Published online: 25 September 2024 DOI: 10.54254/2753-7080/8/2024101

The Contemporary Transformation of Mythical Women: The Reconstruction of Helen and Penelope in Atwood's Works

Yining Zhou

Department of Greek Studies, School of European and Latin American Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, 1550 Wenxiang Road, Shanghai, China

Josephine.Zhou.sisu@gmail.com

Abstract. The feminist wave has driven the reinterpretation of classic texts such as Homer's epics, and Margaret Atwood's works are exemplary of this trend. Atwood creates poetry and novels rooted in the tradition of feminist rewriting, employing mythical female figures like Helen and Penelope to explore these characters' inner worlds, unveiling long-concealed mechanisms of patriarchal power. By using multiple perspectives and nonlinear narratives, she breaks the constraints of singular authoritative discourse. By merging the ancient with the modern, Atwood highlights the shared experiences of women while portraying the awakening of female consciousness. She transforms the stereotypical images of the "wanton woman" and the "virtuous wife" into complex, autonomous individuals, challenging traditional gender role definitions. Atwood's rewriting is not merely a retelling of original stories but an exploration of the underlying gender power structures. She weaves a rich cultural network of women, opening up new horizons for "their own literature.

Keywords: Atwood, Penelope, Helen, Feminism

1. Literature Review

The reconstruction of mythological archetypes from contemporary perspectives often breathes new life into them. The Canadian "Queen of Literature," Margaret Atwood, uses the reshaping of classics as a means of creation, reconstructing a series of mythological characters by skillfully integrating modern feminist perspectives into their characterization. In works such as *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing* and *The Penelopiad*, Atwood brings to the forefront the previously marginalized and obscured figures of Helen and Penelope from ancient Greece, questioning the inherent gender roles and power dynamics within these myths, and challenging the mindset and discourse system under patriarchal culture. Through this approach, Atwood provides readers with a unique perspective to re-examine literary tradition and the construction of social gender while establishing what Showalter describes as "their own literature."

In the tradition of ancient Greek literature, Helen and Penelope, as the two extremes of the virtuous wife and the wanton woman, represent the typical portrayals of women in a patriarchal society. Helen's image has always been a focal topic in classical studies. International scholars have produced abundant research outcomes and numerous monographs on her image. Gumbrecht's *Grafting Helen: The Classical Legacy* innovatively employs the concept of "grafting" by integrating classical studies, Derrida's deconstruction theory, and post-structuralist thought. It traces the evolution of the Helen myth and her image from ancient Greece to modern French literature, exploring her connection with rhetoric, poetics, and politics. *Helen of Troy* by Oxford University's Maguire is a study of the reception of the Helen myth, spanning from antiquity to modern times. It focuses on literature and narratology, examining the various facets of Helen's portrayal.

In contrast, domestic scholars have shown relatively limited attention to Helen's image, with most studies appearing in journal articles. Yang Hui analyzed Helen's portrayal from the perspective of historical interpretation, examining her image as depicted by classical writers [1]. Liu Hao explored Helen's origins and symbolism from a mythological perspective, understanding the Trojan War as a historical and cultural symbol to interpret the social consciousness and its evolution during the Archaic period [2]. Chen Rongnü and Yu Xuan focused on textual analysis of Helen's image in *The Iliad*, using this to glimpse into the status of women and the reasons behind it during Homer's era.

Penelope, as the central female figure in *The Odyssey*, has long attracted the attention of many international scholars. Nancy Felson, using a narratological approach, deeply explores how Homer constructs Penelope's image, analyzing from the perspectives

Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

of the male gaze and subjectivity, and introduces the concept of the "poetics of Penelope" [3]. Barbara Clayton interprets Penelope's weaving as a form of female discourse, examining its emphasis on process, multiplicity, and ambiguity as a means to resist patriarchal-centered narratives [4]. In contrast, domestic scholars have shown less interest in Penelope. In her book *Women and Desire: The Greek World*, Chen Rongnü discusses the ambiguous and complex feminist views in Homer's epics and analyzes Penelope's position of being simultaneously praised and denied in this context.

Through the review of the above literature, it can be seen that scholars have systematically studied the images of Helen and Penelope from multiple angles and levels, yielding fruitful results. However, existing research still has gaps, lacking comparative analyses between the traditional and contemporary reconstructed images of Helen and Penelope, and an intertextual comparison of these two female figures under the same author.

Therefore, based on this foundation, this study will comprehensively apply theories from comparative studies, feminist criticism, and archetypal criticism within mythological analysis to thoroughly interpret Atwood's phenomenon of classic reconstruction. By comparatively analyzing the similarities and differences between the traditional images of Helen and Penelope and their contemporary representations in Margaret Atwood's works, this research delves into the purposes, methods, characteristics, and implications of such reconstructions. It reveals the critique and reflection that feminist criticism brings to traditional narratives and gender notions, and how classic texts are reinterpreted and transformed within a feminist perspective. This approach not only contributes significantly to exploring Atwood's own understanding of gender politics and culture but also holds substantial value for understanding the intrinsic motivations and cultural meanings behind contemporary feminist literary creation.

2. The Portrayal of Female Figures in Epics—Helen and Penelope

2.1. The Flame of Desire: The Tragedy of Helen

Helen, the enchanting icon of the epic, has been manipulated by patriarchal ideology and used as a symbol to oppress and discipline women since her birth in the Bronze Age. Despite her physical appearance never being explicitly described, the power of her beauty is universally acknowledged: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?" [5]. On one side, she represents the allure of desire; on the other, she is linked to savagery, violence, and death. She is a sweet curse, bringing destruction wherever she goes. Men both desire and despise her, embodying the patriarchal culture's ambivalent attitude towards women.

Exploring the etymology of Helen's name may unlock the complexity of her character. The name Helen (Ἑλένη) has three main interpretations: "torch" (ἑλένη) [6], "radiant" (σελήνη), and "destroyer of ships" (ελω+ναυς). Regardless of the interpretation, this radiant name destined the infant to bring turmoil to the world.

From birth, Helen has been intertwined with lust and violence. It is said that Zeus, disguised as a swan, raped her mother Leda, making her a victim of desire and power struggles. From her youth, Helen was seen as a femme fatale who incited conflict. She was desecrated and abducted by Theseus at the sanctuary, igniting the war between Sparta and Athens. As an adult, during her courtship contest, Helen was treated as a trophy for heroes, symbolizing supreme honor. Following the "Golden Apple" incident with Paris, she chose to elope with him—one of the few moments in her life where she had agency. Yet, driven by her free will, she became the source of shared suffering for both Greeks and Trojans. On the one hand, she instilled fear wherever she went, earning the title of "Helen of the Shuddering." On the battlefield, heroes fought in her name, seeking κλέως ἀφίθιτον (immortal glory) [7]. After the war, Menelaus once again fell under her charm, bringing her back to Greece without punishment, and she subsequently disappeared from the stage of the epic.

As a mother, Helen also neglected her daughter. The Roman poet Ovid, in *Heroides*, criticizes this wayward mother through the abandonment of her daughter Hermione: "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, / Yet you ask who your daughter is" [8].

With the spread of Christianity, Helen was later regarded as the embodiment of evil and sin, becoming synonymous with the term "wanton woman." Theologian Alain de Lille condemned Helen in his writings: "Why should I glorify the daughter of Tyndareus with celestial beauty, when she, relying on her beauty, refuses to accept the disgrace of being called an adulteress" [9]. The true cause of war—men's lust and arrogant desire—was thus obscured. Helen was portrayed as an object purely for male aesthetic pleasure, with every stage of her life closely tied to sexuality.

Additionally, as the initiator of war, Helen only appears three times in *The Iliad*, and she is always mired in self-blame, referring to herself as "horrible" and "the source of disaster," internalizing the misogyny of the patriarchal society into her self-perception. Hector's funeral marks Helen's final appearance, where she sheds tears and sings a sincere lament, revealing her predicament in the war: she belongs neither entirely to Greece nor to Troy; she carries the heavy burden of guilt, yet she is also a victim. This complexity and contradiction offer ample space to explore Helen's inner struggles and the motivations behind her choices.

2.2. The Bondage of Fidelity: Penelope's Dilemma

In stark contrast to the "wanton" Helen, Penelope's unwavering fidelity and endurance have earned her the praise of men, making her the ideal model for women. As a wife, she symbolizes Odysseus's warm home, the starting point and destination of his

wanderings. In *The Odyssey*, the stories of Odysseus's and Agamemnon's returns are deliberately paralleled, highlighting the crucial role of a wife's virtue in the stability of the household.

Penelope's name in Greek, Πηνελόπη, is derived from πήνη (thread) [10] and λέπω (to weave) [11], hinting at her intricate connection with weaving. In a patriarchal society, weaving was a primary social duty for ancient Greek women and a quintessential female image. It becomes a metaphor for Penelope's life: like a spider meticulously weaving its web, she uses her cunning to fend off the suitors, but this web also traps her within the confines of her chamber, rendering her the eternal weaver laboring endlessly at her loom.

Weaving earns Penelope the male admiration of "excellence" (ἄρετή), but it also symbolizes her predetermined fate—being trapped within the patriarchal construct of a female role, endlessly repeating the cycle of weaving. This portrayal of the female character embodies the patriarchal expectation of the "ideal wife." Penelope's name is also associated with the "penelops bird," a symbol of fidelity and sorrow [12]. Whether it is the meaning of the "faithful bird" or the root word's connotation of "weaving," both serve as metaphors for her duty—to serve her family as a wife and mother throughout her life.

In the male-dominated epic narrative, Penelope rarely has the opportunity to speak in public; weaving becomes her only means of expression. After Telemachus comes of age, he begins to command his mother, limiting her influence by restricting her right to speak. Penelope's first appearance is during the suitors' banquet, where she requests a change of song but is ordered by her son, Telemachus, to "return to the spinning wheel" and stay out of the male domain. In the context of ancient Greek society, the public sphere was considered an exclusively male space, while women were confined to the private realm. "If a woman dares to enter the male-dominated spaces, she is inevitably met with insult" [13]. By depriving his mother of her public voice, Telemachus reinforces this gender separation, denying Penelope her right to participate in public affairs as an independent individual. He repeats and reinforces the patriarchal pattern of suppressing women, ensuring the continued dominance of patriarchy in the public sphere.

As the object being narrated, Penelope has few opportunities to express her own emotions; she primarily exists through the narratives and evaluations of others. It is precisely Penelope's wisdom, cunning, and long-term silence and obedience within the moral and power boundaries set by men that make her the celebrated model of the "ideal wife and daughter," earning her the condescending praise of male-centric ideology. Even in the underworld, Agamemnon extols her, saying she has earned an immortal reputation for her "virtue and goodness."

2.3. Binary Opposition: The Wanton Woman and the Virtuous Wife

The depiction of these two types of female figures in *Homer's Epics* reflects the binary opposition created by patriarchal society to discipline women—the "virtuous wife" and the "wanton woman." Ancient Greek society believed that women's desire could lead to disaster, thus labeling women with desire as "wanton." In contrast, the so-called "virtuous wife" was portrayed as the embodiment of reason and wisdom, stripped of her own desires. This binary opposition is, in fact, a patriarchal projection of the ideal woman—a desire to retain feminine qualities while eliminating the threat of female desire [14].

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope's evaluation of Helen reflects the internalization of this binary opposition. In Book 23 of *The Odyssey*, Homer reveals Penelope's view on Helen's actions: "The gods must have urged her to commit this shameful act; she had never before committed such a serious crime, and it has brought us immense misfortune" [15].

Although Penelope acknowledges the divine influence as the governing force, she subtly expresses criticism of Helen as the instigator of the war, implying that her reckless indulgence led to great catastrophe. However, Penelope does not seem to realize that her criticism itself is a part of patriarchal discourse. By obscuring Paris's culpability, she unintentionally reinforces the unequal gender notion that women should be held accountable for the actions of men.

Nevertheless, there exists a more complex relationship between Helen and Penelope. The two share a hidden interaction, a bond independent of men within the multiple constraints imposed upon them. Weaving, as the primary domestic activity for women, creates a space that belongs uniquely to them, serving as a mode of expression distinct within a patriarchal society. In *The Odyssey*, Helen weaves a robe for Telemachus and entrusts it to Penelope. This gift, associated with weaving, is passed within the female domestic sphere, linking the two women and establishing an independent and concealed social network. This independent space, hidden within the act of weaving, provides a possibility for the expression of female subjectivity. In the intertwining of warp and weft, women express themselves, take action, and influence their own and their families' destinies. Over time, weaving has become closely intertwined with discourse (μύθος), with the process of unraveling and reweaving symbolizing women's deconstruction and reconstruction of existing narratives. Through language and text, women weave their own stories, challenging the dominant narratives of patriarchal society, thereby laying a solid foundation for the reshaping of contemporary feminism.

3. The Poetry of the Body: Helen's Awakening Power

Helen and Penelope have been subjects of literary depiction for thousands of years. However, as Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*: "She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history" [16]. As projections of male desire and aesthetics, their appearances and voices are controlled by men, with their true thoughts and emotions concealed beneath male narratives.

As an important contemporary Canadian female writer, Margaret Atwood has consistently infused her poetry with feminist tendencies, creating new spaces for the long-marginalized female experiences and voices. Her later poetry displays an even stronger sense of political engagement, focusing intently on gender politics, which echoes the themes found in her novels. Written in 1995, *Morning in the Burned House* emerged in alignment with the second wave of feminism, showcasing Atwood's brilliance in the poetic realm once again. In her poetry, Atwood uses delicate and bold depictions of the body to reveal the unique life experiences and emotional worlds of women, constructing a language system imbued with feminine characteristics. This resonates with Hélène Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine" (writing through the body) and Elaine Showalter's idea of "women's literature." Atwood reinterprets ancient mythological motifs and historical events, integrating feminist theory with myth, history, and reality to restore the true image of women as independent individuals.

3.1. Perspective Subversion: Helen's New Self

In the poem *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing*, Atwood cleverly draws upon the tensions inherent in Helen's character from Greek epics, such as beauty and danger, allure and terror, passivity and agency, and further amplifies them into a force of subjectivity. By shifting the narrative perspective and adjusting the narrative voice, she subverts the singular construction of female images in mythological motifs, allowing women to reclaim control over their bodies and realize their true power, thereby breaking the rules of patriarchy.

The title of the poem reveals that Helen is no longer a passive victim but rather a stripper in the modern commercial world, using her ability to entice men as a means of livelihood. The poem employs a first-person voice, drawing the reader into the inner world of the woman. Helen is given the opportunity to express her nuanced psychological feelings and intense emotions. She does not see herself as an object of exploitation and spectacle; instead, she adopts a cynical tone to confront and provoke her admirers. She considers it her choice, taking pride in her skillful seduction: manipulating men's desires and brutality, she plays with them even as they watch her.

3.2. Linguistic Liberation: A New Voice After Silence

Atwood's poetry is marked by a calm, concise, and clear language, skillfully employing various techniques in her narrative. As translator Zhou Zan noted, her work "has a distinct narrative and dramatic quality" [17]. She firmly opposes the narrow confinement of women's writing to the stale impression of "boudoir literature." She candidly states: "The poetry I read at the time, the ones that moved me, were about massacres, war, mutilation, sex, and death, while women's poetry was expected to be filled with soft, floral, and embroidered lines" [18]. Thus, in this poem, she uses a wealth of realistic vocabulary and unexpected imagery, depicting scenes of bloody violence without any emotional restraint. This creates a unique poetic style—cold, direct, and powerful. At the same time, the use of such bold, realistic language, along with themes of sex and slaughter, challenges and subverts the traditional, elegant, and reserved style of feminine writing, elevating the dimensions and depth of women's literature to new heights.

The first stanza of the poem begins with the discrimination Helen faces from other women, exposing a form of misogyny centered around women [19]: "The world is full of women / who would tell me I should be ashamed of myself / if they had the chance / quit dancing." Atwood sensitively captures the animosity from women who align themselves with traditional patriarchy against those who break free from its constraints. These women gain privileges by conforming to the patriarchal system, so when Helen takes the bold step of reclaiming her autonomy, their vested interests feel threatened. As Simone de Beauvoir stated: "Refusing to be the other, refusing to collaborate with men, for women, is equivalent to renouncing all the advantages that union with the superior caste can bring them" [20]. These women often shame those who defy norms, using the same tactics men employ to degrade women, thereby asserting their privileged status and defining "appropriate" behavior [21].

3.3. Physical Rebellion: From Confinement to Ascension

Atwood directly describes Helen's body, confronting and presenting the objectification and gaze imposed by men. However, she simultaneously uses it as a breakthrough point, subverting the subject-object relationship between genders to achieve an effect of anti-gaze and anti-objectification, offering a pathway for the construction of female subjectivity. This approach can be traced back to French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine" (writing through the body).

Atwood uses words such as "thighs, buttocks, ink stains, cracks, breasts, and nipples" to place the body at the center of the narrative, challenging the traditional Western notion that prioritizes the soul over the flesh. The female body becomes a weapon with explosive power—exploring power dynamics in the writing process and breaking free from the shackles of patriarchal ideology.

When depicting Helen as a stripper, Atwood shows how the female body is reduced to a tool that evokes and satisfies male primal desires, demonstrating how the male gaze dismembers and objectifies the female form. This portrayal reflects Lacan's mirror theory, where the woman becomes the "other" in male self-construction, positioned as an object to be viewed. The omnipresent male gaze forms a covert yet effective mechanism of power, continually reinforcing gender inequality. As Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, women's bodies have long endured the oppression of this mechanism. Women are not only

deprived of subjectivity but are also forced to internalize their status as objects to be viewed and defined, ultimately becoming submissive under this immense pressure [22].

However, Atwood's writing does not stop at describing the objectification of the female body. Helen uses her damaged body and sexuality as weapons to resist, reconstructing a degraded sense of self and challenging the patriarchal system that disciplines the female body. In the latter part of the poem, Helen explicitly mentions her divinity—being the daughter of Zeus and Leda, endowed with primal, destructive power. In the end, she ascends by her own strength, radiating divine light, and completely shattering the image of the confined "other." Helen's ascension subverts the portrayal of the "eternal feminine" in works by writers like Dante and Goethe. The swan egg imagery in the poem symbolizes Helen's rebirth and hints at a new kind of creation. Atwood cleverly reverses the traditional narrative: Helen first experiences a fall as a stripper and then achieves her own ascension, showcasing the richness, dynamism, and growth of the female experience, rejecting the static concept of the "eternal." Through innovative narrative techniques and the use of imagery, Atwood constructs a new form of female literary expression, opening the possibility for dismantling the male-dominated literary order.

4. The Song of Weaving: Penelope's Wisdom and Resilience

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood employs postmodern parody, transforming the traditional heroic narrative into a playful deconstruction, achieving a reversal of moral judgment and an exploration of overlooked histories. She thoroughly examines and reconstructs Penelope's life story, adhering to Frye's "death-rebirth" theory, as Penelope experiences a complete life cycle: from birth to death, and ultimately, resurrection in the underworld, paralleling Odysseus's heroic journey.

Unlike the singular heroic narrative of *The Odyssey*, Atwood adopts a dual narrative perspective. Penelope recounts her memories in a first-person monologue, interwoven with the chorus of twelve maids, elevating the reflection on her personal fate to an observation of the entire female collective. Atwood repositions Penelope as the central figure who leads the narrative, delicately crafting a new, multi-dimensional character. This enriched inner world allows Penelope to transform from a one-dimensional mythical symbol into a tangible, multi-faceted character. Readers gain insight into the full spectrum of oppression she faces in a patriarchal society, as well as her awareness and resistance to it.

4.1. The Patriarchal Cage: A Silent Dilemma

As a child, Penelope's father, Icarius, heeding an oracle, threw her into the sea in pursuit of his own immortality. Her father's betrayal becomes the earliest symbol of patriarchy in Penelope's life and marks the beginning of her distrust towards men and family. "I learned to rely on my own virtues. I understood that I had to take care of myself and could not count on the support of my family" [23]. In adulthood, Penelope's marriage is treated as a political bargaining chip, transferring her from the control of her father to that of her husband. This marriage, in essence, is a transaction—"So, I was handed over to Odysseus like a sack of meat" [24]—and serves as a microcosm of the plight of women under patriarchy.

Within the family, the double standards applied to men and women exacerbate the inequality of power relations. Odysseus's attitude towards Penelope is more like fulfilling a familial duty. During his twenty-year absence, while Odysseus enjoys the company of goddesses, society and the family demand that Penelope remain faithful, confined to the bed that symbolizes a "chastity belt." Odysseus repeatedly tests and doubts her, even half-jokingly threatening to kill her if she were unfaithful [25]. Additionally, Penelope faces silent reproach from her mother-in-law and harsh criticism from the old servant. She laments, "Do I have wise advisors around me? Honestly, who can I rely on but myself?" [26]. Penelope's value is restricted to childbearing, preventing her from participating in broader family decision-making: "They had a consensus: I couldn't have the final say" [27].

As a mother, Penelope also loses her authority to her son, Telemachus. Concerned that his mother's remarriage would threaten his inheritance, Telemachus even wishes for her death. Telemachus's journey to find his father can be interpreted as a crucial phase in his acceptance and internalization of patriarchal culture. In seeking his father, he is not only searching for personal identity but also learning and embracing the values and behaviors of the patriarchal system, thereby transitioning from a boy into the next-generation enforcer of patriarchy. Upon returning from his journey, he proudly declares: "Father would be proud of him for breaking free from women's control" [28]. These actions together form a complete chain of patriarchal oppression, reflecting how the patriarchal system maintains control over women through family power structures and generational transmission.

4.2. Female Wisdom: Penelope's Subtle Resistance

Despite her disadvantaged position, Penelope is not merely a passive victim. Atwood's portrayal of Penelope is far from the traditional narrative of the "tearful" wife; instead, she is a wise, composed, and highly self-aware woman who navigates patriarchal society to protect herself and maintain her dignity. Her cunning and cleverness rival those of Odysseus, and her water-like wisdom enables her to find a space for survival within an unfavorable environment.

Atwood blends the characteristics of women with the qualities of water. Water symbolizes fluidity, softness, and infinite potential, much like Penelope's wisdom: it appears soft but holds immense power; it seems to go with the flow but can adapt to

any environment. As Penelope's mother advises in the book: "Remember, you are half water; if you cannot overcome an obstacle, go around it" [29].

Penelope has a deep understanding of the power dynamics within a patriarchal society and maneuvers within them with flexibility. She possesses keen insight into her husband's cunning and pride but chooses not to expose him, as she understands the importance of preserving male dignity, particularly that of Odysseus as the head of the household and the ruler of a kingdom. When faced with Odysseus's return and the accompanying suspicion, Penelope cleverly devises the bed test. She astutely grasps Odysseus's obsession with his wife's chastity and uses a secret known only to the two of them as the key to validation. This approach not only aligns with the expectations of the "virtuous wife" but also allows her to maintain control over the situation, achieving a subtle reversal of power dynamics. This strategic "compliance" is, in fact, a sophisticated form of self-protection, enabling Penelope to safeguard her interests and dignity without openly challenging the established social order. The marriage bed, as a symbol of the marital institution [30], becomes a power tool in Penelope's hands. She transforms this core element of marriage into her own instrument of authority, gaining a degree of voice and decision-making power within the relationship. In doing so, she "transcends the status of a designated and defined symbol, becoming a vocal subject and a producer of meaning" [31].

Additionally, weaving is a multi-layered metaphorical image that Atwood uses to reinterpret the classical concept of *mētis* and connect it with female experience and narrative. *Mētis*, beyond meaning "cunning," also signifies "skill" and points to Penelope, who demonstrates wisdom and strategic ability equivalent to that of Odysseus through her weaving.

Firstly, weaving provides Penelope with a private space. Within the constraints of a patriarchal society, this activity, considered exclusively feminine, allows her to maintain a disguise that conforms to social expectations. She turns this limitation into a source of power, secretly weaving her plans and participating in decision-making regarding public affairs.

More importantly, weaving creates an independent female space for Penelope and the maids, a space that transcends traditional unequal power structures and demonstrates solidarity among women. This cross-class female relationship challenges the social hierarchy under patriarchy, suggesting the possibility of a new social relationship based on gender identity: "Their 'Yes, madam' and 'No, madam' were almost said with a smile, as if neither they nor I truly believed in their servile gestures" [32]. By engaging in this shared female labor, Penelope and the maids, to some extent, escape male control and surveillance, establishing a warm, cooperative female culture and shared experience: "There was a festive atmosphere those nights, almost a sense of revelry" [33]. The maids, as Penelope's only reliable helpers in her husband's household, play a crucial role in her survival strategy, serving as her bridge to the outside world. In the process, they gradually break through the boundaries of the master-servant relationship, developing a sister-like closeness. This solidarity among women provides Penelope with emotional support and practical assistance, enabling her to mount a subtle resistance against the patriarchal system.

From a narratological perspective, weaving is closely related to storytelling, and Atwood uses this connection to transform what was once a restrictive female activity into a powerful mode of expression, offering new perspectives and possibilities for feminist literary criticism. As feminist scholar Clayton proposes with the concept of "Penelopean poetics" [34], Penelope's weaving is also a metaphorical act of creation. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope is not only the protagonist of her own life story but also its creator and narrator. Through weaving, she is essentially "weaving" her own narrative, recounting the twenty years she waited for Odysseus's return and providing a reinterpretation of *The Odyssey* itself.

However, Penelope's narrative is not singular. Atwood employs a dual narrative perspective, with the chorus of twelve maids both supplementing and contradicting the main storyline. The maids' songs hint at a secret relationship between Penelope and the suitors, challenging the image of Penelope as the perfectly chaste wife and revealing her desires and struggles as a flesh-and-blood woman. However, Penelope vehemently denies these accusations, attempting to cover up the scandal. Atwood uses the contradictions between narratives to expose Penelope's role, like Odysseus, as an "unreliable narrator." She is caught in a dilemma, yearning to express her true experiences and emotions while simultaneously pressured to conform to mainstream narratives.

4.3. Twin Flowers: The Entanglement of Penelope and Helen

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood presents two distinct yet closely intertwined female characters: Penelope and Helen. Their relationship cleverly embodies the concept of "twin flowers" in feminist literature. As cousins, Penelope and Helen are like two petals of the same flower, representing different aspects of femininity: fidelity and seduction, wisdom and beauty, family and freedom. Through their conflicts, competition, and mutual understanding, Atwood authentically portrays the complex facets of women, exploring their situations, choices, and the internalization of patriarchal values in a patriarchal society.

The ambivalence in the relationship between Penelope and Helen is repeatedly depicted. Atwood devotes significant portions of the book to portraying the rivalry between the two. Although their life choices diverge greatly—Penelope choosing family while Helen uses her allure to seek self-realization—Atwood astutely points out that these seemingly opposite lifestyles are, in fact, both products of patriarchal influence. Although Helen appears more free and bold on the surface, she has never truly developed an independent identity. Behind her goddess-like demeanor lies a deep dependence on male validation, an internalization of the male gaze, and an evasion of her true self.

In the book, Penelope's disdain and jealousy towards Helen are amplified; she portrays Helen as a vain and attention-seeking woman who cannot bear solitude. Penelope struggles to break free from the mindset of evaluating women by male standards and feels insecure about her lack of sexual allure. Regarding the issue of war, Penelope sees Helen as the source of all suffering and

casts herself as the voice of justice. She uses narrative justice to correct Helen's hypocritical innocence, questioning how Helen was absolved of blame after inciting the war, thus seeking revenge. Penelope appropriates the traditional male judicial process to pass judgment on another woman [35]. Even a woman like Penelope, who possesses a certain level of self-awareness and recognizes her oppressed state, finds it difficult to completely detach from patriarchal values.

Through the portrayal of Penelope and Helen, Atwood authentically presents the complexity of women, offering both self-reflection and an understanding with empathy: "Women, whether as characters or as real people, should be allowed to be flawed… I want to show that she possesses all the emotions common to humanity—hatred, jealousy, malice, desire, anger, and fear, as well as love, compassion, forgiveness, and joy—without being condemned as a monster, a blemish, or a bad example [36].

5. Atwood's Gender Politics: Female Consciousness and Cultural Construction

5.1. Classic Reconstruction: Literary Innovation in a Postmodern Context

Margaret Atwood's reconstruction of classical myths is deeply rooted in the trend of deconstructing classics that emerged in Western academia in the latter half of the 20th century. This literary practice reflects her keen attention to social issues and the complex interaction between literary theory and social movements of the time.

The "May 1968" protests marked a crucial turning point in the movement to reconstruct classical works. This social movement, which began in France and quickly spread across Europe and the Americas, challenged existing political and social structures and profoundly influenced the intellectual landscape of academia. The anti-traditional and anti-authoritarian atmosphere in society mirrored the "multicultural" orientation within academia, leading to increased attention to issues of race, gender, and class. The stability and closed nature emphasized by structuralism appeared out of touch in such a turbulent social context, paving the way for the rise of post-structuralism and deconstruction.

Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" theory and Michel Foucault's power-discourse theory provided theoretical support for feminist literary criticism to re-examine the classics. Barthes emphasized the polysemy and openness of language, suggesting that writing can unlock diverse meanings. By declaring the "death of the author," he facilitated the "birth of the reader," allowing readers to interpret texts based on their own experiences, breaking the monopoly of traditional meaning. This aligns with the feminist critique of patriarchal ideology and the creation of a female discourse system. Foucault's analysis of how knowledge and power are constructed and reinforced through discourse offered feminist scholars a new perspective, enabling them to reveal the mechanisms of power through language. This provided theoretical tools for understanding the female predicament while exploring literary modes that genuinely express women's experiences, emotions, and desires.

In this context, the trend of "reconstructing classics" gained momentum, with Atwood's reinterpretation of myths representing a significant cultural practice. By reshaping female characters like Helen and Penelope, she challenged the long-standing male-centric perspective that dominated literary creation, breaking down deeply ingrained binary oppositions such as ruler and ruled, spirit and body, male and female. She opened up new expressive spaces for women, presenting more complex and independent images.

As a "novelist with a clear moral and political viewpoint" [37], Atwood understands "politics" as a broad spectrum of power relations rather than being confined to the narrow concept of state machinery and its institutions [38]. This understanding allows her to keenly capture the pulse of social change and respond through her literary work, bringing marginalized, lower-class, and non-mainstream issues to the forefront. Atwood's subversion of female images in myths is heavily influenced by her mentor Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, while also integrating her unique feminist perspective. Frye suggests that literature is a displaced myth, and that myths, as expressions of fundamental human desires and psychological needs, infiltrate texts through "transformation" to continue revealing humanity's deep psychological layers. This inspired Atwood to examine the female figures in myths, uncovering the cultural psychology and collective unconscious they contain. She recognized that the traditional portrayal of women in myths is often a product of the male gaze, filled with distortions and misunderstandings, essentially a patriarchal construct: "The authorities on women are generally men. Because they are men, they assume they have knowledge of women, just as their gender supposedly grants them other knowledge".

Atwood's innovation lies in her critical reconstruction of these archetypes. She gives a voice to the female characters in myths, breathing new life into them. Atwood's reconstruction does not arise from nothing; it is built upon a keen insight into the latent feminist elements present in classical texts. In *Homer's Epics*, while female figures are generally constrained within a patriarchal narrative framework, they already exhibit complexity. Helen is not merely beautiful; she possesses an almost divine insight and mysterious power. Penelope, too, transcends the one-dimensional image of the chaste, virtuous wife, emerging as a wise heroine. The multifaceted nature of these characters and their limited expression of subjectivity within a patriarchal society provide Atwood with a foundation to explore the position of women within power structures.

5.2. Mythical Women: Transformation and Rebirth

Atwood's reshaping of the images of Helen and Penelope is, in essence, a complete subversion of the portrayal of women throughout the Western literary tradition. She transforms the abstract symbols of femininity into real women with tangible

experiences. In *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing*, Atwood places Helen in a modern bar, granting her autonomy through the technique of writing the body. Helen openly reveals her body and desires, treating them as sharp weapons and sources of power. She uses her sexual allure to manipulate situations, making the bodily needs of women a crucial part of her narrative, challenging the traditional literary repression and avoidance of female sexuality.

Similarly, in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope is no longer merely a symbol of passive waiting; she is an individual with a complex inner world and independent thinking, capable of using her unique feminine intelligence to stand on par with Odysseus. At the same time, Penelope also confesses her own desires, with the chorus of maids hinting at her possible affairs with the suitors, revealing her inner struggle under the oppression of a patriarchal society: the desire for fulfillment versus the need to maintain the reputation of a virtuous wife. This reconstruction not only questions the gender power dynamics within the institutions of marriage and family but also explores how women redefine their identity and value in a cultural tradition that has long marginalized them.

However, Atwood does not stop at subverting male-centered narratives to create idealized female stories; instead, she presents complex individuals embedded within social structures and a more authentic female world. Although Penelope displays extraordinary wisdom, her actions and thoughts remain deeply influenced by the patriarchal social structure. Her long wait for Odysseus, while interpretable as an active choice, also exposes her pursuit of social status and her identification with the role of the "virtuous wife." Helen's self-centeredness is equally evident in both works, as she continues to struggle with defining her self-worth through male standards.

More importantly, Atwood keenly recognizes the limitations and pitfalls that feminism may encounter. She remains wary of female centrism; while constructing female narratives, she also deconstructs their authority, opening the possibility for an equal dialogue between genders. Her work extends beyond addressing women's issues, expressing a vision of establishing mutual understanding and respect, ultimately striving for harmonious coexistence between the sexes.

5.3. Creative Techniques: Juxtaposition of Classical and Modern in Multivocal Narratives

In terms of creative techniques, Atwood emphasizes openness and plurality in her writing. First, she employs multiple perspectives and nonlinear timelines. For example, in *The Penelopiad*, she retells the story of *The Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective while also introducing the collective voices of the maids. This polyphonic narrative disrupts a singular authoritative discourse, presenting a more diverse view of history.

In narrative structure, Atwood's use of open-ended conclusions is another hallmark. She refuses to provide readers with a definitive, closed ending, instead leaving many possibilities open. For instance, in *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing*, Helen's fate is deliberately kept ambiguous. This approach challenges the causal logic and determinism of traditional narratives and invites readers to engage in dialogue and reflection.

Moreover, Atwood closely connects ancient myths with modern society, exposing the unchanging aspects of human nature over millennia and highlighting the patriarchal structures that have long dominated women. The patriarchal social culture has not changed, and issues such as women's status in marriage and societal expectations of women resonate with the challenges modern women face. She skillfully interweaves various literary genres, such as the ancient Greek chorus and modern courtroom trial. This blending of genres across eras not only enriches the narrative form but also emphasizes the continuity of history. In *The Penelopiad*, the maids trace the historical shifts in gender power structures, comparing Penelope to the mother goddess of a matrilineal clan. With Penelope's marriage, the matrilineal society is overthrown, and patriarchal order is established. Atwood also incorporates modern courtroom elements, directly linking ancient injustices with the judicial systems of contemporary society. Even in the 21st-century courtroom, the injustice faced by the maids is ignored, reflecting the persistent historical and social status of women.

However, from another perspective, Atwood creates a cross-temporal dialogue through her depiction of women from different periods and social classes, building a unique female culture that provides a space for mutual support and solidarity among women, forming a counter-narrative against the grand narratives of patriarchal society. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood reshapes the relationship between Penelope and the maids, illustrating the complex dynamics within the female community—there are class conflicts between Penelope and the maids, yet there is also a connection as they jointly face patriarchal oppression, hinting at the necessity and possibility of collective resistance. This portrayal breaks the stereotypical notion in traditional narratives that women's relationships are limited to competition and hostility. By exposing the diverse experiences of different women, Atwood highlights the intersection of gender oppression with other social inequalities, such as class and race.

In conclusion, Atwood's reconstruction of mythical women not only breathes new life into ancient myths but also provides valuable material for contemporary feminist criticism. By re-examining and reimagining Greek mythology, she successfully connects the enduring gender relations and power structures from thousands of years ago to contemporary societal issues. *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing* and *The Penelopiad* are not merely innovative retellings of classical literature; they are profound reflections on contemporary gender issues, offering insights and critiques of feminist thought that serve as a mirror for feminist practice.

References

[1] Yang, H. (2008). History and interpretation: A re-exploration of Helen's image. *Journal of Qinghai Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (05), 82-85.

[2] Liu, H. (2022). *A study on the evolution of Helen's image during the Archaic period* (Master's thesis, Southwest University). Southwest University.
[3] Felson, N. (1997). *Regarding Penelope: From character to poetics.* University of Oklahoma Press.
[4] Clayton, B. (2004). *A Penelopean poetics: Reweaving the feminine in Homer's Odyssey.* Lexington Books.
[5] Marlowe, C. (2014). *The tragedy of Doctor Faustus* (Y. Li, Trans.). Beijing University of Technology Press. (Original work published in German).
[6] Liddell, H. G., & Scott, R. (Eds.). (1996). *Greek-English lexicon* (p. 532). Oxford University Press.
[7] Vernant, J. P. (1991). *Mortals and immortals: Collected essays* (p. 56). Princeton University Press.
[8] Ovid. (2004). *Heroides* (H. Isbell, Trans.). Penguin.
[9] Alanus, & Sheridan, J. J. (1980). *The plaint of nature.* Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
[10] Liddell, H. G., & Scott, R. (2007). *Greek-English lexicon (Epitome of the great lexicon).* Pelekanos.
[11] Liddell, H. G., & Scott, R. (1940). *A Greek–English lexicon.* Clarendon Press.
[12] Plutarch. (1967). *Moralia* (B. Perrin, Trans., Vol. XII). Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.
[13] Beard, M. (2018). *Women and power: A manifesto* (Y. Translator, Trans.). Tianjin People's Publishing House. (Original work published in English).
[14] Walcot, P. (1984). Greek attitudes towards women: The mythological evidence. *Greece & Rome, 31*(1), 37–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/642368
[15] Homer. (2014). *The Iliad* (W. Huansheng, Trans.). People's Literature Publishing House. (Original work published in Ancient Greek).
[16] Atwood, M. (2015). *Eating fire* (Z. Zhou, Trans.). Henan University Press. (Original work published in English).
[17] Atwood, M. (1996). Why I write poetry? *This Magazine,* (29).
[18] Callaway, A. (2008). *Women disunited: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a critique of feminism* (Master's thesis, San Jose State University). San Jose State University.
[19] Beauvoir, S. de. (2014). *The second sex* (K. Zheng, Trans.). Shanghai Translation Publishing House. (Original work published in French).
[20] Scanlon, D. (2015). The Odyssey's re-vision: Female agency and women shaming women in Margaret Atwood's 'Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing' and *The Penelopiad. Undergraduate Theses and Capstone Projects,* (145).
[21] Foucault, M. (2016). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (B. Liu & Y. Yang, Trans.). SDX Joint Publishing Company. (Original work published in French).
[22] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 24. (Original work published in English).
[23] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 47. (Original work published in English).
[24] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 70. (Original work published in English).
[25] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 81. (Original work published in English).
[26] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 69. (Original work published in English).
[27] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 113. (Original work published in English).
[28] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 49. (Original work published in English).
[29] Katz, M. A. (Year). *Penelope's renown: Meaning and indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (p. 181). Publisher.
[30] Weng, J. (2000). The eternal wanderer, Odysseus—Homer's epic: An introduction to *The Odyssey.* Taipei: Owl Publishing, p. 39.
[31] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 101. (Original work published in English).
[32] Atwood, M. (2020). *The Penelopiad* (Q. Wei, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 101. (Original work published in English).
[33] Clayton, B. (2004). *A Penelopean poetics: Reweaving the feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (p. 24). Lexington Books.
[34] Kapuscinski, A. (2007). Ways of sentencing: Female violence and narrative justice in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad. Essex Human Rights Review, 4*(2). https://doi.org/info:doi/
[35] Atwood, M. (2006). The curse of eye: What I learned in school. In *Curious pursuits* (p. 34). Virago Press.
[36] Hutcheon, L. (1994). *Canadian postmodernism: A study of modern English fiction in Canada* (F. Zhao & C. Guo, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House, p. 26.
[37] Meese, E. (2017). The empress has no clothes. In E. G. Ingersoll (Ed.), *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (p. 185). Ontario Review Press.
[38] Atwood, M. (2012). *Curious pursuits* (F. Mu & Y. Xia, Trans.). Jiangsu People's Publishing House, p. 25. (Original work published in English).