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Threads of Identity: Classical Reception and Feminist Perspectives of Homer's Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*[1]

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Abstract:

The aim of this academic paper is to analyze the conflict of identity regarding heroic figures (particularly heroines) that derives from literature being suited to different periods of time. Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) and James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) are explored as modern reinterpretations of Homer's *The Odyssey* that differ greatly. Atwood's retelling offers a feminist view, emphasizing Penelope's experiences and questioning traditional portrayals of heroines. Meanwhile, Joyce's Leopold and Molly Bloom reflect concerns of early 20th-century Dublin, navigating a parodic approach to the original story so as to delve into the topic of human experience. Both authors challenge conventional stereotypes by giving voice and agency to marginalized characters like Penelope, although in very different ways and to very different extents. By examining them through the theoretical frameworks of gender studies, classical reception and reception theory (reader-response criticism) intertwined, these reinterpretations reflect contemporary social issues accordingly, and can, thus, shape readers' perceptions and opinions. This results in Atwood's Penelope and Joyce's Molly Bloom being two different and unique characters despite sharing the same origin.

Keywords: classical reception, feminism, retelling, Penelope, Molly Bloom, *Ulysses*.

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1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood, author of *The Penelopiad*, is one of the most influential contemporary female writers from Canada, best known for the feminist perspective on which she bases most of her work. The aforementioned novella, which revisits the story of Homer's Odysseus and Penelope, was originally published in 2005 as a modern retelling that intertwines classical mythology with historical fiction, focusing on the constraints of the ever-awaiting wife in epic poems and literature. In it, Penelope recounts her life story from the underworld, reflecting on her childhood, her unfulfilling marriage to Odysseus, and her experiences during his absence, instead of extolling his adventures as it had usually been the case. She also discusses her relationship with her maids, particularly the twelve who were killed upon his return. The blending of the previous elements and the fresh shift of viewpoints results in a narrative that blurs the lines between myth and reality, inviting readers to question their interpretations of these narratives.

This essay presents a comparative analysis of how heroes and heroines are viewed regarding gender issues, especially across different centuries, and considering different authorial trajectories as well as the differences between the male and the female gaze when it comes to the point of view of writers themselves, providing valuable insight into the literary embodiments of the same types of figures. In order to achieve this, the differences in representation and treatment between classical heroes (Odysseus and Penelope from Homer's *The Odyssey*) and modern characters such as Leopold and Molly Bloom, from the acclaimed novel *Ulysses* (1922), will be studied in contraposition to Atwood's Penelope through the lens of mythical reception (mostly using José Manuel Losada's theories), gender studies, and reader response criticism, with the aid of several articles that deal with the history of feminism and feminist literary theory and criticism, as well as others which discuss reception theory, respectively.

Classical heroes have been often depicted as personifications of masculinity, courage, and strength; whereas heroines have usually been idealized as symbols of fidelity, chastity, and domestic virtue, frequently getting overshadowed by the actions of the male characters and creating a model of behavior in ancient Greek society. However, modern reinterpretations allow for more room to play with nuances,

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introspection, questions of identity, and multidimensional (rather than plain) characters. This is why retellings may serve as a helping tool to give voice and agency to someone like Penelope while subverting traditional stereotypes to showcase the limitations of patriarchal societies and narratives. Losada develops this by observing that there are hardly any mythical heroines in the Middle Ages, and neither do they have a significant appearance in modern works, so even if women in literature may have had a limited opportunity to gain some acknowledgment, it was extremely difficult for them to become mythical figures, with male characters as the center of attention (269). Both Joyce and Atwood, writing in the 20th and the 21st century respectively, defy notions of heroism, masculinity, and femininity, bringing a differing perspective to their own editions of the myth by foregrounding the experiences of marginalized characters like Penelope in their own way, accentuating the complexities and contradictions of modern life. Atwood did so with a full redefinition and redesign of Penelope, while Joyce presented Leopold and Molly Bloom as reinterpretations of Odysseus (Ulysses) and Penelope.

The multiple representations of heroes and, remarkably, heroines throughout time reflect broader shifts in cultural attitudes towards hierarchical power structures, gender roles, and identities, with modern literature exploring a more fluid approach to gender and sexuality. Losada adds to this by indicating that it may be the reason for myths to be perceived differently in current times, as allegories of the human being, so the representations of mythical female figures from ancient times are escalating and becoming fundamental interpretative elements (270). The evolution in gender representation will be traced in this paper in relation to myth criticism and reception theory, emphasizing the role of Atwood's protagonist and Joyce's main characters from *Ulysses*. This will show how gender-based perspectives shifting over time can influence which works appeal to a particular audience and succeed in a given cultural context, since those factors tend to shape the interests and opinions of readers, which may influence writers to adopt differing techniques to suit them. Joyce's recreation may have been innovative at the time, but Atwood's revision presents an updated version of the myth correlated with today's social issues, which could have been disregarded if it had

been published back then. Thus, they culminate in two different works reconsidering the original Penelope, but from unalike perspectives. Both approach Homer's story from varying angles, and comparing them allows for a glimpse into the different standpoints from which they were written. Precisely, the theoretical frameworks of gender studies, reception theory and myth criticism can help to bring greater clarity to this issue, constituting a functional and optimal combination for the purpose of this research.

2.   The Reshaping of a Hero vs. a Heroine

The hero or heroine of a story is usually the central character in a plot (the protagonist), whom the reader's interest usually gravitates towards (Abrams and Harpham 293). Reception theory deals with the response of readers to a given text, focusing on the main interests they may have, which may be altered due to different interpretations and evaluations conducted by the general public in different periods of time (335). This could apply to mythology in that retellings usually reimagine and adapt ancient myths to somehow suit the present times. Roland Barthes compared readers to a receptacle for literature to prevail —as it was considered a gift to the world—, reversing the old pattern of classic criticism passing over the readers, and addressing them as indirect but ultimate authors instead: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). Atwood and Joyce engaged with the story embedded in *The Odyssey*, leaving a legacy for the audience to continue studying and revisit in the future. There can be infinite thought-provoking interpretations of a story, creating a kaleidoscopic effect in terms of perspectives, and this is why reader response criticism may be vital in the literary world.

It is no surprise that, throughout time, female writers have encountered greater difficulty to publish any form of literature. Some may still suffer such oppression, as claimed by Atwood herself in an interview by Mary Morris for *The Paris Review*: "Women in many countries find it difficult to get published at all . . . they find it difficult to write. . . . to become educated. The barriers to women writing are often put in place at a very early age and in very basic ways," and female characters in literature would deal with a similar problem. As stated by Northrop Frye, Atwood's professor in Canada in the late

1950s, science was considered an inherently male discipline, while literature symbolized staying at home; which, at the time, could be translated into not doing anything serious, and, therefore, associated with feminine roles (qtd. in Showalter 40). Elaine Showalter herself argued that, even if that was usually a derogatory association, it was precisely the enjoyment of books and academic expansion which sparked the women's movement and, consequently, feminist literary criticism, since the idea of fictional heroines created conflicting notions of the way women should behave, becoming a paradoxical phenomenon (34). Besides, in her words, "the experiences and achievements of women have already been tacitly relegated to women's time in being hidden from history, obscured, or written out of the historical record" (30), which reinforces the idea of both real and fictional women not being taken seriously.

This could be related to the action of rewriting a classical myth from a feminist perspective in that said activity promotes considering the necessities, views and voices that were previously neglected. Enhancing the story of a fictional character could do literature itself good, since that would mean that more people would be interested in fiction. Notwithstanding this, it becomes even more important after realizing it is common for literature to take part in the real lives of people, generating role models and sources of inspiration, and effectively putting the spotlight on female characters could also foster feminism. Greene suggests that memory is key to advocate for equality, since recent generations might forget how much the struggle for women's rights cost, taking their position for granted (298). This could also encourage more feminist retellings, inasmuch as they bring forward the past that some may have already wiped out of their minds, unaware of how recent it actually is. Adrienne Rich refers to this as "the erasure of women's political and historic past," often "muffled in silence" (qtd. in Greene 298). This might correspond to the need for more inclusive and respectful alternatives of some pieces of literature, especially something as important and influential to subsequent authors as a classic, and this is where classical reception plays a crucial role.

Greenwood points out that, despite the connotations of the words "classic" and "classical" revolving around a stable tradition, classical antiquity is not "a fixed object of

study" (41), which may suggest that there has always been room for retellings to be made, since the classics function as inspiration sources. She adds that classical reception attempts to study the impact that different audiences may have had on Greek and Roman classics throughout history, focusing on their relation to varying world literatures and offering new ways of thinking about the classics; not really as outdated or old-fashioned contributions to literature, but rather as something which has acquired universal value (41). Moreover, other authors address the fact that reception is able to grant the classics the capacity to join contemporary views and "intellectual life," transforming them into a more appealing resource for new students (Wells 135), which is, arguably, the main point behind retellings as well, seeing as they contribute to a mythological revival.

Rewritings having to do with heroines, such as *The Penelopiad*, often pursue greater emphasis on the female character's experiences, agency, and inner life, with stories that tend to delve into the protagonist's relationships and challenges encouraging personal growth, as opposed to having been mostly disregarded in the original versions. In contrast, due to the fact that heroes have usually been praised, retellings of male characters, as it is the case with Joyce's Leopold Bloom, may have more liberty to focus on external events, societal structures, and the "hero's journey" itself, exploring themes that encompass masculine identity without the need to give more depth or intensity to their stories in order to make them stand out. Thus, while Atwood decided to shed light on the struggles of marginalized characters in her novella, Joyce, as a modernist writer, had the opportunity to focus on innovative and experimental forms of writing to explore human consciousness and experience instead, directing the attention to a more spiritual rather than materialist approach. Both of them explore the introspective nature of their characters, although from differing gender perspectives (which are characterized by historical and cultural contexts), and with different purposes, so Joyce's portrayal of Leopold and Molly Bloom does not necessarily feature a feminist perspective or confront gender norms the same way as Atwood's work does. Her Penelope has an assertive and proactive tone and role, whereas Molly's voice can only be heard in an uncensored way through her dozing state

towards the end of *Ulysses*, discussing female sensuality and sexuality. As Losada commented, myths cannot be thought about or "lived" as they were in ancient, medieval, or even in modern times anymore (74). There is a constant need for renewal.

While both Atwood and Joyce provide rich and nuanced depictions of their respective characters, they do so within different literary traditions and thematic emphasis, resulting in two separate versions of these classical heroes that can be analyzed further in comparison to the Homeric ones thanks to reception theory as well. Kirk indicated that "a new approach to the ancient world" would usually be wrong unless it were based on a specific discovery, so it would be fairer to talk about "new perspectives" instead, considering that the "old and familiar ones" may no longer be appropriate or suit current times accurately (74). Frye discussed the idea of classifying fictions by "the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (33). His classification includes divine beings, heroes partially superior to humans and the environment, those superior only to humans (leaders), common humans, and, lastly, those that lack power and intelligence, belonging to the "ironic mode" (33-34). Joyce's characters could fall into the fifth category, whereas Atwood's ones still present a level of supremacy over common humans, but not over the environment. Perhaps, heroines, oftentimes succumbing to vulnerability and alienation, could constitute a subcategory of their own, placed below their male counterparts despite being "leaders" as well. This could be true of Penelope, transforming her into a more relatable figure.

3.   Atwood's Odysseus and James Joyce's Modern Hero: Leopold Bloom

Losada argues that intending to explain how heroes are created would be a futile attempt, since there are various categories to which they may belong. According to him, the mythical imagery surrounding interactions between divine entities and humanity could indicate why it ends up having an impact on normal people regardless of the fantastic elements that may be present (429). That could be the reason behind the interest for new ways of appreciating the classics despite knowing they do not match reality, whether by totally deforming the story or by producing something completely

new based on the same foundation. This provides authors with the opportunity to discuss a plethora of topics and issues that concern both the ancient and modern world —explicitly or implicitly—, allowing reception studies to analyze such processes.

On the one hand, it could be argued that, in *The Penelopiad*, Odysseus is approached through a more critical lens regarding his heroism and the way he treats Penelope, compared to the version from *The Odyssey*. In the latter, Odysseus, being the central figure, is depicted as a hero renowned for his cunning intelligence, bravery, and resourcefulness, celebrated for his tenacity and his journey until he returns to his homeland and family, as it is replicated in Atwood's novella: "trying to get home, enduring hardships, conquering or evading monsters, and sleeping with goddesses" (Atwood xvii). Nonetheless, she proffers yet another perspective on this character through the voice of Penelope herself, accentuating the darkest implications of his ambitions. Odysseus appears to be a flawed individual, characterized by arrogance, deceitfulness, and selfishness: "it was a specialty of his: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away" (Atwood 2).

As in the original story, he reappears unexpectedly and decides to take revenge for the suitors who tried to marry his wife and usurp his place while he was away for over 20 years (Clark 50). The suitors intend to conquer the kingdom, but they would rather do so in a legal way by marrying Penelope, who is to be considered a widow in view of the fact that there is no husband around (49). And, in Scodel's words, "Odysseus' wife and property simply go together" (325), implying the objectification of Penelope as something that belongs to him, and not truly a free human being. In fact, Atwood herself reinforces this view through the following lines: "And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat . . . in a wrapping of gold" (39).

Thus, Atwood may use that as a chance to explore the consequences of his actions from his wife's viewpoint, instead of merely glorifying him and his exploits. She stresses the idea of his prolonged absence during Penelope's struggles, his unfaithfulness, pride, and manipulative side, which he takes advantage of in order to achieve his goals, implying he cannot be outsmarted (Atwood 31). Penelope reflects on her husband's schemes and stratagems often coming at a cost to those who trust him,

and placing a strain on their marriage. After getting rid of the maids, he is presented as "a legendary hero of high repute . . . accused of multiple murders" (Atwood 175). In a way, this description of a hero defies the traditional heroic archetype, offering an anti-heroic vision of him and the impact of his actions on those around him; particularly Penelope, who cries so much she thinks she will become a river or fountain (121), and the maids themselves, who ask to be defended and for him to get punished (183), call him thief and liar (191), and claim to have been murdered as an act of grudge and spite (193).

On the other hand, there is Leopold Bloom, often seen as a modern-day counterpart to Odysseus. Atwood presented him through the eyes of Penelope to shift the narrative focus, but Joyce maintained the male perspective, depicting Bloom as an ordinary man and placing him on the same level as a normal human being in the 1920s, which clearly presents another difference between Atwood's and Joyce's reasons for writing both of their works. While it is true that there are parallels between Joyce's and Homer's characters, Leopold Bloom is not a direct representation of him, but rather the result of Joyce's aim to create a multifaceted character embodying elements of the classical hero while reflecting the concerns of early 20th century Dublin. As W. B. Stanford contends, "Leopold Bloom is not simply a Ulysses in modern dress, . . . The basic humanistic elements in conduct, motive, and environment, are identical for the prince of Ithaca and for this humble citizen of Dublin" (qtd. in Greenway 78).

Following the previous line of thought, Odysseus is usually regarded as a key figure in the Trojan War, but Bloom is a middle-aged Jewish working man from Ireland. His "journey" in *Ulysses* takes place over the course of seventeen hours, navigating the streets of the city, interacting with various characters, and experiencing issues that are more ordinary and introspective than Odysseus's battles and feats, which suit the idea of an epic poem; even though, as Greenway implies, that day of wandering parallels the hero's story of ten years drifting around the Mediterranean as well (67). This could be the case simply because Homer and Joyce were not drawing attention to the same issues, as someone from ancient Greece would not share the same concerns as an Irish modernist writer. Bloom is usually considered Odysseus's alter ego because, as Stanford

indicated, "In the end Ulysses emerges, as he does in the Odyssey, as a man who by prudence and endurance, can overcome the dangers and disasters of life" (qtd. in Greenway 78).

Hence why, even though Leopold Bloom is not an immediate modern version of Odysseus, Joyce may have been drawing on the structures and themes in *The Odyssey* to relate them to Bloom's search for meaning in the modern world, creating a contemporary reimagining of the hero's journey and highlighting the universality of human experiences in the process: "He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible. . . . We walk through ourselves, . . . But always meeting ourselves" (Joyce 273). In turn, Atwood seemed to have decided to show what was often unseen about the original hero, aside from drawing the attention towards Penelope, instead of creating a completely new character from scratch.

4.   Margaret Atwood's Penelope vs. Homer's Original Heroine

Envisioning a retelling and trying to make an already-existing female character shine when the figure in question used to be sidelined must not be an easy task. Lambert writes that, in the play adapted from her novella, Penelope does not want to contribute to the stagnation of women, since her actions, even though noble, led to a catastrophic aftermath involving her maids and confidants. Thus, it covers the question of taking responsibility for one's actions and collateral damages, and of "what unchallenged myths allow this dynamic to persist" (673). Lambert also suggests that Atwood challenges the authority of the original myth to reclaim Penelope's legend as contemporary literature, allowing those marginalized by gender and class to reconsider their feelings towards canonical texts. Besides, she also indicates how moments of celebration entail the disastrous consequences and misery that is usually implicit in warlike victories, influencing Penelope's remorse as she stops being so complacent and chooses to behave like water "that slips between and around obstacles," instead of fostering violence (674).

Homer depicted Penelope as an emotional woman who cries herself to sleep (MacLay 125), almost forced into the shadows. In the original poem, she cannot

dominate her servants or maids, but, at least, neither does she let others impose their will on her thanks to her obstinacy, which may be the roots of her wily behavior as a way of self-defense (126). The Homeric version seeks to represent what he wanted her to be for the possible audience at the time to think of her as the ideal housewife: a little bit more aware of her own knowledge and abilities than expected, but still someone "who knows her place" (127), whereas Atwood's character does not seem to be agreeing or accepting such fate as easily, correlating with Atwood's feminist perspective and her will to make Penelope stand out for herself to reclaim her rightful place. In fact, there is a direct mention of feminism in the book which works as an allusion to the present: "we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap. We can understand your reluctance to have such things brought out into the open" (Atwood 166).

Joyce might have had the opportunity to focus on the male hero due to the fact that they are usually the ones who get most of the attention, while, as discussed previously, the perspectives of female characters tended to be obscured. Hence why someone as mundane as Leopold Bloom could become the protagonist of one of the most relevant pieces of literature ever written. The path was already paved for it to happen that way, albeit that would probably not work that well if it were the heroine instead. And that is precisely why, in order to get the attention of the audience and bring their importance forward, there is a need to foment the appearance of female characters as thoughtful and strong individuals, whether indirectly (with an almost intrusive insight into Molly's dreams and her oneiric discourse in *Ulysses*) or directly (with Penelope's conscious decision to reveal her truth, tell her own story, and open herself to the world in *The Penelopiad*). Consequently, it may be more complicated to create a successful rewriting of a myth to make women stand out than it would be if it were the other way around, as male figures have already been eulogized in their own way since ancient times. This has been the case even in recent periods, such as medieval and modern times, whose literary universe has been inherently masculine (Losada 434). However, this claim does not undermine the fact that complex heroines exist, and Penelope is surely one of them.

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A particular event that reaffirms this statement could be the weaving of her web. She promised to remarry once she finished her project, but she purposefully slowed down the process by unraveling it at night until she was finally caught (Clark 54), and it was not until the twentieth year of her husband's absence that she finally decided to give up on her determination and seemed to agree to remarry (49). It is believed that her fear was not that of falling in love with a stranger, since that was not a possibility, but rather of not identifying an impostor whom she could turn into the owner of Odysseus's legacy (Roisman 61); taking care, control, and responsibility for what he left behind. The web may, thus, symbolize the perception of time, but also illustrate her wit and assertiveness as a passive yet determined individual with thoughts, opinions, and wants of her own, which Atwood might have focused on in order to produce her novella: "I did not appreciate the term *web*. If the shroud was a web, then I was the spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies: on the contrary, I'd merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself" (Atwood 119). Even though the voice of the original has usually been silenced in a way, she is still a subtle figure, and Homer gave her almost undetectable ways to profess her hurt pride (Roisman 68).

When comparing the original Penelope to Atwood's modern version of her, there are differences that can be underscored. In Homer's tale, Penelope is a passive woman whose actions and thoughts are filtered through the perspective of Odysseus, whereas in *The Penelopiad* she regains her own autonomy, permitting readers to gain insight into her mind and feelings directly from her, and claiming that it is her turn to tell the story, as something she owes to herself (Atwood 3). Thus, Atwood may have been trying to place strong emphasis on the limitations with which women had to grapple. Losada also wrote about this Penelope, explaining that her only purpose is to wait for a husband who returns changed by the infidelities and events that he went through (268). This reinforces the idea of the world revolving around the husband, but in order to know, it was paramount to have another voice showing the flip side of the coin, and *The Penelopiad* ensures that with a wife narrating her life, a story that is interlaced with the interludes of the twelve hanged maids (268-269). The circumstances surrounding the man's arrival stimulate Penelope's resentment and memories of their time apart,

resulting in an unutterable frustration which Homer ignored and can only be witnessed thanks to Atwood (269).

For Penelope, memory may be key to stay strong, considering how she holds on to her marriage and the prospect of her husband returning for good, implying that these types of characters were often underestimated in terms of individual potential. As the daughter of a Naiad, she reckons that it is preferable to avoid conflicts and behave like the liquid element, which does not resist, but silently keeps flowing (Losada 269). It is not the first time that Atwood tries to help a female character shine, though. As proposed by Christ (325), she did something similar with the heroine of *Surfacing*, who undergoes a spiritual awakening from the patriarchal world that she rejects. In this way, Atwood's position towards male-defined societies seems to have been declared through her literary career, and Penelope would not be the exception.

5.   Joyce's Molly Bloom as a Modern Penelope Prior to Atwood's

When it comes to previous representations of Penelope, one that can certainly and easily come to mind is Molly Bloom. She is presented as a convoluted character through whom Joyce had the chance to navigate themes of love, relationships, and sexuality. Her ambiguity resides in the fact that she is, from the feminist view, one of the most controversial characters ever created. As Sternlieb suggests, her soliloquy has divided feminist critics blatantly (757), reading as both misogynistic and, as stated by Rebecca West, "one of the most tremendous summations of life that [has] ever been caught in the net of art" (qtd. in Sternlieb 757). Essentially, Molly mirrors the concerns of the early 20th century, while Penelope is rooted in the context of classical literature. Both are wives of central characters in their respective stories and deal with remarkably similar issues of fidelity, but their different literary traditions and time periods are captured adequately.

A critical moment in *Ulysses* is her already mentioned soliloquy, the final part of the novel: a long, highly introspective stream of consciousness, notable for its frankness and depth, which delves deep into her emotions, memories, and thought patterns. In this section, her thoughts meander freely, with little regard for conventional

punctuation or sentence structure, effectively resembling the wandering nature of human consciousness and becoming one of the most celebrated extracts in modernist literature. According to Sternlieb, Molly is just one of Penelope's many versions, and the whole passage, which seems to be her reminiscence about past lovers and the consideration of her feelings towards her marriage, may not even be about deciding between other men and her husband, but about holding onto memory as a means to uphold her marriage, which some scholars have considered a performance in itself, symbolizing the ideal "womanliness" (758).

Regardless of Molly's creation representing the plausible female concerns as an ordinary woman in the 20th century, she is still a "modernization" of Penelope, since the influences of the classical heroine are present in her character. Both Molly and Penelope offer traditionally marginalized perspectives, but even if Penelope's story in *The Odyssey* is primarily told through the eyes of the male figures surrounding her (like Odysseus and Telemachus), Molly's soliloquy provides a glimpse into her psyche. It does not give her enough time to "deconstruct" her role, but rather the preoccupations and urges of a woman who is simply born to be a man's wife, almost like a mere belonging (759). Moreover, Molly is seen through the male gaze as well. As claimed by Williams, she is ultimately seen through Joyce's perspective as her creator, a vision which may have been affected by stereotypes and his own preconceptions of femininity, so she might be no more than a representation of a masculine fantasy in a sexist society (545-546). Joyce may show this through characters who consume literature, with Molly reaching out to texts debating notions of femininity in one way or another (Devlin 74), as in "she gave me the Moonstone to read that was the first I read of Wilkie Collins" (Joyce 896).

Despite the challenges and disappointments these women face, Molly remains steadfast in her commitment to life and love, as evidenced by the sensual and highly personal tone that flows until the closing line, concluding the novel with a powerful affirmation: "and yes I said yes I will Yes." (933). This sentence could be interpreted as a declaration of her willingness to embrace life and to seize the opportunities it offers, magnifying her already enigmatic allure, and echoing Penelope's own resilience and determination to persevere in the face of adversity, in order to outgrow herself and the

barriers that corner her; just as, once again, water does: "But water always goes where it needs to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it" (Atwood 43).

Both of them deal with questions of sexuality and desire in their own way. In *The Odyssey*, Penelope is courted by numerous suitors, presumably symbols of temptation, while waiting for Odysseus. Similarly, Molly reflects on her own desires and experiences with intimacy, but she does so through the remembrance of memories of past lovers, as in, for instance, "but he never forgot himself when I was there sending me out of the room on some blind excuse . . . but hed do the same to the next woman that came along" (Joyce 898). Notwithstanding this, even if both Penelope and Molly remained constant in their wait for their husbands to come back, Penelope has usually been credited for keeping a distance from her suitors and deceiving them due to her unwavering commitment to wait for hers, as in "Hadn't I waited, and waited, . . . despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise?" (Atwood 2), whereas rarely has Molly been given any recognition for staying "firmly bolted to her bed" and preserving her marriage while waiting for Bloom, but rather considered "the adulteress who toys with the ideas of desertion and divorce" (Sternlieb 764). Perhaps, this has been influenced by the idea of seeing Penelope's experience as enduring suffering, as opposed to Molly's apparent boredom and indifference: "I posted to myself with bits of paper in them so bored sometimes I could fight with my nails" (Joyce 898).

Furthermore, Molly's soliloquy might as well be related to Penelope's web, which may mirror the idea of a spider trapping flies as she misleads her suitors. According to Sternlieb, Molly could be leading the readers instead to the depths of her persona, but it is also herself who may be ensnared, since both she and the manifestation of her stream of consciousness could be seen as one whole unit (762). Molly's chain of thoughts is an exhibition of her inner self, and it is precisely the fact that she is half-awake and half-asleep in the passage which grants more plausibility and veracity to her deconstructed arguments, mimicking the aimless weaving and unweaving of a web, or the flow of a stream that roams about freely.

Coetzee published *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), where the protagonist, Elizabeth, crafts the story of Joyce's *Ulysses* from Molly's perspective. Not only is a female writer's

feminist retelling of this particular story interesting, but also the fact that it is integrated in a novel which was written by a man. This provides an insight, anew, into how the male view may interpret female experiences, and their differences depending on historical and cultural contexts, verifying the existing polarity between male and female gender roles in literature. Elizabeth considers Molly a prisoner of a "silent marriage," resembling Penelope's metaphorical trap, and tries to give her some freedom by taking her out of the house even though, at the same time, Leopold is shut out, mirroring Odysseus's troubles to get back into his household (Coetzee 13). She disagrees with Joyce's depiction of Molly, acknowledging that she was released as a sensual being, but not fully recognized as a woman with intelligence and personal interests (14). Hence why she raises the question of whether those women who are thought to have been given voice by male writers had truly been liberated or just deceitfully consigned, once more, to male philosophy (14), which conveniently reflects one of the aspects this paper aims to decipher.

6.   The Modern Versions of Homer's Penelope Compared

As discussed throughout this essay, both Atwood's Penelope and Molly Bloom offer distinct reinterpretations of the original woman, promoting their own individuality as they develop and diverge into two different variants that differ in their portrayal, narrative context, and thematic focus. In both stories, they acquire a sense of determination, whether consciously (Penelope) or unconsciously (Molly). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope narrates her own story, with insights into her thoughts and emotions, permitting a deeper understanding of her character and her situation. But she is not a different person intending to represent someone else, as it could be the case with Molly. Atwood's Penelope is rather what she would be in another context, not a new person that shares characteristics with her. Molly's soliloquy serves as an entryway into her subconscious desires, memories, emotions, and ruminations. Alternatively, Atwood's Penelope, who also has dreams but never tells them, appears to be worried about disastrous possibilities regarding the disappearance of her husband and the dangers she can expect (Atwood 123-124). This showcases a very notable difference

between both characters' preoccupations, with Molly's ones allegedly being more superficial and banal than Penelope's.

Even if Molly shares similarities with Atwood's Penelope, she is a distinct person with her own motivations. Atwood seems to explore female empowerment and the sophistication of storytelling to beard traditional gender roles, whereas Joyce manifested a parodic vision that allowed him to delve into the deepest side of his own Penelope, offering a raw and visceral examination of the human experience through an unabridged vision of Molly's brain. In the 1920s, there was a misleading portrayal of equality, and the presence of women was frowned upon in multiple areas of life. Freedman develops this further by indicating that the inability to view women as humans with other necessities and dreams outside of their sexual role perpetuated a stereotypical conception. Becoming wives and mothers was incompatible with being part of the labor force, and the emphasis that was laid upon a woman's place in society, bringing them "home to domestic and sexual fulfillment" and undervaluing their capacities for work outside the family sphere, partook in the weakening of feminism during those years (393).

Although Molly has the chance to express herself indirectly in *Ulysses*, her discourse could be reduced to memories of past relationships, which rather relegates her to the background as a shallow character that may not be able to offer more than just that, as in "yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in this life . . . he understood or felt what a woman is . . . and I gave him all the pleasure I could" (Joyce 932), or in "God help the world if all the women were her sort down on bathingsuits and lownecks of course nobody wanted her to wear I suppose she was pious because no man would look at her twice I hope Ill never be like her" (871). She may be reducing herself to a sexual being and to the expectations of society and others, even though, as Devlin specifies, a countercurrent proposes that she may be parodying gender roles, wearing a mask or doing a theatrical performance (77).

Joyce's purpose was not to recreate the original myth anyway, but rather to add a parodic twist to it. At its core, it is no more than the life of a man and his wife in Ireland; but Atwood, while still crafting her own envisioning of Odysseus's wife to offer a

different viewpoint and interpretation, seems to remain more faithful to the original. *The Penelopiad* turned out to be a feminist version of the story, adapted to a contemporary context. This is reflected in an enumeration of concepts related to current times, such as stock-market prices, the names Marylin and Adolf, high-heeled shoes, body piercings, or liposuctions (Atwood 186-187), among others. Atwood's Penelope is not a passive figure with the only mission of endlessly waiting for her husband, but a shrewd and artful woman who actively navigates the situation that her household is immersed in: "Now you've heard the plain truth . . . There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose" (139). This could be a nod to women's resilience throughout time. In contrast, Molly's role seems to give the story sensual depth, not necessarily defying the traditional gender roles or dealing with agency in the same way.

On top of that, Penelope's and Molly's issues of fidelity and longing as alienated characters are different, according to their respective narratives. Penelope's loneliness during Odysseus's absence is a central theme in *The Penelopiad*, questioning female passivity and devotion: "Many nights I cried myself to sleep or prayed to the gods to give me either my beloved husband or a speedy death" (Atwood 89). Nevertheless, Molly's soliloquy provides a more contemporary and intimate context, a wish for life and connection that, in spite of its prestige, is just a brief part of the whole novel, not the idea around which the plot unravels. In addition, Atwood employs first-person narration, which consolidates "a more identifiable figure for the solitary reader" (Wright 220). The recurrent metafictional elements suggest that the characters are aware of being part of a story that has been told over and over again without respecting the full picture, and that Atwood wanted that message of resilience to transcend time and space, engaging critically with the myth to consider how stories are constructed and, most importantly, interpreted: "In your world, you don't get visitations from the gods the way people used to unless you're on drugs" (24); when the maids ask the "educated minds" (readers) to remember they are not real girls, but rather symbols or something unreal (168); when the members of the court say that Penelope's times were not "their" times (182), and the most straightforward evidence: "This is a twenty-first-century court of justice!" (184).

Withal, the exploration of power dynamics presents an alternative interpretation, enriching the complexity and reflecting the way in which narratives can get distorted over time, whether by the mere passage of time or by intended manipulation. Additionally, this distortion may be even greater for women, whose experiences, which were usually obliterated, are now, gradually, seeing daylight. Joyce is also known for the unusual narrative style in *Ulysses*, incorporating shifting perspectives, multiple narrators, and intricate symbolism, so his objective may have been to experiment with literature while portraying Leopold as a more relatable Odysseus, whereas Atwood's goal may have been to have a profound impact in terms of gender disparities. All in all, "adaptation is a popular method of storytelling that is, as Linda Hutcheon explains, 'the norm, not the exception'" (Wright 214), and Atwood strengthens "the political goals of effecting change on the page, stage, and beyond" (216) as an advocate for women's rights and visibility through literature, which she definitely accomplished with *The Penelopiad*.

7.   Conclusion

To conclude, while Atwood's Penelope and Joyce's Molly Bloom are influenced by *The Odyssey*, they offer unique perspectives reflecting the preoccupations of their authors: the former as a renewed form of the original from a feminist angle, and the latter as an alternative, parodic version. Both works, tied to different narrative intentions, provide insights into the enduring appeal and intricacies of these iconic characters whose origin dates back to classical antiquity. Through this process, they challenge traditional notions of female representation, extending an invitation to reconsider the complications of love, marriage, agency and power dynamics. After all, despite possible nuances, controversies, and discrepancies surrounding her role, the original Penelope "is a significant character in her own right" and her actions "not only make sense but are strategically clever" (Scodel 325), demonstrating her potential as a smart, insightful, and powerful character.

The development of this essay has allowed for a glimpse into how canonical texts may have served for a suited period of time, but advancements in society end up

requiring new standpoints. Hence why new productions are adapted to the times they pertain to. The creation of new literary works is inevitable and necessary, but the classics do not need to be left behind. Through strategies like retellings, these stories can obtain a new life and regain recognition, especially among younger generations. Human creativity enables a myriad of possibilities, and with reception theory probing the impact that literature has on different populations, it can be seen how pertinent those stories are at each point in time. Thus, a series of works, which may be studied separately or compared, can be unleashed, fostering the fluctuating and wondrous world of literary investigations. Feminist literary theory and criticism also helps to analyze the impact of gender issues in this area, forming a practical tandem together with reception theory to promote a snapshot view into the evolution of literature and how different societies may greet the same works. With that, the differences between literary pieces like *Ulysses*, from the 1920s, and *The Penelopiad*, from the 2000s, become even more noticeable and intriguing.

Not only does the treatment of a hero differ from that of a heroine in that it is easier for the story of a hero to succeed with less effort, but heroines also deviate from each other in terms of representation and revindications. Even if both Joyce's Molly and Atwood's Penelope have been given voices by their authors (which can only be heard, dolefully and respectively, in an ethereal state and after death), simultaneously becoming symbols of introspection and resilience, they are not equal. A male writer could create magnificent female characters, but the angle may differ from that of a female writer, especially as those views usually correlate with their particular societal context. Molly highlights female desire through a semi-conscious stream of thoughts, whereas Atwood's Penelope is consciously proving her might (even in the afterlife), which had often been overlooked by male characters and, prospectively, by a significant fraction of world population. This is why, returning to reception and feminist theories, Molly could conceivably have constituted a feminist icon in the 1920s, but not anymore. That position has been seized by Atwood's Penelope, contemplating the notions of feminism that correspond to the 21st century. On the whole, virtuous women in Greek mythology had often been subordinated and confined to the domestic sphere, and

Willner directs this idea towards the fact that the inability to reverse gender roles facilitates the transformation of women into victims, since such conception of femininity would not help them against hardships (72). This is why it may be imperative to constructively revisit some texts and produce new alternatives, allowing people to choose which content to consume and promoting a higher level of inclusiveness. But, also, to encourage people to recollect past lives, history, and even fiction and poetry reflecting the reality of women during previous times, in order for them to be able to judge by themselves —generating their own ideas and contributing, directly or indirectly, to continue changing the narrative—, in search for equal and fair treatment and representation, in literature and in life, regardless of gender.

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