Margaret Atwood and the re-invention of myth in *The Penelopiad*

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*Resumo:* Com base nas relações transtextuais evidentes no próprio título da *The Penelopiad* de Margaret Atwood, esta pesquisa examina as características paratextuais, intertextuais, metatextuais, hipertextuais e arquitextuais das referidas relações com a *Odisséia*. O foco principal do trabalho é demonstrar como o conflito da autora com os códigos heróicos e com a natureza patriarcal do texto homérico a faz recriar a história de Penélope e de suas doze servas enforcadas a mando de Odisseu, tanto a partir do material épico como do mítico. Ao dar voz a Penélope, como narradora autodiegética, e ao coro das servas que comentam sua narrativa, cujas vozes condizem com nossa contemporaneidade, Atwood reorienta o horizonte de expectativa do leitor para uma nova perspectiva textual, genérica e crítica.

*Palavras-chave:* Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, Intertextualidade, Mito.

*Abstract:* Based on the transtextual relationships apparent in the very title of Margaret Atwood’s work *The Penelopiad*, this article examines the paratexual, intertextual, metatextual, hypertextual and architextual characteristics of those relationships with *The Odyssey*. The main focus of the article is to demonstrate how Atwood’s conflict with the heroic codes and the patriarchal nature of the Homeric text makes her recreate the stories of Penelope and of her twelve hanged maids under Odysseus’ orders, based on epic as well as on mythic material. By giving voice to Penelope as an autodiegetic narrator, and to the chorus of maids who comment on the queen’s narrative, whose voices are in keeping with our contemporaneity, Atwood redirects the reader’s horizon of expectations towards a new textual, generic and critical perspective.


*Résumé:* En tenant compte des relations transtextuelles évidentes au titre de l’œuvre *The Penelopiad* de Margaret Atwood, cette recherche examine les caractéristiques paratextuelles, intertextuelles, métatextuelles, hypertextuelles et architextuelles de ces relations avec l’*Odysée*. L’argument central de l’article c’est de démontrer comme le conflit d’Atwood avec les codes héroïques et avec la nature patriarcale du texte homérique provoque l’auteur à réciter les histoires de Pénélope et de ses douze servies pendues sous l’ordre d’Ulysse, basée en matériel épique autant que mythique. En donnant de voix au Pénélope comme narratrice autodiégétique, et au chœur des servives qui commentent le récit de la reine, dont les voix s’accordent avec notre contemporanéité, Atwood reconduit l’horizon d’expectatives du lecteur à une nouvelle perspective textuelle, générique et critique.


If the subject of poetics, nowadays, is “not the text considered in its singularity”, but “transtextuality, or the textual transcendence of the text” (Genette, 1997:1), one of Margaret Atwood’s most recent fictional works – *The Penelopiad*: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus (2005) – provides a striking example of this claim, the title itself already opening up several transtextual lines of inquiry which set the text “in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.” These relationships will in turn become characterized not only as *paratextual* – links which Atwood’s text maintains with its title, epigraphs, contents, notes, etc. – but also, consequently, as *intertextual* – the effective presence of *The Odyssey* in Atwood’s text; as *metatextual* – the critical relationship which becomes established between *The Penelopiad* as metatext and Homer’s text; as *hypertextual* – uniting Atwood’s text as deriving with Homer’s as pre-existing text; and as *architextual* – the genre relations which link *The Penelopiad* with *The
"Odyssey" and which will determine and guide the “horizon of expectations” (Cuddon, 1992, p.415) of the reading of the work (Genette, 1997: 1-7).

Starting from these relationships, this article investigates the way Atwood, as she comes into conflict with the heroic codes of the Homeric texts and with the patriarchal nature of Greek mythology – specifically exemplified in *The Odyssey* by the hanging of Penelope’s twelve maids on Odysseus’ orders – decides to retell the episode by recreating the characters not just from Homeric but from mythic material too, giving them action and voice, a voice at the same time in keeping with our contemporaneity. In dealing with these relationships, however, we need to keep in mind Genette’s warning not to consider these five types of transtextuality as separate, absolute categories, as, on the contrary, their overlappings are numerous and often crucial, as well as his claim that, if we consider *transtextuality* not as a classification of texts but rather as an aspect of textuality and of literariness, we should equally consider its diverse components not as categories of texts, but rather as aspects of textuality (Genette, 1997: 7-8). For this reason, although we use Genette’s typology in our reading of *The Penelopiad*, we will constantly be establishing an inevitable dialogue among these types of transtextuality, a dialogue provided by Atwood’s text itself.

I – Paratextual relationships

The paratext is defined as that “relationship that binds the text properly speaking, taken within the totality of the literary work, to what can be called its *paratext*: a title, a subtitle, prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, marginal and terminal notes, epigraphs, illustrations, book covers, and other signals, which “provide the text with a (variable) setting” and a “commentary”, which “even the purists among readers” cannot always disregard (Genette, 1997: 3).

Thus, as a first manifest relation with other texts, the title as paratext already establishes a contrast with the titles of classical epics, for, if *The Iliad* is “a poem about Illium (i.e. Troy)” and *The Odyssey* is “the story of Odysseus”, *The Penelopiad* is a poem about Penelope.

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1 As Atwood states, in a joint interview with stage director Phyllida Lloyd, on the première of *The Penelopiad* as a staged reading in London in 2005 — in which Atwood is to play the part of Penelope —,

*The Penelopiad* is dipping a toe in the theatrical waters out of which it came in the first place. Penelope’s opening speech presupposes an audience. She is speaking from the world of the dead to the world of the living. She wants to tell “you” that she’s not what people thought, that other people had told stories about her, but now she is down in the underworld she doesn’t care about social convention, she’s going to tell her own story. She lives or dies depending upon which version of the myth you are reading or listening to. (*The Guardian*, Wednesday, October 26, 2005)
Therefore, if the title suggests a female epic, the subtitle confirms that it deals with Penelope, Queen of Ithaca, wife of Odysseus, a woman whose chief merit, according to *The Odyssey*, is to have waited for her husband for twenty years, raising her son Telemachus, taking care of her domains and keeping the suitors to her kingdom away by means of the artifice of weaving a shroud that she unravels at night. We thus realize that this contrast results not only from the comparison of the title with other epics – the majority of which have a man as their hero, or the glorious feats of a nation, such as *The Aeneid*, *La Chanson de Roland*, *El Poema del Cid*, *Os Lusiadas*, *La Henriade*, *La Messiade*, among so many others – but also from the fact that this woman did not become known for any heroic or other feat of far-reaching effect.

This creative tension is given definite form in the two epigraphs from *The Odyssey* which precede the text: in the first, the ghost of Agamemnon, in Hades, after hearing the story of Penelope’s shroud, of her shrewdness and of Odysseus’ revenge, narrated by the ghost of Amphimedon, exclaims:

‘...Shrewd Odysseus!... You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius’ daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope.’ (*The Odyssey*, Book 24: 191-194)

In the second, the bard describes the hanging of the twelve maids who were supposedly traitors, for they had stained Odysseus’ honor by becoming concubines to the suitors – the princes who had installed themselves in the royal palace and were “eating up Odysseus’ estate” (*Penelopiad*, p.xiv) – and who he condemned to death as a consequence. This act was carried out by Telemachus:

...he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare... so the women’s heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to ring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (*O*, Book 22: 470-473).

If an epigraph designates the fragments of texts which serve as motes for a work and which, coming as they do immediately after the title, suggest that the writer has developed the work inspired by that thought (Moisés, 1999: 189), this conception is confirmed early on by Atwood, as she explains and justifies, by way of a new paratextual element – the Introduction – the reason for the epigraphs and, consequently, for the work. After recalling Odysseus’ adventures and

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2 From now on *The Odyssey* will be referred to as “*O*” in the quotations.
3 A Spanish poem consisting of a single line or couplet containing a complete thought. A mote maybe glossed by several poets or by the same poet in several versions (Preminger & Brogan, 1993: 802).
4 All translations of quotations from books in Portuguese are my own.
cunning – “the character of ‘wily Odysseus’ has been much commented on: he’s noted as a persuasive liar and disguise artist” – as well as the story of Penelope – portrayed as “the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy” (The Penelopiad, p.xiii) – and her relationship with her son Telemachus, Atwood mentions how The Odyssey ends with the slaughtering of the suitors by Odysseus and Telemachus, the hanging of the “unfaithful” maids and the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope. However, as Atwood goes on to say, The Odyssey was not the only version of the story, for a myth could be told in different ways in different places. Therefore, to retell Penelope’s story, and especially the details of her parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours about her, Atwood has gathered material from other sources, such as Robert Graves’ The Greek Myths, mentioned, among other works, in the Notes (which constitute, in their turn, another paratextual element).

Atwood ends the Introduction by explaining her reason for giving voice to Penelope and to the twelve maids:

I’ve chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of The Odyssey: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to. The story as told in The Odyssey doesn’t hold water; there are too many inconsistencies. I’ve always been haunted by the hangedmaids; and, in The Penelopiad, so is Penelope herself (The Penelopiad, p. xv).¹

For that reason these two issues constitute Atwood’s conflict, which led her to re-create the myth by rewriting the episodes from The Odyssey described in the epigraph, since, according to her, the episode of the hanging is not sufficiently justified, nor are Penelope’s real plans clear. Atwood’s obsession will thus also become the heroine’s obsession.

The epigraphs which should guide the text will thus in their turn be misled by the text, for while The Odyssey tells us about Penelope by means of the image projected by Agamemnon in the first epigraph, Atwood will make Penelope speak of herself and present her version/subversion of her own story, thereby deconstructing her Homeric image. And, while in the second epigraph it is Homer who describes the episode of the twelve maids in the epic past of the narrative, in Atwood, besides Eurycleia – Odysseus’ faithful nurse – narrating the fact to Penelope (chapter xxiii), the maids themselves will also narrate their story (chapters ii, iv, viii, x, xiii, xvii, xxi, xxiv, xxvi, xxviii, xxx) simultaneously blaming Odysseus, Telemachus (chapters ii, x, xxvi, xxviii) and even Penelope (chapter xxi) for their hanging, as well as also deconstructing the Homeric images of Odysseus (chapter xiii) and of Penelope (chapter xxi).

¹ From now on The Penelopiad will be referred to as “P” in the quotations.
Moreover, another creative contrast with *The Odyssey* becomes established in relation to the narrative perspective: in *The Odyssey*, Homer, as a heterodiegetic narrator, sings the feats of heroes, even when giving them voice; in *The Penelopiad*, the very heroine, as an autodiegetic narrator, reconstructs her real story, the episodes being confirmed by the chorus of the maids who also narrate their own story, as mentioned above. This narrative strategy will therefore become a crucial procedure for transmitting to, and evoking in the narrate the effects Atwood aims at, such as: the apprehension, by the narrator as main character – and therefore, also by the reader, as we identify with the narrating “I” – of the relative weight of the diegetic elements found in *The Odyssey*. These elements are related to the historical context in which the Homeric narrative is placed, with its thematic and cultural dominants, and Penelope’s judicious reaction – as Atwood’s spokesman – concerning these very elements, a reaction expressed in the reconstruction/subversion of some episodes of the Homeric epic, and, specifically, of the two epigraphs.

As a last para textual element, the Contents – indicating that the text is divided into twenty-nine chapters, eighteen of which are narrated by Penelope and, in a parodic counterpoint, the other eleven chapters are sung, recited or narrated by the chorus of the twelve hanged maids – confirm once more that the chapters narrated by Penelope as well as those sung by the maids will present versions and inventions of their own stories: not only from their birth onwards until the fatal outcome with Odysseus’ return, but also Odysseus’ judgment and the maids’ endless pursuit of him in his posthumous and simultaneously future life, forcing him to constantly return to the world of the living, in various reincarnations.

II – Intertextual relationships

If the paratextual elements already reveal that *The Penelopiad* as title breaks down our expectations in relation to the traditional hero of an epic, that the two epigraphs will direct the critical development of the text and that the Introduction will confirm the reason for the creation of the work – Atwood’s need to rewrite the myth, in order to redeem Penelope’s story by means of mythical versions other than the one presented in *The Odyssey*, and, especially, to redeem the innocence of the twelve hanged maids – it is through the intertextual relationships that Atwood’s text establishes with those of Homer and the myths that this redemption will be achieved.

Whether in the explicit form of a quotation – as the epigraphs have already shown – or of an allusion – the complete understanding of
which presupposes the perception of “a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts” (Genette, 1997: 1) – the intertextual relationships will also keep up an uninterrupted dialogue with the paratextual relations already analysed, while simultaneously pointing towards others. In this way, when these intertextual relationships are re-examined through the architextual, hypertextual and metatextual relations – that is, by means of generic, transformative and critical relations – that The Penelopiad establishes with The Odyssey, they become even more significant, for it is by way of this dialogue that Atwood’s subversive creativity will be best delineated. Therefore, concentrating on the intertextual relations that the epigraphs establish with Atwood’s text, we shall examine in what way the image of Penelope as presented by Agamemnon and the episode of the hanging of the twelve maids is recontextualized and retold by Penelope and by her maids.

In relation to the first epigraph, already partially commented on in Atwood’s Introduction – one understands the reason for Agamemnon’s praise: he is comparing Penelope to his own wife, Clytemnestra, who, with her lover Aegistus, murdered him. As the sequence of the epigraph reveals,

A far cry from the daughter of Tyndareus, Clytemnestra –
What outrage she committed, killing the man she married once! –
Yes, and the song men sing of her will ring with loathing.
She brands with a foul name the breed of womankind,
Even the honest ones to come! (O, Book 24: 219-223)

This favourable comparison had already been voiced once during Odysseus’ visit to Hades, when the ghost of Agamemnon, after telling Odysseus how he was murdered by his wife and her lover, admonishes him for his indignation,

so even your own wife – never indulge her too far.
Never reveal the whole truth, whatever you may know
Just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest.
Not that you, Odysseus, will be murdered by your wife.
She’s much too steady, her feelings run too deep,
Icarius’ daughter Penelope, that wise woman. (O, Book 11: 500-505).

Therefore, when Agamemnon praises her once more, after hearing from Amphimedon how Penelope behaved during Odysseus’ absence and even on his arrival at Ithaca, this praise – commemorated in the epigraph – well reveals this woman’s position, as wife and queen, in Greek patriarchal society: a figure emblematic of female virtue (in the sense of preserving her chastity and therefore not having children by other men to inherit the throne), fidelity, loyalty and obedience: the qualifiers “faithful/flawless/constant/loyal”, all synonymous of her capacity to wait for twenty years for her husband, deriving from the
strength of the etymological sense of “virtue” (used twice by Agamemnon) as vigour, valour, courage, energy.

This image, nevertheless, is what Atwood will recreate through her readings of Greek mythology, in which the following versions appear:

Some deny that Penelope remained faithful to Odysseus. They accuse her of companying with Amphinomus of Dulichium, or with all the suitors in turn, and say that the fruit of this union was the monstrous god Pan – at sight of whom Odysseus fled for shame to Aetolia, after sending Penelope away in disgrace to her father Icarius at Mantinea, where her tomb is still shown. Others record that she bore Pan to Hermes, and that Odysseus married an Aetolian princess, the daughter of King Thoas, begot on her his youngest son Leontophonus, and died in prosperous old age. (Graves, 1990: 373-4).

The *Odyssey* nowhere directly suggests that Penelope has been unfaithful to her husband during his long absence, though in Book xviii, 281-3 she bewitches the suitors by her coquetry, extorts tribute from them, and shows a decided preference for Amphinomus of Dulichium (*Odyssey* xvi.394-8). But Odysseus does not trust her well enough to reveal himself until he has killed his rivals; and his mother Anticleia shows that there is something to conceal when she says not one word to him about the suitors (*Odyssey* xi.180 ff.) The archaic account that makes Penelope the mother of Pan by Hermes, or alternatively by all the suitors, refers, it seems to the goddess Penelope and her primitive spring orgies. Her cuckolding of Odysseus and eventual return to Mantinea, another archaic story, are a reminder of his insolence in forcing her to come with him to Ithaca, against ancient matrilocal custom. But Nausicaa, the authoress, tells the story in her own way, white-washing Penelope. She accepts the patriarchal system into which she has been born, and prefers gentle irony to the bitter satire found in the *Iliad*. The goddess is now displaced by almighty Zeus, kings are no longer sacrificed in her honour, and the age of myth has ended (Graves, 1990: p. 374-5).

Availing herself of these versions to recreate the Homeric narrative, Atwood presents Penelope from several perspectives, when the latter retells her life story to us. In chapter V, after describing her cousin Helen’s beauty, Penelope comments:

As for me... well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to tell me that because I was a princess, and shortly after that a queen, but the truth was that although I was not deformed or ugly, I was nothing special to look at. I was smart, though: considering the times, very smart. That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion. (*P*, p. 21)

Her slight irony concerning what others said about her own beauty, devotion to her husband, discretion and, especially, her sagacity – already acknowledged in those times – thereby revealing a Penelope with an extra attribute in addition to those praised by Agamemnon, is reinforced by her self-defense, as she dismisses the mischievous comments about her, as told in the mythical versions mentioned above:

At this point I feel I must address the various items of slanderous gossip that have been going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years. These stories are completely untrue. Many have said that there’s no smoke without fire, but that is a fatuous argument. We’ve all heard rumours that later proved to be entirely groundless, and so it is with these rumours about me. The charges concern my sexual conduct. It is alleged, for instance, that I slept with Amphinomus, the politest of the suitors. The songs say I found his conversation agreeable, or more agreeable than that of the others, and this is true; but it’s a long jump from there into bed. (*P*, p.143)

Her sexual behaviour with the suitors, her mother-in-law’s silence concerning them, and even the fact that Odysseus did not reveal himself immediately to her when he came back, are all explained and/or refuted
by Penelope. She thus shows that Agamemnon’s account was only one part of the reality, for it revealed the version of a man imbued with a patriarchal vision, in which the social organization was hierarchical: men maintained the dominant positions in terms of power, status and prestige, while women were excluded from power. Consequently, women’s behavior should be regulated by what men expected or demanded from them: virtue and obedience.

However, in spite of this refutation, in the next chapter the chorus of maids presents “The perils of Penelope, a Drama”, another dramatized version of Penelope’s story. In this account, Penelope and Eurycleia agree that the latter should point out to Odysseus the maids who connived with Penelope’s betraying of Odysseus with the suitors and who, therefore, should be eliminated as “disloyal”, so that Penelope could keep her reputation as model-wife. She implores the old nurse,

Oh then, dear Nurse, it’s really up to you To save me, and Odysseus’ honour too! Because he sucked at your now–ancient bust, You are the only one of us he’ll trust. Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal, Snatched by the suitors as unlawful spoil Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be The doting slaves of such a Lord as he! (P, p. 150).

Atwood, however, provides us with another version of Penelope, this time as she presents herself to Odysseus, after the executions of the suitors and the maids and following the couple’s reunion in their nuptial bed, after twenty years apart. As Penelope comments, after Odysseus had told her of all his adventures and how much he had missed her,

(…) I told him how vary many tears I’d shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I’d been, and how I would never have even so much as thought of betraying his gigantic bed with its wondrous bedpost by sleeping in it with any other man.

The two of us were –by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other. (P, p. 173)

Atwood thus does not limit her creativity by offering only one different account from that presented by Agamemnon, which she specifically wanted to deconstruct. As she appreciates Penelope’s shrewdness, Atwood leaves the possibility open that Penelope may be telling the truth to us readers of the twenty-first century, as well as hiding her sexual relationship with the suitors, as revealed by the maids, who were accused by Eurycleia in connivance with the queen, and consequently, executed; especially as Penelope discloses to us, at the end, that her “tedious faithfulness”(P, p. 173), revealed to Odysseus, could be a lie. Penelope’s “scheme”, therefore, lacks nothing beside the literal and metaphorical piece of weaving which she worked on to cheat the suitors, thereby characterizing this Atwoodian heroine as a
challenger of the Homeric patriarchal conventions as she subverts, through ambiguity, her own image as consecrated by Homer.

In relation to the second epigraph, already partially commented on in the paratextual relations, Greek mythology briefly mentions the episode of the hanging of the maid-servants by Odysseus, after the massacre of the suitors:

He now paused to ask Eurykleia, who had locked the palace women in their quarters, how many of these had remained true to his cause. She answered: ‘Only twelve have disgraced themselves, my lord.’ The guilty maid-servants were summoned and set to cleanse the hall of blood with sponges and water; when they had done, Odysseus hanged them in a row. They kicked a little, but soon all was over. (Graves,1990: 372)

Other mythical references to the maids suggest that the suitors to Penelope’s hand, during Odysseus’ absence, spent their time “disporting themselves in Odysseus’s palace, drinking his wine, slaughtering his pigs, sheep, and cattle, and seducing his maid-servants” (Graves,1990: 370), thereby providing Atwood – obsessed with the cruel, unjust death to which these maids were submitted by Odysseus in the myth, and by Telemachus on Odysseus’ orders in The Odyssey – with the justification to rewrite their story. This injustice, however, is endorsed by the very myth, for, in the language of myths, every enterprise that carries out justice, that redeems offenses, that rescues someone from a state of wretchedness, is generally represented as the restoration of a former ideal order (Calvino, 2004: 19). The punishment meted out by Odysseus to the suitors and the servants is thus his attempt to restore an ideal order, that existed prior to his departure to Troy, thereby reaffirming his true identity and his pitiless treatment of his enemies.

As one reads in Homer’s text, Odysseus, on being received by the queen and her maids on his return to Ithaca disguised as a beggar, decides to test the women and his own wife, in order to better plan the massacre of the suitors. When he is insulted by one of the maids, Melantho, because of his ragged appearance, Odysseus gives her a premonitory warning:

“(…) So beware, woman, or one day you may lose it all, All your glitter that puts your work-mates in the shade…. No women’s wildness here in the house escapes the prince’s eye.” (O, Book 19: 88-9 and 95-6).

Penelope also admonishes her, by saying: “(…) make no mistake, you brazen, shameless bitch./None of your ugly work escapes me either – You will pay for it with your life, you will!”(O, Book 19: 119-101).

And, in her conversation with the alleged stranger, Penelope reveals to him how her maids had divulged her weaving stratagem to the suitors and how she was then forced to finish the shroud, against her will:

Three whole years
I deceived them blind, seduced them with this scheme. …
Then, thanks to my maids – the shameless, reckless creatures –
The suitors caught me in the act, denounced me harshly.
So I finished it off. Against my will. They forced me. (O, Book 19: 169-175)

In this way, she provides Odysseus with a reason to ask his nurse Euryceleia, after he had ruthlessly murdered the suitors, to quickly reveal to him which were the disloyal servants: “Quick, report in full on the women in my hall –/ Who are disloyal to me, who are guiltless? (O, Book 22:443-4). And Euryceleia’s answer, accusing twelve of the fifty women who had betrayed him – again in keeping with the Greek heroic and patriarchal code – thus leads to the hanging of these servants:

“(…) now here’s the truth.
Fifty women you have inside your house,
Women we’ve trained to do their duties well,
To card the wool and bear the yoke of service.
Some dozen in all went trampling to their shame.
Thumbing their noses at me, at the queen herself? (O, Book 22: 444-450)

Yet whereas in Homer there are no references to the story of these maids – for, as slaves, their tale would not constitute a noteworthy subject, epics being restricted to feats of war – and, therefore, the reader’s judgment is based only on the above excerpts, Atwood makes the maids present their true and unknown story in a chorus in several chapters, and as a counterpoint to Penelope’s narrative, as mentioned above.

This creation of Atwood’s reveals the submission which these maids were subjected to, from their obscure birth to their execution and posthumous life in Hades: forced to work for their masters since they were children, submissive to them and to the visitors as concubines; their games with their future executioner – Telemachus; sleep as their only rest; their unfulfilled dreams of liberty and happiness; their constant rape by the suitors with no one attempting to prevent it. Besides telling their stories, the maids also blame Odysseus for their execution, including even Penelope in this accusation, for conniving with Euryceleia to stop them telling Odysseus about the queen’s supposed treacheries. As the maids retell their hanging –,

You roped us in, you strung us up, you left us dangling like clothes on a line. What hijinks! What kicks! How virtuous you felt, how righteous, how purified, now that you’d got rid of the plump young dirty dirt-girls inside your head! (…) Why did you murder us? What had we done to you that required our deaths? You never answered that. It was an act of grudging, it was an act of spite, it was an honour killing.(P, p. 192-3)

– we clearly perceive how Atwood, rejecting the Homeric version that they were guilty and that their hanging had been an act of “washing” Odysseus’ honor, rewrites The Odyssey by adding “apocryphal” elements in relation to Greek patriarchal culture, as she includes the
maids’ unofficial story and thus reinvents the myth, always open to the creativity of poets\(^6\).

The intertextual relations that the two epigraphs establish with the Atwoodian text – and which actually gave rise to *The Penelopiad*, because of the conflict they aroused in the writer – thus complement and broaden the paratextual relations already examined and also point towards the architextual, hipertextual and metatextual relationships which will come next.

**III – Architextual relationships:**

Although Genette argues that the object of poetics is the *architextuality* of the text\(^7\) – “the entire set of general or transcendent categories (...) from which emerges each singular text”; that it is an abstract” and “silent” relationship, “articulated at most only by a paratextual mention”, which remains of “a purely taxonomic nature”; and, further, that, in all cases, “ the text itself is not supposed to know, and consequently not meant to declare, its generic quality”(Genette, 1997:4), there is no way of avoiding assigning the title *The Penelopiad* to the epic genre, as much because of Penelope’s name as because of the “-iad”- “poem about” – which connects it with *The Iliad*, as mentioned above. Moreover, Genette continues, “determining the generic status of the text is not the business of the text but that of the reader, or the critic, the public” who “may choose to reject the status claimed for the text by the paratext”; however, “the fact that this relationship should be implicit and open to discussion(...) or subject to historical fluctuations (...), in no way diminishes its significance; generic perception is known to guide and determine to a considerable degree the readers’ expectations, and thus their reception of the work”(Genette, 1997:4-5).

In *The Penelopiad*, remarkably, the perception of the genre is not only declared and therefore imposed on us from the paratext and also from the intertextual relationships onwards, but will continue to be declared to and imposed on us by way of the whole work: from the hypertext in its relations to the Homeric hypotext, as well as from the

\(^6\) As Auerbach comments in relation to this patriarchal culture, the Greek text is limited and static in reference to the circle of acting characters and of their political mobility. Eurycleia spent her life in the service of the Laertiades family, is intimately linked to their destiny, loves them and shares their interests and feelings. But she has neither a life nor feelings of her own: she has only those of her masters. With this one arrives at the realization that life, in the Homeric poems, only takes place in the aristocratic classes – everything that belongs to the world outside this circle only participates in a subservient way. The upper class is so patriarchal that at times it tends to forget its character as a class. But it is still a kind of feudal aristocracy, whose men divided their time between fighting, market deliberations and feasts, while their women look after the maids at home. As a social structure, this world is totally immobile; the fighting only takes place between different groups of master classes; nothing appears from below (Auerbach, 1946:18-20).

\(^7\) Afterwards called “*transtextuality*” (Genette, 1997, p. 1).
metatext. However, these relationships with the architext as macro-structure will again become characterized as conflicting, if we take heed of the rules basic to the epic genre as pointed out by Massaud Moisés (1999: 184-188):

1. It should revolve around a memorable, sublime, solemn subject matter, related to warlike undertakings, as is the case with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* – the first celebrating the heroic actions and the suffering of the Greeks and Trojans during the Trojan war and the second narrating Odysseus’ adventures and misadventures during the ten years he took to return to Ithaca, but also reporting at the end his heroic performance as he challenged and killed the more than a hundred suitors installed in his kingdom, whose ambition was to marry his wife.

2. It should stick to historic events which occurred a long time ago, so that the legendary becomes established and/or that they allow the poet the freedom to add the product of his fantasy; as is well known, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were created around 900 B.C., and are characterized as natural or primitive epics, being anonymous and/or a kind of collective creation, of which the poet was the rhapsodist or compiler.

3. The protagonist of the action should be a hero of superior physical and mental strength; as the hero of Classical Antiquity, a being capable of performing superhuman feats, the Homeric hero also characterizes himself by his prowess, his physical and moral courage as Odysseus, who returned home to his wife victorious over all the enemies and dangers he faced (Moisés, 1999: 273), in the same way as Penelope, in *The Odyssey*, is characterized as having “great wisdom” (Book 23: 464).

4. Love may be inserted into the heroic plot, but in the form of isolated episodes and, by being tender and magnanimous, it harmonically complements the war feats; as *The Odyssey* reveals, after Penelope recognizes Odysseus – Rejoicing in each other, they returned to their bed, “The old familiar place they loved so well” (*O*, Book 23: 338-9), – a scene which harmonically complements Odysseus’ heroic deeds and the wreaking of his vengeance against the suitors, and which, in turn, is further enlarged and enriched by the mutual telling of their stories:

   But the royal couple, once they’d revealed in all  
The longed-for joys of love, revealed in each other’s stories,  
the radiant woman telling of all she’d borne at home,  
watching them there, the infernal crowd of suitors  
slaughtering herds of cattle and good fat sheep – (…)  
And great Odysseus told his wife of all the pains  
He had dealt out to other men and all the hardships  
He’d endured himself – his story first to last –  
And she listened on, enchanted…  
Sleep never sealed her eyes till all was told. (*O*, Book 23: 342-353).
Through them, we appreciate better the way Atwood creatively subverts the notion of genre, expanding it and adapting it to her own times – post-modernity, with its social and cultural conventions.

First, as she takes an unremarkable story as the subject for an epic: the narrative of a woman, even if she is a queen; closely bound not to warlike undertakings, but to Penelope’s life from her birth to Odysseus’ return twenty years after their marriage; and, simultaneously, as she intermingles episodes from Penelope’s narrative with those of her maids, who also narrate and comment on their stories – anonymous, plebeian and therefore “despicable”, concerned with the vile acts committed against them from when they were children up to their hanging and later pursuit of Odysseus.

Secondly, even though on the one hand Atwood adheres to historical events long past – for besides The Odyssey, she makes use of other materials, such as the above-mentioned Greek Myths by Robert Graves – on the other hand she places herself, with her creative subversion of the Homeric epic inserted in another cultural stage – the twenty-first century – in another type of epic: the artificial or scholarly epic, “the pondered product of a developed society”, created by a single poet (Moisés, 1999: 188). This subversive creativity in relation to the legendary allows Atwood to add “with liberty” the product of her fantasy: to make the heroine present another version of the events as well as of what will happen to the Homeric characters – herself, Odysseus, the twelve maids and Helen of Troy, among others – after the end of The Odyssey, as occurs at the end of The Penelopiad.

Concerning the third rule, as Atwood presents as protagonist not a hero of superior physical and mental strength but a woman who, even if she does not have “superior physical strength”, possesses the mental strength to manipulate not just the suitors but even Odysseus himself, when he returns to Ithaca. This is emphasized by her deciding to make him wait for her to recognize him, in order to be able to hide her real feelings about the hanging of her beloved young maids, by pretending not to recognize him at first; and also to prevent him from imagining that she would have thrown herself into the arms of all those who claimed to be Odysseus (P, p. 170); or when Penelope reveals to Odysseus, after they had lovingly met again in the same nuptial bed of their youth, the ruses she had used to get rid of the suitors – weaving the shroud of her father-in-law Laertes, as well as encouraging and simultaneously misleading the suitors so that they would turn against one another (P, p. 172-3).
With regard to the last rule, as Atwood inserts love scenes between Penelope and Odysseus, not in order to harmoniously complement the war feats, but to establish a parallelism of contrast with the cruel execution of the innocent maids on Odysseus’ orders. Similarly, these love episodes, even if they are “tender and magnanimous”, are complemented by Odysseus’ and Penelope’s telling of their own stories; but, in contrast to The Odyssey, in which both rejoice in listening to them, Atwood’s Penelope classifies them as “invented”, as both were “proficient and shameless liars of long standing” (P, p. 172-3), thus exposing the “invention” of both husband and wife, as they reveal their “lies” to each other:

And so we climbed into the very same bed where we’d spent a great many happy hours when we were first married (…) I was glad it was dark by then, as in the shadows we both appeared less wizened than we were. (…) After a little time had passed and we were feeling pleased with each other, we took up our old habits of story-telling. Odysseus told me of all his travels and difficulties – the nobler versions, with the monsters and the goddesses, rather than the more sordid ones with the innkeepers and whores. (…) In my turn, I related the tale of the suitors, and my trick with the shroud of Laertes, and my deceitful encouraging of the suitors, and the skilful ways in which I’d misdirected them and led them on and played them off against one another.

Then he told me how much he’d missed me (…) and I told him how very many tears I’d shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I’d been (…)

The two of us were –by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.

But we did. Or so we told each other. (P, p. 171-3).

Regarding the expressive means of epic poetry too, even though Aristotle allowed an epic tale to be in prose, the rules postulated the use of verse, which should reflect the magnitude of the heroic deeds. For this reason, the dactylic hexameter maintained until the last verse was the most convenient metrical structure, not only because of the martial pauses which distinguish it (Moisés, 1999: 184), but also because of its symmetry, reflecting the unchangeableness of spirit required of the epic narrator, who should be keep a distance from the facts.

Atwood, in her turn, besides using the traditional expressive means such as prose in the chapters in which Penelope narrates her story, and verse, mainly in the chapters in which the chorus of maids sings, recites or narrates their stories, as the titles of the chapters already indicate –

cap. ii “The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme”;
cap. viii: “The Chorus Line: If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune”;
cap. xiii: “The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty”;
cap. xvii: “The Chorus Line: Dreamboats, A Ballad”;
cap. xxviii: “The Chorus Line: We’re Walking Behind You, A Love Song”;
cap. xix: “Envoi” –

– also recreates the expressive means, introducing, in addition to the already mentioned literary forms and poetic compositions, an elegy in
prose, a verse drama, a lecture and a trial video-taped by the maids, again shown in the titles of the chapters:

cap. iv: “The chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids”;
cap. xxiv: “The Chorus Line: an Anthropology Lecture”;
cap. xxi: “The Chorus Line: the Perils of Penelope, A Drama”;
cap. xxvi: “The chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as videotaped by the maids”.

This re-elaboration of the expressive means is still further enhanced by the use of the chorus of maids. While in Greek tragedy the chorus, besides fulfilling the role of collective character, commenting on the actions and behavior of the other characters in the light of the people’s conscience, thereby also becoming the spokesman of the audience (Onofrio, 2003: 132), in The Penelopiad the use and function of the chorus are also re-evaluated and redimensioned: firstly, by making it an essential, integral part of the dramatic genre; secondly, as it gives a new perspective to Penelope’s narrative, so that its function is not merely reflective. As we have seen, the chorus of maids presents its story interspersed with accusations not only against Odysseus but against the whole Greek patriarchal system, thereby demystifying the hero’s image as well as exposing the flaws of this system in relation to the servant class, forced to serve their masters in everything. They vent their feelings, in “Kiddie Mourn, a Lament by the Maids”,

“We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not gods, they were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in the palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk, as children. (...) if our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman (...) wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse. (...) We ground the flour for lavish wedding feasts, then we ate the leftovers; we would never have a wedding feast of our own, no rich gifts would be exchanged for us; our bodies had little value. But we wanted to sing and dance too, we wanted to be happy too”.

Moreover, whereas in Greek tragedy “the chorus remained the conservative soul of the play, the articulate spokesman for traditional religion and society” (Princeton, 1993: 201), Atwood’s chorus is the spokesman of the maids, who, like Penelope, undermine the Homeric image of Odysseus and of the heroic codes of the times.

Therefore, as this use of different genres and literary forms leads us to foresee – reminding us of the mixture of genres of the Menippean Satire as theorized by Bakhtin – the chorus has a parodic and critical function: Atwood desecrates the expressive means of the epic with the alternately ironic, jocular, emotional, reflexive, critical, philosophical, parodic and accusatory tone which Penelope and her maids adopt, as they relive the events of The Odyssey in which they participated, not as heroines, but as secondary characters - neither unbiased nor distanced from the facts as would befit the narrator of an epic, but reliving them by means of their narratives, while still feeling the weight of the
patriarchal nature of Greek mythology exerted on their lives and the disastrous consequences that resulted from this authority.

Consequently, this dialogic character of *The Penelopiad* represents once more the conflict that Atwood tries to solve, as she makes it the main function of her work to contest the ideological values presented in *The Odyssey*, thus encouraging the reader to reflect not just about the destiny of a collectivity, as in the classical epic poem, but also about the human condition. Penelope reflects, decides and comments – after Odysseus’ trial – about the possibility of returning to the world of the living after drinking from the waters of forgetfulness:

> I’ll never drink the Waters of Forgetfulness. I can’t see the point of it. No; I can see the point, but I don’t want to take the risk. My past life was fraught with many difficulties, but who’s to say the next one wouldn’t be worse? Even with my limited access I can see that the world is just as dangerous as it was in my day, except that the misery and suffering are on a much wider scale. As for human nature, it’s as tawdry as ever. (P. p. 188)

And this discovery of the truth, by a twenty-first century Penelope, expands the epic genre, by adding a dimension to it which *The Odyssey* could not have: the individual, as the epic corresponded to “a time previous to that of the individual conscience, and therefore, directed towards the destiny of a collectivity” (Lukács, apud Soares, 2006: 42).

The epic poem is further characterized by the marvelous: “the impact of supernatural forces on the heroes’ actions – as much by the intervention of gods on the earthly plane and/or by every change of action, provoked by agents that may or may not be supernatural (Moisés, 1999:184, 318). Thus, if the historical events of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are imbued with a supernatural atmosphere which brings together myths, gods and heroes, *The Penelopiad*, having Penelope and the twelve maids as heroines, undermines and parodies this use of the supernatural, for instead of a hero invoking a goddess, the maids make the invocation - not in their own time, but in the twenty-first century. At Odysseus’ trial, when the judge acquits the hero of the slaughter of the twelve maids, they demand justice and call on the Furies. Infernal deities with the appearance of crones, with snakes for hair, dogs’ heads, coal-black bodies, bats’ wings, and bloodshot eyes, their task is to hear complaints brought by mortals about the insolence of the young to the aged, of children to parents, of hosts to guests, and of householders or city councils to supplicants - and to punish such crimes by hounding the culprits relentlessly, from city to city and from country to country, carrying brass-studded scourges in their hands so that their victims die in torment (Graves, 1960: 122).

Three in number in Greek mythology, these black goddesses, who appear immediately after a crime is committed in the family, reappear in Atwood to the number of twelve, corresponding to the twelve hanged
maids. They need to be invoked by the maids in order to inflict their punishment on Odysseus, who spilled not the blood of someone of his own family, but the innocent blood of the maidservants, who belong to an inferior social class, which thus subverts the use consecrated by mythology. As the maids implore,

Oh, Angry Ones, Oh Furies, you are our last hope! We implore you to inflict punishment and exact vengeance on our behalf! Be our defenders, we who had none in life! Smell out Odysseus wherever he goes! From one place to another, from one life to another, whatever disguise he puts on, whatever shape he may take, hunt him down! (…) Let him never be at rest! (P, p. 183)

On the other hand, Odysseus’ defense attorney also invokes the goddess Athene in order to save him from being pursued by the Furies: “I call on grey-eyed Pallas Athene, immortal daughter of Zeus, to defend property rights and the right of a man to be the master in his own house, and to spirit my client away in a cloud!” (P, p. 184).

Bearing in mind the fact that the goddess Athene was Odysseus’ protectress against all the dangers which befell him as he returned from Troy, the attorney’s invocation to her to protect his client, this time from the Furies, becomes parodic of the epic genre as architext, by adding the figure of a twenty-first century defense attorney to call upon the protecting goddess, instead of the hero himself, as occurred in The Iliad and in The Odyssey.

The judge’s reaction confirms the travesty of this trial, as he comments on the din inside the courtroom with the arrival of the Furies, as he addresses the Furies and then the goddess Athene, and finally as he inquires where Odysseus is. The latter has been spirited away in a cloud, which is simultaneously – in one of the versions of Athene’s birth – the place where the goddess is hidden and Zeus, striking this cloud with his head, causes Athene to emerge (Graves, 1974: 108):

What’s going on? Order! This is a twenty-first-century court of justice! You there, get down from the ceiling! Stop that barking and hissing! Madam, cover up your chest and put down your spear! What’s this cloud doing in here? Where are the police? Where’s the defendant? Where has everyone gone? (P, p. 184)

Thus, despite using the supernatural as a characteristic of the epic, Atwood creatively de-articulates it from its classical function, as she makes the Furies chase a Homeric hero at the behest of the maids, while a twenty-first century defense attorney invokes the goddess Athene to defend his “client” and a judge asks Athene to cover her chest and put down her spear, in a parodic reference to Athene’s traditional garb: a helmet on the head, a spear in one hand and a shield in the other.

The Penelopiad also partially re-elaborates the structure of the epic as architext, in that we have an autodiegetic narrator, besides the chorus of maids, as we have seen. Thus, while a complete epic consists
of a proposition, an invocation, a narration and an epilogue, these parts receive the following reformulation at Atwood’s hands:

– The proposition, i.e., the enunciation of the theme right at the beginning of the work, is presented by Atwood as author in the Introduction (paratext) and in chapter I “A Low Art”, in which Penelope, as the author’s spokesman, presents her reasons for retelling the facts of her life, in order to retrieve her real story; therefore, if the theme in the classical epic is the glorious feats of heroes, in Atwood the theme is Penelope’s and the maids’ stories, which are not revealed by *The Odyssey*.

– The invocation, i.e., the appeal to the gods to help the poet in his creative undertaking, is deconstructed in *The Penelopiad* by the fact that we have a woman relying only on her own narrative skill to tell her story. As she herself characterizes this skill, it is a “low art”: “Now that all the others have run out of air, it’s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I’ve had to work myself up to it: it’s a low art, tale-telling.” (*P*, p. 3-4);

– The central and most extensive part, the narration, which contains the detailed registering of the hero’s actions, is made up in Atwood of two autodiegetic narratives – Penelope’s and her maids’– as we have already seen. Unlike the classical epic, their actions are not heroic, but subordinated to the patriarchal nature of Hellenic culture: Penelope is subordinated first to her father, then to Odysseus and later to Telemachus, while her shrewdness is the only weapon she really uses to keep the suitors away; the maids are always subject to their masters’ orders and actions and they are never the performers of their own actions. While the classical epic must obey a logical sequence, the artificial order – *in medias res* – being preferable to chronological order, Atwood makes use of chronological order, but starting out from an unusual viewpoint: the narrators are already in Hades, recalling their lives and retelling their stories, in order to accuse and thus demystify the figure of Odysseus.

– The epilogue, which needs to contain an unexpected and happy ending while being believable and consistent is reformulated by Atwood in the last two chapters: in chapter XXVIII, in the parodic “love song” to Odysseus, the maids repeat their accusation of the hero and state that they will always chase him – bringing to mind the scene in which they invoke the Furies; in chapter XXIX, when the maids repeat yet again in the Envoi – the final strophe of a ballad – their accusation of Odysseus, and their determination to continue to pursue him, disappearing then as they fly away as owls. That is, the happy ending of the epic becomes an open ending, unfinished, like a post-
modern narrative, for Odysseus will continue to reappear in the world of the living or of the dead, under different disguises, in order to escape the persecution of the maids/Furies.

In this way, Atwood amplifies the notion of genre as architext, as she uses it again in *The Penelopiad*, by way of a reformulation of the rules, of the expressive means, of the characterization and of the structure of the epic, inscribing it therefore in the twenty-first century, that is, in a literary post-modernity ready/willing to reread/reevaluate former works from a new cultural and critical stance.

**IV – Hypertextual relationships**

Even if *The Penelopiad* is already characterized by several types of transtextuality, as we have seen, it is hypertextuality – defined by Genette as “any relationship uniting a text B (the hypertext) to an earlier text A (the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary”, that is, any relationship which binds “a text derived from another preexistent text” (Genette, 1997: 5) – which will provide us with a new series of specific procedures adopted by Atwood in her reading of the myth: first, in order to deconstruct the monological images of Penelope and Odysseus, according to the Hellenic cosmovision; then, reconstructing them by way of a new cultural perception which is polyphonic, in keeping with our historical, cultural and social contemporaneity.

This derivation, besides being of a descriptive or intellectual kind (Genette, 1997: 5) – in which *The Penelopiad* as metatext speaks of a text, *The Odyssey*, and is thus a hypertext of *The Odyssey* – is simultaneously of another kind, by resulting from the hypotext but transforming it, as an answer to the gaps which were left by Homer in relation to the episode of the maids and to Penelope’s own story.

This “transformative process” undertaken by Atwood should be *simple or direct* – like the transposing of the action of the *Odyssey* to twentieth-century Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* – or more complex and indirect – as in the *Aeneid*, in which Virgil tells another story, that of Aeneas, but imitates the genre established by Homer (Genette, 1997, p. 5-6). However, both processes are present in the *Penelopiad*, for, on the one hand, Atwood transposes the action from the times of the Hellenic past up to the twenty-first century, enlarging and restructuring the scheme of action and of relationship among the characters (that is, she makes Penelope retell her story concerning Odysseus and the maids in a manner different from Homer’s), and on the other hand, she makes the

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8 As Scholes and Kellogg assert, Homer and other authors of primitive heroic narratives did not aspire to the complexities of narration which we find in later narratives. The characters are invariably flat and static. Odysseus is a man who is never caught unawares (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966: 164).
maids tell another version of Penelope’s, Odysseus’, and their own stories, in this way corroborating the account given by the queen, as she uses the Homeric architext but simultaneously expands and reformulates the epic genre, as we have seen.

Within the general chart presented by Genette of hypertextual practices, he adopts the term transformation to include the genres of parody, travesty and transposition, and the term imitation to include pastiche, caricature and forgery. Although these practices are also present in The Penelopiad, to a greater or lesser degree, we shall concentrate on what Genette calls transposition or serious transformation, which he considers to be the most important, due to its historical importance, its aesthetic accomplishment and the scope and variety of the procedures it calls upon. Transposition “can give rise to works of vast dimensions”, “whose textual amplitude and aesthetic and/or ideological ambition” – as is the case of the Penelopiad – “may mask or even completely obfuscate their hypertextual character”, a productivity that is “linked to the diversity of the transformational procedures that it brings into play” (Genette, 1997: 212-13), and with which Atwood operates. Thus, The Penelopiad would have been conceived:

1. By thematic transformation or ideological inversion, as Atwood replaces the theme of the Homeric hero with that of his wife and maidservants, simultaneously inverting the dominant ideology of the Homeric heroic codes by presenting them as heroines and Odysseus as a hero who, in spite of his physical and moral courage, in keeping with his classical status, does not hesitate to order the slaughter of the innocent maids, merely because they had slept with the suitors and thus not been “loyal” to him.

2. By transvocalization, that is, the switch from first to third person (Genette, 1977, p. 213) in The Odyssey, through the voice of Penelope and the maids, again with the purpose of giving the women their own voice – the queen as well as the slaves.

3. By spatial and temporal transfer (Genette, 1997: 213): The Penelopiad takes place in the world of Classical Antiquity as well as in a court of justice in the twenty-first century, in order to project Penelope’s obsession in retelling her true story and to confirm that the punishment to which Odysseus was submitted by the maids’ invocation of the Furies is eternal, for he will continue to be pursued incessantly both in the world of the living and in the world of the dead.

In this manner, the Penelopiad, within the field of transposition — as the most important of all hypertextual practices – performs a function not so much of a practical or sociocultural order (Genette,
1997, p. 395), because it is a sequence or continuation of *The Odyssey*, but of an aesthetic order, which is its creative function, whereby a writer “leans on one or more preceding works to construct that which will give expression to his thought or his artistic sensibility” (Genette, 1997 p. 395) and which comes to be represented by the amplification, continuation and thematic transposition which occurred in *The Penelopiad* in relation to certain episodes in *The Odyssey*.

Therefore, even if each hypertext can be read for itself and is invested with a meaning that is autonomous and thus in some manner sufficient, there is in every hypertext an *ambiguity* due to the fact that a hypertext can be read both for itself and in its relation to its hypotext. And, if hypertextuality can be either mandatory or optional according to each hypertext (Genette, 1997:397-8), hypertextuality in the *Penelopiad* is indispensable, as Atwood points out by means of the paratextual signals, for the hypertext always wins, with the perception of its “hypertextual status” (Genette, 1997: 398), inviting us to a “relational reading”, “palimpsestuous” (Lejeune apud Genette, 1997: 399), because we end up by falling in love with at least two texts simultaneously: *The Penelopiad* and *The Odyssey*. Thus, through the fact that hypertextuality has in itself the merit of constantly launching “ancient works into new circuits of meaning” (Genette, 1997: 400), Atwood’s prowess, effected in the *Penelopiad* through the conflict with the hypotext engendering the hypertext, becomes even more impressive.

**V – Metatextual relationships**

Just as the hypertext is almost always fictional, fiction derived from another fiction, the metatext is not fictional in essence, for *metatextuality*, that is, the “commentary” that “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it” (Genette, 1997: 4), is a *critical* relation, par excellence, and therefore also more extensive, encompassing all the others (Genette, 1997:87).

As a critical relationship, *metatextuality* would be present in Atwood from the very conception of her work, generated by the conflict that, as a reader of *The Odyssey*, she had perceived in relation to the other two issues presented in the epigraphs, as mentioned earlier. As the critical metatext is conceived, but not practiced without the help of a considerable part of the citational intertext, the intertext as well as the paratext, the architext and the hypotext materialize in their creativity this critical relationship, non-fictional in itself, for the deconstruction and the consequent reinvention of the myth have only occurred because they were given impulse by Atwood’s critical mind. This critical relationship, which she established and which simultaneously impregnates all the others, also becomes manifest in the critical spirit
which Atwood transmitted to her heroine, as the author’s spokesman, for Penelope’s voice and conscience belong and are directed to our post-modernity, even if she is speaking from the world of the dead.

Metatextual relationships – always in dialogue with the other transtextual relationships – thus constitute the neuralgic point from which the Atwoodian conflict as well as creation start, as they give us the chance – by way of the critical outlook that her epic reinvention throws on Odysseus’ and Penelope’s myth – to re-evaluate Penelope’s story, and, behind it, to re-evaluate the hierarchical and patriarchal nature expressed by the Homeric vision in *The Odyssey*.

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