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Myth and Intersections of Myth and Gender in Canadian Culture: Margaret Atwood's Revision of the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2020-2003>

Abstract: The first part of the article deals with the national myths of Canada. It demonstrates that the long-time supposed lack of myths in Canada may itself be regarded as a myth. After presenting useful meanings of the term myth, the intersections of myth/mythology and gender are considered, both in Canadian culture and in Greek mythology. Linking Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—the canonized beginnings of Western literature and their foundation on ancient myth—with Canadian culture, Margaret Atwood's works and their treatment of ancient and social myths are then focussed on, particularly her revisionist rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* in her novel *The Penelopiad* (2005). This women-centered rewriting of the originally male-dominated story starts from two issues: what led to the hanging of the 12 maids, and what was Penelope really up to? Among the results are an intriguing re-conception of the original main characters, an upgrading of female domestic life, and a debunking not only of Odysseus and his supposedly heroic deeds but also of the authority of ancient myths where precarious not least concerning their conception of gender and gender relations.

1 Introduction

When I was a student in the late 1970s, I was taught that a specificity of Canada was its remarkable lack of national myths—quite in contrast to its southern neighbor, the United States, which has been drenched with national myths like 'the American Dream,' 'the Frontier/the (American) West,' 'Manifest Destiny,' and 'American

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Exceptionalism,' all very positive, indeed 'exceptional' self-conceptions of that nation. In contrast, many earlier treatments of Canadian culture at some point resorted to a quote from Canadian writer Earle Birney's poem "CanLit" of 1962, which ends like this: "it's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted"—a kind of Canadian Exceptionalism *ex negativo*. Robert Kroetsch, too, whom Linda Hutcheon dubbed "Mr. Postmodernism," ruminated in his essays on Canadian literature and culture on the lack of Canadian founding myths, master narratives or meta-narratives, that is, concepts or implied micro-stories that condense a nation's shared or assumed story. Similarly, Canadian theorist and critic Northrop Frye famously stated that the Canadian sensibility "is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (Frye 1971, p. 220), addressing a precarious correlation between space, the perceiving subject, and the role of the imagination. Frye's former student Margaret Atwood in her literary works also created memorable phrases that symbolically encompass this earlier view of a lack of an identifying center in Canada, for instance: "We're on my home ground, foreign territory" (in *Surfacing*, 1972a) or, "The moving water will not show me my reflection" (*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 1970).

Yet, as a reaction to the cultural climate in Canada at the time, it was also Atwood—besides other critics such as Douglas Jones and John Moss—who set out in the early 1970s to identify typical motifs in Canadian literature which, as Atwood claimed, set off this literature from other literatures, especially American and British literatures. Her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* of 1972 presents the concept of survival as a central, typical motif or theme in Canadian literature. The book developed into the most discussed, best-known, and most frequently sold guide to Canadian literature and is a prime example of so-called thematic criticism, a frequent critical approach to literature in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s. Thematic criticism is interested in the themes and motifs of artistic creations, here specifically in what literary texts tell us about Canada, rather than, for instance, in their esthetic quality, their formal and stylistic aspects. This kind of criticism had developed in Canada in combination with a cultural nationalism fostered by Canadian politics at the time and in the wake of myth criticism, a school of criticism that Northrop Frye's scholarly works had launched in the 1950s (see esp. his *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957). Frye was interested in recurrent myths and symbols in literature and argued that all literary genres derive from myth. He

understood myth as a structural principle that manifests itself in the metaphors, images, and symbols of a text, thus revealing its underlying meaning [...] [and he] claimed that a culture's collective unconscious manifests itself in recurrent plot patterns, images, and motifs, which make the particular text a mirror of fundamental human experiences and at the same time anchor it in a larger context of tradition. (Rosenthal 2008, p. 293, p. 292)

Both Frye and Atwood argue that literature and its recurrent patterns are indicative of cultural and national identities, reflect and indirectly externalize a culture's collective unconscious or, as Atwood phrases it: "Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind" (Atwood 1972b, p. 18–9). Thus, while the national myth about Canada was for long that Canada supposedly lacked national myths, this does not mean that myths did not exist, or that their existence was not recognized, in Canadian literature and culture, quite the contrary.

2 National Myths of Canada

So were the critical tenets about the Canadian culture of the larger part of the twentieth century valid? Were there really no widely known, nation-defining conceptions of Canada before proposals by Atwood and others in the early 1970s? And what about today? By and by, in the wake of the earlier myth criticism and thematic criticism, Canadian critics have elaborated on a number of myths the belief in which, they argue, has held this prototypically multicultural society together. Sherrill Grace, Daniel Chartier, Renée Hulan, Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, and others have in the last decades commented on the idea of North as Canada's prominent national myth. Others have named multiculturalism, a term that was, after all, coined in Canada. Daniel Francis in 1997 published a book entitled *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* in which he devotes one chapter each to seven "core myths" (Francis 1997, p. 10) of Canada:

These are the images and stories that seem to express the fundamental beliefs that Canadians hold about themselves. [...] With repetition they come to form the mainstream memory of the culture, our national dreams, the master narrative which explains the culture to itself and seems to express its overriding purpose. (Francis 1997, p. 10)

Francis deals with the following myths, arguably in some chronological order and/or according to their increasing centrality: "Making Tracks: The Myth of the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway]; The Mild West: The Myth of the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police]; Your Majesty's Realm: The Myth of the Master Race; The Infantilization of Quebec: The Myth of Unity; Divided We Stand: The Myth of Heroism; The Ideology of the Canoe: The Myth of Wilderness; Great White Hope: The Myth of North" (Francis 1997, p. 5).

I briefly comment on only the last three of these core myths, namely heroism, the wilderness, and the North. Heroism in Canadian history and culture has long been a problematic concept, quite in contrast to American culture, which freely produces heroes and embraces, even idolizes them.

Canadian history does not present that many occasions when heroism on a grand scale was necessary. We have evolved historically at a measured pace [...], without the turmoil of civil unrest. We have had no civil war, no wild west, no successful revolution [...]. We have also lacked, until quite recently, a myth-making industry [...]. Our book-publishing industry was weak and foreign-owned; our film industry was non-existent. The media which create and sustain mythic heroes were not available to us. (Francis 1997, p. 112)

In a country with no common language, three “founding nations” (the First Nations plus the French and the English ‘charter groups’), which is today ethnically much more diverse and fragmented into several regions, hero worship tends to work out only for certain groups and parts of the country (see the case of Louis Riel), thus tends to divide rather than unite the nation. Francis concludes: “Every region of the country has its local heroes, but as a nation we have none” (Francis 1997, p. 114). And even when there were candidates, like Billy Bishop, the wizard pilot and former hero of the First World War, this heroism was soon called into doubt and deconstructed by Canadians. As George Woodcock stated in 1970: “Canadians do not like heroes, and so they do not have them” (qtd. in Francis 1997, p. 127). Or as Margaret Atwood formulates it metaphorically: “We [Canadians] cut tall poppies” (Atwood 1982, p. 305). In the absence of historically remarkable public figures, Francis argues, “celebrity has replaced heroism” (Francis 1997, p. 127). Indeed, we tend to be aware rather of Canadian artists — renowned writers, painters, or musicians — than, for instance, the Canadian ‘Fathers of Confederation,’ who remain an anonymous group of people.

The myth of wilderness and the myth of North are related: North in this Canadian context often also means wilderness (though not necessarily the other way round). In his treatment of wilderness, Francis focuses on what he regards as Canada’s prime, indeed mythic symbol, the canoe, which for him also points to a metaphorical voyage:

The canoe carries us out of our European [sic] past deep into the wilderness where we are reborn as citizens of the New World. The canoe emerges as the mother image of our national dreamlife, the symbol of our oneness with a rugged northern landscape, the vessel in which we are recreated as Canadians. As much as the beaver or the Canada goose or the maple leaf, the canoe is presented as our link to the land, to the past, to our Aboriginal forebears, and to our spiritual roots. (Francis 1997, p. 129)

In 1961, historian W.L. Morton had already written that the “alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life, and forms the basic elements of Canadian character” (qtd. in Francis 1997, p. 128–29). This unifying and empowering view of the wilderness (and the North) was also shared by the members of the first important and today iconic art movement in Canada, the Group of Seven, which officially formed in 1920. The paintings of these

artists have come to shape our idea of the Canadian landscape. Owing to their seeming omnipresence nowadays on book covers, T-shirts, coffee mugs, or placemats, Robert Fulford has called these nature paintings “Canada’s national wallpaper” (qtd. in Francis 1997, p. 135). The Group of Seven were so successful because they were great artists but also because they had a “nationalistic agenda” and “claimed to be creating not just art but a new national consciousness” (Francis 1997, p. 141), tied back to a distinctive, rugged, awe-inspiring northern natural setting and a unique style of representing it. It only added to their legendary status that their progenitor and inspiration Tom Thomson, self-taught artist and allegedly accomplished canoeist, died early, in 1917 at age 39, on a solo canoe trip on Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park.

3 Myth/Mythology and Gender

What do these Canadian myths of heroism, of wilderness, and of the North have in common? What role does gender play in these (and other) myths in Canada? How do myths and gender intersect? And what are useful meanings of the protean term ‘myth’?

Turning first to the national myths I have referred to, these are highly condensed, nation-defining ‘stories,’ or symbols, which the cultural elites, or even the larger part of a population, are aware of, tend to believe in, or at least acknowledge—whether or not these myths are an accurate representation of reality. Most often they are not, because national myths abstract, idealize, streamline. They embody what a culture wants to regard as its important values and force a diversified history into a coherent “story” (see Francis 1997, p. 11)—which points to the common usage of ‘myth’ in everyday language as ‘distortion’ or ‘untruth.’ As for the myths of wilderness and the North, many Canadians have never even been in the far northern parts of their country and, in contrast to its popular image, Canada is one of the most urbanized countries in the world. In contrast to the rugged, wilderness-oriented image the Group of Seven members wanted to convey also of themselves—due to their conviction that “the essence of Canadianness was present in the land”—it is known that, for instance, J.E. Macdonald “was a quiet, unadventurous person, who could not swim, or paddle, or swing an axe, or find his way in the bush” (Francis 1997, p. 142). Gaile McGregor has argued: “We tell ourselves that we find the wilderness peaceful and rejuvenating, but our history and our culture reveal just the opposite, that nature in the raw scares the wits out of us” (McGregor 1985, p. 53). Then too, scholars have demonstrated that “many of our cherished myths were invented by government agencies or private corporations for quite specific, usually self-serving, purposes” (Francis 1997, p. 9; see also

Rose 2003). A case in point is the Canadian Pacific Railway, which in the nineteenth century marketed the Canadian West (the prairies, the Rocky Mountains) with beautiful photos in order to get Canadians and people from abroad to use their trains to see, or settle in, the newly accessible parts of the country. Those photos laid the ground for the marketing of Canada as a country of beautiful, largely unspoiled nature in national and international tourism and have shaped the image of the Canadian West, and of Canada at large, as ‘nature’s country.’

Although national myths aim at capturing the whole nation, they tend to be generalizing, non-inclusive, mainstream constructions by the ruling strata of society that screen out certain groups or parts of it. And that brings us to the issue of gender. If we look at the myths I have referred to and their treatments in theoretical literature from a gender perspective, we might think that Canada to a large extent exists of men only. In Daniel Francis’s chapter on the myth of heroism, I could find only one Canadian woman mentioned (Laura Secord). This is, of course, not only the author’s choice but also an aspect of social history: thus, for instance, apparently all the earlier explorers and cartographers coming to Canada were male (such as Alexander MacKenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson).¹ In Francis’s chapters on wilderness and the North, again only very few women are mentioned and, with one exception,² remain anonymous and are seen as a group: “dance hall girls” (Francis 1997, p. 159) and “beautiful women” (p. 154). Concerning painters in this context, too, the Group of Seven is 100 per cent a group of men. Women in Canada for long have been systematically excluded or marginalized by myth-making; for instance,

[t]he Group [of Seven] painted nature in the raw, wild and *virile*: the country as seen from a canoe. [...] They spoke of art as an energetic, *manly* activity; they identified painting with adventuring and exploring. [...] It was believed that the struggle to survive in a northern climate created a set of national characteristics, including [...] physical strength, stamina, and *virility*, which set us apart as a separate people. (Francis 1997, p. 136, p. 142, p. 154; emphasis added)

Or, in connection with (ice) hockey, Canada’s “northern” national game: “He Shoots, He Scores, becomes the national motto, rather than From Sea to Sea” (Francis 1997, p. 168).

¹ Mina Benson Hubbard went to Labrador in 1905. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* refers to Marie-Anne Lagimodière, a fur-trader’s wife, as “one of the first women of European descent to travel into what is now Western Canada” in 1806 (Gwiazda 2018, n.pag.), as was Isobell Gunn, who in 1806/1807 worked for Hudson’s Bay Company but, significantly, did this dressed as a man.

² “Nell,” an actress and wife of Earnest Shipman, an early Canadian filmmaker (Francis 1997, p. 156).

If we want to learn about the role of women in mythmaking and make them visible, we by and large have to turn to female authors. Particularly from the 1960s onwards, master narratives have also bred counternarratives. The fourth and final chapter of Margaret Atwood's non-fiction treatment of the Canadian North, *Strange Things* (1995b), deals exclusively with female writers' contributions to the idea of the North, such as Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, Pauline Johnson, Joyce Marshall, Ethel Wilson, Marian Engel, Aritha van Herk, and Ann Tracy. Atwood concludes that female characters in these writings do "not conquer the natural world, or penetrate it" but tend to "befriend it" (Atwood 1995b, p. 106).³ She nevertheless points out that "large areas of Northern mythology are practically devoid of women" (Atwood 1995b, p. 90), apart from the Wendigo. The Wendigo, a giant, cannibalistic figure with a heart of ice and eyes full of blood, derives from Algonquin Indian mythology. It originally has no gender, though in literature it is mostly male (Atwood, however, discusses a novel by Ann Tracy referring to female Wendigo figures). Sherrill Grace in her chapter 5, "Fictions of North," of her 2001 monograph *The Idea of North* focusses equally on three male and three female writers on the North, the latter Aritha van Herk, Elizabeth Hay, and Gabrielle Roy. Concerning, for instance, van Herk's novel *The Tent Peg*, Grace, similarly as Atwood, sees a communion, not an opposition, between the female protagonist and the land/nature, such as when the protagonist and a grizzly bear "are represented as sisters sharing their space, agreeing to be different and to let live" (Grace 2001, p. 201). As Grace signals with her even choice of contemporary writers, especially in creative literature in Canada, women, also renowned ones, are substantially represented, which has left its mark on the way of dealing with ancient as well as cultural and popular myths. But before I further demonstrate this in connection with a text example, let us briefly consider various essential meanings of the term 'myth.'

The term has seen a bewildering number and range of definitions, some of them quite useless, such as Robert Segal's recently defining myth, much too broadly, as "a story about something significant" (Segal 2015, p. 4). Wolfgang Funk describes "Mythos" as "gemeinhin eine Geschichte, die zur Erklärung oder Versinnbildlichung grundlegender menschlicher Erfahrungen oder Fragestellungen dient" (Funk 2018, p. 15). Sigrid Weigel sees myth as a "social imaginary" articulated in certain images, characters, and stories, particularly in literature and painting (Weigel 1987, p. 269–70; my translation) but also in opera, film, and comics, that is, in the arts. The word 'myth' derives from Greek *mythos*, which

3 The texts she discusses are mostly not set far north but rather in the woods and summer-cottage country outside major Canadian cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal.

originally referred to something said, or a story. In Greek antiquity it then came to mean weighty stories about gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, and other larger-than-life, though anthropomorphized beings, such as nymphs. The stories were first transmitted orally, from generation to generation, with variations to the core story, thereby adapted to changing times, locations, and social contexts: “No myth exists in just one version” (Doherty 2001, p. 101). Wai Chee Dimock speaks of “network mediation” (Dimock 2015, p. 319) and “user-generated input” (p. 320). Although she also calls the epic “the most input-friendly genre on record” (Dimock 2015, p. 321), these stories have a recurrent, recognizable core (“epic essentialism”).⁴ First composed to be performed orally, they were later written down, in the literary forms of epic, drama, and poetry. Myths going back to Greek and Roman antiquity are complex but effective, powerful stories about outstanding characters and events which are of collective, even archetypal significance and impact. That they are regarded as “the prototype of all subsequent Western mythology” (Doty 2004, p. 16) may be seen also in how these mythical characters and constellations have survived the passing of centuries outside the arts, too. Thus in everyday life we today still speak, though in a much broadened context, of ‘Cupid’s arrows’ as cause of falling in love, of an ‘Adonis’ for a handsome man, of an ‘Oedipus’ or ‘Electra complex’ (see Freud and Jung), of an ‘Odyssey’ for a seemingly endless journey, of a ‘Sisyphean task’ for a seemingly never-ending undertaking, of ‘Herculean strength,’ of ‘narcissists’ and ‘Furies,’ of ‘Trojans’ for malicious computer software, or of Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility, when referring to one of the leading organic food lines. So-called national myths have already been referred to. Roland Barthes has pondered upon “mythologies” of everyday life and describes, for instance, certain French cars, beverages (wine) and meals (like beefsteak and pommes frites) as “Mythen des Alltags,” thus the German translation of Barthes’s book. Barthes treats mythology as a language and as ideas in form (Barthes 2010 [1957], p. 9), which makes the study of mythology a part of semiology and of ideology (see Godard 1991, p. 9–11; see also Körte and Reulecke 2014). In a popular usage of the term, ‘myth’ has also come to denote a misconception, mistaken belief, falsehood, as in ‘the myth about female car drivers’ (see the international women-driver jokes). It also denotes supposedly larger-than-life people, as in ‘Lady Di has become a myth.’ The origins of myth for W.R. Halliday “lie in the human endeavour to understand the universe” (Sellers 2001, p. 2) — see, for instance, the various creation myths of different cultures. For Robert Segal myth is to make humans “‘feel at home in the world’

⁴ On “epic [non-]essentialism” (in connection with film adaptations) see Dimock 2015, p. 326–28, though I regard her argument concerning this issue as rather extreme.

rather than to explain the world” (Segal 2014, p. 273). He thus addresses also the affective impact of myths.⁵ We should, however, be aware of how myths often combine illustrative, explanatory, affective, and normative functions, that is, how these “social imaginaries” also shape rather than merely reflect or embody world views and behavior patterns—either through repetition, if with variation, and thereby perpetuation, or through a conscious critical assessment of the overt significance and implications of certain myths.

From their early beginnings onwards, myths have been linked to gender issues (on classical myth and gender see Doherty 2001; Lefkowitz 1986; Lyons 1997; Zajko and Leonard 2006). Since myths are culturally important, psychologically affective and effective core narratives that “*provide symbolic representations of cultural priorities, beliefs, and prejudices*” (Doty 2004, p. 18; original emphasis), these core narratives have also contributed to forming ‘myths,’ in a more general sense, or cultural images, of women and men, with a normative impact. In this broader understanding of myth in the context of what may be called ‘social mythology’—Malinowski speaks of “myth as charter” in this context (see Doherty 2001, p. 102)—the concepts of femininity and masculinity may be regarded as myths which have been tied back to and repeatedly recreated in stories. Mary Daly, Riane Eisler, and many others have argued that “the patriarchal myths we have inherited derive their potency from ‘stolen mythic power,’ [...] that mythologies around the world originated in the worship of the mother goddess as the source and destination of all life [...] in all the oldest creation myths the female goddess creates the earth from her own body” (Sellers 2001, p. 16–7).⁶ Due to changes in food-management techniques over the centuries, women and men’s roles gradually changed and it became the men’s role to protect food supplies against marauding invaders, with a greater stress on physical violence and war. As a result, gender relations and gender myths were changing and in the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal world view, they developed from a communal and cooperative into a power-differential, hierarchical pattern.

One of “patriarchy’s inaugural myths,” Homer’s *Iliad*, is full of gratuitous violence and has been regarded as misogynist (see, e.g., Sellers 2001, p. 18, p. 8).

5 See also: “Die Genesis des Mythos entspringt dem affektiv-kognitiven Bedürfnis des Menschen nach Weltbewältigung, -erklärung oder -deutung auf einer dem Logos entweder nicht zugänglichen oder von ihm nicht gewählten Ebene der Auseinandersetzung mit der Welt” (Heuermann 1988, p. 12–3).

6 See also Keating 2014; Wilson 2000, p. 215; and Doherty 2001, where it is argued that “belief in prehistoric ‘matriarchy’ [...] originated with male scholars [such as J.J. Bachofen] who thought that human progress had meant getting *beyond* that stage” (Doherty 2001, p. 115; original emphasis).

The text deals with the Greek-Trojan war, its causes,⁷ and Odysseus' (Latin 'Ulysses') 'heroic' and wily deeds, which lead to the Greeks' eventual conquering of Troy (think of 'the Trojan horse'). Homer's second epic, *The Odyssey*, treats Odysseus' long return journey home to his kingdom on the Greek island of Ithaca, after the Trojan War had extended over 10 years. The many adventures of his return journey span another 10 years. When the hero, first disguised as a beggar, eventually returns home to his loving wife, Queen Penelope, after 20 years of absence, he kills her many suitors whom she had faithfully and shrewdly resisted while waiting for her husband's return. He also orders the execution of her 12 favorite maids, who had got entangled with the suitors.⁸

4 Intersections of Myth and Gender in Margaret Atwood's Works

Linking these canonized beginnings of Western literature and their foundation on ancient myth with contemporary Canadian culture, I will deal with Margaret Atwood's revisionist rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad* of 2005. Indeed, the contemporary writer who has been considered to have made most use of ancient and cultural myths in her, or his, own creative writing comes from Canada.⁹ Myth and Atwood expert Sharon Wilson even states: "So evident are mythological and other folktale intertexts in Atwood's literary art that one might question whether any of her texts lacks such reference" (Wilson 2000, p. 220). It is true that from Atwood's earliest published book (the poetry collection *Double Persephone* of 1961) onwards, she has worked with mythological stories, characters, and images, in general most noticeably in her poetry but also in her numerous

7 The causes of this war were "a tangle of invasions and thefts," a series of reciprocal kidnapping of women, such as the Greeks stealing Medea and, in retaliation, the abduction of beautiful Helen of Sparta (later Helen of Troy) by handsome Paris, son of Priam of Troy; see Sellers 2001, p. 30 and p. 148, n.126. Scholars estimate that the Trojan War "took place in the 13th or 12th century BC during the Mycenaean era, [and] it is widely accepted that Homer composed his epic poems centuries later during a period falling between 750–700 BC. [...] [T]he historical environment of the poem is that of Homer's own day" (Kapuscinski 2007, n.11, n.pag.).

8 For a treatment of Homer and especially *The Odyssey* and their contexts see the "Introduction" to a new English translation of the text by Emily Wilson (2018) — which is the first English translation of the text by a woman, see <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/11/20/16651634/odyssey-emily-wilson-translation-first-woman-english> — and Katz 1991.

9 On the use of ancient myth in Canadian poetry from "imitation to quotation to parody" see Pache (1991, p. 145); for a short survey of the use of ancient myth in Canadian literature see Keller 2012a p. 38–9.

other works in the many genres she has tackled, including her visual art. Often, her taking up and revising myths in her writing foreground gender issues—see, for instance, her poems “Double Persephone” in *Double Persephone*,¹⁰ “Siren Song” and the “Circe/Mud Poems” in *You Are Happy* (1974); “Orpheus (1),” “Eurydice,” “Letter from Persephone” in *Interlunar* (1984); “Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing,” “Sekhmet, The Lion-Headed Goddess of War, Violent Storms, Pestilence, and Recovery From Illness, Contemplates the Desert in The Metropolitan Museum of Art” in *Morning in the Burned House* (1995a); as well as her short fictions “It’s Not Easy Being Half-Divine” and “Nightingale” in *The Tent* (2006). In her works, Atwood calls into question the time-honored authority of patriarchal classical myths, for instance by giving their female characters a voice, empowering them by presenting the events from their perspective, a narrative method that shakes up the received stories. Less overtly but not less effectively, numerous Atwood texts demonstrate to what extent “unconscious mythologies” (Atwood in Kaminsky 1990, p. 32) may motivate and influence behavior, especially concerning gender identities and gender relations. Atwood’s texts particularly work toward making readers more conscious and critical of cultural discourses and constructions of femininity. They thereby contribute to what Liz Yorke calls “the unfixing of the stereotyped associations that cluster around the traditional [...] myths and stories of western patriarchal cultures” (qtd. in Beyer 2000, p. 279).¹¹ For, as Alicia Ostriker has pointed out:

At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, [...] the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis [, and Penelope] [...]. It is thanks to myth we believe that women must be either ‘angel’ or ‘monster.’ (Ostriker 1986, p. 316)

5 Myth and Gender in Margaret Atwood’s Novel *The Penelopiad* (2005)

To refer to *The Penelopiad* straightforwardly as a (postmodern) novel means, as often with Atwood’s works, stretching this generic term—see below on the text’s structure and Ingersoll 2008, who calls the text both “a prose fiction version of the myth, a kind of ‘novelization’” (Ingersoll 2008, p. 111) and “Atwood’s pastiche of tragic drama” (p. 113). The title “Penelopiad” takes up Homer’s titles “*Iliad*

¹⁰ On the covert relevance of gender in the title poem see Djwa 1995, p. 30.

¹¹ For good analyses of diverse examples of Atwood’s use of myth see Beyer 2000; Howells 2008, here esp. p. 59–61; Keating 2014; Kundu 2008; and Péneau 2012.

(meaning ‘pertaining to *Iliion*,’ the city of Troy) and *Odyssey* (centering on the hero Odysseus), whereby ‘Penelopiad’ clearly indicates that the story pertains to Penelope and gives her a prominent role” (Rousselot 2011, p. 131; see also Alexander Pope’s mock epic, *The Dunciad*). In her rewriting of *The Odyssey*, Atwood works against the traditional binary images of gender groups (and also against the “essentialist–antiessentialist binary debates” on gender; see Beyer 2000, p. 280), an undertaking that is particularly fruitful in dialogue with classical myths and their rather static view of gender identities. Atwood, in contrast, shows individual and gender identities as an ongoing process, as variable, explorative, and multiple. Through the two epigraphs she chooses for her novel, which are both quotations from Homer’s pre-text, Atwood foregrounds the two main issues she tackles in her own version of *The Odyssey*. The first issue is Homer’s rendering of Penelope as an ‘angel,’ a ‘flawless’ model of wifely faithfulness and virtue. This characterization is encapsulated in Agamemnon’s eulogy to Penelope, the quote from Homer in the first epigraph of Atwood’s *Penelopiad*:

“Shrewd Odysseus! [...] You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius’ daughter! [...] How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope.” (Atwood 2005a, p. ix)

For Atwood, this “glory of virtue,” as other restricting images of women, has definitely faded. In the “Introduction” to her novel she, doubtful, formulates the first of two main riddles and “inconsistencies” she sees in Homer’s pre-text: “what was Penelope really up to?” (Atwood 2005b, p. xv). In fact, Homer’s conception of Penelope staying at home waiting for her husband while he is out in the world having exciting adventures (sexual ones included) is the founding myth of the infamous ‘sexual double standard’ in Western patriarchal cultures concerning different, socially modulated, sexual behavior of women and men, as well as of the inside/outside dichotomy of gendered spaces. With the conception of Helen’s character, *The Odyssey* also champions the view, still persistent today, that beauty, or external appearance, is the most important characteristic of a woman, as well as the archetype of the (evil) seductress making men lose control (Helen and especially Circe). Contrasting Penelope and Helen, Homer’s epic also establishes the virgin/whore dichotomy.

In Atwood’s rewriting, Penelope, after her death, as a “disembodied voice” (Howells 2006, p. 7) from the Underworld, may speak for herself—the larger part of the novel is made up of Penelope’s first-person narration. As a result, Atwood’s Penelope is rendered as much more diverse and complex, more ‘human,’ and certainly not flawless. Although she, for the larger parts of her narration, overtly

re-affirms essential parts of the traditional myth, in a perceptive reading, she figures as an elusive, unreliable narrator. Even the very first sentence of her narration, “*Now that I’m dead I know everything*” (Atwood 2005a, p. 1; original emphasis), must be regarded as ironic and indirectly also targets the traditional view that myths tell of fundamental, ‘timeless’ truths. Thus Atwood with her own contribution undermines the traditional view of myth as suggested in the general preface to the Myth Series initiated by Canongate Press in the United Kingdom (with publications simultaneously in 32 other countries), of which *The Penelopiad* provides one of the first three of altogether, by 2038, one hundred commissioned or anticipated contributions by diverse invited writers (see: “Myths are *universal and timeless* stories that reflect and shape our lives” [Myth Series’ preface, p. iv; emphasis added]). And although Atwood’s Penelope overtly presents herself as having been faithful to Odysseus over all these years, in spite of many temptations, she, after his return and their friendly exchange of mutual appeasements, characterizes both her husband and herself as “proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said” (Atwood 2005a, p. 173). Even close to the beginning of her narration, Penelope states: “Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better” (Atwood 2005a, p. 8). Then, too, Penelope repeatedly narrates of her longing for her absent husband, how she loves and admires him, presenting him as nice and caring in his direct treatment of her. But she does not regard him as the hero he appears to be in Homer’s pre-text.¹² With Atwood’s poetics of inversion (Nischik 2003 and 2009, ch. 2), here, for instance, using a method of external judgment of a person traditionally applied to rate women, Atwood makes Penelope (and Helen) repeatedly focus on Odysseus’ looks by referring to his “short legs” and his “barrel chest” (Atwood 2005a, p. 30–1). Penelope’s unimpressed, irreverent attitudes are conveyed in colloquial, humorous, witty, also blunt language that subverts the Homeric epic, elevated style. Here are two examples:

Of course she [Helen] was very beautiful. It was claimed she’d come out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who’d raped her mother in the form of a swan. She was quite stuck-up about it, was Helen. I wonder how many of us really believed that swan-rape concoction? There were a lot of stories of that kind going around then – the gods couldn’t seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other. (Atwood 2005a, p. 20)

¹² See also Wilson on Odysseus’, from today’s perspective, supposedly heroic deeds: “Who beside Atwood’s Circe and Penelope has ever questioned Odysseus’ vengeful and unheroic acts, including slaughtering the twelve maids, let alone wondering how killing Trojans established him as a hero?” (Wilson 2012, p. 58–9).

Penelope's questioning epic authorities and norms is, self-ironically, also directed toward her own narration:

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making [...]: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children — folks with time on their hands. [...] [T]here's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts. (Atwood 2005a, p. 3–4)

Indeed, Atwood's text is a postmodern parody of its pre-text, and partly even a burlesque travesty,¹³ as becomes particularly clear when we now turn to the maids.

For another revision of the Homeric figure of Penelope is that in Atwood's women-centered rewriting of the originally male-dominated story¹⁴ it is suggested that Penelope was, and still feels, guilty of the killing of her 12 favorite maids, though their execution was ordered by Odysseus, and carried out by their son Telemachus. In Atwood's text,

the twelve maids are the youngest, prettiest, and most faithful servants to Penelope, especially instructed by her to be pleasant to the suitors in order to spy on their secrets and report back to her. They even help her with her unweaving at night, creating a delightful atmosphere of sisterhood that pokes a finger in the eye of patriarchy and eradicates the class system, albeit briefly. (Massoura 2017, p. 400)

The execution of the 12 maids is the second of the two main issues or riddles for Atwood in the pre-text which she tackles in her version, namely: "what led to the hanging of the maids [...]" (Atwood 2005b, p. xv). This also brings us to the second epigraph that Atwood selected for her rewriting, the quote from Homer's pre-text that refers to the hanging of the 12 maids, who get practically nothing to say in the original. This brutal execution of 12 women is given short shrift in the pre-text, in merely three lines: "the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (*The Odyssey*, Book 22, l. 470–73)." Thus Odysseus did not only kill Penelope's about one hundred suitors but also had her favorite maids killed. As Atwood stated in two short comments on her novel: "the hanging of the 12 'maids' — slaves, really — at the end of *The Odyssey* seemed to me unfair at first reading, and seems so still" (Atwood 2005d, n.pag.). "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids: and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (Atwood 2005b, p. xv). Atwood also made use of other intertexts concerning the

¹³ On these generic issues see Staels 2009.

¹⁴ See also: "Because nearly all the works to survive from antiquity were composed by men for largely male audiences, the viewpoints of male figures (characters and narrators) tend to predominate" (Doherty 2001, p. 36).

Penelope and Odysseus myth, particularly of Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*,¹⁵ and thus one suggestion in her version as to why these maids had to die concerns their having got involved with several of Penelope's many suitors, without their master Odysseus' consent—as also hinted at, though ambiguously so, in the original (see Howells 2006, p. 12; Howells 2008, p. 62; Massoura 2017, p. 401). In *The Penelopiad*, it is stressed that Odysseus is unaware that it was in fact Penelope who, during his absence, had asked her maids to spy on the suitors, by whatever means they saw fit.

The shift of the maids from an utterly marginal position to center stage in Atwood's version—a change of focus as to gender and class frequent in Atwood's works—is also mirrored in her novel's structure: In the 29 numbered sections of the book, Penelope's 18 sections of first-person narration are 11 times intercut with sections in which the maids speak out. These sections are always headlined “A Chorus Line,” a phrase significantly linking modern musical theater with the ancient Greek chorus. As Atwood herself points out, “[t]he chorus of Maids is in part a tribute to the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy, in which lowly characters comment on the main action, and also to the satyr plays that accompanied tragedies, in which comic actors made fun of them” (Atwood 2007, p. vi). Following the headline “A Chorus Line,” various genre-addressing subtitles are always added, as the maids' sections are framed in a mix of different poetic, narrative, and dramatic as well as two non-literary text genres. They range from nursery rhyme, popular song, sea shanty, and ballad, via drama, to an anthropology lecture¹⁶ and the transcription of a videotaped, twenty-first-century court trial of Odysseus. In this trial, Odysseus is accused of “multiple murders” (Atwood 2005a, p. 175) but acquitted of the murders of the suitors because, according to the judge, “the generally esteemed [...] Odysseus was really acting in self-defence” (p. 177). The execution of the maids is considered negligible by the male judge, “a regrettable but minor incident” (p. 182). This court trial, videotaped by the maids, is another of the many (also funny) anachronisms of Atwood's rewriting, for “preceding the development of courts, constitutions and inscribed legal codes in the seventh century BC, Greece in the eight century BC possessed ‘no written laws or courts’ and [c]rimes were defined not by the state but by the accepted customary norms of

¹⁵ See Atwood drawing attention to this in her “Introduction” (Atwood 2005b, p. xiv) and “Notes” (Atwood 2005c, p. 197) which frame her novel at the beginning and end.

¹⁶ See: “the ‘Anthropology Lecture,’ a parody of critical writing on the *Odyssey* in the vein of Robert Graves, which reduces the maids and their suffering to mere symbol” (Jung 2014/2015, p. 55); on anthropologist writing of the myth and ritual school cf. Staels 2009, p. 104. Atwood uses a similar strategy criticizing abstract or relativizing types of academic discourse in the “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*” at the end of her eponymous novel (1985).

the kinship households that made up the society” (Kapuscinski 2007, n.pag., quotes from E.M. Tetlow 2005, p. 27).

In this truly ‘Atwoodian,’ multi-generic and multi-voiced manner, Penelope thus does not only talk back to Homer’s version, but the maids in Atwood’s version also talk back to Penelope’s narration (and to the judge). The maids wittily question and contradict Penelope’s statements and self-characterizations, and blame *her* for their deaths, although they also eternally haunt, or ‘stalk,’ Odysseus in the Underworld. As Hilde Staels pinpoints it:

from the maids’ standpoint their mistress is a cunning liar, who committed adultery, caused them to be seduced and raped by the suitors, and who ordered their execution. They interpret her as an incarnation of Artemis, a death-bringing moon goddess, whose arrows killed them [...]. The maids thus counter their mistress’ unreliable version of herself as someone ‘who had never transgressed’ (21). (Staels 2009, p. 106)

Did the maids, then, have to die because, from Penelope’s perspective, they knew too much, particularly, as the case may be, about Penelope’s multiple infidelities with her suitors? Atwood leaves this question, as several others, open. In any case, the maids point out the utter, also symbolic, significance of their murder in their *post-mortem* anthropology lecture, in which they politely counter an impertinent male listener in their audience: “Thus possibly our rape and subsequent hanging represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians. [...] No, Sir, we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap” (Atwood 2005a, p. 165–66). As Rousselot explicates: “The Chorus implies that the execution of the maids may have marked the end of a matriarchal society that had usurped power during the king’s absence” (Rousselot 2011, p. 141). Rather than “usurp[ing] power,” women, especially Penelope, of necessity had taken over power, running the kingdom during Odysseus’ long absence and neglect of his kingdom. In the final analysis, the title figure in *The Penelopiad* remains enigmatic, like other Atwoodian female protagonists, such as Zenia in *The Robber Bride* and Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*. Through the montage of different story versions and takes on events even *within* Atwood’s text (in particular Penelope’s version versus the contradictory one of her maids), any idea or pretence of a ‘true’ story, and thereby also the traditional authority of myths, are constantly undermined.

From a gender studies perspective, Atwood’s rewriting of Homer’s *The Odyssey* foregrounds the following thematic issues of the original, all of which serve the “patriarchal regulation of social relations” (Mayer 2014, p. 307; my translation) and thereby the downgrading and control of, ‘ideally,’ submissive women: a sexual double standard, which gives men leeway while restricting women; physical violence by men against women and men; women’s dependence on men

(of existential, even life-threatening impact); female archetypes, such as the faithful wife, the beautiful woman, the seductress, and the virgin/whore dichotomy; and male archetypes, such as the heroic adventurer or the philanderer. In Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, the following additions and revisions, genderwise, are foregrounded: The focus is shifted from the masculine to the feminine, and the rewriting thereby invents "a vividly realized female community that was barely acknowledged by Homer" (Howells 2008, p. 70). The narrative perspective is linked to female characters, who thereby get the opportunity to present themselves beyond the angel/monster dichotomy female characters had often been confined to in classical mythology. There is a clear focus on domestic life and the value, also the literary value, of the everyday (Penelope, the maids), rather than on extraordinary war and traveling adventures (Odysseus) as in the pre-text. Howells speaks of a "postmodern domestication of myth" and points out that "Penelope's chapter on the Trojan War is called 'Helen Ruins My Life'" (Howells 2008, p. 65). Female characters are presented as agents, rather than reactive to male actions, and thus reach beyond "archetypes of female passivity and victimization" (Kapusinski 2007, n.pag.) Also, female characters are no longer the looking glass reflecting their men at twice their size¹⁷—"for nearly every story or song from the *Odyssey* celebrating Odysseus's heroism, [...] a deflating counter story" is posited (Wilson 2012, p. 57). Howells points out: "it is the maids and not Penelope who have the last word, defaming (to use de Man's terminology) the Homeric monument to male heroism and female fidelity" (Howells 2006, p. 12). In extension of the traditional male/female binary of power politics, Atwood focuses on female rivalry, rather than sisterhood, based on women's jealous, reductive, or even malicious view of each other as they compete for men's attention, attraction, and approval, thereby colluding with patriarchy. These fraught relations of female rivalry in Atwood's rewriting encompass Helen vs. her cousin Penelope, Penelope vs. her mother-in-law Anticleia, and Eurycleia (Odysseus' old nurse) vs. Penelope. As a result, there is, for instance, a "magnification of the Helen role" in *The Penelopiad*, which here effects the "demythologis[ing] of the idealized image of Helen" (Kapusinski 2007, n.pag.).¹⁸ Mihoko Suzuki even speaks of "sororophobia" in the context of female rivalry (Suzuki 2007, p. 270). In the end, Penelope is left without any supporters, male or female, and has to fend for herself. Penelope's mother, a Naiad (water nymph), had taught Penelope as a child: "*Water is patient. Dripping water wears*

¹⁷ This metaphor is taken from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), see Wilson 2012, p. 57.

¹⁸ On the Helen/Penelope relationship, female emotional violence, and narrative justice see Kapuscinski 2007. On this same-sex and similar relationships in Atwood's works see Ingersoll 2008, p. 114–19. (Ingersoll is one of the strikingly few *male* scholars who have published on *The Penelopiad*.)

away a stone. [...] If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does" (Atwood 2005a, p. 43; original emphasis). Patricia Pearson generally argues that although women "frequently circumnavigate physical violence," they "become aggressors of a different kind" by using "psychological violence" and "developing into 'masters of indirection'" (Pearson qtd. in Kapuscinski 2007, n.pag.). Atwood's rewriting also deals with such (debatable) options for women to work around and reduce their socially produced dependence on men.

6 Conclusion

Surveying the use of ancient myth in modern Canadian poetry, Walter Pache concluded in 1991 that this use developed from imitation in the nineteenth century via quotation in modernist time to postmodern parody as of the 1960s. By extending formal experiments to burlesque travesty and a multi-genre mix in *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood has considerably pushed forward, and updated, the reception of ancient myth in twenty-first-century literature also form-wise. Wolfram Keller argues that the book "translates a foundational European text across the Atlantic to translate it back, in global setting, mainly to Europe" (Keller 2012b, p. 36). What seems more important here than a national dimension is the book's transnational, indeed global, significance as Atwood focusses on the universal category of gender, reconceiving the still virulent patriarchal aspects of that myth and its stereotypical, asymmetric gender identities. In fact, already Plato had argued that any group has to be careful which myths to pass on to their children and posterity—and *how*, we should add today. As Sellers states, "we must be ethically responsible in our choice of what to write [and teach]. Repeating Homer verbatim will only ensure that violent tales of warfare and rape are wired into the brains of each new generation" (Sellers 2001, p. 32). Since "*myths coalesce social values [...] that have been found worthy of repetition and replication*" and "display guiding models for modes of attitudes and behaviors," and since "people are the most unaware of the myths that they live out every day" (Doty 2004, p. 19–20, p. 27; original emphasis), a critical and revisionist approach to age-old myths and their cultural weight, not least concerning their traditional hierarchies of gender and class, has indeed been called for. Roland Barthes pointedly argues

that the way myth creates its meaning makes it difficult to refute its power: once we have received the myth its impact cannot be erased by explanation or qualification. Deconstruction or the reading of myth to expose its manipulations and suppressions is not enough, we must counter with our own mythopoeia; as Barthes writes, our best weapon against myth is to mythify in turn. (Sellers 2001, p. 32)

In Canada, a country that has been heavily involved with history, culture workers have been busy with this de- and remythologizing task, using myth as “a resource for imaginative creativity” (Doty 2004, p. 35)¹⁹ with a socio-political impact. This is particularly true of Canada’s leading writer, Margaret Atwood, who has devoted a large part of her long literary career to subverting and rewriting ancient and social myths where they restrict human freedom and equality, in particular gender equality, where they discriminate against women with power politics detrimental to them and, in the final analysis, also to men.²⁰ In Atwood’s “postmodern ironic contesting of myth as master narrative,”²¹ the spirit of Homer’s Penelope, in the original utterly virtuous and faithful, domestic and submissive, admonishes us from the Underworld in *The Penelopiad*: “Don’t follow my example, I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours!” (p. 2; original emphasis). In any case, as Atwood reflects on “the paradox of mythology—its simultaneous persistence and changeability” (Doherty 2001, p. 164): “The ancient myths remain fertile ground. Who knows what might sprout from them next?”²²

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19 For a survey of the influence of the Odysseus myth in Canadian prose fiction (focusing on texts by Frederick Philip Grove, Robert Kroetsch’s novel *The Studhorse Man*, and Atwood’s *Penelopiad*), see Keller 2012a.

20 On the costs of patriarchy, “the inequalities of the gender order,” also for men, see Connell and Pearse 2015, p. 8.

21 Quote from Hutcheon 1988, p. 50, in a different context.

22 Atwood, *The Penelopiad: The Play* (Atwood 2007, p. viii).

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