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Beyond the “Chorus Line”: A Response to Susanne Jung*

CHRISTINE EVAIN

Expanding from the 1974 poem about Penelope and from the 1981 “True Stories” poem, *The Penelopiad*, like many of Atwood’s texts, provides an opportunity to explore the nature of stories in general. In her article “‘A Chorus Line’: Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* at the Crossroads of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres,” Susanne Jung points out how the reader of *The Penelopiad* “is offered a myriad of stories, theories, points of view of what might have happened, but knowledge of the ‘truth’ of what happened is forever deferred” (Jung 52). While *The Penelopiad* allows Atwood to weave in many of the recurrent themes of her work from iconic representations to metafiction, the main focus of Susanne Jung’s article is on trying to perpetrate or uncover “the true story” by giving a voice to silenced voices. The technique that Atwood adopts here is what Reingard Nischik calls “her technique of gender-oriented revisioning” (156), which, in this case, undermines Homer’s Penelope and subverts the “icon of wifely fidelity” (Howells 57). Penelope’s voice is “irreverent and skeptical as [she] mocks the posturing of male heroes” (Howells 59), and her emancipation is reminiscent of many of Atwood’s female figures, including the witty Gertrude (Hamlet’s mother) in “Gertrude Talks Back” in *Good Bones* (15-18), and Circe in *You Are Happy* (45-70). Furthermore, Atwood’s *Penelopiad* foregrounds previously marginal-

*Reference: Susanne Jung, “‘A Chorus Line’: Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* at the Crossroads of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres,” *Connotations* 24.1 (2014/2015): 41-62.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debjung0241.htm>>.

ized characters and untold storylines, allowing Penelope and the maids-as-chorus-line to take center stage. Susanne Jung highlights the form chosen by Atwood in her particular rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* and investigates the construction and function of the poetic insertions within Atwood's narrative which are reminiscent of "[b]oth ancient Greek chorus and modern musical number" and which "employ a range of poetic genres, from nursery rhyme to sea shanty to ballad and idyll, thus giving the maids voice as a collective" (Jung 42). Jung seeks to demonstrate the importance of the Maids' interludes in the narrative, all the while underlining the social privilege of the masters, clearly showing how the masters are blind to these privileges and how they are equally blind to the sufferings they cause.¹

My comments concerning this article will simply serve to further highlight the unusual form chosen for the subject matter—a mixture of genres finely analyzed by Susanne Jung. This will lead me to comment on how Atwood offers a new brand of narrative that I will describe as a "metafictional and mythical cabaret-style confession" which works within an ethical framework serving the purpose of denouncing social privileges. I will also point to ur-material in Atwood's work, including her poetic work which I will consider as the seeds planted for *The Penelopiad*—in terms of exploring both recurrent themes and forms. Finally, having scrutinized Penelope's voice more closely, I will explore another possible interpretation of the ending of *The Penelopiad* that differs from the one suggested by Susanne Jung but does not exclude alternative interpretations.

Atwood's most recent work has been produced "in what has been described as a cabaret style" (Hengen 50), and it is the mixture of this cabaret style with several other ingredients such as the confessional voice, the posthumous voice, intertextuality, metafiction and not to mention ethical comments (in the form of a denunciation of social privileges) that gives *The Penelopiad* both a typical Atwoodian feel to the text and an unprecedented originality. The metafictional component, frequently to be observed in Atwood's work, is mainly present, as underlined by Susanne Jung, in the obsession with the true story. It

is interesting to note that the conflicting stories are clearly highlighted by textual markers such as “said some,” “No, [...] said others. [...] No, said another” (*Penelopiad* 91), thus finger-pointing the agents of the many Odysseus stories and providing the reader with the following implicit metafictional comment: stories are subjective, and different versions can be spun out by different people.

Much more could be said about the metafictional and intertextual components of the narrative as well as the interweaving of genres, but suffice it to say that Atwood’s “modern-day musical theatre” (Jung 44) or “cabaret style [fiction]” (Hengen 50) is tightly connected to post-modern writing. By revealing the origins of the narrative and giving us a glimpse of how stories are fabricated, the reader is encouraged to appreciate the narrative on different levels, all the while adopting a sensible critical distance. Thus, Atwood offers her own brand of metafictional cabaret-style creations, which includes the victim voices of the maidens as well as an ethical framework defined by the chorus.

Defining the ethical framework is only one of the many functions of the chorus; a point which serves as another element of response to Jung’s article. When comparing Atwood’s novel to Greek drama, she argues that the main function of the maids’ chorus in *The Penelopiad* is “setting up an ‘ethical [...] framework’” (44). Quoting Brockett and Hildy (see 19-20), she lists the other key functions of the chorus in Greek drama which she does not dwell on in relation to *The Penelopiad*: “setting ‘the mood for the play,’ adding ‘dynamic energy,’ ‘giving advice’ to the characters or even serving as an ‘antagonist’” (Jung 44). I would argue that these functions are equally important in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*. As a matter of fact, they are inseparable from the novel’s ethical framework. Indeed, the tongue-in-cheek humour serves to reinforce Atwood’s comment about unethical social privileges, providing entertainment, contrasts, and adding “dynamic energy” to the narrative, thus “[setting] the mood” (Brockett and Hildy 19-20) for the novel, in a cabaret-like rewriting of the Greek drama chorus. The comic aspect of the novel is all the more forceful

because, combined with the multi-faceted chorus line, it serves the ethical argument, much like in the Shakespearian tradition, where comedy is never far from tragedy, and vice versa—both forms converging in a message which challenges the audience/the reader to question the established order or social conventions.

With regard to Penelope's voice—which is both a posthumous and confessional voice of *The Penelopiad*—, it makes sense to highlight how the choices concerning the narrative voice unsettle the reader and challenge him/her further. Atwood's poem "Siren Song" (*You Are Happy* 38-39) reveals the power of the confessional voice and highlights "the self-reflective and ironical dynamics of a confession addressed to the reader" (Evain 99). The poem "emphasiz[es] the reader's cheap infatuation with any voice which speaks of his uniqueness: 'you [my reader] are unique / at last' (YAH 39)" (Evain 99). The form of a posthumous memoir chosen by Atwood is reminiscent of many Atwoodian voices speaking to us from beyond the grave. The originality here lies in Atwood's ability to mix different genres as she "give[s] the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xv). Susanne Jung thus describes the very structure of the novel:

The novel consists of two intertwined narratives: in the main narrative, Penelope, speaking from the Underworld, relates her life from birth to the end of the Trojan War and, finally, Odysseus' return to Ithaca. Both her own and her husband Odysseus' afterlife in the Greek Underworld are also described. This main narrative, a prose monologue, or as Penelope herself has it, a "tale" (*Penelopiad* 4), is shadowed by the narrative of the maids, who relate their side of the story in lyrical segments interspersed throughout the main narrative. The maids speak mostly as one collective voice, mostly in verse. (43)

Indeed, Atwood's Penelope belongs to the category of posthumous narrators, spinning her tale about her life and her husband, all the while inhabiting the world of the dead and interacting with other "dead" characters such as Helen of Troy. The maids' voices in *The Penelopiad* are also posthumous. As Niederhoff points out, "[a] cursory perusal of her writings yields a long list of people returning from the

underworld" (61)—from *The Animals in that Country* (1968), to *The Tent* (2006) including the full sequence of *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970).²

These strange voices show as Atwood's Susanna Moodie would put it, that the dead have their "ways of getting through" (*Journals of Susanna Moodie* 60) and that they have something to tell us—one could go as far as to say that the dead have something that they *absolutely need* to tell us. Indeed, as Niederhoff suggests, the dead protagonist-narrators cannot find peace unless they communicate with the living, and it is only when they are heard by the living that they can be restored to death. Niederhoff illustrates this point by giving us several examples in Atwood's work and linking these examples to Greek mythology. His comment concerning Patroclus is enlightening:

In his encounter with Achilles, Patroclus is temporarily restored from death, but what he is negotiating for is a restoration to death. Caught in the no-man's-land between the dead and the living, he is waiting to be buried in the proper fashion, which will allow him to pass the gates of the underworld and to find his place in the "hall of Death," never to "fare [...] from the dark again." (Niederhoff 62-63)

Both the chorus and Penelope return from the dead. The maids' angry voices want justice and therefore haunt Penelope's narrative. As Atwood herself puts it: "The maids in *The Penelopiad* [are] angry, as they still feel they have been wrongfully hanged" (*The Penelopiad: The Play* vi). But what is Penelope's specific request as she speaks to us from the dead? Do the anger and denunciation that underpin the maids' chorus line apply to her discourse, or is she merely playing with storytelling, avoiding the serious issues and condemnations of the chorus line? As the main "revenant" protagonist of the novel, is she in quest of peace or justice in the same way the maids are? Does she resemble the other Atwoodian "revenants"? While Penelope's narrative is haunted by the chorus line, her discourse would certainly not have the same effect on the reader if it were stand-alone. It is because of the strong connection between Penelope's and the maids' versions, that the reader feels the haunting power of the ensemble. Questions concerning this power of Penelope's narrative are not only connected

to the chorus line, but they also tie in with her position in relation to the maids' hanging. Is Penelope a victim of Odysseus' infidelities, or is she to some extent his accomplice? As often with Atwood, the so-called victim—in this case Penelope—is shown to share the guilt of her victimizer because she consents to what is being done to her and to other victims.

This comment leads me to further scrutinize the main protagonist of *The Penelopiad*, especially in relation to possible interpretations of the ending. Let me start by emphasizing Susanne Jung's point about the balance between Penelope's voice in relation to the maids'. Although most of the narrative is articulated in Penelope's voice, the maids do take center stage, thus reversing the 1975 musical tradition highlighted by Marvin Hamlisch, "turn[ing] the chorus line into protagonists, foregrounding what is usually backgrounded in musical theatre" (Jung 44). It is thanks to the voice of the maids that the novel carries its ethical dimension. The poetic form of their chorus reinforces their capacity to haunt the narrative. As Jung further comments:

[T]he maids' subjectivities, which have been denied agency in the main narrative, haunt this same narrative. (Lyric) poetry lacks the temporality that (narrative) prose possesses. The failure to reintegrate the narrative voice of the maids within the main (i.e. Penelope's) narrative is presented—appropriately—as an ever present haunting of that narrative in the form of poetic insertions. The insertions might thus be argued to serve, structurally, also as representations of intrusions produced by the trauma of exclusion of these voices. And as such they remain, appropriately, forever severed from the temporality of the main narrative. (57)

The temporality of Penelope's main narrative is indeed fecundated with the timeless poetry of the maids which serves to reinforce the haunting power of the novel. At the end of the last chapter, the question remains: have the ghosts of the maids been laid to rest, or will they continue to haunt us? Penelope, for her part, does not appear very concerned about the haunting maids. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, she is staged as someone seeking some sort of distraction, in her capacity as a revenant. She continues to communicate with the reader, after the trial of Odysseus, in the same light-hearted manner:

taking advantage of a dead person's trance, she "jumps in" and connects with the world of the living: "When there's an opening, I frequently jump in to fill it. I don't get out as often as I'd like" (*Penelopiad* 185).

If Penelope remains immune to the maids' suffering, she is however a little annoyed that the same cannot be said of Odysseus, who is now being tortured by his victims. Penelope cries out to the maids in anger: "Why can't you leave him alone?" (*Penelopiad* 190), and she does, indirectly, concede that both Odysseus' guilt and the maids refusing to be dismissed affect her more than she would care to admit: "By this time I'm crying" (*Penelopiad* 190), she says, although she then describes the departure of the maids from the scene in a grotesque and mocking way. As for us, the readers, we are the maids' best allies. We are the only hope that they have of being heard. This communication from the world of the dead to the world of the living gives a gothic quality to the text that is underlined by Susanne Jung and also by Coral Ann Howells. Howells claims that "*The Penelopiad* might be seen as Atwood's Gothic version of *The Odyssey*" (58): "[the maids' voices] celebrate the return of the repressed" (69), and "their fates represent [...] the dark underside of heroic epic" (69). This comment serves to underline the originality of *The Penelopiad*, which could be described as a mythical gothic cabaret-style confession—an unprecedented Atwoodian cocktail with nevertheless very typical Atwoodian ingredients.

The gothic element in *The Penelopiad* is further foregrounded by the importance given to transformation. Susanne Jung compares the play to the novel, claiming that, in the play, different from the novel, the maids are denied transformation. I would argue that in both cases the haunting continues; the transformation does not occur in the play, and it is, at the most, incomplete in the novel. Susanne Jung thus describes the maids' transformation:

In simple, nursery rhyme-like verse the maids take their exit, "sprout[ing] feathers, and fly[ing] away as owls" (*Penelopiad* 196). Their transformation into birds of wisdom at the novel's close allows for the possibility of release

for the maids. Telling their tale, presenting their side of the story, a shadow narrative to both the *Odyssey* and Penelope's tale, might serve in this reading as a kind of redemption for the maids, who have released not just their physical human form but also their negative affect, with the implied twenty-first century reader serving as witness to their trauma. The transformation of anger into art, into poetry and song, releases their negative affect and its hold over them. (48-49)

My interpretation is that, to a certain degree, the transformation is mocked and is therefore perhaps not to be taken at face value. While the maids do not remain stuck in their chorus selves and indeed "*sprout feathers, and fly away as owls*" (*Penelopiad* 196), their discourse remains both haunting and mocking:

and now we follow
 you, we find you
 now, we call
 to you to you (*Penelopiad* 195)

Because the maids will "follow" and "call to" the "you" of the poem (that is to both Penelope and Odysseus and to the reader him/herself), their disappearance is not to be trusted. Their call and exit from the scene is accompanied by a self-mocking: "to wit too woo / to wit too woo / too woo" (196). This can be read, not as a form of closure or of release, but rather as the possibility of further transformations and retellings of the story. Whether the maids as personae are released of their negativity is probably irrelevant. I would suggest that it is the possibility of never-ending transformations of the story that matters. Atwood's wry humour, combined with her capacity to revisit ancient myths, offers a retelling of the story which encourages the reader to think of other retellings and to possibly offer his/her own.

Atwood's brand of writing in *The Penelopiad* weaves in many poetic forms many of which are songs—"the nursery rhyme, the popular tune, the sea shanty, the ballad, the love song" (Jung 44). In the same way, many of the poems in *You Are Happy*—the volume that contains the ur-figure of Penelope—are songs. The "Circe/Mud Poems" sequence (*You Are Happy* 45-70) is composed of songs and different

types of poems which vary in form, from free verse poems to prose poems. They point to a Penelope who is not unlike the one in *The Penelopiad* but seen through the lens of Circe. She is described as “sit[ting] in her chair / waxing and waning / like an inner tube or a mother, / breathing out, breathing in” (*You Are Happy* 65). The reader is led to think that Penelope is up to something. She is very different to the “icon of fidelity” of Homer’s myth:

surrounded by bowls, bowls, bowls,
tributes from the suitors
who are having a good time in the kitchen

waiting for her to decide
on the dialogue for this evening
which will be in perfect taste
and will include tea and sex
dispensed graciously both at once. (*You Are Happy* 65)

This ur-figure of the Atwoodian Penelope is a teasing figure, who likes to have a good time and enjoys being surrounded by suitors. She gets to decide on “the dialogue for th[e] evening,” dispensing both “tea and sex”—all in “perfect taste.” She is in a position of control and has no intention of relinquishing this control. The Penelope figure fully comes into her own in the last stanzas of the poem when Atwood gives her own version of Penelope’s weaving:

She’s up to something, she’s weaving
histories, they are never right,
she has to do them over,
she is weaving her version,

the one you will believe in,
the only one you will hear. (*You Are Happy* 65)

Through the persona of Circe, Atwood gives us a glimpse of Penelope. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood’s Penelope is finally given a chance to weave her full story. It is as if Atwood had thought, after writing the “Circe/Mud Poems” sequence, “I’m not quite done with Penelope yet.” Atwood’s second version of Penelope has many points in com-

mon with the first; but the two Penelopes differ in that the second hears the chorus line of the maids. The reader is given to understand that this second Penelope is perhaps more affected by the maids' chorus than she would like to be. Atwood's first Penelope does not mention the maids at all—they simply do not exist in the "Circe/Mud Poems"—and therefore the first Penelope cannot comment on their version of the story nor can she lead the reader to reflect on their position as voiceless victims.

Thus, returning to Homer's text again, thirty-one years after the "Circe/Mud Poems" sequence in *You Are Happy*, Atwood manages not only to expand on the poetic image she created of Penelope weaving stories and entertaining suitors, but also to make her second Penelope a more complex figure than the first. It must also be underlined that her movement from poetry to prose, which is not unusual in Atwood's work, proves to be valuable: poetic ur-figures are revisited and enriched, and this highlights the fecundity of poetry. Indeed, the resurfacing of one of the "Circe/Mud Poems" into a full-blown novel—*The Penelopiad*—is simply yet another illustration of Atwood's poetry as the "seed planted for the next novel" (Evain and Khandpur 107). It shows once more how Atwood's personae, images and leitmotifs can resonate from the poetry to the novels—the poetic quality of writing thereby spanning from one form to another.

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NOTES

¹For Jung's distinction between the social privileges of the masters and the epistemic privileges of the maids, see esp. 58 and 61.

²The list also includes short stories and novels—stating mainly the peculiar uncanny accents in the narrators' voices in *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Cat's Eye* (1988), and *Alias Grace* (1996).

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