Women in Myth

Relational accountability in *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood

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Summary

Recently, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of rewritings of Greek myths by and from the perspective of women. *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood is one of these books. It is a mythical retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus' wife Penelope tells her side of the story. In her story, these is an interesting emphasis on relational accountability, a concept used in feminist scholarship as a condition for the production of good (which means partial and situated) theory.

Through a feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis, I examine Penelope's enactments of relational accountability in the context of several gendered discourses that strongly shape her life. In her relationships with other characters, her belonging is dictated by compulsory heterosexuality, which makes her prioritise her belonging with men over belonging with women. In her relationship with the *Odyssey*, Penelope questions the inconsistent treatment of her cleverness in the *Odyssey*, thus revealing a gendered discourse that only allows Penelope's cleverness to celebrate powerful men. In her relationship with the audience, Penelope tries to be accountable for her role in the death of her maids through telling her story to the audience, because she could not and still cannot belong with them directly. These different discourses interact to achieve the common goal of keeping women from belonging with other women and hailing them into an identity that simply exists to celebrate powerful men, but Penelope is not only shaped by their power: she resists it too.

In the context of the mythical retelling, Penelope's dynamic position realises myth's potential for open-endedness and opens up the story of the *Odyssey* for new meanings. Through enacting relational accountability in her individual life story, Penelope is able to transform the story that has dominated cultural memory for a long time. This analysis shows why it is important to take stories seriously as sources of knowledge: they can expose obscured power relations and the discourses that they hold in place. In a time where we attempt to value women's perspectives and incorporate them into our structures and cultural memories, we need stories and specifically mythical retellings as a site where we can challenge what we know and come to understand the way in which we make sense of the world.

Keywords: mythical retelling, relational accountability, Penelopiad, Odyssey, hierarchy of knowledge

Introduction

Around two years ago, something drew my attention in the bookshop at the station where I frequently spent time waiting for my train home. Every time I walked in, the table filled with reinterpretations of Greek myths seemed to be a little more crowded. I soon realised that most of these books were written by and from the perspective of women. Edith Hall, professor of Classics at King's College London, identifies a growing interest in Greek myths that might have called this table into existence: "Writers are thinking about the way they relate to our own lives but also about how the stories might be told differently" (Dowd 2018). Two books that frequently caught my eye were *Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker and *Circe* by Madeleine Miller. Both of these books made the shortlist for the 2019 Women's prize for fiction, along with several other books containing new perspectives on history written by and about women (Flood 2019). But they are not only about history: "What really struck us in Barker and Miller's books is what hasn't changed," says Kate Williams, chair of the judges (Flood 2019). Women's rewritings show us that women's (hi)stories are written by men, but they also show us that we are changing and starting to value and incorporate women's perspectives (Flood 2019).

The version of history that most of us know is, as this trend shows, not all-encompassing. It is based on archives which contain written records that are mostly created by and about upper class white men (Phillips and Bunda 2018, 6). In their book about the relationship between stories and research, Louise Gwenneth Phillips and Tracey Bunda discuss the absence of stories from these archives, and thus history. This absence is due to the fact that traditional Western thinking looks for a certain type of knowledge: the type from which objective, universal truths can be derived. This perspective says that this type of knowledge cannot be found in stories (Phillips and Bunda 2018, 6): "stories as myths, legends and folk tales are left abandoned, set apart, positioned as lesser to the purities of evidentiary knowings" (Phillips and Bunda 2018, 9). In reality, stories are not so different from knowledge and history. This is specifically true for myths, as they address real, historical social issues in a fictional context (Maggie Humm 2013, 54). In an article on the use of story as theory and methodology, Andrea Riley Mukavetz argues that "story, history, and theory are merely categories that we created to develop a hierarchy of knowledge and intellect" (Riley Mukavetz 2018, 21). Because of this hierarchy, stories are excluded from the domain of knowledge about our past, which can also teach us about our present and open up possibilities for our future.

For a long time, feminist and other scholars have been searching and finding ways to resist this hierarchy of knowledge, which harbours an ideology of objectivity. One particularly important tool has been the concept of accountability. By acknowledging the impact of their identities on their research process, researchers can become accountable for their positions and in turn show how other research lacks this accountability. This can be done in terms of position, but also in terms of relationships. Through this practice of accountability, researchers create partial, situated truths, a feminist form of objectivity. Stories offer such truths too (B. Davies and S. Gannon qtd. in Phillips and Bunda 2018, 6): their truths are all about complexity, symbolism, and new insights (Phillips and Bunda 2018, 6). Because they "support our changing norms of knowledge delivery and exchange the mantles of expert roles among all participants" (Elizabeth P. Quintero qtd. in Phillips and Bunda 2018, viii), they are fitting vehicles for such truths. In this thesis, I read a story through the lens of this (specifically relational) accountability practice in order to expose the truth that it theorises.

Telling stories to make sense of the world is increasingly seen as the essence of being human (Anna De Fina and Barbara Johnstone 2015, 152); retelling stories is a fundamental part of this practice. Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian literary scholar and author of *A Theory of Adaptation*, resists the idea that retellings are simply reproductions: "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 2013, 7). These two elements, the repetition and the change, are also what draw people to adaptations (Hutcheon 2013, 9). According to Liedeke Plate, Assistant Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, myth works according to this same principle of "repetition with a difference" (Plate 2011, 29). She argues that the rewritings of myths by women from around the beginning of this millennium and the early twenty-first century, or 'mythical retellings' as she calls them, can be distinguished from those of fifty years ago by looking at the way in which they tell their story (Plate 2011, 29). Older rewritings are focused on substituting the story we know by a different one and 'fixing' the past, but mythical retellings emphasise myth's open-endedness, as they are "merely a moment in a cultural process of storytelling that is ongoing" (Plate 2011, 31). In this thesis, I study one of these mythical retellings: *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood.

The Penelopiad is an adaptation of the *Odyssey*, Homer's famous epic about Odysseus' travels after the Trojan War. Interestingly, Atwood writes from the perspective of Odysseus' wife Penelope, who waits twenty long years for her husband's return. From the afterlife, Penelope tells her side of the story. *The Penelopiad* was published in 2005, which means it can be classified as a mythical retelling. In this thesis, I show that *The Penelopiad*

realises the transformative potential that mythical retellings offer by enacting feminist relational accountability. My research question is: *How does Penelope in Margaret Atwood's* The Penelopiad *transform the story of the* Odyssey *through enacting relational accountability?* This question is divided into the following subquestions:

1. How does Penelope enact relational accountability in her relationships with other characters?
2. How does Penelope enact relational accountability in relation to Homer's *Odyssey*?
3. How does Penelope enact relational accountability in her relationship with the audience?
4. How do these enactments of relational accountability transform the *Odyssey*?

Before I answer these subquestions in their own chapters, I map out my theoretical framework and explain my methodological approach. In my conclusion, I connect *The Penelopiad*'s transformative force to the hierarchy of knowledge. Through this research, I aim to create a connection between literature and scholarship that encourages a mindset wherein story is seen as a valuable source of knowledge about topics such as gender, knowledge production, and storytelling.

Theoretical framework

As I have explained in the introduction, the hierarchy of knowledge values objective, universal knowledge above all. Donna Haraway, who often brings science and feminism together in her work, theorised this ideology of Western science and philosophy in 1988. She argues that researchers in these fields erase their own position, which allows them to allegedly see everything without being seen. They perform a 'god trick' and thus create completely objective, universally true knowledge (Haraway 1988, 587). Haraway resists this ideology of objectivity by arguing that we should always produce knowledge from the perspective of our bodies, because this makes us accountable and produces partial instead of (dishonest) universal truths. These 'situated knowledges' are a feminist version of objectivity (Haraway 1988, 598-590).

Around the eighties, when Haraway's ideas were already emerging in the academic sphere, the 'reflexive turn' took place in feminist and cultural studies. Academics began to reject the idea of objective, disembodied knowledge (production), and instead wrote their identities into their research in order to 'situate' their knowledge (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 19). Adrienne Rich's "Notes toward a Politics of Location" (1984) is a foundational text of this time. Rich urges us to 'situate' ourselves (write about our identities in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.) in order to avoid universalizing certain (white, Western) perspectives (Rich 2013, 35). Through this 'situating' or 'locating' practice, power structures and privilege that are implicated in and influence knowledge production become visible, which in turn brings us a step further in the "struggle for accountability" (Rich 2013, 29). Thus, both Haraway and Rich identify situating ourselves as a necessary step towards the goal of being accountable for the research we conduct and knowledge we produce.

In 2005, only a few months before *The Penelopiad* was published, Aimee Carillo Rowe, a scholar in the fields of gender and cultural studies, wrote a response to Rich's argument. Carrillo Rowe claims that Rich "fails to locate "location" within community. In this way, she does not hold herself accountable to the allies who enabled her to see from that vantage" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 19). Rowe aims to move beyond 'individualised locations' through a politics of relation, which is centred around our relationships with others and makes power relations within them visible (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 20 and 25). By moving along different modes of belonging (ways of relating to others) and letting them inform each other, we can be politically productive: she calls this 'differential belonging' (Carrillo Rowe 2005,

34-35). Carrillo Rowe theorises a relational form of feminist accountability in scholarship that is a condition for creating honest, situated theory.

In *The Penelopiad*, the character of Penelope enacts this same relational accountability through the way in which she tells her story. An effect of this practice is that she not only renders visible her own position and belonging, but also the positions and relationships (and power relations implicated in them) that remain invisible in the *Odyssey*, so that she uncovers a different version of Homer's story. Interestingly, relational accountability fulfils a double function in Penelope's story: her enactment of it not only shows a different side of the *Odyssey*, but also is what makes *The Penelopiad* the partial, situated perspective that can produce 'good' theory according to the feminist standards I have outlined. Using *The Penelopiad* as a source for theory about the workings of belonging, knowledge production, gender relations, and storytelling (instead of simply dismissing it as fictional or subjective) brings many insights. This can be interpreted as another argument for including stories in the domain of knowledge production and resisting the Western idea of what can be truth or authorised knowledge.

The double function of relational accountability in *The Penelopiad* is particularly interesting because of its status as a mythical retelling. As I have said before, the mythical retelling is characterised by its "radical potential for open-endedness" (Plate 2011, 31). Plate also describes it as "the fluid encounter of the individually lived life with the told story, inscribing the individual with the collective – or, alternatively, allowing the collective and cultural memory to be impacted by the individual" (Plate 2011, 32). Cultural memory is "a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (Marita Sturken qtd. in Plate 2011, 32). The mythical retelling is a 'technology of cultural memory', which means that through it, memories are created, circulated, and interpreted, and it therefore determines "both what and how a culture remembers" (Plate 2011, 30). Thus, the mythical retelling is a tool with which what we remember can be impacted. It achieves this by way of telling individual life stories that relate to the 'told story', the story that dominates our collective cultural memory. *The Penelopiad* is such an individual life story. Through Penelope's enacting of relational accountability (that is inherently about her life) in this story, it impacts what we remember and emphasises the open-endedness of storytelling. Seeing as "institutional discourses encourage forgetting instead of memory" (Riley Mukavetz 2018, 18), *The Penelopiad* possesses the potential to change what we remember and thus what kind of story about history and knowledge production is created.

As Sturken's definition of cultural memory shows, stories fight for a place in cultural memory: they are subjected to and part of the power dynamics that rule this field. In the past, women's rewritings were part of tactics: they were individual acts of rewriting that tried to create space within a system that did not make space for them (Plate 2011, 32-33). According to Plate, contemporary rewritings might turn into a strategy: more and more of them are "strategic representations that rejoin the goals of women's history" to rewrite history (Plate 2011, 33). This strategy is carried out from a place of relative power (Plate 2011, 33), which for this book could be its being part of a well-known publisher's series (Canongate's *Myth Series*) and Atwood's widespread reputation. Feminist literature (along with feminist art and scholarship) specifically aims for "the undoing of the hegemonic and authoritative version of History (and his story)" (Plate 2011, 33). According to Plate, "the distinction between women's rewriting as a tactic or as a strategy of memory hinges on the rewriting's relation to feminism, women's studies and the women's movement" (Plate 2011, 33). In this thesis, I aim to show the connections between (feminist) story and (feminist) theory and argue that *The Penelopiad* undoes the hegemonic and authoritative version of history by enacting relational accountability.

Gender and women's studies do not only challenge gendered forms of social inequality and injustice, but also contribute to our understandings of the world and possibilities of changing it (Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson 2015, xxiv and xxvii). My research is about women's literature and how it can change our views on the boundaries between story, history, and theory, and centres around a concept that is deeply rooted in gender studies: it thus strongly connects to these aims. Furthermore, the ideas that I have incorporated from the field of indigenous studies were completely new to me and I think that implementing them in this context shows the potential for new insights that these perspectives can bring. It is incredibly important to me that I accurately represent all of the approaches and ideas that I draw on. However, I realise that the amount of theories I use and the fact that I am new to many of them prevents me from describing all of their aspects and nuances. I have tried my best to do them justice, but I highly encourage anyone to read into these topics and find more connections that can help transform the landscape of scholarship.

Method

My goal in this thesis is to show how *The Penelopiad* enacts relational accountability to transform the story of the *Odyssey*, specifically in terms of gender relations and belonging. In order to do this, I employ the method of feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA). Kristen Hogan rightly said that "We not only need "diverse books," we need the tools to read them and to put them in conversation" (Hogan 2016, xxii). This method is such a tool, with which I can read *The Penelopiad* in a way that enables me to bring its transformative potential into focus. I have adapted the method of FPDA slightly to fit my research, while still following its core principles.

FPDA brings together the different elements of feminism, poststructuralism, and discourse analysis. Judith Baxter, who theorised the FPDA method, defines discourses as "forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices" (Baxter 2003, 7). They are clusters of meaning with material consequences, because they influence what we do and how we do it. By "inscribing and shaping power relations in all texts", they become ways to interpret the world (Baxter 2003, 7). In this context, power is not (only) an oppressive force, but something that is everywhere, simultaneously impacting and being wielded by people (Baxter 2003, 8). Furthermore, there is not simply one discourse per topic or 'thing' in the world: "there are always plural and competing discourses constituting power relations within any field of knowledge or given context" (Baxter 2003, 8). In this thesis, I analyse discourses of gender and belonging in the context of *The Penelopiad*.

The feminist and poststructuralist aspects of FPDA give it a distinct analytical focus. Feminism draws the analysis towards aspects that have to do with gender (Baxter 2003, 11), while poststructuralism contributes a focus on language as a place where meaning is created (Baxter 2003, 6) and the process of identity construction through discourses (Baxter 2003, 25). Thus, they make FPDA "a feminist approach to analysing the ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in their world according to the ways in which they are located by competing yet interwoven discourses" (Baxter 2003, 1). This is why I look at how Penelope constructs her identity through interacting with discourses implied in the *Odyssey*. I have chosen Penelope's character for two reasons: the book is mainly about her personal life story (which resonates with Plate's concept of the mythical retelling) and she is one of the silenced voices in the book that FPDA aims to give space (Baxter 2003, 65-66). Feminism and poststructuralism also give FPDA its activist character,

as they have "a questioning of elitist aesthetics and an urge to confuse traditional disciplinary boundaries" in common (Maggie Humm 2013, 138). In this research, I specifically aim to question and resist hierarchies concerning knowledge production and belonging in order to emphasise the connectedness of literature and scholarship.

There are many different ways to do FPDA (Baxter 2003, 58). Baxter's guidelines and research examples focus very much on analyses of short excerpts of spoken text. For this reason, and because I want to focus on the concept of relational accountability, I have constructed an FPDA method that fits my aims, but still honours the three defining principles of this approach. These principles are self-reflexivity, a deconstructionist approach, and selecting a specific feminist focus. Self-reflexivity is about being aware of and drawing attention to the fact that all research is constructed and the role of the researcher or author in that process (Baxter 2003, 61). As explained in earlier sections, it is my opinion that all research and knowledge is partial and situated and that this should always be accounted for. Furthermore, this principle echoes aspects of relational accountability, which means that it will be an important part of the analysis itself. A deconstructionist approach is about acknowledging that meaning is never fixed, without losing meaning altogether (Baxter 2003, 62). It aims to question and deconstruct the world around us in order to create space for new ideas and comparisons (Baxter 2003, 61). In my analysis of *The Penelopiad*, I interpret Penelope's story in a way that shows how she questions and deconstructs the world around her, and which consequences this has. The third principle, selecting a specific feminist focus, is about "highlighting key discourses on gender as they are negotiated and performed within specific, localised contexts" and "making sense of the ways in which these discourses position female speakers (in particular) as relatively powerful, powerless or a combination of both" (Baxter 2003, 66). The framework of relational accountability gives me the tools to do exactly this, as it describes different discourses on gender and belonging. Furthermore, Carrillo Rowe's conception of relational accountability is meant to expose the conditions and effects of our belonging, which can be "both oppressive and libratory, and more often both" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 36). Relational accountability offers explanations as to how discourses on gender position Penelope in terms of power and in a fluid way.

These key principles of FPDA give me (already quite specific) guidelines for my research. In determining what exactly to analyse and how to interpret it, however, I have chosen relational accountability as my guiding principle. This is why I analyse the three different 'types' of relationships that are present in *The Penelopiad*: the relationships between Penelope and the other characters, between Penelope and the *Odyssey*, and between Penelope

and the audience. For the relationship between Penelope and other characters, I turn to other work on *The Penelopiad* that identifies the same focus on responsibility and relational accountability in character relationships that I research in this section (Mihoko Suzuki 2007) to single out certain relationships and interactions. To interpret the bonds that Penelope forms during her life (and after her death), I use Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, a discourse that dictates Penelope's position and belonging. For the section on Penelope and how she relates to the *Odyssey*, I look at Penelope's stance on the narrative of the *Odyssey* and how it positions her. I interpret this relationship by looking at Penelope's characteristic cleverness and how it differs in the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*. Thirdly, I analyse the relationship between Penelope and the audience: storytelling presupposes a community, as it needs both a storyteller and listeners (Phillips and Bunda 2018, 10). In this section, I study how Penelope (self-reflexively) positions herself in relation to us. I place this in a broader context that connects the central role of guilt and responsibility in this relationship to Penelope's belonging. Thus, these three relationships show how Penelope positions herself and which discourses play a role in this process. In line with the exploratory nature of FPDA, I have not picked any specific discourses to research in advance, but followed the connections that I identified between the story and relational accountability, which led me to certain discourses linked to relational accountability. My last section and corresponding subquestion brings the results from the previous three together in one coherent interpretation, in which I explain how Penelope positions herself and which consequences this has for the story of the *Odyssey*. This allows me to answer my research question in the conclusion, where I connect the transformative potential of *The Penelopiad* to the context of the hierarchy of knowledge.

Analysis

Penelope's relationship with other characters

In this first section of my analysis, I answer my first subquestion: How does Penelope enact relational accountability in her relationships with other characters? I specifically look at Penelope's relationships with Odysseus, Helen, and the twelve maids. Analysing these within a discourse of compulsory heterosexuality shows how Penelope's belonging with others is influenced by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality.

In her work on relational accountability, Carrillo Rowe mostly writes about relationships between people. She does not only theorise different ways of belonging, but also the power relations that are implicated in these relationships. She points to the existence of "normalizing discourses" or "hegemonic forms" of belonging, such as heterosexuality, whiteness, and masculinity (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 30). She explains that these forms of belonging dictate our daily lives: "dominant identity categories interpellate subjects through regulatory practices that essentially condition belonging" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 28). These categories create 'rules' which tell us with whom and in what ways we can and cannot belong. In *The Penelopiad*, we see such processes in the context of the heterosexual hegemonic form of belonging. Drawing on Rich's work on 'compulsory heterosexuality', Carrillo Rowe argues that heterosexuality obscures the different ways in which we can belong and instead dictates one specific way in which we should belong, specifically in terms of gender: "Rich points out that such forces tell us to and with whom women *must* belong (men), as well as those who whom women may *not* belong (other women)" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 30). Penelope's version of the story displays these regulatory practices of compulsory heterosexuality and their consequences for Penelope's belonging.

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is characterized by one relationship specifically: "Every aspect of her existence is defined by her relationship to Odysseus: she is his wife, the mother of his child and the mistress of his estate" (Betyne Van Zyl Smit 2008, 394). This relationship remains crucial in *The Penelopiad*. It is dictated by compulsory heterosexuality from the start, as she is expected to enter an arranged marriage with a man at fifteen years old. When they first meet, Odysseus provides Penelope with a way out of her home, where she lives with a father that tried to kill her and a mother that mostly ignores her. After their wedding, however, she also develops "friendly feelings towards him – more than that, loving and passionate ones" (Atwood 2005, 48). When he leaves to fight the Trojan war, she is

desperately waiting for him to return, both because she wants her boredom relieved (Atwood 2005, 81) and because she wants him to love her and tell her that she has done well (Atwood 2005, 89). Even her taking charge of his affairs as a woman is "on his behalf, of course. Always for him" (Atwood 2005, 89). She yearns to be(long) with Odysseus and sees him as her only ally and friend: without him, she is alone (Atwood 2005, 79).

In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's relationship with Odysseus remains crucial, but we also see others appear: Penelope's bond with Helen and the maids are two of the most important elements of the book (Suzuki 2007, 275). In these two relationships, we see the other side of the coin of compulsory heterosexuality, which is the destruction of "communities of belonging to and with other women" because of women's (imposed) "desire to belong to and with men" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 31). In Helen's case, this is made clear by Penelope's remarks about how much she despises Helen. When Penelope's hostile attitude is interpreted by Helen as jealousy, she is not wrong: Carrillo Rowe explains how "compulsory heterosexuality positions women to compete with each other for male attention and approval" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 30-31). Penelope's jealousy does not stem from a wish to be like Helen, but from seeing her as a threat to her relationship with Odysseus. Helen is the one who caused Odysseus, Penelope's only 'place of belonging', to leave for Troy. Furthermore, Helen is known for her beauty and powers of seduction, which makes Penelope wonder if Odysseus prefers Helen over her: "why was he still – and possibly always – thinking about Helen?" (Atwood 2005, 64). Thus, when Penelope says Helen is the source of all of her misery (Atwood 2005, 131), she means that Helen interferes with her belonging with and to Odysseus.

Compulsory heterosexuality also shapes Penelope's relationships with her twelve beloved maids, but in a different way. At first, this bond seems a promising one: it is one of the first positive connections we see Penelope make in her lifetime. It echoes one of Carrillo Rowe's 'modes of belonging' or different ways of relating to people, through which we can move when we are with different people and at different points in time (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 33). The mode I am referring to here is the separatist one, wherein "we not only recognize our differences, but we value them and seek to nurture them solely among people "like us"" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 34). It is a safe space for when the outside world becomes overwhelming and where we can share our dreams and visions with people who have similar backgrounds, experiences, or ideas about the world (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 34). For Penelope, her bond with the maids is such a form of belonging. They tell each other stories, laugh, and share secrets: "We were almost like sisters" (Atwood 2005, 114). With the maids, Penelope

does not have to fight for her place in a man's world, but can safely exist among other women. However, after a while, the relationship between Penelope and the maids turn toxic. She wants them to keep an eye on the suitors that are waiting for Penelope to pick a new husband and find out what they are up to, even if that means sleeping with or getting raped by them. Penelope accounts for this by saying that "it's one way of serving your master, and he'll be very pleased with you when he comes home" (Atwood 2005, 117). Thus, Penelope's desire to belong with Odysseus corrupts her relationship with the maids, as she abuses the power[1] she has over them to serve Odysseus.

Thus, an interpretation of Penelope's relationships with other characters reveals how the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality dictates belonging. Here, we see oppressive and liberating modes of belonging interact: Penelope's relationships with other women in her life are infected by her yearning for Odysseus. Compulsory heterosexuality destroys the bonds she could have formed with other women: instead, when she comes close to them, her desire for and loyalty to Odysseus eventually triumphs, causing her to push them away.

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[1] Baxter points at the dangers of privileging certain voices over others (Baxter 2003, 66). Although I give an underprivileged female voice (Penelope) room to speak, it is important to note that if it was up to the maids, Penelope's belonging with them would probably be interpreted in an entirely different way, specifically when taking class difference into account. My focus is on Penelope's perspective, but for an interpretation of *The Penelopiad* that focuses more on class differences, I recommend Mihoko Suzuki's "Rewriting the "Odyssey" in the Twenty-First Century" (2007).

Penelope's relationship with the Odyssey

The Penelopiad is a response to Homer's *Odyssey*. Even though Penelope herself never references it directly, Margaret Atwood mentions the *Odyssey* as her main source of inspiration and information in her Introduction and Notes, and towards the end of the book it is called "the main authority on the subject" (Atwood 2005, 179). In this section, I analyse how Penelope exposes and resists obscured gender stereotypes of cleverness by positioning herself in the context of and in relation to the *Odyssey*.

As I have shown in the previous section, there are hegemonic discourses of belonging that hail us as subjects and place us into certain identity categories. When we think of these identity categories in terms of belonging, however, we can see what the conditions and effects of belonging are and how accountability for these processes can be established. This last goal can be achieved by hailing power and the ideology to which it connects in the same way that it hails us (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 28). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope does not subscribe to the way in which she is hailed and made by normative discourses. Instead, she both enacts accountability and demands it from Homer and the *Odyssey* as she positions herself in a way that shows the conditions and effects of her belonging in this story.

A large part of *The Penelopiad* is dedicated to Penelope proving other versions of the story wrong. Because *The Penelopiad* is an adaptation of the *Odyssey*, we can assume that the other stories she refers to mostly originate from Homer's work. Her objections to these accounts are nearly always about how she is positioned by them, specifically in terms of her cleverness. This cleverness is already a defining character trait of Penelope in the *Odyssey*, but Atwood shines a new light on it (Suzuki 2007, 269). In the *Odyssey*, a group of suitors tries to convince Penelope to pick one of them as her new husband, as they do not believe Odysseus will return. Penelope devises a strategy to keep them from bothering her: she starts weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, which must be finished before she can even think of marrying again. At night, she unravels her work, so that she will never finish it. Curiously, Penelope's cleverness is strikingly absent as soon as Odysseus returns. According to the *Odyssey*, she does not recognise her husband when he first enters the palace in a disguise, because the goddess Athene has distracted her. Penelope's plan to once again let Odysseus win her hand in a contest against the suitors is also attributed to a divine plan (Atwood 2005, 139-140). In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope contradicts these stories, saying that she immediately recognised her husband (but did not show this to protect him) and carefully set up the contest to pick a new husband, knowing that only Odysseus could win it (Atwood 2005, 136-137 and

140). If Penelope is clever enough to distract the suitors with a trick, it seems likely that she would also be smart enough to recognise her own husband and come up with another scheme.

How can this inconsistency be explained? What Penelope says about Odysseus' return gives us a clear direction: "if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognise him: it's always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness" (Atwood 2005, 137). In this quote, she connects her personal experience to a broader discourse in which it is not suitable for a woman to display her cleverness, especially when this means she is then as smart as or even smarter than a man. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is permitted to display her cleverness only when it serves the purpose of showing the world what a perfect, faithful wife Odysseus has, who will go to great lengths to stay loyal to him. As soon as Odysseus returns, his cleverness takes centre stage again and Penelope's must vanish in favour of it. Because Penelope's intellect has been established by then, something else must explain why she did not immediately welcome Odysseus and how the contest came about. In both cases, this is done by way of divine intervention. In light of the discourse that I have just highlighted, the role of the gods seems to be something more than simply a way of making sense of the world: it is a mechanism that can be used to tell the story in a way that celebrates powerful men and obscures a realistic account of the lives of women.

In contrast to the first section, this section is about resisting how we are made by hegemonic discourses. By taking accountability for her actions, Penelope draws attention to her inconsistent cleverness in the *Odyssey* and that this is linked to her relationship with Odysseus and men in general. The difference between the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* is the effect of a gendered discourse wherein cleverness is reserved for the powerful men in the story. This means that in order to belong in the *Odyssey*, Penelope's character must fit a discourse that foregrounds Odysseus' cleverness. The consequence of this form of belonging is that Penelope's cleverness can only be present when it serves Odysseus' reputation and must otherwise be obscured by divine intervention. *The Penelopiad* gives a more realistic account of Penelope's character, which undermines the story of the *Odyssey* and where Penelope belongs in it.

Penelope's relationship with the audience

Penelope's story is meant to be heard. Although she opens *The Penelopiad* by saying "it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe to myself" (Atwood 2005, 3), the audience is a crucial part of her storytelling practice: she addresses us directly, talking about 'our world' and both counting on and setting out to change what we know. In this section, I examine Penelope's motives for telling her story to us and explain how she attempts to enact accountability in her relationships with the audience.

According to Carrillo Rowe, "the work of self-reflexivity must be mobilized … within the relational spaces in which the subject inserts herself or is inserted *and* those in which she fails to do so" (Carrillo Rowe 2009, 6). Penelope creates, or inserts herself into, a relationship between herself and the audience. Within this relationship, she not only tells us her experiences, but also reflects on them at the same time, saying things such as "So I foolishly thought myself quite wise" (Atwood 2005, 118) and "in hindsight, a grave mistake" (Atwood 2005, 115). Interestingly, these reflections often concern the fate of her twelve maids, who were hanged after Odysseus' return because they had been 'disloyal' by consorting with the suitors (Atwood 2005, 158). For this, Penelope often seems to feel guilt and to want to defend herself. Shannon Carpenter Collins, a literary scholar, identifies this guilt as Penelope's motivation for telling her story in the first place: "Why does this most perfect wife feel compelled to defend herself by telling the story in her own words, from her own perspective? Because she must justify her actions that allowed the Maids to be hanged" (Carpenter Collins 2006, 65). Following this interpretation, it seems that Penelope wants to convince us, the audience, of her innocence.

Penelope is well aware of the fact that defending herself makes her seem guilty (Atwood 2005, 3). She still tries, even though her words of remorse sound hollow when followed by excuses such as "But I was running out of time, and becoming desperate, and I had to use every use and stratagem at my command" (Atwood 2005, 118). It almost seems as if she does not want to be judged as either guilty or innocent. An explanation for this can yet again be found in the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality. Carpenter Collins describes Penelope's conflict as follows: "To ally herself openly with the Maids, Penelope would have to lose the approval of the powerful males of her world, and in doing so lose her own status. She is unwilling to do so, perhaps even afraid of doing so. Yet, by not doing so, she becomes complicit in the murder of the Maids" (Carpenter Collins 2006, 65). Thus, belonging with

men once again triumphs over belonging with women, leaving Penelope unable to scrub the blood off her hands.

These observations make for an interesting conflict. Penelope is not remembered for her crimes, not even haunted by the ghosts of the maids, who only torment Odysseus. Why would she not simply leave things as they are? A hint can be found in her determination to tell her story. At the beginning of the book, Penelope says: "I like to see a thing through to the end" (Atwood 2005, 4). This resonates with a quote by Dorothy Allison, an American feminist writers, who says that "telling the story all the way through is an act of love" (Allison qtd. in Hogan 2016, xxi). Interestingly, telling stories has always been a loving practice for Penelope, both with Odysseus and the maids (Atwood 2005, 114 and 172). However, this time, Penelope's love is not directed at Odysseus, whom she has not forgiven "for everything he put me through" (Atwood 2005, 189) and who is remembered as a hero and thus would not benefit from a different side of the story. That leaves only one other community with which she felt comfortable when she was alive: the maids. During her life, Penelope could not openly ally herself with the maids, even though she loved them dearly. Now that everyone she knew is long gone, she tries to save what is left of their bond. Because the maids will not speak to her in the afterlife (Atwood 2005, 190), Penelope tries to make amends in a different way: through telling the world about their relationship and the maids' innocence. It is her love for them that causes her to struggle when trying to take accountability: it is too painful to admit that she is responsible for the maids' deaths, but also to ignore her guilt entirely. Instead, she expresses her debt to her community through the only way of loving she has ever known: storytelling. At least this way, the world will know her pain.

Thus, Penelope's efforts to be accountable to the audience can be interpreted as an attempt at taking responsibility for the actions that led to the death of the maids. Through telling her story to us, she honours this community one last time: changing our interpretation of their bond is the closest Penelope will come to accountability. This section completes the part of my analysis wherein I examine how Penelope enacts relational accountability in *The Penelopiad*. In the next section, I look at how these enactments transform the *Odyssey*.

Transforming the Odyssey

In the first three sections of my analysis, I have shown how Penelope enacts relational accountability in *The Penelopiad.* The first section shows how the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality dictates Penelope's belonging with other characters: belonging with and being accountable to Odysseus is her priority and this keeps her from having healthy bonds with other women. In the second section however, Penelope resists a normative gendered discourse of cleverness instead of seemingly unconsciously undergoing it. By taking accountability and hailing the power that produces this discourse, she undermines the *Odyssey*'s inconsistencies in order to celebrate powerful men. The third section reveals how Penelope attempts to be accountable in her relationship with the maids through her relationship with the audience. By way of storytelling, she shows her guilt and regret to the audience, which then understands how important this community was to her and how much she wanted to belong there. These three relationships show how Penelope tells her story by way of positioning herself in terms of belonging.

Through a feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis, I have analysed how a historically silenced voice speaks in a context that is shaped by hegemonic gendered discourses. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope negotiates her identity, relationships, and positions in the context of the *Odyssey*. This process is influenced and limited by discourses that work together to achieve the same goal of keep women from belonging with other women, hailing them into an identity that simply exists to celebrate powerful men. Although these discourses position Penelope in certain ways within this story, she also positions herself by enacting relational accountability. Furthermore, this positioning hails the power (relations) that holds these discourses in place, which exposes them and makes it possible to resist them (because "we cannot alter that which we cannot see" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 30)). This way, *The Penelopiad* does not only show how Penelope is rendered relatively powerless by hegemonic discourses, but also how she exerts power within these discourses that impact and shape her, questioning and deconstructing them in the process. This dynamic perspective on Penelope's character goes against the *Odyssey*'s attempt to create a closed narrative with a fixed meaning. Thus, Penelope's story creates space for new meanings to emerge and thus opens up the story of the *Odyssey*.

How, then, do these enactments of relational accountability transform the *Odyssey*? To answer this question, we return to the concept of the mythical rewriting. The mythical rewriting is a strategy that aims to change cultural memory. I argue that *The Penelopiad*

shows that the mythical retelling's power to transform cultural memory lies in its "fluid encounter of the individual life with the told story" (Plate 2011, 32). By enacting relational accountability in the way in which she tells her life story, Penelope does not only create a partial, situated truth that is grounded in experience, but also exposes how the *Odyssey* tells its story and lacks this relational accountability. Seeing as the *Odyssey* is the version of the story that is dominant in our cultural memory, this makes *The Penelopiad* a strategic representation of the impact of hegemonic discourses of belonging on daily life. Thus, *The Penelopiad* rewrites history: it undoes the hegemonic and authoritative version of history that is the *Odyssey*. Moreover, Penelope's partial, situated account of her life realizes myth's "radical potential for open-endedness" (Plate 2011, 31). This is emphasised even more by how Penelope makes the audience part of the story and interpretation of it: she makes us aware of our role in the storytelling process, which in turn emphasises that Penelope's story is "merely a moment in a cultural process of storytelling that is ongoing" (Plate 2011, 31). Thus, Penelope's enactments of relational accountability transform the *Odyssey* by exposing the power structures within it and thus opening up the story it tells to other perspectives, interpretations, and meanings.

Conclusion

According to Andrea Riley Mukavetz, "a powerful story is participatory and relational" (Riley Mukavetz 2018, 6). In this thesis, I have shown the power that a participatory and relational story like *The Penelopiad* holds. Through enacting relational accountability in her relationships with other characters, the *Odyssey*, and the audience, Penelope shows the impact of hegemonic gendered discourses of belonging on her life. Furthermore, she questions and deconstructs these discourses, which opens up the fixed, 'universal' story of the *Odyssey*: myth's potential for open-endedness is realised by telling the story in a way that emphasises partial knowledge, relational accountability, and the fluidity of meaning. This way, Penelope undoes the hegemonic and authoritative version of history that the *Odyssey* displays.

It is important to note here that, like any piece of theory or knowledge, my research has limitations. For example, I have focused on the perspective of Penelope, leaving out the perspective of the maids and some interesting dimensions that their viewpoint addresses, such as class oppression. I have also not compared *The Penelopiad* to the *Odyssey* in a close reading, which means I am mostly reliable on Atwood's account of the *Odyssey* for making points about it. However, I am convinced that my research brings together some incredibly interesting and important theories that need to be further explored to realise the potential of an alliance. Future research can be a step in this direction and also incorporate the elements that are absent in mine.

My analysis of *The Penelopiad* shows how mythical retellings can change the (hi)story we know. Seeing as myths draw on real issues, it is important to take seriously what they can teach us about our past, present, and future. *The Penelopiad* shows us the impact of hegemonic discourses and thus emphasises how important it is that they are seen and challenged. Since we cannot change what we cannot see, we must expose power relations in our society in order to enable social change. Especially now that we are starting to value women's perspectives more and actually incorporate them, we must explore every possible way of doing this. This thesis shows that stories and specifically mythical retellings are one such tool, as they centre around the same relational accountability that is currently changing the landscape of knowledge production. Now that we live in a time wherein mythical retellings are incredibly popular and the discourse of relational accountability has secured a place in feminist scholarship, it is time to use these tools to further the project of changing discourses of knowledge production to be more inclusive and take another step in the struggle for accountability.

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