

Reading *The Penelopiad* through Irigaray: Rewriting Female Subjectivity*

The Penelopiad'ı Irigaray ile Okumak : Dişi Öznenin Yeniden Yazımı

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Öz

Bu makale Margaret Atwood'un 2005 yılında yayınladığı *The Penelopiad* adlı romanını Luce Irigaray'ın dişi özne ve ataerkil ve anaerkil kültürlerin çatışma alanı olarak mitolojinin yeniden okunması tartışması bağlamında inceleyecektir. *The Penelopiad* Penelope'ye ve Odysseus'un Ithake'ye dönüşünde katlettiği Penelope'nin on iki hizmetçisine özne konumunu verir ve epik şiiri bir de onların dilinden bakış açısından dinleriz. Odesa'daki sessiz karakterlerin kalemi eline aldığı, çeşitli yazın türlerinin bir kolajı olan bu romanda, tür, cinsiyet, dil sorunsalları bir araya gelir ve yeni bir özne ve cinsiyet paradigması ortaya çıkar. Bu yeniden yazımda ortaya çıkan Odesa anlatısının bastırıldığı, varlığını inkar ettiği farklı bir özne ve cinsiyet kavramına işaret eden ataerkil kültür öncesi anaerkil bir toplum yapısıdır. Bu yeni özne anlayışı da Luce Irigaray'ın, hümanizmin erkek egemen, tekil ve tek sesli öznesine alternatif olarak sunduğu dişi özne anlayışına benzer; çoğul ama cinsiyet farklılığının farkında olan bir öznedir. Roman böylece erkek egemen öznenin dayandığı temelleri sarsar ve bizi bir kez daha 1990'larda başlayan, feminist eleştirmenlerle ve Derrida'nın izinden giden yapısökümcü eleştirmenleri karşı karşıya getiren dişi özne tartışmalarını gözden geçirmeye davet eder. Margaret Atwood bu romanında, kadınların özne konumuna erişmelerinin temsil ve güç ilişkilerini sorgulamaya olanak sağlayan yeni bir dil ve edebiyat üretebileceğini gösteriyor.

Anahtar sözcükler: Yeniden yazım, Irigaray, dişi özne, yapısöküm, mitoloji.

Abstract

This article analyzes Margaret Atwood's 2005 novel *The Penelopiad* in the light of Luce Irigaray's argument of female subjectivity and re-interpretation of mythology as the site of the representation of patriarchal power turnover and suppression of matriarchal cultures. Giving subject positions to silent agents and using various genres, *The Penelopiad* brings together gender, genre and language in such a way that results in a paradigm shift in conceptualizing subjectivity and sexuality in a similar vein that Luce Irigaray calls for. Reconstructing the silent characters such as Penelope and her twelve maids whom Odysseus murders upon his return to Ithaca in *The Odyssey*, Atwood unfolds the traces of a previous socio-economic structure's existence and its suppression in the epic. Revealing history in myth and myth in history, she criticizes patriarchy through its exclusions and suppression of female traditions that indicate a different construction of sexuality and subjectivity in pre-patriarchal cultures. The novel destabilizes the foundations of the male subject, which occasions revisiting the controversial issue of female subjectivity that has produced an immense amount of literature since the 1990s with the rise of deconstructionist criticism. Atwood's text shows that women's claim to a subject position helps produce a different language and literature that allows for the exploration of suppression and representation.

Keywords: Rewriting, Irigaray, female subjectivity, deconstruction, mythology

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Reading *The Penelopiad* through Irigaray: Rewriting Female Subjectivity

Beginning in the late 1960s rewritings of myths and canonical works have become a staple sub-genre in women's writing. Investigating the relationship between oppression and representation, how certain identities become disenfranchised in narratives and how the disenfranchised identities are represented, many women writers address questions of voice, agency, and language in rewriting inherited narratives. Questions of agency and subjectivity have generated many narratives that focus on female characters or colonial characters who are limited to their role as accessories in the development of white male figures in the original work. One of the early examples of these rewritings is Jean Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargossa Sea* that focuses on Antoinette/Bertha's story and produces a new narrative that weaves together identity, gender roles and colonialism (Rhys 1997; Bronte, 1982). Canongate Myth Series where myths are rewritten by contemporary writers, such as Jeanette Winterson's rewriting the myth of Atlas in *Weight* (2005) and Ali Smith's recreation of Iphis in *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) is motivated by the same impulse. Another novel from this series, Margaret Atwood's 2005 novel *The Penelopiad* investigates a silent, intriguing mythical female figure, Penelope, and her maids in *The Odyssey*. Atwood offers a re-evaluation of not only Homer's epic but also mythology in her rewriting of the myth of Odysseus from the point of view of his wife, Penelope, and her maids who are murdered upon Odysseus' return to Ithaca. Here, I will discuss this rewriting in the context of Luce Irigaray's interpretation of mythology as a battlefield of male-dominated cultures and matriarchal cultures that can be traced in the discrepancies and silences of the representation of mythology. By revealing the suppression of matriarchal cultures and hence female sexuality in the narration of the male hero, Atwood creates a female subject that can be read along Irigaray's critique of the male subject of humanism that is constructed on the suppression of female sexuality and within a hierarchical relation between the sexes. In the tentative subject position of Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, we see a female subjectivity that, for Irigaray, needs to be created as an alternative to the determined male subject position built on violent hierarchies.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood gives subject position to Penelope, whose significance lies in her being Odysseus' patient wife in the epic, and to her twelve maids, who are but a detail in Homer's *The Odyssey* to intervene in Penelope's first person narration in various literary genres from idylls, ballads, rhymes, and songs fulfilling the function of the Classical Greek chorus. The allusion to Greek drama with Penelope in the center in place of the male tragic hero and the maids voicing matriarchal culture's values and traditions, which Atwood extends in her theatrical script of the novel, co-produced by the British Royal Shakespeare Company and the Canadian National Arts Centre in 2007 and The Nightwood Theatre in 2012, casts a critical look on the Greek culture and mythology in general as the site of repression of matriarchal cultures.¹ Atwood successfully combines this reproduction of Greek drama with a record of a videotape of a twentieth century trial of Odysseus, accused by the maids, and an anthropology lecture delivered by the maids. This structure of the novel composed of various genres from idylls to lectures as if the narrative is in search of a form, suggests that gender difference and oppression are implicated in genre. These two narrative devices, that is giving subject positions to silent agents and what Lydia Curtie calls genre contamination are characteristic features of postmodern literature but as Curtie also suggests, women writers' employment of these narrative

¹ Hilde Steals (2009), and Earl Ingersoll (2008) also point out the novel's form as a Greek tragedy. Ingersoll further argues that Penelope's narration is intended as tragedy and that Penelope is presented as a tragic figure.

techniques, as in *The Penelopiad*, brings together gender, genre and language in such a way that results in a paradigm shift in conceptualizing subjectivity in relation to gender (Curtie, 1998, p. 53).

Reconstructing the silent characters in *The Odyssey*, Atwood unfolds the traces of a previous socio-economic structure's existence and its suppression in the epic. Revealing history in myth and myth in history, she presents Penelope as a queen belonging to a pre-patriarchal culture. *The Penelopiad* suggests that the contradictions and gaps in the epic are the traces of the patriarchal, male dominant culture's suppression of female traditions. By exposing patriarchy's exclusions and suppression of female traditions that indicate a different construction of sexuality and subjectivity, the novel destabilizes the foundations of the male subject of patriarchal culture. Atwood's reading of the epic through its gaps resonates with Luce Irigaray's call that mythology needs to be reread so as to disclose how patriarchy establishes its norms by debunking and erasing female traditions. Irigaray argues that male subjectivity is constructed through an insistent rejection of sexual difference and female body and this reflects on the rejection of female traditions that mythology testifies to. For Irigaray, exposing how the paternal genealogy subdues maternal genealogies, disclosing what Margaret Whitford calls "the negative moment," is a necessary step on the way to create a new imaginary that can embody the two sexes' desires and bodies (1994, p. 101; 1991, p. 103).

Female subjectivity has been a controversial issue in literary criticism since the 1980s with the rise of deconstructionist readings. Whether women have access or should have access to a subject position and the role of gender in the constitution of the subject have become the axis around which evolved questions of agency and truth, bringing feminism and deconstructionist in an oppositional relation in most cases. While many feminist positions affirm the agency of the female subject, Derridean criticism of feminism has severely rejected these claims to subjectivity as an aspiration to male power.² I suggest that the representation of female subjectivity in *The Penelopiad*, contextualized in Luce Irigaray's argument of female subjectivity, hints at an alternative subjectivity to the disembodied humanist male ideal that is founded on violent hierarchies but it does not support the feminist affirmation of the coherent and unified female subject as a political stance either. I believe taking subjectivity as if it has always been and can only be the humanist subject that Derrida criticizes has missed out some of the critical weight of various approaches to subjectivity in the 1980s and 1990s.

2 Literature on this debate between deconstructinists and feminist scholars is immense. Many critics have dealt with the encounters between deconstruction and feminism in relation to female subjectivity so far. Three comprehensive works that summarize the basic clashes between them are Linda Hutcheon's *Politics of Postmodernism*, Alice Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* and Diane Elam's *Feminism and Deconstruction* (Hutcheon, 1989; Jardine, 1987; Elam, 1994). These critics, among others, have put together the clashing points between these two views with fair amount of argument on both views. See Mary Poovey who argues that the category of woman necessarily refers to a humanist ideal that goes along with biology is destiny ideology, and that feminists need to learn that woman is a social construct (1988, p. 52) Peggy Kamuf claims that woman as identity refers to an undifferentiated present origin prior to signification (Kamuf, 2002, p. 86). Anne Emmanuelle Berger suggests Derrida could get rid of the expression of sexual difference instead of keeping the idiom of sexual difference even if to deconstruct it (2005, p. 57). See also Linda Alcoff (1988) and Kate Nash (1994) for this side of the debate. Critics like Sonia Kruks and Wendy Brown, on the other hand, have drawn attention to the fact that the deconstructive view devitalized feminism as a political movement. Kruks's account of the subject as situated in the work of Simone de Beauvoir, which has been the general understanding of the self as a social construct in feminist thought, is meant as to offer an alternative to essentialism and what she calls "hyperconstructivism" (Kruks, 1992; Brown, 1987). Linda Alcoff also discusses the depoliticizing results of the postmodern rejection of female subjectivity (Alcoff 1988). The debate seemed to close in 2000s, with the consensus that women's subjectivity could be accepted as a strategic move for political purposes, as voiced in different ways in Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, among others; however, in Judith Butler's recent work *Undoing Gender* and *Frames of Work*, the issue of subjectivity is revisited, suggesting the idea of a new form of humanism (Haraway, 1988; Butler, 2004; 2009).

Within the framework of Irigaray's exploration of femininity and critique of patriarchy, it can be seen that Atwood envisions a female subject different from the coherent, stable, unique male subject built on exclusions and oppressions but one that is open to change and to renew itself in the process of its explorations. Thus, the subject is neither the humanist subject nor the political stance that needs to be maintained even if we do not believe in its viability. Atwood's fiction, like many other novels produced by women writers evolving around issues of female subjectivity from yet different angles, is evidence enough that this debate is far from conclusive. Contemporary women's writing is teeming with female subjects looking for narrative devices and spaces that will allow them a position from which they can speak and affirm their sexual difference from the unified coherent male subject of humanism. Atwood's fiction has earned a well-deserved reputation for representing relationships among women and mother-daughter relationships- among sisters and mothers as in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), friends as in *The Robber Bride* (1993) and problematizing the relation of women to representation as, in addition to the novels mentioned, *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) exemplify. While academic debates have taken a turn towards the acceptance that deconstructive viewpoint refuses the category of woman as a necessary result of the rejection of humanism and positive sciences, contemporary women writers who create female characters distance themselves from this refusal and search for various aspects of subjectivity rather than refusing sexual difference. Sarah Waters's fiction, beginning with *Tipping the Velvet* in 1998, for example, has dealt with female subjectivity in relation to history, narrative and fiction. Her rewritings of major works such as the rewriting of *Oliver Twist* and *The Woman in White* in *Fingersmith* investigates how narratives and fiction create subjects which are always sexual (Dickens, 1996; Collins, 1994; 2003). In that sense, sexual difference and female subjectivity is far from being closed and decided in contemporary women's fiction.

The female subjectivity that emerges at the conjunction of the maids and Penelope's story-telling does not so much produce a parallel subjectivity to the male one or an alternative history as much as it challenges the very conceptualization of history and subjectivity. The maid's lecture recaps what is insistently discarded in theories of subjectivity; that patriarchy and the philosophy it nourishes has a history that needs to be traced in the curious details and gaps in literature. Embedded in *The Penelopiad's* exploration of a suppressed female culture in Homer's epic is the undermining of the legitimacy of history as the producer of the truth of the past and the reception of myth as fiction, imaginary stories that do not hold the authority to narrate the past. Hilde Steals voices the common view of myths when she says that Penelope speaks of myths "as if they were historical narratives based on actual events, instead of products of the imagination [...]" (2009, p. 104). Myths, the stories of gods and goddesses, are accepted as fiction, strictly distinguished from history, which is, like other disciplines, quite a recent discipline that emerged around the eighteenth century as we understand the genre today. In *The Penelopiad*, in the maids' anthropology lecture explicitly, mythology is given the license of telling the truth as much as history. And, as Ruta Slapkauskaitė also notes, mythology is treated as a scene where patriarchal and matriarchal cultures clash, "a battlefield of power relations," which evokes Irigaray's view of mythology as the history of patriarchy (2007, p. 144). Atwood's suggestion that the epic embodies the traces of the suppression of Penelope's divine ancestry and the moon goddess cult suggests that mythology manifests a battlefield between patriarchal religions and matriarchal religions. In *Thinking the Difference*, Irigaray argues that history's complicity in the establishment and maintenance of male dominance that refuses to acknowledge the difference of feminine sexuality needs to be questioned. She writes that

If the rationale of History is ultimately to remind us of everything that has happened and to take into account, we must make the interpretation of the forgetting of female ancestries part of History and reestablish its economy. (Irigaray, 1994, p. 110)

For Irigaray, mythology is as much history as much as history is mythology.³ It is now a common understanding among scholars that writing and especially writing the history is neither a simple act nor is it free of power relations. The rejection of mythology's authority on narrating the past, then, is part of the effort to suppress female traditions whose marks create discrepancies and gaps in *The Odyssey. The Penelopiad* makes this point explicitly; that's why Ruta Slapkauskaitė says the novel "is as much literary criticism as it is fiction" (2007, p. 145).

As mythology contains the traces of the suppressed female religions, language carries the traces of female desire. Based on her close reading of Freud and Lacan's theory of sexuality, Irigaray argues that in the present sexual economy, woman is neither acknowledged to have a value in and for herself nor represented as an entity- she is the negative term in subjectivity; man who does not have a penis; not man but aspiring to be a man as Freud claims in his theory of penis envy (Freud, 2005, p. 334). In Freud's theory of sexuality, the girl's desire for her mother, specificity of her body, her sexuality, her instincts, and her relation to her mother remain unexplained, the mother being the object that the girl must renounce and the boy must continue to desire taking the place of the father. For Freud and Lacan, too, the girl renounces her mother, hence her own sexuality, and desire the father occupying the place of the mother to enter the symbolic domain and become a woman. Girl's desire for the mother, the first object of desire has to be disavowed but then this means the disavowal of her own sexuality as well. Keeping the centrality of male sexuality intact, Lacan replaces the penis in Freud's theory with the phallus and suggests that the phallus is the transcendental signifier that orchestrates the subjects, establishes the rules of intersubjectivity in the transition from imaginary to the symbolic, the field where language and social norms exist. The phallus designates who will become the subject of desire in the symbolic or who will be the signifier of lack. For Lacan woman enters the symbolic by acting as if she is the phallus, the signifier whereas the male, by virtue of being a male, acts as if he has the phallus. Woman does not have a transcendental signifier as man does and so she signifies the lack- the lack of the phallus, satisfaction and can never attain the position of the subject because she does not have the phallus (Lacan, 1982). In Irigaray's critical reading of psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan, what is left out of the law of the phallus does not simply vanish, but finds ways of resistance and makes itself heard in the silences and gaps in language; in Irigaray's words, language bears

[...] those blanks in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion and which, by their silent plasticity, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms. (1985a, p. 142. Italics in the original)

For Irigaray, since woman does not have the language, representations and language for expressing her desire for the mother and her own sexuality, language bears lacks, gaps, inconsistencies.

3 Greek myths are important for Irigaray not only because they manifest a different social order but also because they contain positive representations of mother-daughter such as Persephone and Demeter. Irigaray's work concentrates extensively on mother-daughter relations and she argues that we need symbolism to affirm this relationship to change the present male economy of sexuality and desire. See Jacobs (2007) for a critical reading of myth's centrality in Irigaray.

Exposing these blanks opens up a path for a different system of representation in which sexual difference can be articulated. What is needed, according to Irigaray, is “questioning words as the wrappings with which the “subject,” modestly, clothes the “female” (1985a, p. 142). *The Penelopiad* partakes in this project by exposing the governing imaginary of Odysseus’ identity, the logic that keeps him intact against the threat of sexual difference. Atwood’s reading of the gaps and silences in the epic reveals the suppression of matriarchal cultures and a different economy of sexuality as the condition of the constitution of the epic hero.

In the “Introduction” Atwood writes that Telemachus’s hanging of Penelope’s twelve maids particularly in a row by a ship’s hawser and the castration of a goatherd, Melanthius, has prompted her to search for what is missing in the story of Odysseus that leads to these peculiar events (2006, p. xxi). By tracing Penelope’s identity and the gaps and contradictions in *The Odyssey* in Robert Graves’ account of the moon-goddess cult in *The Greek Myths*, Atwood connects the incomprehensible and puzzling events in *The Odyssey* such as the castration and mutilation of Melanthius, and Odysseus’ forcing the maids to clean the suitors’ blood before he hangs them, to the fertility rites that the narration of Odysseus’s return in *The Odyssey* endeavors to suppress (Graves, 1966).⁴ Atwood gives the role of explaining the significance of these events to the maids in *The Penelopiad*. In addition to revealing Penelope’s divine identity, as the semi-goddess in the moon-goddess cult, the maids’ anthropology lecture discusses how mythology and history works to distort and suppress the moon-goddess cult. In the light of the fertility rituals, the events upon Odysseus’s reclaim of the kingdom reveal themselves to be the reenactment of the fertility rites in an upside down way. Homer’s narration uses the symbols of the fertility rituals to scorn and pervert them as this narration belongs to post-matriarchal era when matriarchal cultures are suppressed. Robert Graves explains that the fertility rites were based on the identification of women and the moon by building a correspondence between the moon’s cycle and women’s menstrual cycle. The number twelve is significant in these rituals because it represents the twelve months, and the twelve maidens of the thirteenth month in the lunar calendar, which is Artemis, that is Penelope. In the fertility rituals, banquets and orgies are followed by the sacrifice of male or female victims to rejuvenate life and the bathing of the maidens in the victims’ blood (Graves, 1966, p. 11-16). The banquets with the suitors and the maids in *The Odyssey* recall these fertility rites but in the epic these sacred banquets and rituals are desecrated and represented as an assault on the male’s property. Within this perspective, Odysseus’ rage and violence against the suitors and the maids who sleep with them appears as the manifestation of the patriarch’s violence against the rites held in honor of the moon-goddess, Penelope. The hanging of the twelve maids by the sacred boat-moon’s hawser-umbilical cord is a sacrilege against the moon-goddess cult and it symbolizes the patriarchal power turnover in society.

The bow-shooting contest, which would be held to choose the new king, to gain the hand of the queen for a year in matriarchal cultures, is now held to possess the hand of the queen permanently in Homer’s narration. The subverted representation of matriarchal traditions and customs confirms and imposes the patriarch’s power over matriarchal customs: Odysseus, the king, refuses to give up his reign for the queen’s next lover, killing a minor character, a goatherd as a surrogate king. The castration of Melanthius echoes the sacrifice and castration of the old king in moon-goddess rituals but it

4 Atwood notes that in addition to Robert Graves’ work, she used other sources as well for different versions of Penelope’s ancestry. For matriarchal cultures, see Bachofen, J.J. *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen* (1967).

now, in the post-matriarchal Homeric era, represents the patriarch, Odysseus, as the permanent central power figure. By establishing this connection between the castration of Melanthius and matriarchal custom of sacrificing the old king, choosing a new king for the goddess, and the fertility rites, Atwood makes the events upon Odysseus' return intelligible. Otherwise, the particular way and time the maids are murdered, and especially the curious castration of an insignificant goatherd Melanthius remain a puzzle, as Atwood notes in the "Introduction.

As Odysseus, the adventurer of the epic is now exposed to be the goddess's lover, the Year King who was supposed to be killed and castrated to ensure fertility in the normal fertility rites, some of his particularities beg to be noticed. What is most significant about Odysseus in Homer's narration is that he is an absent patriarch in Ithaca, being captivated or enchanted by goddesses and queens here and there. Taking into account his temporary stay with Penelope, there is not much to distinguish her from other queens such as Calypso or Circe, who keep him as a husband for a short while. In addition, Odysseus fails to be a proper patriarch when he attempts to avoid going to Troy to fight by shamming madness. These details again reinforce the idea that Homer's epic discloses more than the adventures of a traveller.

In Atwood's rewriting of the myth, Penelope never openly refers to the suppression of female traditions by a new emerging male dominant culture as her maids do but her references to her family background, her dealings with the suitors, and her management of the household imply that she belongs to a culture that is being disposed of by a new culture. Based on Atwood's reading of Robert Graves' account of Penelope, Penelope's narration unravels two different social orders represented by her hometown Sparta and Odysseus' home, Ithaca. In Sparta, there are semi-goddesses, Naiads, who do not fit in the role of the mother and wife as defined in a patriarchal society: a woman's leaving her home upon marriage is a "new fangled idea" as Helen puts it, and fish is common food on the table (Atwood, 2006, p. 37). Penelope's mother's dislike of property, indeed her indifference to possessing objects or nature, as illustrated with her refusal to measure objects and food in terms of quantity and numbers indicates that this society has a different value system. Her mother's protest "Fish come in shoals, not in lists" points out to a different relation to nature, a different economy of exchange among people, and between nature and people (Atwood, 2006, p. 86). This difference reflects on motherhood as well. Penelope's mother does not act the maternal role in patriarchal societies such as dealing with Penelope's marriage arrangements. To fulfill Odysseus' wish, Penelope moves to Ithaca after her marriage where she has to learn everything from scratch in this unfamiliar society; men look barbaric, people eat mostly meat and bread and motherhood is the only meaningful and respectable role for women. Penelope finds herself in conflict with her mother-in-law and Odysseus' nurse Eurycleia over mothering Odysseus and, later on, over mothering her son, Telemachus. Eurycleia and Odysseus' mother's roles set a sharp contrast to Penelope's mother; their roles are limited to nourishing, washing, and looking after men's bodies whereas Penelope's mother is not interested in maintaining men in shape. These differences present the two places as representatives of two different cultures: a matriarchal society in Sparta, and the new culture of Ithaca where patriarchy is being established.

Adding this information about Penelope's ancestry and with the comparison of Ithaca and Sparta, Atwood offers a different perspective to *The Odyssey*. The daughter of a semi-goddess, a Naiad, separated from her family after her marriage in accordance with foreign traditions and in contradiction to her local customs where the groom moves in with the bride's family starts to disrupt the representation of the patient loving wife who enters the story as an appendage to Odysseus' identity. The account of her life after Odysseus leaves for the Trojan War furthers the idea that Penelope belongs to a diffe-

rent culture. After Odysseus' absence of ten years, the household goes through a lot of changes with the help of Penelope's diplomatic and management skills. Odysseus' mother being dead, Eurycleia too old, Telemachus too young, and the father-in-law scared away by Penelope's weaving of a shroud for him, she acts as the queen of the household. Her weaving seems more a threat than a ruse to put off her suitors. It was the same act that drove her own father to attempt to drown her when she was a child, upon hearing an oracle that she would weave his shroud. What is deemed a proper wifely pastime in Homer's version now appears to be a menacing act against men. In her queen-like position, Penelope establishes peace and prosperity through her diplomatic skills over the suitors and through her newly acquired household management skills. She keeps the palace wealthy despite the suitors' plunder by learning stockbreeding and commercial transaction. In this difficult job, it is the female legacy that helps her survive in this foreign home. She remembers her mother's advice:

[...] *Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water.* (Atwood, 2006, p. 43, italics in the original)

Penelope's mother provides her with the skills for fighting against the male power rather than modeling the nourishing maternal role. This advice proves very useful when Penelope alone has to handle the brutal suitors in pursuit of Odysseus' property in an antagonistic culture. In addition to her suitors, Penelope has to manage her son, Telemachus, too, who claims the throne after his father. The inconsistencies in *The Odyssey* are not only related to Odysseus' doubtful delay in returning home. Various characters throughout Homer's epic -among the suitors, Antinous, Eurymachus, and Pallas Athene, too- suggest that Penelope's return to her father's house and marriage whoever she wants to will ensure the safety of Odysseus's property and secure Telemachus' authority (Homer, 2003: II. p. 175-178; II. p. 295-300; I. p. 425- 430). Penelope's resistance to this idea and Telemachus's lack of authority to send her back to Sparta is deemed as the cause of the suitors' aggression. Telemachus knows that he cannot turn Penelope out of his house (Homer, 2003: II. p. 202- 215). He is concerned that he cannot afford to pay for her dowry if he sends her back (Homer, 2003: II. p. 207-208). Refusing to leave her palace, Penelope builds a female household with her maids keeping the suitors at bay with the patience and endurance that she learns from her mother.

In Atwood's version, Penelope's narration is a defense against the charges of adultery with the suitors and her justification for her actions in the absence of Odysseus. Penelope denies the rumors that she slept with some or all the suitors bearing the goat-god Pan as a result (Graves, 1966, p. 101). On the other, she admits to using her maids to spy on the suitors and to manipulating the suitors with false hopes. She also accuses Helen, her cousin for her sufferance. As in her other works of fiction, in *The Penelopiad*, too, Atwood elaborates on the antagonistic relationships among women, as critics have noted so far (Suzuki, 2007, p. 270). This focus on antagonism among women makes a case for the idea that in male-dominant cultures, women can only relate to each other as rivals. Atwood reconstructs Penelope's rivalry with Helen, her cousin, and her "antagonist, even her nemesis" as Ingersoll says, over physical beauty and their popularity among eligible men as an important part in the queen's life (Ingersoll, 2008, p. 114). Atwood again shows how women are represented as commodities in the market for exchange among men, and how this structure leads to their rivalry as commodities and conflicts over their value in the market determined by men, as Irigaray argues (Irigaray, 1985b, p.177)

In this rewriting, Penelope appears as a new form of subject. Penelope speaks as a woman but because the moon-goddess religion contains a different concept of divine and motherhood in a necessarily alternative relation of woman and man, this stance offers an alternative to the humanist subject that relies on hierarchies and on the exclusion of the woman as the subject. While for deconstructionist view, talking about/as woman is to remain in the phallogocentric discourse, investigating subjectivity at the moment of the establishment of patriarchy in terms of its constitutive exclusions, which is a different map of desire and sexuality in matriarchal cultures, allows for an alternative route to subjectivity. The maids play a crucial part in creating this new form of female subject. The maids' intervention in various genres functions to keep the female subject from collapsing into stasis and becoming an absolute truth. The portrait of Penelope as a tactful, resourceful woman keeping her household and herself safe against men in pursuit of her wealth that appears in Penelope's narration is countered with the maids' chorus, idylls, and rhymes. In these parts, the maids accuse the queen of laying the blame on their door after using them to sleep with the suitors and to spy on them. The story of one disenfranchised is subjected to doubt and critique by another. That their parts invoke the chorus parts representing the voice of the people in Greek drama further highlights their role in breaking the uniformity of one subject. Also, as Shannon Carpenter Collins notes, Penelope is a self-confessed liar (2006, p. 60). While Penelope asserts her own truth and story over the epic's, her truth is constantly contradicted, put under suspicion, its foundation, motivation is exposed by other agencies and by herself.

In his article on rewritings or "minor character elaborations" as he pins the term, Jeremy Rosen discusses at length the problematic assumptions and the ideological foundations of treating rewritings as liberating. He takes issue with the idea that representations of disenfranchised characters such as women result in their liberation in life. He argues that the investment in the representation of female character, Penelope, or the maids, for instance, is part of what he calls "liberal subjectivism" and "perspectival pluralism" (2013, p. 144). It is true that the relation between literature and social reality is a complicated one and certainly not a direct simple relation of reflection. And yet, they are closely related. For many women writers, and Irigaray as discussed above, language is both the source of oppression and means for liberation. Jeremy Rosen misses the point that while exceptions can exist, the rewritings, especially in women's writings, explore questions of representation, language, agency and truth which are part and parcel of experience. What we call experience or political sphere is also a linguistic field. Writing the history on the basis of the definition of history as that of patriarchal culture and refusal of pre-patriarchal era as history determines how patriarchy works and hence the contestation of this version of history can permit new ways of thinking. In *The Penelopiad*, on one level, Penelope might seem to be contesting the Homeric version with her own truth but when we consider the complex structure of the novel, her subjectivity emerges as one that is open to reassessment and re-inscriptions. The novel's overall project is not to establish Penelope as the new truth, a humanist subject, but to destabilize the epic hero by exposing how the constitution of this male hero depends on the suppression of female sexuality, matriarchal cultures, and an alternative history.

Jeremy Hansom's charge of reinscribing the humanist project in the rewritings seems to result from the emphasis on the agency of women in the rewritings. It is true that *The Penelopiad* counters the deconstructionist rejection of subjectivity but it does not so because it offers a determined subject of truth instead but by pointing out to an exclusion and definition of history and thereby subjectivity in

the construction of male subjectivity. In the deconstructionist stance against identity lies a basic belief in patriarchal order's being the only social order in human history whereas *The Penelopiad* emphasizes the fact that this order is founded on an erasure, on a rejection of female traditions and religions. Ignoring pre-patriarchal societies and their philosophy that has been in academic vogue in the last decades is problematic in many senses. First of all it implies criteria to decide what counts as history and philosophy. Claiming that pre-patriarchal gains its sense only in patriarchal culture avoids facing difference and eliminates the possibility of understanding patriarchy in its exclusions and historicity. Disregarding the pre-patriarchal cultures and contingency of patriarchy serves the ideology that it is an eternal universal structure. Yet, if we vouchsafe as much credit to mythology as much as we do to history, mythology manifests the exclusions and rejections on which patriarchy builds itself; in order to understand the male subjectivity we have to understand these rejections and fears that lie under these rejections.

Taking patriarchy as the only order in history and philosophy, discussions on subjectivity are limited to an era recorded and interpreted by patriarchal cultures. Derrida's argument that claiming a sexual identity or any sort of identity means returning to metaphysical binaries and thus phallogocentrism implies a symmetrical positioning of female subjectivity to male subjectivity.⁵ The controversy over female subjectivity has produced too immense amount of literature to be addressed here fairly. The point I would like to underline is related to the problematic parallelism drawn between the female subject and male subject and the acceptance of patriarchal accounts of history as the only viable account of the past. Irigaray has been charged with essentialism, with offering a determined category of woman against the male subject but Irigaray's writing on female subjectivity in no way stabilizes a subject position against a stable male subjectivity. Derrida's project is destabilizing what has defined itself as a unique subject, on the other hand, when what is being written or read is women, deconstruction as a reading of difference in what asserts itself as presence is irrelevant for women are not present, not whole, not subjects. Peggy Kamuf also misses this point when she assumes that woman as identity refers to an undifferentiated present origin prior to signification for she is indeed in the system of signification; she is the lack that constitutes the male presence (2002, p. 86). Her presence is her absence; hence there is no need to fall back to pre-signification. Irigaray states that:

The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary undoubtedly places woman in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology. (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 30)

This is not a celebration of fragmentation. This is the result of the lack of symbolization, representation of female sexuality. But also, her access to language and identity would again be multiple; she would not be defined by the logic of phallogocentrism since "woman does not have a sex. She has at least two of them, but they cannot be identified as ones" (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 28). The specificity of the female sex cannot be thought of in the logic of the phallus. Through the allusion to the female sexual

5 Derrida's notorious remarks on the subject has been quoted many times: "Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man. And in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philosopher this woman lays claim- just as much claim as he- to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility" (1979, p. 65). Here, Derrida places female subjectivity in a symmetrical relation to male subjectivity and feminism as a theory that claims male's truth. Derrida's views on feminism and female subjectivity has been discussed at length by feminist critiques elsewhere. For his most explicit remarks on the subject, see also his interview "Choreographies" (1985). See Whiteford's *Philosophy in the Feminine* (1991) for a comparison between Derrida and Irigaray's treatment of identity, especially Chapter 6 "Identity and Violence" where she discusses the particularities of female identity in the deconstructive readings. Ellen Armour, too, recognizes Irigaray's deconstructive readings and use of woman as a disruption of metaphysical binaries (Whiteford, 1997).

organ, the multiplicity of women's erogenous zones, Irigaray states that the identity that woman can have access to should not be perceived from the point of male identity but it should be in accord with the multiplicity of the female pleasure. Criticizing Irigaray for falling back on phallogocentrism, as many critics have done, means assuming that when Irigaray speaks about female subjectivity, she applies the logic of identity to the female subjectivity but Irigaray offers a different conceptualization of subjectivity; one that does not obey the law of phallogocentrism or pushes the body out of the text. Irigaray suggests that a different conceptualization of truth, representation, and subjectivity is possible and *The Penelopiad* offers one alternative to such as a female subject in Penelope's position. Penelope is not a subject of truth but one that problematizes subjectivity, truth, and history.

Irigaray's project of producing a female subjectivity in language means a different conceptualization of truth, language and meaning, and *The Penelopiad* offers a similar attempt to change the male imaginary and the symbolic by marking the erasure of female ancestries in the establishment of male truth. Reading *The Penelopiad* alongside Irigaray's deconstructive strategies reveals a female subjectivity that destabilizes the male subject's grounding on the silent and unrepresented female sexuality. Without allocating her in one of the two positions available in patriarchal social norms, that of the faithful wife, or the prostitute, Atwood locates Penelope in the historical and cultural context, questioning the writing of history at the same time. In this process, the identity of Odysseus as the epic hero is revealed to be dependent on the exclusion of goddesses and moon-goddess cult. Once we read the blanks in the epic, reconstructing the maids' voice, "the blind spot in Homer's *Odyssey*" in Khalid's words, the hero turns out to be the hero of a patriarchal turnover rather than the epic traveller (Khalid and Tabassum, p. 20).⁶ The change Odysseus goes through in this process illustrates Irigaray's argument that the gendered subject and truth occur at one and the same.

It is no wonder that when Irigaray speaks of woman as the subject of her language, she is accused of being phallogocentric herself. When the Darwin inspired Victorian scientist Adamson recounts the way of life of Amazon Indians located by a river in Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia," he notes that the imaginary of those people is so constricted to their natural environment and they are so ignorant of different environments that when they meet a person, the question they ask is not "Do you live near a river" but "What is your river like?" (Byatt, 1993, p. 117). Our conceptions of subjectivity, similarly, restricts our imagination, yet still human beings have also proved themselves to be both imaginary and imaginative beings capable of creating new social and linguistic forms again and again throughout their long history on earth.

6 Khalid interprets *The Penelopiad* as a historiographic metafiction that corrects the representation of Penelope and the maids (2013). I agree that the novel offers an alternative truth, however, I also argue that the novel's significance lies in its exposition of the foundations of the truth; that any truth can and should be questionable.

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