Paniagua's observation is decisive here:

> Atwood clearly criticizes men's privilege in Ancient Greek society, but not only men's privilege is denounced, but also upper-class women's privilege over low-class women with the mockery of Penelope's narrative voice and a defence on the maids. (52)

The execution scene makes this critique inescapable. Penelope could not prevent the maids' deaths through force as she lacks that form of power. But her failure goes beyond incapacity; she did not fully disclose the danger to the maids, she did not intercede on

their behalf with Odysseus, and she did not publicly acknowledge the role she had assigned them. The class-based asymmetry that governed their relationship in life governs the terms of their death. This continues to govern the terms of the narrative as Penelope narrates and the maids are described. Their deaths are filtered through her perspective, their suffering measured against her loss, their lives assessed by the value they provided to her scheme.

Rodríguez highlights that the murdered maids stand for Janice Raymond's concept of gyn/affection, a synonym for female friendship. Whereas Penelope remains trapped within what Raymond calls hetero-reality: "the world view that woman exists always in relation to man" (20). Even in her most intimate moments with the maids, Penelope's solidarity is ultimately subordinated to her own survival within the patriarchal structure. The class divide forecloses the possibility of genuine female solidarity, because solidarity would require Penelope to risk her own position and the patriarchal system has ensured that her position depends on the exploitation of those below her. The maids are not merely servants within the household; they are victims of a system that commodifies female bodies and through Penelope's own narrative management it silences subordinate voices even in the death.

The most sophisticated dimension of Atwood's Marxist feminist critique concerns not material exploitation but discursive power: the power to tell the story, to name reality and to determine what counts as truth. This is where Penelope's class privilege is most fully operative and most consequential for the possibilities of narrative justice. Her ability to narrate is inseparable from her aristocratic position as she possesses the education, social influence and authority that the maids entirely lack. The novella opens with her declaration of intent: "Now that all others have run out of air,

it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself... I'll spin a thread of my own" (Atwood 4). The weaving metaphor is deliberate and revealing: just as how she controlled the physical loom by weaving and unweaving Laertes' Shroud, she now controls the narrative loom too. By constructing and reconstructing the truth according to her own interests. Thus, it can be stated that from the outset her storytelling is a form of ideological power.

Atwood further complicates this by connecting the act of storytelling explicitly to class. In the chapter entitled "A Low Art", Penelope concedes that "it's a low art, tale-telling," associated with the lower classes like that of the minstrels, players and servants right before proceeding to appropriate that art for her own purposes. She states, "I'd tried to play the minstrel" (93), while simultaneously acknowledging that "there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling with the arts" (93). This self-conscious appropriation is itself a class act: Penelope descends into the cultural forms of the subordinate class in order to claim the intimacy and authority of first-person narration, while retaining the ideological advantages of her aristocratic position. As Paniagua observes, Penelope "decides that she is going to become a storyteller, to tell the hidden truth" (58), yet what she tells is always a partial truth, shaped by the need to preserve her moral image and justify her actions.

Kapuscinski's assessment is precise here, Penelope openly acknowledges certain mistakes, yet her confessions remain incomplete. Thus, her narrative becomes an example of how dominant individuals manipulate truth to preserve authority. This manipulation operates through several techniques like that of selective remembrance, ironic self-deprecation that deflects serious interrogation, and the strategic confession of lesser transgressions to obscure greater ones. Looking back on the events preceding

the maids' execution, Penelope concedes that her "actions were ill-considered and causing harm" (Atwood 123), yet immediately qualifies this: "But I was running out of time, and becoming desperate, and I had to use every ruse and stratagem at my command" (Atwood 120). The confession is real, but it is carefully bounded. As Adrienne Rich observes, evasions of the truth are "usually attempts to make everything simpler [...] than it really is" (188) and Penelope's narrative is consistently, strategically simpler than the full truth of what occurred.

Penelope also acknowledges a paradox at the heart of her narration: "I have no mouth through which I can speak" (Atwood 4). As a dead person speaking from Hades, she cannot literally speak yet she does speak, and at considerable length. The novella is saturated with this kind of irony and paradox: only the dead can raise their voices here, and the act of narration itself is presented as both impossible and unstoppable. From a Marxist feminist perspective, this paradox is politically meaningful. It signals that narrative authority, even when apparently liberated from the constraints of the living world, remains structured by the class relations that governed the speaker's life. Penelope narrates because she was always the one with the cultural resources to narrate; the maids perform and sing because those were always the only forms available to them. The hierarchy of narrative forms mirrors and reproduces the class hierarchy of Ithacan society.

The feminist message of the novella is perceptible from its opening pages from the rhetorical questions that Penelope deploys to defend herself: "Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptations..." (Atwood 157). In *The Odyssey*, faithfulness is Penelope's sole defining virtue, the quality that justifies her position and her survival. Atwood's rewriting reveals

the terrible cost of that faithfulness: Penelope saved her own position by failing to protect the women who served her. From a sociological perspective, Perkins highlights how "when man began to feed and defend woman, she ceased proportionally to feed and defend herself" (61). Hence Penelope's dependence on Odysseus is structural and not merely the emotional means that when forced to choose between her maids and her own survival within the patriarchal order, she chooses herself. This is not simply a moral failure; it is the predictable consequence of a system in which women are denied independent access to justice and must navigate it through the men who control it.

Against Penelope's controlled, authoritative narration, the maids' choral voices constitute what can be understood as a structurally necessary counter-narrative, the one that does not simply supplement Penelope's account but actively contests it, exposing its omissions, distortions and self-serving interpretations. Mihoko Suzuki highlights the intersection of gender and class hierarchies through this choral device, while the interruptive presence of the maids provides intervals of counter-truth to Penelope's truth claims, instantiating a degree of balance that Penelope's own attempts at justice consistently fail to restore.

The maids' voices are confined to culturally marginal forms: songs, ballads, shanties, popular tunes and theatrical performances. This confinement is not accidental it reflects the class-based restriction on which modes of expression are considered authoritative. Penelope narrates in prose; the maids sing and perform. Penelope speaks in the first person with the full authority of a subject; the maids speak in chorus, collectively and anonymously. These differences in expressive form are themselves evidence of the class dynamics that the novella maps: as Paniagua notes, *The Penelopiad* denounces "the fact that the vast majority of women in these myths were

servants and slaves who were never supported not even by their female mistresses" (52-53). The maids' restriction to marginal cultural forms is the discursive equivalent of their material dispossession, a confirmation that the system that denied them property, safety and justice also denied them the authoritative voice through which such injustices might be named and redressed.

Yet the maids are not silenced. Their collective songs, especially the chorus in "Kiddie Mourn", give voice to the experiences that Penelope's narration consistently softens or omits: the violence of being sold or stolen, the impossibility of refusing their masters' demands, the total absence of bodily autonomy. Where Penelope frames their exploitation in terms of unfortunate necessity, the maids name it plainly and collectively. This collective naming is itself a form of narrative justice, the one that operates from below, through solidarity and persistent haunting, rather than from above through the authority of a single speaking subject.

In the chapter titled "The Perils of Penelope", the maids' chorus offers its most politically subversive reading: "Only the twelve, my lady, who assisted, / Know that the Suitors you have not resisted… They must be silenced, or the beans they'll spill!" (Atwood 150). This accusation directly implicates Penelope in the logic of the maids' execution, suggesting that their deaths were not simply the product of Odysseus's wrath but of a calculated political scheme to ensure their silence. Whether or not this interpretation is 'true' within the world of the novella is deliberately left unresolved and this irresolution is the point. The maids' counter-narrative does not replace Penelope's narrative; it destabilizes it, exposing it as one interested perspective among several rather than the authoritative account it claims to be.

Northrop Frye identifies that "the righting of the balance is what the Greeks called *nemesis*" (209), where the essential thing is that nemesis happens regardless of its instrument. The maids' function throughout the novella as agents of nemesis, returning repeatedly from Hades to expose hidden guilt and unresolved injustice. Their haunting of Penelope, which leaves her in tears at the novella's close, functions as a form of psychological and moral reckoning that no earthly judicial process has provided. Frye further observes that the chorus traditionally symbolizes the 'social norm' or the 'society from which the hero is gradually isolated.' In *The Penelopiad*, the maids' chorus performs this function with a specifically class-inflected way: they represent not the general social norm but the suppressed underclass whose perspective Penelope's narrative has systematically excluded. Their persistence ensures that this exclusion cannot be complete that the full truth of the class dynamics cannot be wholly contained within Penelope's self-serving account.

The continuing dialogism between Penelope and her maids brings into focus the central question of narrative justice: within a system structured by class inequality, can justice be achieved through narrative at all? Penelope's appropriation of narrative authority is simultaneously an appropriation of the traditionally masculine realm of justice where she positions herself as judge, prosecutor and jury, determining which transgressions are punished and whose are passed over. As Karen F. Stein observes, the "motif of telling a story in order to name and blame an evil-doer recurs in different forms in Atwood's fiction" (158). Penelope tells her story precisely to name and blame but the instability of her authority is exposed by the maids' persistent counter-narrative, which names and blames in return.

Barbara Hudson identifies that conceptions of justice and penalty are determined by "who has the power to say who is punished, whose ideas count" (6). This observation captures precisely the problem that *The Penelopiad* dramatizes: the ostensibly universal principle of justice is underwritten by social inequalities and inequitable power dynamics. Penelope's narrative justice is not impartial, it is enacted in service of her own perceptions, structured by her class position and selective in its acknowledgement of the harms she has caused. As Kapuscinski notes, her confessions remain consistently incomplete. She acknowledges a tactical failure not warning the maids fully while deflecting recognition of the structural conditions she perpetuated. Rather than confronting the class privileges that protected her within Ithaca, she redirects attention toward her own suffering as a neglected wife and isolated woman. This strategic self-fashioning exposes how narrative authority can function as a mechanism of ideological power a means through which uncomfortable histories are softened, distorted or partially erased.

Similar to the Shroud of Laertes woven and unwoven simultaneously Penelope's narrative fabricates a mode of justice while also unweaving it, exposing the frequently purblind nature of judicious processes. The maids' marginalized testimonies, confined to unauthorized cultural forms, reveal how Penelope's pursuit of justice has forced to the periphery precisely those perspectives that would most fully indict her. It is only in the latter half of the narrative, where the maids' persistence grants them entry into the space of performance and even the judicial proceeding, that the possibility of power being equalized is gestured toward though not confirmed. What the novella suggests is that justice, if achievable at all, will be won through struggle and the recognition of unequal power relations, not granted from above by those who possess narrative authority.

The recognition of the power inequalities that underlie justice processes leaves, in Hudson's terms, the question of where the moral centre is to reside. Atwood does not answer this question directly. Instead, she stages an irresolvable contest between Penelope's controlled, aristocratic narration and the maids' fragmented, collective, haunting counter-voice. The contest is irresolvable not because both sides are equally valid, but because the system that structured the original injustice the class hierarchy that rendered the maids' expendable and Penelope's narrative authoritative has not been dismantled. The novella refuses the comfort of resolved justice precisely because such comfort would be ideologically dishonest: a simulation of equilibrium that would reproduce the very erasure it claims to undo.

This chapter has argued that the class-based dynamics between Penelope and the twelve maids constitute the primary mechanism through which power, voice and authority are unequally distributed in *The Penelopiad*, and that this unequal distribution fundamentally shapes the possibilities of narrative justice within the novella. Through a Marxist feminist analysis, the chapter has traced how these dynamics operate across three interlocking levels.

At the material level, the divergence in class position between Penelope and the maids determines the scope of their respective agency. Penelope's aristocratic status affords her supervision over resources and domestic labour, enabling a form of strategic resistance to patriarchy; the maids' economic dispossession renders them entirely vulnerable, their bodies and labour commodified within Ithaca's patriarchal economy. This material divergence is not simply background context rather it is the structural precondition for everything that follows.

At the ideological level, Penelope's class privilege enables her to extract surplus value from the maids through the intelligence scheme, the weaving of the shroud and the management of their emotional and bodily states while framing this extraction as care, duty and affectionate solidarity. The Marxist feminist insight that the ruling class naturalizes inequality by presenting it as voluntary or affective is borne out with precision in Penelope's relationship to the maids. Her complicity in their deaths is real but carefully obscured, both from the maids themselves and from the readers she addresses. The ideological distancing of the elite from the lived realities of the oppressed is visible in her softened language around sexual violence, her paternalistic dismissal of the maids' emotional lives and her partial confessions reveal how dominant individuals reconstruct reality to minimize their complicity in systems of exploitation.

At the discursive level, narrative authority itself emerges as a form of class power. Penelope's access to education, social influence and the leisure of retrospective narration grants her control over the story over what is remembered, what is acknowledged and what version of events achieves the status of truth. The maids are confined to marginal cultural forms: songs, choral performances, fragmented testimonies. Yet their persistent counter-narrative refuses complete suppression. Through their haunting of Penelope, their choral re-enactments and their collective naming of the violence done to them, they perform what Frye identifies as nemesis, 'the righting of the balance' even as they demonstrate how partial and tenuous that righting must be within a system that has never granted them authoritative voice.

Ultimately, *The Penelopiad* does not offer a straightforward feminist recuperation of silenced women's voices. It offers something more challenging: a recognition that recovery of voice is not the same as achievement of justice, and that

solidarity among women is impossible without first confronting the class structures that divide them. As Paniagua observes, the novella denounces specifically "the fact that the vast majority of women in these myths were servants and slaves who were never supported not even by their female mistresses" (52-53). It is this refusal of easy resolution, of false solidarity, of narrative justice that pretends to be more impartial than the class conditions of its production allow that constitutes *The Penelopiad's* most enduring contribution to the study of class, gender and representation. The maids insist, from beyond death, that they have not been forgotten. Thus, the novella insists, through the unresolvable contest it stages, that the truth of their lives and their murders cannot be fully contained by any narrative, however artfully constructed by those who had the power to survive.

Chapter Three

Stylistic Resistance and Écriture Féminine in *The Penelopiad*

This chapter analyses how Margaret Atwood employs innovative narrative techniques to destabilise traditional storytelling structures in *The Penelopiad* (2005). Its primary aim is to demonstrate that narrative authority is not fixed but contested, shaped and reshaped through stylistic experimentation, multiple perspectives and the strategic deployment of form. By situating the novella within the framework of *écriture féminine*, as theorised principally by Hélène Cixous and further elaborated by Luce Irigaray, this chapter examines how voice, style and textual form contribute to the power dynamics within the text, ultimately showing how the marginalised speak back to the dominant narrative of classical myth.

The concept of *écriture feminine*, a mode of writing rooted in the female body, fluid subjectivity and a refusal of phallocentric logic, provides a productive lens through which to read the novella's formal strategies. Cixous's foundational imperative, that "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875), finds a direct literary application in Atwood's text, where the suppressed voices of Penelope and the twelve maids return from the underworld to seize the narrative. As Cixous insists, woman must "put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement" (875), and it is precisely this movement which is disruptive, embodied and collective that structures the formal architecture of *The Penelopiad*.

The chapter unfolds across three interconnected stages. It opens by theorising the relationship between écriture féminine and the novella's dual narrative structure, placing Penelope's prose voice in dialogue with the maids' choric interventions. It then moves into a close reading of the maids' choric sections, analysing how their formal features like lowercase typography, collective address, generic multiplicity, and embodied imagery give shape to a feminist politics of writing. Finally, the chapter reflects on the wider significance of Atwood's formal choices for questions of narrative authority, historical silencing, and the limits of female solidarity.

Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa*, remains one of the most influential articulations of a distinctly feminine writing practice. For Cixous, the history of writing has been almost entirely confounded with the history of reason, a phallocentric tradition that has systematically silenced women, reducing their voices to the margins of culture and text. Against this tradition, she calls for a writing that erupts from the body, that refuses containment and that embraces multiplicity, overflow and the refusal of fixed meaning. As Sofia Varino has noted, Cixous "used the concept of the 'feminine' in her plays as a container for heterogeneity, liminality and difference, mobilizing it to animate feminist strategies that interrupt male, white and/or hegemonic forms of subjectivity" (291). For Cixous, the practice of feminine writing is fundamentally characterised by the desire to create a mode of expression in which gendered, embodied and racial difference retains its alterity rather than being absorbed into the masculine economy of the same.

Luce Irigaray extends this project by positing a form of women's writing that evades male monopoly and resists appropriation into existing symbolic structures. Rather than drawing upon what she terms the monolithic logic of the phallus, this mode

of writing draws on the diversity, fluidity and multiple possibilities inherent in female sexual experience and subjectivity. Such writing disrupts phallocentric logic through non-linear expression, multiplicity and fluidity; rather than adhering to rigid, hierarchical and rational narrative structures, it embraces fragmentation, corporeality and collective modes of articulation. This form of writing resists fixed meaning and instead foregrounds plurality, openness and the embodied experience of women.

Crucially, *écriture féminine* is not simply a style but a politics, a challenge to the authority of the text itself. As Cixous argues, writing has historically operated as "the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). To write as a woman, for Cixous, is therefore always already a political act: it is to intervene in the historical suppression of the feminine and to insist upon the legitimacy of a radically different way of making meaning. This framework is indispensable for reading *The Penelopiad*, a text in which the formal choices are never merely aesthetic but are always bound up with questions of power, memory and the right to tell one's own story.

In *The Penelopiad*, the contrasting narrative strategies of Penelope and the maids are structurally inseparable from their different relationships to power. Penelope's prose narration is structured, coherent and explanatory, a mode of storytelling that seeks order, justification and a kind of retrospective authority. This stylistic choice signals her partial alignment with dominant patriarchal discourse: her voice operates within an already established narrative framework, attempting to reclaim agency from within the very system that has defined and constrained her. Though Penelope speaks from death which is a vantage point beyond the hierarchies of the

living, her narrative remains shaped by the rhetorical conventions of explanation and self-defence.

In sharp contrast, the maids' choric interventions introduce a radically different narrative form. Their sections incorporate songs, nursery rhymes, courtroom drama, anthropological lectures and sea shanties, creating a dynamic and stylistically diverse narrative texture. This multiplicity of forms disrupts the stability of the text and resists any singular, authoritative interpretation. By speaking collectively, always as "we" rather than "I", the maids challenge the foundational idea of a unified, sovereign voice and instead foreground a shared, marginalised perspective. The fragmented and experimental structure of their sections can thus be understood as an embodiment of *écriture féminine*: a writing that Cixous describes as "volcanic" in character, that "brings about an upheaval of the old property crust" and that refuses to make room for itself within the existing order "if she's not a he" (888).

This formal contrast is not incidental. It encodes within the structure of the text itself, the unequal power relations between mistress and slaves, between the woman whose story has been partially told and the women whose stories have been entirely suppressed. Penelope's narrative coherence reflects the partial privilege of her class position even within a patriarchal world; the maids' formal exuberance and fragmentation reflect both the creativity that emerges from the margins and the impossibility of articulating their experience within the conventions of legitimate discourse. As Cixous argues, it is "impossible to define a feminine practice of writing", for such writing "will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system" (883). The maids' choric sections perform this very impossibility and this very surpassing.

The maids' speech can be identified as a manifestation of *écriture féminine* on several interconnected levels: typographical, grammatical, formal and thematic. Together, these features constitute what Cixous calls the "inscription" of woman in language and her entry into the text on her own terms, through her own body and movement.

One of the most immediately striking features of the maids' choric sections is the exclusive use of lowercase letters. This typographical choice, common among contemporary feminist writers, including the hyperfiction writer Francesca da Rimini and the confessional Instagram poet Rupi Kaur operates on multiple levels. As one reading suggests, in the maids' chorus the reason why only small letters are used can be because of their intention to avoid hierarchies and lack of equality of importance from some letters to others. The refusal of capitalisation is also a refusal of the grammatical conventions that mark importance, proper names and the beginning of authoritative statements; it levels the text, democratising it formally in a way that mirrors the collective, non-hierarchical politics of the maids' speech.

At the same time, the lowercase typography can be read as expressive of the maids' self-perception of the smallness and inferiority imposed upon them by a lifetime of slavery, sexual exploitation and social invisibility. Atwood chooses this form deliberately: it is not merely a stylistic quirk rather a formal encoding of the maids' social position and their response to it, at once an expression of internalised diminishment and a political refusal to participate in the language of the powerful.

The maids consistently speak as "we", a collective subject that stands in pointed contrast to Penelope's "I". This grammatical choice is itself an act of *écriture féminine*, for it refuses the individualisation that dominant discourse imposes upon subjects in

order to manage and contain them. As Cixous argues, woman "always occurs simultaneously in several places" and "un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces" (882). The maids' collective voice performs this simultaneity and this disruption of unity, articulating an experience that is shared rather than individual, communal rather than private.

The use of "we" also foregrounds what Cixous calls the woman-for-woman relationship, the bonds of solidarity and mutual recognition that exist between women outside the economy of patriarchal exchange. The maids' choric speech is not addressed to Odysseus, to Penelope or to any male authority; it is addressed to each other and through the text to the reader. This mode of address enacts, at the level of form, the feminist politics that the content of the maids' sections articulates.

The maids' interventions encompass an extraordinary range of genres and forms: lament "The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn", popular song "If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune", sea shanty "The Willy Sea Captain", anthropological lecture "An Anthropology Lecture" and courtroom drama "The Trial of Odysseus, As Videotaped". This generic multiplicity is itself a formal enactment of *écriture féminine*. It refuses the master narrative's demand for a single, coherent form, instead proliferating genres that each illuminate a different facet of the maids' experience and a different mode of resistance. In Cixous's terms the text becomes, "a veritable aesthetic activity" that refuses enclosure and instead foregrounds the inexhaustible richness of the feminine imaginary (876).

The formal fragmentation of the maids' sections also operates as a kind of testimony to historical trauma. As Atwood's metaliterary frame reminds us, *The Penelopiad* is concerned with what is left out of the classical record with the stories that

could not be told because those who lived them were denied the authority to speak. The maids' fragmented, plural voice registers this historical suppression even as it refuses it; their formal exuberance is inseparable from the violence that has been done to them.

A central concern of *écriture féminine* is the relationship between writing and the body. For Cixous, the repression of women is above all a repression of the female body: its pleasures, its language and its capacity for signification. "Write yourself," she commands; "Your body must be heard" (880). In *The Penelopiad*, the maids' choric sections inscribe the body in multiple, often violent registers. Their early lament records the bodily reality of their childhood slavery: the labour, the sexual abuse and the absence of comfort. In "The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn" they describe how "it did us no good to weep, it did us no good to say we were in pain" (Atwood 13), a statement that captures both the physical reality of their suffering and the social interdiction against expressing it.

Janice Raymond has theorised this kind of enforced bodily stoicism as a "protective mechanism" allowing victims of prostitution to separate themselves from the humiliation, violence and degradation that they experience. The maids in *The Penelopiad* deploy precisely this mechanism, developing strategies of evasion and ironic distance, they say "we became polished and evasive, we mastered the secret sneer" (Atwood 118), that allowed them to survive the conditions of their exploitation. Their laughter, their shared secrets and their collective irony constitute what Cixous calls the *jouissance* of women who refuse to sublimate. Who have, as she puts it, "saved their skin, their energy" by "inhabiting these sumptuous bodies" (886).

This embodied dimension reaches its fullest expression in "The Chorus Line: The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll," in which the maids care for Penelope's infant,

singing of how "nine months he sailed the wine-red seas of his mother's blood" (Atwood 65). As Gerardo Rodríguez observes, "the poem is a reproduction of the maternal realm driven by instincts, corporeity, irrationality, lack of language and vulnerability, thus connecting with Kristeva's semiotic phase" (28). Rodríguez relates the maids' relationship to Atwood's maternal figures through the concepts of abjection and female *jouissance*: corporeality is enhanced to present the woman's body as a site of signification (29). Then comes the chilling twist that ends this section, the maids' realisation that had they known Telemachus would one day order their deaths, they might have drowned him as an infant, this foregrounds the female capacity for both creation and destruction, a double capacity that patriarchal myth consistently denies to women.

In Atwood's novella, trauma is not silenced but transported through art embodied in the maids' choric performance, their rhymes, their songs, their courtroom testimony. The classic story of Odysseus functions as a nexus in this metaliterary work: a literary account that was far away from the truth but everybody believed. The maids' testimonies reveal how art can be used to transport and transmit trauma across time, making visible what the dominant narrative has suppressed.

This dynamic resonates with what Bracha Ettinger has theorized as the transgenerational transmission of memory: the capacity of an artwork to function as a "transport-station of trauma", in which the traumatic encounter between artist and world "penetrates into, impregnates and creates further encounters" (Ettinger 331). between the work and its successive readers. In Ettingerian terms, the maids operate as artists deploying what she calls the *Matrixial Gaze*, a mode of address rooted in the feminine-maternal sphere, pre-rational and pre-linguistic in its origins, yet capable of

transmitting ethical questions, compassion and the demand for witnessing across generations (Abd Elsalam 39). The traumatic, for Ettinger, does not simply wound; it becomes Beauty, and in doing so redefines it. When the maids address the reader directly at the novella's close: "we're here, we're all here too, the same as you" (Atwood 195), they enact precisely this transgenerational transmission: their suffering, transported through artwork reaches future generations with the force of living memory rather than archived history.

The maids' poetry is not merely thematically resistant rather it is formally resistant, deploying a range of stylistic devices that enact their refusal to be silenced. Their earliest choric intervention includes rhyme, "air/fair," "bitch/itch", alliteration "feet", "fair", "fear" and anaphora in the repeated formula "the ones you failed, the ones you killed" (Atwood 9). These devices serve a double function: they are at once pleasurable, they make the maids' speech memorable, quotable and accusatory, using the conventions of song and poetry to direct blame and demand acknowledgement.

Dark humour and irony function throughout the novella as key modes of resistance. In "The Chorus Line: If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune", the maids' perform a bitter parody of the fairy-tale romance narrative, singing of a maid who wishes to marry a hero and live happily ever after, before revealing the fact that hard work and death are their actual destiny. The passing of a hat at the performance's end introduces a moment of startling meta-theatricality, placing the maids in the position of minstrels begging for coins from the very court that exploits them. Cixous's description of the feminine text as "volcanic" (888) resonates here: the irony is not comfortable but erupts from beneath the surface of the performance, threatening to destroy the very cultural forms it inhabits.

The maids' most overtly political intervention comes in "The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture", in which prose displaces poetry to present a sustained analytical argument. Here, the maids' claim that they could have been moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal goddess of the moon, and report that our rape and subsequent hanging represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians. This shift to analytical prose is itself significant: it claims for the maids not only the right to poetic expression but the right to historical and theoretical analysis, to the authoritative discourses that have historically been reserved for male scholars. As Cixous writes, it is time for women to "score their feats in written and oral language" (880) and to become "at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process" (880).

While the maids' choric sections enact the principles of *écriture féminine* most fully, the relationship between their narrative and Penelope's complicates any straightforward celebration of feminine writing as liberatory. Penelope is neither a straightforwardly oppressive figure nor an uncomplicated ally; she occupies the contradictory position of a woman who both suffers under and benefits from patriarchal structures.

This contradiction becomes explicit in "The Trial of Odysseus, As Videotaped," in which Penelope is asked to testify about the maids. Her initial response carries a flash of genuine solidarity, she says: "They were like the daughters I never had. (Starts to weep) I felt sorry for them!" (Atwood 113). But this solidarity quickly collapses into normalisation: "But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life" (Atwood 14). She ultimately admits that Odysseus's real crime

was that the maids' were raped without permission, framing the problem not as the rape itself but as the breach of proprietary protocol. Her final defence of Odysseus, despite her knowledge of his crimes, situates her firmly within what Raymond calls the "hetero-reality narrative", the ideological framework through which women's lives are structured by their relations with men, at whatever cost to their solidarity with other women.

The nurse, Eurycleia represents a subtler but equally significant complication. In "The Trusted Cackle-Hen", Penelope reveals her jealousy of Eurycleia's intimate knowledge of Odysseus and her special, pre-linguistic "language" for babies. This language is intuitive, embodied, pre-rational and connects as Penelope intuits, with the maternal dimension of *écriture féminine*. But Penelope's response to it is not admiration but competitive anxiety, an inferiority complex that reveals how thoroughly patriarchal domesticity has structured even her most intimate relationships with other women.

These complications are important because they prevent the novella from offering a naively utopian vision of female solidarity or feminist writing as automatically liberatory. Atwood's text is deeply aware of the class dimensions of gender oppression: Penelope can afford the partial coherence of her narrative because of her social position; the maids have no such luxury. The formal contrast between their voices encodes this inequality even as the text, as a whole, insists upon the maids' right to speak.

The novella's closing image, the transformation of the maids into owls crystallises the text's meditation on voice, freedom and the afterlife of the suppressed. The owl is a creature of multiple symbolic valences; in Greek mythology it is associated with Athena, goddess of wisdom, in the novella's logic, it connects the maids to

Penelope, who finds that her own attempts to scream from the underworld produce only the owl's cry. The shared metamorphosis of mistress and maids suggests, despite everything, a final convergence of their fates, a posthumous solidarity that the living world denied them.

The owl also symbolise freedom, throughout their lives the maids were denied mobility, autonomy and voice but after the death, they gets transformed into birds and thus gain all three. Their final choric intervention, "we had no voice" is followed by the onomatopoeic "to wit to woo", an enactment in sound of the very voice they claim to have lacked. This is the ultimate performance of *écriture féminine*: the body itself becomes writing, the cry becomes language, and the women who were silenced finally speak, even if they speak in a register that the phallocentric order cannot hear or comprehend. As Cixous imagines it, woman's writing "lets the other language speak; the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death" (889). The maids' owl-cry is precisely a language that is beyond enclosure, beyond death, beyond the reach of those who tried to silence it.

This chapter has argued that Margaret Atwood's formal and stylistic choices in *The Penelopiad* are inseparable from the text's feminist politics. Through the theoretical framework of *écriture féminine*, it has shown how the maids' choric sections with their lowercase typography, collective voice, generic multiplicity and embodied imagery enact as a radical challenge to the authority of the dominant narrative. At the same time, the chapter has attended to the complications of this challenge: the class contradictions embodied in the contrast between Penelope's voice and the maids', and the limits of female solidarity within a patriarchal order.

What the novella implicitly resists is a brand of neoliberal feminism that celebrates women's creative expression and mutual support in the abstract, while leaving untouched the deeper material realities of the class divisions, racial hierarchies, and economic dependency that continue to disadvantage women. Atwood refuses this abstraction. The maids' *écriture féminine* is always already marked by their specific social position: their writing is not universal but particular, not transcendent but embodied, not free but won at enormous cost. This is, ultimately, what makes it so powerful. As Cixous insists, it is "only by undoing" the work of historical suppression and by inscribing the breath of the whole woman that the possibility of genuine transformation becomes imaginable (880). The maids, in their fragmented, ironic, embodied and collectively voiced interventions, do precisely inscribe themselves into the text, into history and into the reader's memory, refusing, even in death, to remain silent.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a critical examination of Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) as a site where gender, class, and narrative authority converge, conflict, and ultimately resist easy resolution. By bringing together Marxist feminist theory and the concept of *écriture féminine* as its dual theoretical lens, the project has traced the operations of power simultaneously at the level of material conditions and at the level of narrative form, revealing how these two registers are not merely parallel but mutually constitutive. The central argument is that *The Penelopiad* is not simply a feminist counter-narrative to the Homeric tradition but a structurally self-aware text that maps the unequal distribution of narrative authority onto the class-based dynamics between Penelope and the twelve hanged maids. Their relationship is neither uncomplicated solidarity nor straightforward exploitation; it is, rather, a contradictory and morally complex dynamic shaped by the intersection of patriarchal constraint and class privilege. The conclusion this study reaches is both literary and political: within a system structured by interlocking hierarchies of gender and class, the possibility of narrative justice remains permanently compromised.

The study grounded its analysis in two complementary theoretical traditions. Marxist feminism provided the conceptual tools necessary to examine the material conditions governing the lives of both Penelope and the maids, foregrounding the economic base upon which the patriarchal superstructure of Ithaca rests and making visible what a purely gender-focused analysis would tend to obscure: that women's oppression is profoundly differentiated by class position. *écriture féminine*, as

developed principally by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, provided the analytical vocabulary for reading the formal and stylistic dimensions of the text, attending to whether and how women can speak within, or against, the phallocentric symbolic order that has historically reserved authoritative discourse for men. Together, these frameworks enabled an integrated analysis in which theme and form are treated not as separable concerns but as aspects of a single political project. Far from being incompatible, the two traditions proved mutually illuminating: material conditions shape the possibilities of expression, and the forms through which women write and speak both reflect and potentially resist the material conditions that structure their lives.

Chapter Two demonstrated that the divergence in material conditions between Penelope and the maids is the structural foundation upon which every subsequent dynamic of power and exploitation rests. Penelope's aristocratic position affords her access to education, resources, and the leisure that makes retrospective self-narration possible. The maids, by contrast, are rendered entirely economically dependent, their bodies and labour commodified within Ithaca's patriarchal economy in a manner that admits no escape. This divergence is rendered with particular sharpness in the animal imagery of "The Birth of Telemachus", where the contrast between the princeling's welcome and the maids' dehumanised births performs the ideological work that class hierarchy requires: the naturalisation of inequality and the presentation of social hierarchy as biological destiny. Penelope's contradictory class position where she is both objectified as a woman within patriarchal structures but also holding substantial class power over enslaved women is the moral and political engine of the novella. When she conscripts the maids into her intelligence network without fully disclosing the danger or providing any means of protection, she extracts surplus value from them in a manner that mirrors the broader capitalist logic the novella critiques: within a system

that denies women autonomous access to political power, those with relative class privilege can only preserve their position by leveraging the bodies and labour of those below them. The Shroud of Laertes crystallises this dynamic with particular force: Penelope's weaving and unweaving, so often read as a symbol of female intelligence and resistance, is an achievement made possible by the maids' invisible, unrecognised labour. When the shroud's secret is eventually betrayed, Penelope attributes the failure to the maids' carelessness rather than confronting the structural conditions of their exploitation which acts as a textbook ideological manoeuvre that the novella makes visible to the reader even as Penelope performs it.

The analysis of discursive power revealed that narrative authority is itself a form of class power. Penelope's ability to narrate is inseparable from her aristocratic position; from her opening declaration "Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making" (Atwood 4), she controls the narrative loom as she once controlled the physical one. The hierarchy of narrative forms mirrors and reproduces the class hierarchy of Ithaca: Penelope narrates in prose with the full authority of a subject; the maids sing and perform collectively and anonymously. These differences in expressive form are evidence of the class dynamics the novella maps: the maids' confinement to songs, ballads, sea shanties, and courtroom performances is the discursive equivalent of their material dispossession. Penelope's narrative justice, the study argued, is not impartial but is enacted in service of her own perceptions, structured by her class position, and selective in its acknowledgement of the harms she has caused. Her confessions, as Kapuscinski observes, are consistently incomplete: she acknowledges tactical failures rather than structural ones, redirecting attention toward her own suffering as a neglected wife while deflecting recognition of the conditions she perpetuated. Similar to the Shroud of Laertes woven and unwoven simultaneously,

Penelope fabricates a mode of justice while also, inexorably, unweaving it, exposing the purblind nature of those narrative processes that claim to deliver it.

Chapter Three demonstrated that Atwood's formal and stylistic choices are inseparable from the text's feminist politics. The maids' choric sections with their lowercase typography, collective voice, generic multiplicity, and embodied imagery constitute a sustained enactment of *écriture féminine*: a writing that erupts from the body, refuses containment, and embraces multiplicity and the refusal of fixed meaning. The lowercase typography performs the democratic levelling that the maids' content demands, while simultaneously expressing the smallness and inferiority imposed upon them by a lifetime of slavery and social invisibility, holding in tension two contradictory impulses of resistance and internalised diminishment that cannot be resolved without falsifying the complexity of their position. The generic multiplicity of their interventions encompassing lament, popular song, sea shanty, anthropological lecture, and courtroom drama enacts what Cixous calls the inexhaustible richness of the feminine imaginary, refusing the master narrative's demand for a single, coherent form. The shift to analytical prose in "An Anthropology Lecture" is particularly significant: by claiming the right to historical and theoretical analysis, the maids assert their access to the authoritative discourses historically reserved for male scholars. Their collective "we", in pointed contrast to Penelope's "I", refuses the individualisation that dominant discourse imposes upon subjects and foregrounds a shared, marginalised perspective. The novella's closing image, the transformation of the maids into owls, the creature associated with both Athena and Penelope's own posthumous voice enacts the ultimate performance of *écriture féminine*: the body becomes writing, the cry becomes language, and the women who were silenced finally speak in a register that the phallocentric order cannot hear or comprehend.

One of the study's most significant contributions is its sustained attention to the limits of female solidarity within the novella and to the structural reasons for those limits. *The Penelopiad* does not offer a straightforward feminist recuperation of silenced women's voices but something considerably more challenging: a recognition that the recovery of voice is not the same as the achievement of justice, and that solidarity among women is structurally impossible within a system that pits class interests against gender solidarity. The trial scene is particularly illuminating: Penelope's testimony in "The Trial of Odysseus, As Videotaped" begins with an apparent flash of solidarity "They were like the daughters I never had" (Atwood 113) before collapsing into the normalisation of sexual violence and an ultimate defence of Odysseus, situating her firmly within Raymond's hetero-reality narrative: the ideological framework through which women's lives are structured by their relations with men, at whatever cost to their solidarity with other women. Barbara Hudson's insight that conceptions of justice and penalty are determined by who has the power to say who is punished and whose ideas count captures precisely the problem the novella dramatizes. Within its world, no mechanism exists through which the maids can obtain justice, because the institutions of justice are structured by the same class and gender hierarchies that produced their deaths. The maids' haunting of Penelope functions as a form of psychological and moral reckoning a '*nemesis*' that, as Northrop Frye identifies, happens regardless of its instrument. But even this nemesis remains partial: it produces guilt and grief, not redress; recognition, not justice.

The novella's refusal of resolved justice is, ultimately, its most rigorous political gesture. A conclusion offering closure would be ideologically dishonest: a simulation of equilibrium that would reproduce the very erasure it claims to undo. What distinguishes Atwood's contribution to the feminist mythological retelling tradition is

its refusal of the naively celebratory model of voice-recovery that characterises some later works: it does not simply restore the silenced woman's perspective but interrogates the conditions under which voice is distributed and the degree to which even the act of retelling reproduces the inequalities it seeks to expose. The study's findings thus carry implications extending beyond *The Penelopiad* to the broader fields of literary theory and feminist criticism. Feminist literary criticism must attend to class not as an addendum to gender analysis but as a constitutive dimension of it; narrative authority is never simply a question of who speaks, but of who is believed, whose form of speaking is recognised as authoritative, and what material and ideological conditions determine these recognitions.

What makes *The Penelopiad* such a significant and enduring literary achievement is its refusal to sentimentalise these recognitions. It does not console with the suggestion that voice, however recovered, can substitute for justice. It does not allow solidarity to paper over the structural inequalities that divide women from one another. As Paniagua observes, the text denounces specifically "the fact that the vast majority of women in classical myths were servants and slaves who were never supported, not even by their female mistresses" (52–53). In staging the irresolvable contest between Penelope's authoritative narration and the maids' haunting counter-voice, Atwood has produced a text that does not merely represent inequality but actively interrogates the mechanisms through which it is sustained, naturalised, and reproduced in life, in death, and in the stories that outlive us all. The maids insist, from beyond death, that they have not been forgotten. The novella insists, through the unresolvable contest it stages, that the truth of their lives and their murders cannot be fully contained by any narrative, however artfully constructed by those who had the power to survive. The maids' owl-cry at the novella's close is, finally, a challenge directed as much at the

reader as at any character within the text: a demand to hear what has not been fully heard, to acknowledge what has not been fully acknowledged, and to recognise, in the gap between Penelope's story and the maids' counter-narrative, the shape of an injustice that literature can illuminate but cannot, by itself, repair.

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