The Penelopiad

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada to parents Margaret Dorothy and Carl Edmund Atwood. Margaret was an avid reader from a young age and quickly realized that she wanted to pursue a career in writing. After studying at the University of Toronto, Atwood attended Harvard University and obtained a masters' degree in English. Following her graduate studies, Atwood began teaching at various universities in Canada. Since she began publishing her work in the 1960s, Atwood has produced more than fifteen novels and almost twenty volumes of poetry, as well as many short story collections, children's books, and nonfiction works.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although Atwood does not explicitly consider *The Penelopiad* to be a feminist novel, *The Penelopiad* and Atwood's other writing are politically aligned with the Feminist Movement. The Feminist Movement is a social and political movement whose goal is to make society equal for the genders. In order to do this, one of the approaches of the Feminist Movement has been to reveal the ways in which women have been oppressed throughout history. *The Penelopiad* falls into this category, as it shows how *The Odyssey* is a male-focused text that has been read primarily without consideration of how gender affects the poem and its characters. *The Penelopiad* also describes events surrounding the supposedly historic Trojan War. It is still unclear to scholars whether the Trojan War actually happened in some capacity; however, it is certain that the events as recounted in *The Penelopiad* and *The Odyssey* have been so mythologized that they are no longer accurate.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Perhaps most obviously, Atwood's novel is closely intertwined with and based off of Homer's *The Odyssey*, an ancient Greek epic poem that describes the Greek hero Odysseus's long journey home after the Trojan War. Odysseus's journey was an oral myth long before Homer recorded it; however, Homer's text is still considered to be the canonical account of the story. As Atwood states in her introduction, she also consulted with a variety of other ancient Greek texts in order to give a more expansive vision of Penelope's early life and childhood.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Penelopiad
- **When Published:** October 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature
- **Genre:** Feminist Literature, Postmodern Literature
- **Setting:** Ancient Greece and the Greek afterlife
- **Climax:** Odysseus's murder of the Suitors and the Twelve Maids
- **Antagonist:** Helen, Odysseus (partially)
- **Point of View:** Penelope, in a first-person narrative, and The Twelve Maids, in various narrative forms

EXTRA CREDIT

Play. Margaret Atwood developed *The Penelopiad* into a play in October 2005, (immediately following its publication as a novel) which was then performed throughout Canada.

Myth Series. Atwood's book was written as part of the larger Canongate Myth Series, a series of books based on myths that had been rewritten by contemporary writers.

PLOT SUMMARY

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* retells the story of the *Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope and her Twelve Maids. The story is told in retrospect, with Penelope and the Maids in the afterlife reflecting on the events that occurred centuries before. Penelope's first person narrative is a mostly chronological account starting at her birth, while the Maids provide commentary on her narrative.

Penelope's account begins with her deciding from the afterlife to tell her side of the famous story of her marriage to Odysseus after thousands of years. The Maids, meanwhile, introduce themselves through a song that accuses Odysseus of killing them. Penelope begins her account with her childhood, stating that she was born in Sparta to King Icarius and a Naiad mother. According to stories Penelope heard growing up, Icarius tried to kill Penelope in infancy by throwing her into the **sea**, but Penelope was saved by a flock of ducks. Her mother, meanwhile, was neglectful and cold. In the Maids' commentary on Penelopes' childhood, they compare their own lineage, contrasting their slave and peasant parents with Penelope's royal ones.

Penelope next describes the contest for her hand in marriage, a running race, when she was fifteen. Odysseus won the race (supposedly by cheating) and married Penelope that day. The Maids comment on the section with envy, since they are not allowed to marry.

Contrary to custom, Odysseus took his bride back to his home on the island of Ithaca. The sea journey was rough for Penelope, and once they landed things weren't much better. Although Penelope quickly came to love Odysseus, she did not get along with her mother in law, Anticleia, and found Odysseus's former nurse, Eurycleia, to be very condescending. Penelope had no friends her own age or status. Penelope's only comfort was the birth of her son, Telemachus, and her love for Odysseus.

Eventually, Odysseus received word that Penelope's cousin Helen, whom Penelope despised, had left her husband Menelaus for a Trojan prince named Paris. Menelaus and several other men intended to lay siege to Troy in response. They came to search for Odysseus, who had sworn an oath to Menelaus to protect his rights to Helen. Odysseus tried to feign madness to get out of his obligation, but he was caught in the end. Odysseus sailed for Troy.

Time passed, Telemachus grew up, and Anticleia died. Penelope learned to manage Odysseus's estates in his absence. News came from minstrels about Odysseus's exploits during the war. Then, finally, news came that the Greeks had won the war. Expecting Odysseus to come home, Penelope looked for ships on the horizon, but none came. Minstrels brought strange tales of Odysseus's difficult attempts to get home, until one day the reports stopped coming. The Maids, during one of their commentaries, give a poem-form synopsis of the experiences that Odysseus supposedly had in the *Odyssey*.

Meanwhile Suitors began to show up at Ithaca, asking to marry Penelope in the hopes of gaining access to her dowry. Claiming that they were guests, the Suitors took everything they wanted from the estate, running it into the ground.

As the time of Odysseus's absence lengthened, the number of suitors grew bigger and they became more impatient. Penelope devised a plan to fend them off, saying that she would not pick one to marry until she had finished **weaving** a shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes. However, every night, Penelope and her Twelve Maids secretly unraveled the work that she had done that day, prolonging the process and buying her more time. Meanwhile, Penelope told the Maids to spend time with the Suitors and gain their confidence by sleeping with them and saying bad things about Odysseus and his family. The Maids obliged and told Penelope whatever they learned.

The Suitors finally learned of Penelope's trick with the shroud thanks to the loose lips of one of the Maids. They confronted Penelope about it. Penelope promised to finish the shroud quickly and then pick a suitor. Telemachus, growing impatient, secretly left to search for word of his father. When he returned, Penelope prayed to the gods once more for Odysseus's return. She then found Odysseus out in the courtyard, disguised as a beggar. Penelope did not let on that she recognized him, but sent him to Eurycleia for a bath. Eurycleia recognized Odysseus by the scar on his leg, but did not tell Penelope about his identity, although, secretly, Penelope already knew. During his time in the palace, Odysseus overheard the Twelve Maids saying bad things about his family, unaware that they were acting according to Penelope's orders.

Penelope spoke with the beggar/Odysseus, still pretending not to know who he was. She said that she still missed her husband and remained faithful to him. She then asked his advice on her idea to have an archery contest to finally decide which Suitor should win her hand, knowing that the task she had set was one only Odysseus could succeed in. Odysseus/the beggar agreed this was a good idea, and he won the contest when Penelope held it that day. He then locked Penelope in her room and killed all of the Suitors.

After the Suitors' murders, Odysseus asked Eurycleia to point out the Maids who had been unfaithful to him. Eurycleia pointed to the Twelve Maids who had been spying for Penelope, and Telemachus **hung them**. Following the hanging, Odysseus "revealed" his identity to Penelope, who pretended to be surprised. Odysseus then set sail again soon after finally arriving back at home, to go on a quest to cleanse himself of the Suitors' murders.

In the afterlife, the Twelve Maids haunt Odysseus, following him everywhere. The Maids, in their commentary, evaluate their own murders from an anthropological perspective and then hold a mock trial for Odysseus to attempt to punish him for his deeds. Odysseus chooses to leave Penelope over and over again in order to be reborn and temporarily escape the Maids. Penelope, meanwhile, stays in the fields of asphodel, and the couple replays their estrangement over and over again in the world of the dead.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Penelope – Penelope is the daughter of King Icarius, the mother of Telemachus, Odysseus's wife, and the first-person narrator of the majority of the novel. Penelope, although not a beauty, is known for her cleverness, her devotion, and her modesty. Penelope is insecure about her looks and her ability to attract men, often comparing herself to her cousin Helen, whom she loathes. Penelope marries Odysseus at age fifteen and then returns to Ithaca with him. In Ithaca, Penelope finds herself with few friends. She loves Odysseus, however, and the two often lie in bed together, telling stories. Penelope gives birth to Telemachus a year before Odysseus leaves for the Trojan War. During Odysseus's absence, Penelope becomes an expert at managing Odysseus's estate independently, employing twelve of her Maids to help her spy on the Suitors who have come to beg for her hand in marriage. A skilled **weaver**, Penelope tricks the impatient Suitors by telling them that she will not select one of them for marriage until she is

finished making a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. She then unravels her progress each night with the help of her trusted Maids. In the afterlife, Penelope is haunted by the fact that Odysseus ordered her **Maids' deaths** when he returned home. Penelope never chooses to be reborn, preferring, like she did in life, to stay at home in the fields of asphodel.

Odysseus – Odysseus is Penelope's husband, Telemachus's father, King of Ithaca, and the hero of the Greek myth of the *Odyssey*, upon which *The Penelopiad* is based. Odysseus is described as short-legged, barrel-chested, and extremely clever. He has a deep voice that contributes to his profound powers of persuasion and his superior storytelling abilities. Odysseus is also an expert sailor. Odysseus marries Penelope after cheating to win a running race for her hand. He is kind to Penelope, who falls in love with him. Odysseus's own feelings towards Penelope are less clear. After being summoned by Menelaus, Odyssey wages war against the Trojans. However, he does not return until long after the war is done. During the years he is gone, some suggest that he was completing the heroic deeds recounted in the Odyssey, while others suggest those stories were only to cover up his philandering and waywardness, and his lack of a desire to return home. When Odysseus does eventually return, he kills Penelope's Suitors and **executes** her Maids, leaving him with profound, irreconcilable guilt.

Helen – Helen is Penelope's cousin, Menelaus's wife, and Paris's lover. She is considered to be the most attractive woman in the Greek world and she uses her divine beauty to her advantage. Penelope characterizes Helen as vain, cruel, and flirtatious. Penelope feels that she is living in Helen's shadow and often compares herself to her. She worries that Odysseus prefers Helen to her. In Penelope's narrative, Helen runs away from Menelaus with Paris, a Trojan prince, inciting the Trojan War and causing Odysseus to leave Ithaca. In the afterlife, Helen continues to seek male attention. She often goes to séances and decides to be reincarnated in the world of the living.

Eurycleia – Eurycleia is Odysseus's former nurse and a servant in his household. Eurycleia is entirely devoted to Odysseus and always thinks she knows what's best for him. This annoys Penelope, who finds Eurycleia controlling and condescending. Still, Eurycleia is loyal servant and one of the few people who takes the time to show Penelope the ropes when she arrives at Ithaca. Eurycleia also helps Penelope deliver Telemachus and nurses him with care. Eurycleia is the one who points out Penelope's favorite Maids to Odysseus to be **killed** at the end of the book.

Telemachus – Telemachus is Odysseus and Penelope's only son and the Prince of Ithaca. Born only one year before Odysseus left for Troy, Telemachus knows of his father mostly through the stories his mother tells him. Penelope and Eurycleia raise Telemachus, spoiling him as a child. As a teenager, Telemachus is angsty and rude to his mother, criticizing her for letting the Suitors eat away at his inheritance. Ultimately, Telemachus sails to find his father and helps him kill the Suitors and the Twelve Maids.

The Suitors – The Suitors are the swarms of men who come to beg for Penelope's hand in marriage after Odysseus's departure. The Suitors are generally much younger than Penelope. They profess to be in love with her, and to think she is beautiful and charming. However, behind Penelope's back, the Suitors talk about how Penelope is old and ugly, and they admit to only pursuing Penelope for her considerable dowry. The Suitors feast every day at Ithaca, eating away at Odysseus's fortune and Telemachus's inheritance. They recklessly disregard the property and they rape and seduce Penelope's Maids. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he and Telemachus kill all of the Suitors.

The Twelve Maids – The Twelve Maids are Penelope's twelve most trusted servants, whom she raised since they were children. Throughout the novel, the Maids, acting as a Greek Chorus, give their own perspective on the events of the plot, sometimes contradicting Penelope's account. The Maids are the daughters of poor women and slaves and they have spent their entire lives working for Penelope and her family. The Maids are devoted to Penelope and they help her during Odysseus's absence. They Maids spy on the Suitors for her, sometimes falling in love with or being raped by the men in the process. In order to gain the Suitors' trust, Penelope commands the Maids to say bad things about her and Odysseus. At night, the Maids also help to unravel the shroud that Penelope **weaves** for Laertes in order to procrastinate choosing one of the Suitors. At the book's end, Odysseus orders the Maids to be **killed**, and Telemachus hangs them. In the afterlife, the Maids haunt Odysseus.

King Icarius of Sparta – Icarius is Penelope's father and a King of Sparta. According to stories that Penelope heard growing up, Icarius tried to kill Penelope when she was a baby by throwing her into the **sea**. After the incident, Icarius was overly affectionate towards Penelope, but Penelope never felt at ease with him. Icarius had wanted Penelope and Odysseus to stay in the Spartan court, but they instead broke with tradition and sailed to Ithaca.

Penelope's Mother (The Naiad) – Penelope's mother is a Naiad (a Water Nymph, or kind of minor goddess), wife of King Icarius of Sparta, and a Queen of Sparta. Characterized as neglectful and cold, Penelope's mother shows little to no interest in Penelope's life, preferring to spend time swimming in fresh **water**. She does, however, give Penelope the advice to "be like water" in order to get what she wants, leading to Penelope's **weaving** scheme.

Menelaus – Menelaus is Helen's husband, Odysseus's friend and ally, and a King of Sparta. Rich, loud, and not especially

good looking, Menelaus is a powerful ruler who won Helen's hand in a contest. When Helen ran away with Paris, Menelaus came to Ithaca to ask Odysseus to join him in a war against the Trojans, since Odysseus swore an oath to protect Menelaus's claims to Helen. Later, Telemachus goes to Menelaus's palace to seek news of his father.

Laertes – Laertes is Odysseus's father, Anticleia's husband, and Penelope's father-in-law. Laertes is faithful to his wife Anticleia because he is afraid of her. Laertes lets Odysseus rule the island and, after his disappearance and Anticleia's death, Laertes takes up a quiet life as a farmer (possibly because he has gone a little crazy). It is Laertes's shroud that Penelope **weaves** in order to trick the Suitors.

Uncle Tyndareous – Uncle Tyndareous is Penelope's uncle, Helen's father, and King Icarius's brother. He and Icarius share the throne of Sparta. Tyndareous is characterized as mean, selfish, and conniving. Penelope believes that Tyndareous helped Odysseus cheat in the running competition for her hand in marriage so that Odysseus would take Penelope away to Ithaca and Tyndareous's children could inherit the Spartan throne.

Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks – Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks is one of the Twelve Maids and a particular favorite of Penelope's. She often has a speaking role in the Maids' poems, plays, and songs. When Penelope told the Maids to insult her and her family to gain the Suitors' trust, Melantho threw herself into the role whole-heartedly.

Palamedes – Palamedes is a man faithful to Menelaus who goes with him to press Odysseus into joining them in a war against the Trojans. Palamedes is the one who places Telemachus in front of Odyssey's cart, thereby proving that Odysseus is faking his madness to try to get out of going to war.

The Fates –The Fates are mysteries figures in Greek mythology that decide the destiny and lifespans of mortal humans. They are three old women who **spin thread**, measuring it out to determine the length of people's lives. The Fates are more powerful than the other Greek gods and goddesses (even Zeus) and cannot be tricked by mortals.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Autolycus – Autolycus is Odysseus's grandfather and supposedly a son of the god Hermes. He is known for being a skilled liar, cheater, and storyteller. Autolycus may have tried to get Odysseus killed by a boar in order to keep from having to hand over Odysseus's inheritance to him.

Anticleia – Anticleia is Odysseus's mother and Penelope's mother-in-law. Anticleia is harsh towards Penelope, often criticizing her and commenting negatively on her youth. Anticleia dies after Odysseus's disappearance, leaving Penelope to manage the estate alone.

Actoris – Actoris is one of Penelope's maids and a gift from her father, Icarius. Penelope brings Actoris with her to Ithaca from Sparta. Actoris is unhappy in Ithaca and greatly misses her friends at home. Actoris, who is middle-aged, dies soon after arriving on the island.

Theseus and Peirithous – Theseus and Peirithous are Greek heroes who abducted Helen when she was twelve, intending to marry her when she was old enough. According to Helen, the two men were in complete awe of her beauty. Helen's brothers went to war with Athens in order to get Helen back.

Paris – Paris is a Trojan prince and Helen's lover. He is supposedly extremely handsome. After secretly wooing each other during a feast in Paris's honor at Menelaus's palace, Paris and Helen ran away together, inciting the Trojan War.

Agamemnon – Agamemnon is Menelaus's brother, who goes with him to press Odysseus into joining them in a war against the Trojans.

Teiresias – Teiresias is a blind prophet who Odysseus supposedly meets during his journeys. According to Odysseus, Teiresias gave him advice on his journey home when he went to see him in the underworld, and told him that Poseidon had a vendetta against him since he killed the Cyclops.

Antinous – Antinous is one of Penelope's Suitors that Odysseus kills with an arrow. Antinous turns into a corpse every time he sees Penelope in the fields of Asphodel, clearly still angry about the circumstances of his death.

Medon – Medon is a herald who tells Penelope about Telemachus secretly leaving to find Odysseus after Penelope has already learned of his departure from her Maids.

Iphthime – Iphthime is Penelope's sister, who appears to her in a dream to tell her that Telemachus will return home safely.

Sisyphus – According to rumors, Sisyphus is Odysseus's real father. Sisyphus is known for being an extremely tricky man who cheated death several times.

Piraeus and Theoclymenus – Piraeus and Theoclymenus are friends that Telemachus makes during his trip to find Odysseus. They eat dinner with Telemachus at Ithaca when they return.

Poseidon – Poseidon is the Greek god of the sea. He has a vendetta against Odysseus, and according to the stories, he prevents Odysseus from reaching home.

Athene – Athene is the Greek goddess of wisdom. She helps Odysseus in his endeavors.

Hermes — Hermes is a Greek god and messenger who is associated with thievery and trickery. Odysseus is supposedly descended from Hermes.

Zeus – Zeus is the leader and most powerful of the Greek gods, and supposedly the real father of Helen.

Artemis – Artemis is the Greek goddess of the hunt and of virginity.

Pan – Pan is the Greek god that, according to some rumors, Penelope gave birth to after sleeping with every single one of the Suitors.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

STORYTELLING, TEXTUAL AUTHORITY, AND FALSEHOODS

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* reinvents the myth of Homer's *Odyssey*, retelling it through the eyes of Penelope, Odysseus's wife. In her retelling, Atwood actively engages with questions of mythology and invention, self-reflexively investigating the relationship between storytelling and truth. The concept of storytelling is highly important from the very beginning of the novel, when in Penelope's first chapter she talks about why she is finally telling her own story and discusses how she had previously remained silent because she "wanted happy endings." Penelope clearly implies that the normal narrative arc towards a happy ending, or narrative structure in general, has silenced her side of the story. In this chapter, Penelope also describes many of the stories invented about her infidelity following the circulation of the *Odyssey* as "scandalous gossip," again linking storytelling with untruth. Penelope then furthers this idea by frequently connecting storytelling to fiber work and her own **weaving**, which she uses for deceptive purposes.

Furthermore, Atwood's decision to write the novel itself could also be taken as a criticism of the idea of textual authority (the concept that the text is sacred, final, truthful, and cannot be questioned). *The Penelopiad*'s very existence implies that Homer's version of the story is somehow misleading or incomplete. Atwood's revision also undermines several major plot points of the *Odyssey*, including the idea that Penelope did not recognize Odysseus when he arrived back at Ithaca in beggar's clothing. Moreover, to write her revision, Atwood relied on other contemporary Greek texts besides the *Odyssey*, suggesting that the *Odyssey* is not the only authoritative account of the myth. In fact, in her introduction, Atwood specifically states that the *Odyssey* is "not the only version of the story" and discusses how, because of its nature, oral myth is inherently made up of many different voices.

While the reader may assume that Atwood's revision of the myth through Penelope's eyes is a kind of "correction" of the *Odyssey*, the fact that Atwood troubles the idea of a complete and truthful narrative undermines the trustworthiness of her own novel as well. Atwood actively engages with this tension, especially through the chorus of Maids whose voices are present throughout the novel. The Twelve Maids question Penelope's decisions, suggesting that Penelope is complicit in their **murders** since she does not reveal to Odysseus that they were helping her all along. Although Penelope attempts to exonerate herself in her narrative, suggesting that there was little she could have done to help at the time, the Maids' chorus condemns Penelope for her lack of action. In opening Penelope's own narrative up for criticism, then, Atwood suggests that even Penelope's voice cannot be taken as authoritative or definitive.

This overthrow of textual authority in turn troubles the idea of an authoritative or correct reading of the *Odyssey*, opening the text up for more radical interpretation. The Maids explicitly discuss this in the section "An Anthropology Lecture," where they argue that the *Odyssey* represents the overthrow of women-led society and the switch to a male-dominated society—a social upheaval that likely actually took place in early history. The Maids believe that their listeners may disregard their alternative reading as "feminist claptrap," suggesting how, up to the present, readers of the *Odyssey* who questioned predominate power structures were soundly rejected by the mainstream readers. However, Atwood's implication that there is no objective truth in storytelling allows for the possibility of a breadth of readings, not only a "correct one." In short, while Atwood dismantles the idea of objective, truthful storytelling and the authoritative text, she also opens the *Odyssey* up for more creative, alternative readings.

CLASS, WOMANHOOD, AND VIOLENCE

Atwood's account of the events of the *Odyssey* through Penelope and the Maids' eyes focuses on the hardship and heartbreak of life as a woman in ancient Greece. Among these difficulties are the social and psychological pressures that women face. Atwood examines them primarily through Penelope, whose first person account gives the reader a sense of how Penelope feels about the societal expectations of women.

One of the problematic social dynamics that Atwood explores is the intense competition between women. Much of this competition is over male sexual attention, like in the case of Helen and Penelope's rivalry and Penelope's sense of inadequacy because of Helen's beauty. Penelope spends quite a bit of her narrative taking stock of her own plainness compared to Helen, while Helen repeatedly rubs in her superior beauty. This toxic dynamic results in Penelope's fierce dislike of Helen, whom she calls "that septic bitch." Rather than being allied in their shared status as women, or in their familial relations (Helen is Penelope's cousin), Penelope and Helen are rivals for male attention. This rivalry seems to be the consequence of a society that values women only for their beauty, since

Penelope's cleverness and devotion go undervalued.

Some of the competition between women, though, is less focused on male sexual attention, and more on correctly filling a stereotypically female role in general. For example, Penelope finds that her mother in law (Anticleia) and Odysseus's former nurse (Eurycleia) are constantly judging Penelope's performance as a wife. Eurycleia takes Penelope under her wing, but many of her instructions give Penelope unnecessary stress. Eurycleia tells Penelope "whether to cover your mouth when you laugh, on what occasions to wear a veil, how much of the face it should conceal," centering her instruction around female modesty and showing how the minute details of women's behavior are constantly policed. Eurycleia also controls Penelope's mothering of Telemachus very closely and criticizes her independent choices. Through Penelope's narrative, Atwood shows how social norms of women's behavior and desirable qualities cause Penelope constant stress and make her feel extremely alienated.

While Penelope suffers because of the psychological pressures of her gender, Atwood shows how, in comparison, the Twelve Maids have it much worse. Because of how their class status interacts with their gender, the Twelve Maids suffer even more than Penelope does in the male-dominated society of Greece. Though Penelope still has to fend off the Suitors that come to marry her after Odysseus does not return, the Suitors at least never threaten to harm Penelope physically. The Maids, however, are often the victims of rape at the hands of these same Suitors. Both Penelope and the Maids discuss rape as an extremely common event in ancient Greece, committed by both the Greek gods and mortal men. While Penelope theoretically is also susceptible to this threat, the Maids' lowly status means that they are totally unprotected from it. When the Maids are raped, none of their rapists are punished for their deeds. On the contrary, Penelope and Eurycleia treat rape as a normal, if unfortunate, occurrence. Still, it is clear that the Maids themselves are extremely affected emotionally and physically by the violation. Penelope describes, for example, how the girls "felt guilty" and "needed to be tended and cared for."

Ultimately, the maids are not only raped, but they are then punished for their rapes with murder. When Odysseus returns and **kills the Maids**, he says his murders were not a problem because the Maids were "whores." Eurycleia also describes these women as "notorious whores," despite the fact that she knows that many of them were actually rape victims, and did not willingly have sex with the Suitors. During the "The Trial of Odysseus" chapter, Penelope states that the women were killed because they were raped with their master's permission, not just because they were raped, highlighting the fact that their slave status makes them especially unprotected. The Maids also specifically blame their slave status for their fate, stating in their second chapter that they were discarded because they were "born to the wrong parents."

In sum, while Atwood shows the struggles that women face in Greek society in general, her characterization of the Twelve Maids highlights how low class status exacerbates the violence and psychological trauma that all women are susceptible to.

ANTIQUITY, MODERNITY, AND PROGRESS FOR WOMEN

The Penelopiad is framed as Penelope and the Maids' retrospective narratives, in which they look back from the afterlife on what they did in the past. Due to this dynamic, Penelope repeatedly refers to how society has changed since the time when she was alive in Greece.

The ancient Grecian characters are keenly aware of what goes on in the modern era. In the afterlife, spirits have the option to return to earth for a time with the memories of their past lives wiped out. As a result, they are up to date on societal shifts and trends. Helen, who has taken this option several times, tells Penelope about "bikinis, and aerobic exercises, and body piercings" and suggests that she and Penelope take a trip to Las Vegas. Even understandings of Grecian history, which Penelope and Helen actually lived through, have changed since their time on earth. Penelope, for example, notes that modern people consider the Trojan War, in which Helen's elopement with Paris is supposed to be the central issue, to have been an issue of trade routes. Through her comparison of contemporary customs and her narrative description of older ones, Penelope highlights the vast difference in culture between antiquity and the modern day.

At the same time, however, these changes have not done as much as the reader may think to improve the world, especially in regards to the treatment of women. Atwood most clearly showcases this during the Maids' chapter "The Trial of Odysseus." The chapter is written as a court transcript. The format of the trial is in the style of a modern-day court system, featuring lawyers, a judge, order in the court, etc. But despite the court's modernity, the judge arrives at the same outcome for Odysseus as the Greeks did—no punishment for killing the Maids. The judge states that it is impossible to judge Odysseus because his times "were not our times." However, the judge then goes on to say that it would be a shame if this one "minor incident" ruined his career. This is highly ironic, because fear of ruining a man's career is an often-cited, and often criticized, excuse for silencing victims of rape in modern times. Through this irony, Atwood shows how Odysseus's times are, in fact, not very different from our times, with violence against women going undiscussed and unpunished.

Not only does Atwood suggest that modern times have not made much progress in regard to the treatment of women, but she even suggests that progress is not guaranteed, and that societies can regress rather than progress. To give one

example, Penelope discusses how, during her time in Greece, a switch was being made in marital practices. According to Penelope, men used to move in with their wives' families, and money and titles were kept in women's families as a result. Women were still being used as vessels to convey inheritances, just like in later Western Civilization before women could own property, but in this original Greek system women were at least not completely uprooted from their communities and physically trafficked elsewhere. But, as Penelope notes, during her youth there was a new and growing trend toward women moving in with their husband's family instead of the husband moving to join the wife's family. Penelope and Odysseus take part in this growing trend, with Penelope leaving fashionable Sparta for the isolated island of Ithaca. While Penelope is not upset about this when it happens, she often discusses feeling isolated and lonely, suggesting that this change may not be in her best interest. In general, this change could be considered to be more objectifying and more damaging for women, a regression in their personal rights.

Atwood makes the possibility of regressing in society's treatment of women clearer in the chapter titled "An Anthropology Lecture." During this chapter, the Twelve Maids explicitly make the case that the scene at the end of *The Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* represents the switch from a women-centered society to one that is male dominated. In their argument, the maids argue that the twelve of them plus Penelope represent the thirteen lunar moons in a year, and that their rape and **hanging** represent the "overthrow of the matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians." Their argument is not only based in the symbolism of the narrated event and its parallels to other iconography, but also in the fact that there is archeological evidence that such an overthrow actually existed. In other words, the Maids describe the fall of a women-centered society in favor of a men-centered one, leading to the rest of the patriarchal history of Western Civilization. Atwood's emphasis on the precariousness of progress for women forces the modern reader to look critically at their own society and the cultural changes being made.

CHRISTIANITY VS. GREEK RELIGION

Atwood's novel, which Penelope narrates from the afterlife of the ancient Greek underworld, actively engages with spiritual and religious subject matter, imagining the relationships between lofty concepts like death, fate, and repentance. From her postmortem perspective, Penelope spends a significant amount of time describing the conditions of the afterlife, which Atwood bases on Greek mythology. In the afterlife, Penelope walks through fields of asphodel (the section of the afterlife for the virtuous, heroic, and god-favored), occasionally running into other dead people from her time in Ithaca. Below the fields of asphodel are other layers of the underworld, with grottoes for the less morally good (the "pickpocket…stockbroker… and small-time pimp"). The lowest layers feature mental torture for the most "villainous"— i.e. the people who have disobeyed and displeased the gods.

In describing the afterlife, Penelope often focuses on the strangeness of being physically disembodied. She describes how the gods cannot physically punish the dead because of their bodilessness, and emphasizes her own state of "bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness." Christian concepts, meanwhile, seem to have been added to supplement Greek religion, despite their often contrasting ideals. In modern times, Penelope notes, the Greek gods are much less present than they were in her times. This is perhaps because Christianity is much more prevalent, and the Greek gods have to share time with the Christian one. Penelope also states that a new establishment to take in dead people has opened near the fields of asphodel, with "fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks." Presumably, this is meant to be Christian Hell. In contrast to the fields of asphodel, Christian Hell is an embodied state where people endure physical torture, so physical bodies must be preserved during burial. Atwood does not discuss Christian Heaven at all in the book, presumably because, unlike Hell, which Penelope says is next door, Heaven would not be located underground, near the Greek underworld.

While Christian religion seems to have been seamlessly added adjacent to the old Greek one, Penelope still insists on the existence of certain Greek concepts such as fate, bringing the two religions into contrast. In Greek mythology, as Penelope notes, fate is controlled by three sisters, the Fates. These three women, who are spinners, measure out the length of people's lives with thread and cut it when they are to die. This idea obviously does not afford for much will power or personal choice, although, notably, Penelope does imply that there are ways to trick the Fates. For example, Penelope describes Odysseus using his wits to circumvent the fate that the Fates had prescribed him. Still, Odysseus's ability to do so is an exception, and most mortals live and die by the whims and the wills of the Fates. Notably, the concept of the Fates places women, and women's work like **spinning**, in the most important religious roles, giving them the power to end and begin life itself. The Fates are, in fact, considered to be even more powerful than the gods, including Zeus. This undercuts the otherwise male-dominated structure of the Greek god system, in which Zeus, a male god, is the most powerful. The concept of the Fates also contrasts starkly with the Christian faith, which puts a male god in total control of the lifespan of humans.

The idea of the Fates and fate more generally also differs starkly from the modern Christian concepts of sin, repentance, and redemption. The ideas of sin, repentance, and redemption rely on the belief that each individual makes personal choices

and does not have a prescribed destiny, fundamentally contradicting the idea of fate. In Christianity, if a person makes an immoral choice, God holds them responsible for it, punishing them in the afterlife. A person can also repent through a series of rituals and be forgiven in the eyes of God. Unlike Christianity, ancient Greek religion offers no recourse for people who have acted immorally. In Greek religion, righteousness has more to do with flattering the gods, who have individual quirks and who themselves are fallible and often behave in ways that contradict modern morality. As a result, morality and goodness are fairly separated from religious practice. This is a problem for Odysseus and Penelope, who have no way of redeeming themselves and making up for the **murder of the Maids**. Instead, the Maids taunt Odysseus and Penelope, following them around the fields of asphodel and performing skits and songs to remind them of their culpability forever.

Through her descriptions of Christianity and Greek religion, Atwood gives the reader a portrait of these two distinct and contradictory but coexisting religious systems, each with different relationships to blame, destiny, freewill, punishment, and the afterlife.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WEAVING AND FIBER WORK

Throughout *The Penelopiad*, Atwood connects fiber work and Penelope's weaving with ideas of storytelling and lying. Penelope refers to telling her own narrative using fiber work terms, saying that she will "spin a thread of her own," and she calls Telemachus a "spinner of falsehoods like his father." The idea of "spinning a tale" implies invention, suggesting storytelling is not a reflection of the truth but a fabrication of it. The weaving and fiber crafts that are literally present in the novel are also used for purposes of deception, further associating fiber work, lying, and storytelling. Penelope's own infamous weaving project is based on a lie, when, to try to pacify the suitors, Penelope tells them she will marry as soon as she is finished weaving a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. However, Penelope undoes all of her progress every night to prolong the process and buy herself time. In doing so, Penelope literalizes the figures of speech she uses that connect fiber work with storytelling and lying.

THE MAIDS' DEATHS

During the chapter entitled "An Anthropology Lecture," the Twelve Maids give an explicit, symbolic reading of their own death and invite the reader to adopt it. In this reading, details of the Maids' deaths as described in *The Odyssey* and reproduced in *The Penelopiad* carry symbolic meanings that, in aggregate, make them a metaphor for the overthrow of female-focused goddess cults by male-dominated, father-god-focused religion. The number of Maids plus Penelope (who the Maids see as the Priestess of this cult) equals thirteen, or the number of lunar months in a year. The Maids and Penelope, therefore, represent a cult of the moon goddess according to this reading, and the slaying of the Suitors stands for an annual ritual to renew their virginity. However, Odysseus's arrival and his killing of the Maids and marriage to Penelope symbolize how male-centric religion hijacked the rituals of this female-focused religion and eventually eclipsed it. According to the Maids, there is archeological evidence for this same kind of religious upheaval in the ancient world.

There is a further complication to this symbol as well, however. Although the Maids themselves offer this reading, they also suggest it as a means to avoid facing the fact that they were real girls who suffered pain and violence. This symbolic reading of the Maids' Deaths, then, may actually be a warning *against* symbolism of this kind—a condemnation of turning violence against women into an abstract concept divorced from real people's live experiences.

WATER

In Penelope's life and narrative, water takes on a special but ambiguous significance. Penelope is the daughter of a Naiad, or a Greek fresh water spirit, a fact that immediately links her to water. In addition, as a child, Penelope's father Icarius nearly drowned her in the ocean before a flock of ducks brought her to shore. Throughout Penelope's life, her near-death experience stays with her, giving her an intense fear of the sea. During Penelope's trip to Ithaca, she feels sick the entire time, highlighting the strained relationship Penelope has to the ocean. This may represent Penelope's troubled relationship with her mother, since later, in one of the Maids' songs, the Maids refer to the fluid in a mother's womb as an ocean. However, it is also water that serves as Penelope's inspiration to weave Laertes' shroud as a diversion tactic to avoid marrying one of the Suitors. Penelope thought of the **weaving** scheme after remembering her mother's advice to "be like water" by staying patient and persistent. According to her mother, rather than using force, water finds ways around obstacles to get where it's going. In short, water may represent Penelope's connection to the female body and to her mother—relationships that are painful and strained for Penelope, but important nonetheless.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Canongate Books edition of *The Penelopiad* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners. *Don't follow my example!* I want to scream in your ears—yes, yours!

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In her opening chapter, Penelope describes how the story of the *Odyssey* has been read throughout history thus far and why exactly she has decided to tell her side of the story. In this quote, Penelope describes how the "official version" of the story, in which Penelope is depicted as incredibly modest and a model wife, became "a stick used to beat other women with."

Penelope's frustration about being "a stick used to beat other women with" suggests that she has been venerated as an ideal woman while being used to insult and devalue women who did not behave the same way as she did, or did not so perfectly fulfill standards of normative womanly behavior. Meanwhile, Penelope clearly feels that the cost of fulfilling this role was not worth the pay-off when she tells the reader, "don't follow my example!" Her cautionary advice suggests that the normative womanly role, while it may be praised in the songs and stories, damages women overall.

Note also that Penelope here introduces the idea of story-telling or even lying as "yarn-spinning," an extended symbol that will be built upon throughout the book.

Chapter 4 Quotes

We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse.

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

The Maids speak this quote in the chapter about their childhoods, which directly follows Penelope's chapter about her own upbringing. Unlike Penelope, the Maids were not valued as children, and they describe being told they were "dirty."

The Maids, who handle many domestic tasks around the palace, are certainly acquainted with physical dirt, as they suggest when they say, "dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty." The word dirt, however, carries a double sexual meaning, which the Maids draw out as they continue, stating that they were "the dirty girls" and describing how, as slaves, they were not allowed to deny powerful men who wanted to sleep with them. This quote shows how men's sexual transgressions were blamed on women (the Maids, not the men, become "dirty," and the dirt is their "fault"), despite the fact that it is the men initiating sex. This quote also highlights the lack of consent in sex between the Maids and their masters or their master's friends, and highlights how rape stigmatizes women.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Then after hundred, possibly thousands of years…customs changed. No living people went to the underworld much any more, and our own abode was upstaged by a much more spectacular establishment down the road—fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks—a great many special effects.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope, who has been describing how the

Greek underworld works, mentions a new institution for receiving the dead that opened nearby to the fields of asphodel.

Penelope's descriptions of this new place clearly correspond to Christian Hell, as she describes "fiery pits" and "demons with pitchforks"—the latter being a clear reference to the Christian devil. This quote shows how Atwood, in her sometimes playful reimagining of the *Odyssey*, portrays the relationship between ancient religion and modern Christianity as one of casual coexistence rather than conflict. Ancient Greek religion, rather than being incorrect or imaginary, has simply fallen out of fashion, while Christian religion has newly appeared and become more popular. Throughout *The Penelopiad*, Atwood draws attention to the differences between Ancient Greek and Christian religion, particularly in regards to guilt, blame, and atonement.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. 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. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does.

Related Characters: Penelope's Mother (The Naiad) (speaker), Penelope

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope's mother gives Penelope advice on her wedding day. Penelope's mother, who is a Naiad, has a special connection to water, and so she tells Penelope to look to water for guidance on how to behave in her new life.

Penelope's mother's advice encourages Penelope to take up what could be considered a traditionally feminine disposition: one that is patient, lacks resistance, and is "caressing." However, Penelope's mother also suggests using this temperament to slowly wear away obstacles or to totally evade them in order to get what she wants. In other words, Penelope's mother suggests using stereotypically feminine docility as a clever means of deception and manipulation. Penelope uses this technique later with the Suitors, when the traditionally feminine task of weaving becomes Penelope's strategy for resistance.

The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard her scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Before discussing her own wedding night, Penelope here describes the traditional expectations of consummations of marriage in Ancient Greek society. Penelope describes the consummation as the role-playing of a "sanctioned rape."

By describing how the consummation of marriage mimics a rape scene, Penelope highlights the violence that men force even rich women, even their new wives, to endure in normal life. Wedding nights in Greek society are stained with "blood" and are a "conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing," giving the sense that violence against women is not a corruption of but is rather built into the normative structures of traditional marriage. This description also highlights how marriage disrupts female friendships and communities, symbolically represented by how the gatekeeper stops the bride's "friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her." Atwood shows the roots of marriage culture as violent and brutal rather than divine and cherished.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Oh gods and oh prophets, please alter my life,
And let a young hero take me for his wife!
But no hero comes to me, early or late—
Hard work is my destiny, death is my fate!

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the Twelve Maids profess their desire to marry a young hero before declaring that dream impossible because of their circumstances and class status. This quote is part of a longer song about how the Maids' lives would be different if they were born princesses.

In the quoted stanza, the Maids beg the gods and prophets to change their lives, knowing, however, that "hard work" is their "destiny" and "death" their "fate." The Maids evoke the Ancient Greek concept that the Fates predetermine people's lives, so neither gods nor prophets could plausibly change them. Throughout the book, Atwood brings up the idea of fate again and again to examine it and question what it means to disadvantaged people like the Maids, who are told to simply accept their oppression as inevitable. This chapter also occurs right after the description Penelope's own wedding, highlighting how marriage, although oppressive to women in many ways, would be much more desirable for the Maids than their current state.

Chapter 9 Quotes

She'd been in the household ever since Odysseus's father had bought her, and so highly had he valued her that he hadn't even slept with her. 'Imagine that, for a slave-woman!' she clucked to me, delighted with herself. 'And I was very good-looking in those days!'

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60-61

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes Eurycleia's pride at the fact that her master Laertes never tried to sleep with her. Penelope takes note of this as she describes her feelings upon first arriving in Ithaca and meets Eurycleia for the first time.

According to Eurycleia, Laertes valued her "so highly" that "he hadn't even slept with her," suggesting that men do not value the women, or at least the slaves, that they sleep with. This implies that, for women servants, sex is a means of establishing their masters' power over then rather than a pursuit of pleasure. Eurycleia's pride at the fact that Laertes never slept with her shows how she has bought into the gender and class system in which women have less value if they are raped, and how she in turn perpetuates this damaging culture. This is one of many instances in the book when Atwood shows how sex is used to shame women.

I ought to have thanked her for it, with my heart as well as my lips…Whether to cover the mouth when you laugh, on what occasions to wear a veil, how much of the face it should conceal, how often to order a bath—Eurycleia was an expert on all such matters.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Eurycleia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes her feelings about Eurycleia's advice on how to behave according to the customs of Ithaca.

Eurcyleia's advice centers on female modesty—she describes how to properly wear a veil, when to hide emotions and laughter, etc. This shows how women often perpetuate restrictive norms of female behavior, and how patriarchy is upheld not only by men, but also by compliant women. Penelope's reaction to her advice, meanwhile, shows Penelope's discontent with these rules: she "ought" to have thanked her for it in her "heart as well as [her] lips." Penelope never specifies exactly why she dislikes Eurycleia's advice—is it only her condescending tone? Or the fact that the expectations of her behavior feel constrictive? Atwood leaves the exact reasons for Penelope's discontent unclear.

'Helen hasn't borne a son yet,' he said, which ought to have made me glad. And it did. But on the other hand, why was he still—and possibly always—thinking about Helen?

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Telemachus , Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes Odysseus's reaction to the birth of Telemachus. Odysseus is happy that Penelope had a son, but his comparison of Penelope to Helen upsets her.

Penelope frames her unhappiness about Odysseus's comment as displeasure that he is "still—and possibly always—thinking about Helen." Penelope seems concerned that Odysseus may be in love with Helen, or at least thinks often and fondly of her good looks and charms. The fact that Odysseus's compliment is only a comparison to another woman shows how women in Greek society are pitted against each other and competition between them is encouraged, preventing them from supporting one another. Moreover, Penelope is praised for giving birth to a son, showing how women are valued based on their reproductive capabilities rather than personal merit, and how boy children are valued more than girls.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Nine months he sailed the wine-red seas of his mother's blood…
In his frail dark boat, the boat of himself,
Through the dangerous ocean of his vast mother he sailed
From the distant cave where the threads of men's lives are spun,
Then measured, and then cut short
By the Three Fatal Sisters, intent on their gruesome handicrafts,
And the lives of women also are twisted into the strand…

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids (speaker), The Fates , Telemachus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of a poem in which the Twelve Maids describe Telemachus's birth before comparing it with their own births.

The Twelve Maids describe Penelope's womb as a "wine-red sea," linking the ocean with the female body. This metaphor elevates the female body to a level of high importance, considering how central the sea is to Ancient Greek life and the story of Odysseus (and the "wine-dark sea" is a common phrase in Homer's work). The Maids also place women in a central, powerful role in this section of the poem as they mention the "Three Fatal Sisters," the Fates who decide men's fates through the traditionally feminine craft of spinning. By noting the central role that women play in determining men's destinies and by linking the female body to the sea, Atwood places women in positions of extreme importance in this poem, despite how poorly they are treated in the rest of the novel.

Chapter 11 Quotes

If word got around about his post, said Odysseus in a mock-sinister manner, he would know I'd been sleeping with some other man, and then—he said, frowning at me in what was supposed to be a playful way—he would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the room beam.
I pretended to be frightened, and said I would never, never think of betraying his big post.
Actually, I really was frightened.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

After telling Penelope the secret that one of his bedposts is carved from a tree with its roots still in the ground, Odysseus jokingly tells Penelope that he will kill her if she ever tells anyone else about it, since he will think it means she has been unfaithful.

Odysseus's "joking" tone seems to not be a joke, but actually a veiled threat. Odysseus's graphic level of detail as he describes how he would kill Penelope implies Odysseus's high capacity for violence, particularly violence towards women, despite the fact that he has been a good husband to Penelope thus far. This threat is especially sinister considering Odysseus's later murders of the Maids, which proves Odysseus's willingness to follow through on his thoughts of violence. Penelope's real fright, meanwhile, shows how in Ancient Greek society, violence was such a normal part of interactions between men and women that women could not trust even the men they were closest to not to hurt them.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Rumors came, carried by other ships… Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another… Some of the men had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of the usual kind, said others… Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some… and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam. Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 83-84

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes the rumors that have been arriving with storytellers to Ithaca about Odysseus's exploits on his way home from the Trojan War.

These rumors juxtapose the extraordinary with the ordinary, the mythological with the normal, showing how myths may be created. In some of the stories, Odysseus's activities have been less-than-savory since his departure, filled with little other than bar fights and prostitutes. But the other stories tell of Odysseus's heroic deeds fighting monsters and romancing goddesses. As Penelope describes these different rumors, Atwood suggests how myths may be created as everyday and even unsavory decisions become embellished, expanded, and elaborated into glamorous myths. Atwood compares this, again, to fiber crafts, saying the minstrels "embroidered" the stories' themes to make them more appealing. In doing so, Atwood emphasizes that stories, rather than simply reflecting the truth, are constructed and crafted.

I had such a clear picture in my mind—Odysseus returning, and me—with womanly modesty—revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man's business. On his behalf, of course. Always for him. How his face would shine with pleasure! How pleased he would be with me! 'You're worth a thousand Helens,' he would say.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope, who has been managing Odysseus's estates in his absence, imagines Odysseus's praise when he will finally arrive home and see how hard she has worked to maintain and expand his fortune.

Though Penelope expresses pride and happiness in what she is doing in her descriptions of learning to manage the estate, here Penelope frames that gratification in terms of Odysseus's praise, "on his behalf" and "always for him." The way that Penelope emphasizes that her work was for Odysseus's benefit seems somewhat unreliable, considering how proud Penelope seems of herself, and how adamantly Penelope protests against her own sense of accomplishment. Moreover, when Penelope fantasizes about Odysseus telling her "You're worth a thousand Helens," Atwood shows how Penelope feels constantly measured in comparison to other woman, not only on her own merit. This quote shows the reader how difficult it is for Penelope to find personal fulfillment in the gendered system of Ancient Greece, and how, when she does find fulfillment, she must reframe it only in terms of her husband's praise.

Chapter 15 Quotes

Though we had to do it carefully, and talk in whispers, these nights had a touch of festivity about them, a touch—even—of hilarity… We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles, we made jokes… We were almost like sisters. In the mornings… we'd exchange smiles of complicity… Their 'Yes ma'ams' and 'No ma'ams' hovered on the edge of laughter, as if neither they nor I could take their servile behavior seriously.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), The Twelve Maids

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes the nights she spent with her Twelve Maids, unraveling the shroud she made during

the day in order to trick the Suitors. Penelope remembers these nights fondly, noting their "festivity" and even their "hilarity."

Through their nights spent working together working to deceive the Suitors, Penelope and the Twelve Maids develop a female community that is missing throughout the rest of the novel. Rather than competing for male attention, the women share stories and tell jokes as they work. Penelope, highlighting how the unweaving brings them together, says they are "almost like sisters." Not only does working together create bonds between the women, but it also almost dismantles the strict class structure that oppresses the Maids. While class divides are normally sharp, Penelope notes how the Maids' servile "yes ma'ams" and "no ma'ams" "hovered on the edge of laughter," since their secret work has bridged the class divide.

At the same time, we only see this relationship from Penelope's perspective here, and as the Maids never really comment on having a close bond with their mistress, it seems likely that they didn't find their enforced servility to ever be as sisterly or "unserious" as Penelope did.

❝ It was not unusual for the guests in a large household or palace to sleep with the maids. To provide a lively night's entertainment was considered part of a good host's hospitality, and such a host would magnanimously offer his guests their pick of the girls—but it was most irregular for the servants to be used in this way without the permission of the master of the house. Such an act amounted to thievery.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), The Suitors, The Twelve Maids

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes the culture surrounding maids, slavery, and sex in ancient Greece. Maids, being the property of their master, were required to have sex with any man of higher status than them as long as their master approved.

This quote highlights how Ancient Greek culture condoned and institutionalized rape by taking away sexual choice from slave women. Atwood strikes an ironic tone in this quote as she describes the "magnanimous" way that a master would offer his slaves to visitors for sex. By telling the reader that sleeping with a slave without the masters' permission was "thievery," Atwood highlights the backwards moral values of this society, in which property rights were more respected than bodily autonomy and human rights.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ He then said that he'd made the decision he'd had to make—he'd gone in search of his father, since no one else seemed prepared to lift a finger in that direction. He claimed his father would have been proud of him for showing some backbone and getting out from under the thumbs of the women, who as usual were being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment. By 'the women', he meant me. How could he refer to his own mother as 'the women'?

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Odysseus, Telemachus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Here Telemachus defends his choice to go in search of Odysseus without Penelope's permission, criticizing his mother in the process.

Through this quote, Atwood shows how male-dominated societies perpetuate themselves and how ideas of male superiority and misogyny are transferred through generations and validated by bonds between fathers and sons. When Telemachus states that Odysseus, who he has never met, would have been "proud" of him for "showing some backbone and getting out from under the thumbs of women," he imagines a male bond between himself and his father that, since they have never met, is solely based in their maleness in comparison to Penelope's femaleness. Meanwhile, Telemachus articulates the misogynist fear of being controlled by "overemotional" women without "reasonableness and judgment." Throughout this speech and Penelope's reaction, Atwood shows how Telemachus has internalized the anti-woman sentiments of Greek society, alienating himself from the mother who raised him for the sake of a father he never knew.

Chapter 19 Quotes

I didn't let on I knew. It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognize him: it's always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes her reaction to Odysseus when, after years of absence, he shows up at their palace in Ithaca wearing beggar's clothing as a disguise. Penelope pretended not to recognize him.

When Penelope admits that she did, in fact, know who Odysseus was when he first arrived back in Ithaca, she effectively revises the story as told by the *Odyssey*, which portrays Penelope as totally ignorant of Odysseus's identity. Penelope's correction of this fact shows how, although the *Odyssey* is regarded as the authoritative account of Odysseus's journey, its male perspective might render it incomplete or incorrect. Moreover, Penelope suggests that the male ego is part of the reason that she lied, since she would be a "foolish wife" to "step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness." Considering how Penelope's silence later results in the Maids tragic deaths, Atwood seems to be suggesting that male arrogance and ego may lead to deception and danger.

I then related a dream of mine. It concerned my flock of lovely white geese, geese of which I was very fond. I dreamt that they were happily pecking around the yard when a huge eagle with a crooked beak swooped down and killed them all, whereupon I wept and wept.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), The Suitors, The Twelve Maids, Odysseus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope tells Odysseus, who is disguised as a beggar, about a dream she had in which an eagle kills her flock of white geese. Penelope notes that the eagle's beak is "crooked," and that the deaths caused her remarkable grief.

Penelope's dream clearly represents Odysseus's later murder of the Twelve Maids, with the crooked-beaked eagle symbolizing Odysseus and the twelve white geese symbolizing the Maids. The fact that the geese are white suggests the Maids' innocence, while the eagle's crooked beak implies Odysseus's corruptness in committing their murders. When Penelope tells Odysseus the dream, however, Odysseus incorrectly assumes that the eagle is good, and that it represents himself killing the Suitors. This difference in interpretation shows how male-focused readings can ignore women's roles in stories, just as Odysseus ignores Penelope's grief in his interpretation. But moreover, it suggests that an overly male-focused perspective may obscure the truth and lead to real-world consequences.

Chapter 20 Quotes

The more outrageous versions have it that I slept with all of the Suitors, one after another—over a hundred of them—and then gave birth to the Great God Pan. Who could believe such a monstrous tale? Some songs aren't worth the breath expended on them.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Pan , The Suitors

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Penelope describes the rumors that have been circulating about her sexual infidelity during Odysseus's absence. Penelope notes one story she finds especially ridiculous, which states that, after sleeping with all the Suitors, Penelope gave birth to the god Pan.

While Penelope scoffs at what she sees as the ridiculousness of this rumor, the mythological story is not especially different from the legendary stories of Odysseus's exploits on his journey home, which similarly feature gods, goddesses, and monsters. While Penelope is willing to believe Odysseus's stories, she finds it ridiculous that such stories would be told about herself, suggesting she may be misguided (whether willfully or not) in believing Odysseus's account of his travels. Moreover, as Penelope recounts the rumors of her infidelity she casts into doubt her own narrative, in which she asserts that she was totally

chaste in Odysseus's absence.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ Let us just say: There is another story.
Or several, as befits the goddess Rumour…
Word has it that Penelope the Prissy
Was—when it came to sex— no shrinking sissy!
Some said…that each and every brisk contender
By turns did have the fortune to upend her,
By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan
Was then conceived, or so the fable ran.
The truth, dear auditors, is seldom certain—
But let us take a peek behind the curtain!

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids (speaker), The Suitors, Pan , Penelope

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147-148

Explanation and Analysis

The Twelve Maids speak this quote in one of their chapters that takes the form of a script for a play. This play depicts a vision of Penelope's role in the Maids' deaths which is different from both the *Odyssey* and Penelope's account. In the Maids' sometimes-raunchy rhyme, Penelope, who was unfaithful to Odysseus, throws the Maids under the bus to keep Odysseus from finding out her secret. According to this version of events, based on a rumor in circulation, Penelope had sex with each and every Suitor, and then gave birth to the god Pan.

This quote is significant because it casts Penelope's entire narrative into doubt, causing the reader to wonder which version of events is correct. Prior to this section of the book, Penelope's narrative seemed more reliable than the *Odyssey*. Now, though, the Maids suggest it is possible that neither narrative is accurate. While the myth of Penelope giving birth to Pan seems unrealistic, so does the myth of her legendary fidelity. In fact, just as Odysseus's bar fighting and frequenting of brothels seems more realistic than fighting monsters and sleeping with goddesses, Penelope's infidelity seems much more realistic than her perfect chasteness for decades. Again, this quote casts doubt on Penelope's version of events, emphasizing that Penelope is an unreliable narrator.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ 'Only twelve,' she faltered. 'The impertinent ones. The ones who'd been rude… They were notorious whores.'
'The ones who'd been raped,' I said. 'The youngest. The most beautiful.' My eyes and ears among the Suitors, I did not add. My helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves.

Related Characters: Penelope , Eurycleia (speaker), The Twelve Maids

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159-160

Explanation and Analysis

Eurycleia and Penelope exchange this dialogue after Odysseus and Telemachus murder the Suitors and hang the Maids. When Eurycleia tells Penelope that some Maids were hanged, Penelope asks which ones, prompting this conversation.

Eurycleia's statement that it was "only" twelve shows how extremely little value the Maids' lives held in Greek society due to their status as slave women. Her subsequent comments that they were "impertinent," "rude," and "notorious whores" shows how violence against women is often blamed on the behavior of the women themselves, and reinforced by social norms that require women to be excessively nice, polite, modest, and chaste. Penelope's reply, then, shows an alternative way of looking at the Maids' murders, one that focuses on the fact that they were victims of violence (not only murder, but also rape). She calls them the "youngest" and "most beautiful," demonstrating how this violence punishes even the women who possess traits that men consider desirable. She then thinks of her emotional connection to the girls, emphasizing their value as people and friends (and calling back to her dream of the eagle killing her beloved white geese). While Eurycleia demonstrates how societies might view violence against women callously, Penelope gives a more humanized, albeit painful, perspective.

Chapter 24 Quotes

> No, Sir, we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap. We can understand your reluctance to have such things brought out into the open—rapes and murders are not pleasant subjects—but such overthrows most certainly took place all around the Mediterranean Sea, as excavations at prehistoric sites have demonstrated over and over.

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

The Twelve Maids speak this quote during their chapter called the Anthropology Lecture, in which they attempt to prove that their own deaths symbolize the overthrow of woman-centric religion by a male-dominated one. Here, the Twelve Maids respond to an audience interjection. Presumably, from their response, the audience member accuses them of promoting "feminist claptrap."

The fact that the Maids field this question devaluing their work as "unfounded feminist claptrap" speaks to how feminist lenses for understanding academic fields are often dismissed or degraded. Moreover, the Maids' response attributes this backlash to the fact that the audience member has a "reluctance to have such things brought out into the open" (i.e., rape and murder). This shows the culture of silence and discomfort surrounding violence against women. Moreover, the Maids' understatement that rapes and murders are "not pleasant subjects" shows just how ridiculous this "polite" silence is when it comes to such brutal topics.

> Point being that you don't have to get too worked up about us, dear educated minds. You don't have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. That might be too upsetting. Just discard the sordid part. Consider us pure symbol. We're no more real than money.

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

The Twelve Maids say this at the end of the Anthropology Lecture, during which they attempt to prove that their own deaths symbolize the overthrow of woman-centric religion by a male-dominated one. In this quote, the Twelve Maids state that their reading allows the reader to avoid confronting their real human pain by thinking about them only as symbols.

When the Maids state that their metaphorical reading allows the readers to escape the fact that they are "real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice," their tone is bitingly ironic, suggesting that the male audience of "dear educated minds" cannot stand to face the reality of their pain. In doing so, the Maids also undermine their own reading of events, suggesting how reading events as symbolic might obscure the reality and profundity of human pain. The last two lines are a reference to social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's work, highlighting also how a critical academic lens may dehumanize and transact women's pain (it's an academic currency "no more real than money") for the sake of knowledge and argument.

Chapter 25 Quotes

> Then he told me how much he'd missed me, and how he'd been filled with longing for me... and I told him how very many tears I'd shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I'd been, and how I would never have even so much as thought of betraying his gigantic bed with its wondrous bedpost by sleeping in it with any other man.
> The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.
> But we did.
> Or so we told each other.

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Odysseus has returned home from his adventures after the Trojan War and has just killed the Maids and the Suitors. Odysseus and Penelope are in bed, catching up on the many years since they have seen each other last. Odysseus tells Penelope he missed her even when he was sleeping with

goddesses, while Penelope states that she cried when he was gone and never thought of being unfaithful.

Penelope reveals the unreliableness of her own narrative thus far when she states that they were both good liars. While Penelope has previously stated that Odysseus was a good liar, she has never admitted the same about herself. Moreover, Penelope does lie to Odysseus in this moment: though Penelope professes not to have ever even *imagined* sleeping with another man, she already confessed to thinking about what it would be like to sleep with the Suitors earlier in her narrative. This makes the reader question the reliability of the other things Penelope promises Odysseus in this moment, including details that she describes in her narrative to the reader, like her excessive crying. This moment casts doubts not only on Penelope's honesty with Odysseus, but also on her honesty with the reader.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ Your client's times were not our times. Standards of behaviour were different then. It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor incident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career. Also I do not wish to be guilty of an anachronism. Therefore I must dismiss the case.

Related Characters: The Twelve Maids, Odysseus

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which appears during Odysseus's supposed trial, the judge, who seems to be working in a modern courtroom, delivers his verdict exonerating Odysseus of the guilt of killing the Twelve Maids. In his decision, the judge states that he does not find Odysseus guilty because he does not want to be "anachronistic" and condemn Odysseus's actions in an older, different culture, and also because he does not want to tarnish Odysseus's career legacy.

The judge's concern about not wanting to seem anachronistic since Odysseus's time "were not our times" is a frequently cited reason among people looking back on literature and history for not judging or condemning horrific actions in the past. Ironically, though, the judge's other comment, that he does not want the murders to tarnish Odysseus's career, is a commonly used modern excuse for condoning or not punishing violence against women, especially rape. His use of this reason for not condemning Odysseus then makes his fear of anachronism ring hollow: Atwood implies that Odysseus's times *are* our times, in which women's lives continue to be valued less in the law and in society than men's professional achievements.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: A LOW ART

The Penelopiad opens with Penelope, the first-person narrator, quoting herself saying, "now that I'm dead, I know everything." Penelope then goes on to say that this wish did not come true, at least not totally. Death, Penelope thinks, despite the knowledge it does bring, is not worth the cost. She even says that she would rather not know some of the things she has learned.

In the opening section of her narrative, Penelope immediately draws attention to the fact that she is dead, highlighting the setting as the afterlife and introducing the theme of Ancient Greek religious views, which recurs throughout the text.

Penelope begins to describe the afterlife, stating that everyone arrives to the underworld in a sack "full of words—words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you." Penelope notes that her own sack was full of words about her husband, and that some people say that her husband made a fool of her and got away with everything.

Penelope's description of the "sack full of words" shows the central role that stories, rumors, and myths play in the book, and the importance they have in determining and shaping one's identity—both as it's experienced and as it's perceived by others.

Odysseus's account, Penelope thinks, was always so "plausible," and many people believed his account of things while taking the mythology with a grain of salt. Penelope admits that even she believed him often, thinking that he would not lie to her since she was such a loyal wife.

This section seems to be somewhat ironic, considering how Odysseus's adventures in the Odyssey *are already highly mythologized. Belief in Odysseus's account seems to have been part of Penelope's role as his wife.*

Bitterly, Penelope thinks that all she amounted to was a "stick used to beat other women with," since all the storytellers considered her the model of a faithful wife. Penelope wanted to scream at other women and tell them not to be like her. Penelope admits that she always knew that Odysseus was tricky, but that she pretended not to see that side of him. Instead, she kept her doubts to herself because she "wanted happy endings." Now, though, Penelope realizes that lots of people were mocking her in secret. They told stories about her that Penelope calls "scandalous gossip," but that she says will only make her seem guilty if she denies them.

Penelope feels that the official version of events flattened her character into a means of controlling other women (making her an ideal of blind faithfulness and constancy toward her husband, to a standard to which other women were then held), showing how narrative can be oppressive. As Penelope continues, suggesting she remained silent because she wanted "happy endings," Atwood shows how the normal narrative structure itself can be distortive and suppressive. As Penelope describes the rumors about her, Atwood continues to show this more damaging side of narrative.

Penelope decides that it is her turn to make her own story now, because she owes it to herself. She notes that storytelling is a "low art," and that people would have laughed if she had tried to be a storyteller in the past. However, Penelope states that she no longer cares about public opinion, so she will continue with her story. Penelope states that her lack of a physical body makes speaking difficult, and she has no one to listen to her story. Still, she is determined to tell it.

As Penelope describes storytelling as a "low art," the reader may think of the various other arts—like fiber work, which is so central to this story— that have been described as "low," and how these "low" art forms are often associated with women and femininity.

CHAPTER 2: THE CHORUS LINE: A ROPE-JUMPING RHYME

The chorus of Twelve Maids narrates this chapter in first-person verse. In their poem, the Maids address an unknown second person (who turns out to be Odysseus) who they accuse of **killing them**. They describe their hanging, dwelling on their feet twitching in the air and the injustice of their death. They accuse Odysseus of "scratching his itch" with many women, and assert that what they did was much less deserving of condemnation than what he did.

In this section, Atwood introduces the Twelve Maids, who serve as a Greek chorus (a traditional element of Ancient Greek drama) throughout the book, commenting on and sometimes contradicting Penelope's narrative. As the Maids introduce their accusations against Odysseus, they point out the double standard of promiscuity for men and women—a double standard that persists even today, thousand of years later.

The Maids note that Odysseus was armed with words and a spear. The Maids say that they cleaned the blood of their dead lovers (the Suitors) before being hanged. They reiterate that **their deaths** were not fair and accuse Odysseus of taking pleasure in commanding their deaths.

When the Maids note that Odysseus was armed with words and a spear, they draw a parallel between the two, suggesting that words might be a kind of weapon. Odysseus's control of language and narrative gives him power.

CHAPTER 3: MY CHILDHOOD

The third chapter returns to Penelope's first-person narrative as Penelope wonders whether to begin her story at the beginning or elsewhere. She states that to truly start at the beginning, because of the timeline of cause and effect, she would have to start at the beginning of the world, so instead she will start with her own birth.

When Penelope states that, in order to truly start at the beginning with her story, she would have to start at the beginning of the world, she is perhaps implying that, since her story is part of a larger history of her gender, she cannot divorce herself from it.

Penelope tells the reader that her father was King Icarius of Sparta and her mother was a Naiad (a river spirit). Penelope goes on to recount the story that, when she was a baby, her father ordered her to be thrown into the **ocean**. Penelope believes this was because of a prophecy that Penelope would **weave** her father's shroud, and so her father thought that if she could not weave it, he would never die. Penelope notes that she did not, in fact, weave his shroud, but rather her father-in-law's.

Penelope's early experience with her father shows how, from the time she was a child, her life has been colored by male violence. That her father acted based on a prophecy reinforces how stories and words are supremely influential, so much so that they could inspire infanticide. Icarius's actions show how quick people are to act upon the stories that they hear.

Penelope deviates from her personal history to remark that teaching crafts has become less popular than it was when she was alive. She endorses **crafting** as a way to pretend to be busy and so not to have heard inappropriate things that people are saying.

Crafting and fiber works are often depicted as feminine arts and are one of the main symbols throughout the novel. They often are used to represent storytelling.

Penelope returns to the story of Icarius throwing her into the **sea**, saying that she may only have invented the shroud prophecy to make herself feel better. It's hard, Penelope says, to know when she's made a story up and when she's heard it from someone else.

As she discusses her father's attempt to kill her, Penelope suggests the possibility of using stories as a way to mitigate or disguise unpleasant realities.

Regardless, Penelope says, she was thrown into the **sea**, although she does not remember it. Someone else told her the story when she has a child, and this strained her relationship with her father. Penelope attributes her reserve and wariness to this near-drowning incident.

Although Penelope does not remember her father's betrayal, the stories of his violence against her still affect her deeply, showing how powerfully stories can change viewpoints and affect relationships.

Since Penelope is the daughter of a Naiad, however, drowning her was not a smart plan. Her connections to the **water** and its creatures caused a flock of ducks to rescue her. As a result, Icarius took her back and gave her the nickname "duck." She imagines that he felt guilty, since after that, he was overly affectionate towards her.

Penelope's mother is a Naiad (water nymph), and Penelope believes that her maternal connections saved her. Penelope's mother's connection to water is one of many ways that Atwood links the ocean with women and motherhood.

Penelope, however, could not reciprocate Icarius's affections. She remembers walking with her father along a cliff or riverbank and wondering if he might, at any moment, decide to try to kill her. Afterward, she would go to her room and cry. Penelope remarks that frequent crying is a common trait among people born to Naiads.

Although Icarius is now kind to Penelope, the knowledge of his violence against her makes Penelope unable to trust him. This serves as a representative example of the effect of historical violence against women, which creates lingering fear and mistrust.

Penelope goes on to describe her mother, who was beautiful but coldhearted. Penelope's mother would slide away from Penelope if she tried to hug her. Penelope hopes that her mother sent the ducks to save her, but thinks that it probably wasn't her, since her mother did not much like children. Penelope thinks that if her father had not thrown her into the **sea**, her mother might have done so herself because of her inattentiveness and moodiness. Penelope attributes her self-sufficiency to her childhood with her unsupportive parents.

While Penelope does think that her blood relation to her mother is part of what saved her, Penelope does not have a close emotional relationship with her whatsoever. In general, Penelope's youth is devoid of strong female relationships, whether with a mother figure or peers her own age. It's suggested that the lack of female community in Greece (at least among the upper class) is part of what makes women like Penelope so vulnerable.

CHAPTER 4: THE CHORUS LINE: KIDDIE MOURN, A LAMENT BY THE MAIDS

This chapter returns to the Maids' narrative, and like in Penelope's prior chapter, they discuss childhood. Their own parents, they note, were poor peasants or slaves or people who sold them. Unlike Penelope's parents, their parents were not Naiads.

Although Penelope's childhood may have been difficult, the Maids show how their poverty and low social class from birth made their childhoods infinitely more dangerous.

During their childhood, the Maids worked in the palace all day long, with no rest or comfort. They were verbally abused and told they were parentless, lazy, and dirty. The Maids say they were "dirty girls" and note how they could not refuse when their owners or noblemen wanted to sleep with them, even if they cried or were in pain. The Maids emphasize that this happened to them when they were still children.

Because of their status as female slaves, the Maids not only have to work all day, but they also suffer the constant threat of sexual abuse and rape. Atwood here shows how class status compounds with gender to leave slave women extremely susceptible to gendered violence.

The Maids discuss doing the work to put on wedding feasts but never having their own, and not having gifts exchanged for them because their "bodies had little value." Still, they say, they also wanted to be happy. So as they grew older they learned to attract and sleep with men, to drink leftover wine, to spit in their masters' food, and to laugh together.

While marriage is, to Penelope, a kind of monetary exchange, the Maids see marriage as a privilege. To them, marriage is a way of establishing that their bodies have value. Atwood shows how systems of oppression like marriage can look different depending on class status.

CHAPTER 5: ASPHODEL

Chapter 5 returns to Penelope's narrative as she describes what life is like in the underworld. She notes that it is very dark, but that this can come in handy when she pretends not to recognize people she doesn't want to talk to. There are also, Penelope says, the fields of asphodel to walk around in. Penelope thinks the fields of white flowers are "pretty enough" but boring and monotonous. She notes that the only thing to eat in the underworld is this same asphodel.

As Penelope describes the underworld, it is clear to readers familiar with Christianity that the Ancient Greek afterlife is extremely different from the Christian one. Penelope's afterlife in the fields of asphodel, the most honorable part of the underworld, lacks the pleasures of Christian Heaven.

Penelope finds the dark grottos of the lower levels, where the minor criminals go, to be much more interesting (she also admits to being attracted to the bad boys who frequent them). However, Penelope does not often go to the really deep levels, where the gods punish the "truly villainous" with mental torture. Penelope does like to go down there sometimes to remember what it was like to be hungry and tired when she was alive.

As Penelope discusses the punishments that villains endure in the lower levels of the Ancient Greek underworld, her descriptions show how different this underworld is than Christian Hell. Unlike Hell, where punishment is physical, punishment in the Greek afterlife is purely psychological torture.

Sometimes, Penelope says, the people of the underworld can see into the world of the living, or can even go there when summoned. In the old days, this happened with an animal sacrifice, when a hero was looking for advice or prophecy from one particular spirit. Penelope admits that they make the prophecies hard to understand on purpose, so that they get called back to feast on the animal's blood, which makes them feel alive again. Other times the spirits would appear in dreams, but Penelope finds this less satisfactory. Also, Penelope says, some spirits never make it to the underworld because they are never given a proper burial.

As Penelope continues to describe Ancient Greek religious beliefs, it becomes even more obvious how vastly different Ancient Greek religion is from modern-day Christianity. Unlike mainstream Christianity, Ancient Greek religion featured conversation with the dead and animal sacrifice. Meanwhile, human spirits frequently visit the earth, showing how much more flexible the concept of death is in Ancient Greece.

Now, though, customs have changed. Living people do not visit the underworld, and new spirits go to a "much more spectacular establishment down the road" with "fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth… demons with pitchforks," etc. Still, though, the spirits in the underworld are sometimes called up to the world of the living by magicians and mediums. Penelope finds this kind of summoning demeaning, but admits that it does help her stay up to date on what is going on among the living. She was interested to learn about the light bulb, and notes that some of the spirits have infiltrated the television signals.

Penelope explicitly resolves the question of the role of Christianity in the modern world when she describes what is clearly Christian Hell, with "demons with pitchforks" (devils) and characteristic fire. Through this description of Christian Hell, Atwood shows how, as she rather playfully imagines it in this novel, Christianity has not replaced earlier religions or revealed them to be false, but has simply been added alongside them.


Penelope is not often summoned by magicians, but her cousin Helen is in high demand. Penelope finds this unfair, because Helen's reputation is so much worse than hers. Of course, Penelope thinks, Helen is very beautiful and is also supposedly the daughter of Zeus, who raped Helen's mother. Penelope remarks that the gods could not keep their hands off of mortal women and "were always raping someone or other."

This section introduces Penelope's rivalry with Helen. Meanwhile, Penelope's casual remarks about how some god is "always raping someone or other" shows how rape is so normalized and common in Penelope's culture that she has become offhand and casual about it. It also shows how the Greek gods were not paragons of virtue, but were often even less moral than the humans they ruled.

Helen likes being summoned by the magicians because she can have many men admire her again during the sessions. She sometimes appears in Trojan clothes that Penelope finds over-the-top, and spins around. Or she appears like she did when she tried to win over her husband, Menelaus, after he won the Trojan War.

Penelope's frustration with Helen quickly becomes clear as Penelope criticizes the clothes that Helen chooses to wear. Penelope's superficial criticisms reveal her petty side as Penelope actively competes with her cousin. These two famous women of myth clearly have no special bond, but only a sense of competition.

Penelope notes that people used to tell her that she was beautiful because she was a princess, but in fact she was fairly plain. She was, however, known for being smart, discrete, and devoted to her husband. Penelope thinks that her intelligence and faithfulness are a lot less appealing to a summoning magician than Helen's sex appeal.

Helen's beauty and easy ability to get male attention clearly makes Penelope feel insecure, as evidenced by Penelope's discussion of her own plainness. Penelope's good qualities (brains, devotion) are less valued than Helen's looks. Notably, Penelope is still concerned with gaining male attention, rather than describing hers and Helen's qualities as inherently good or valuable.

Penelope notes that Helen was never punished for all the harm and suffering she caused to people (presumably Penelope means during the Trojan War). Penelope insists, though, that she does not mind, and tell the reader that next she is going to discuss her marriage.

Penelope seems to feel that Helen has avoided atoning for the Trojan War, showing how the Ancient Greek afterlife has no real mechanisms for assigning guilt and atoning for evil deeds.

CHAPTER 6: MY MARRIAGE

Penelope opens Chapter 6, which continues in her first-person narrative, by saying that her marriage was arranged. Most marriages, she notes, were arranged at the time. According to the old rules of her day, only "important people" got married, because the point of marriage was to transfer inheritances. Other people had love affairs, sometimes even with gods, but did not actually get married. When goddesses had affairs with mortals, the man often ended up dead.

In this section, Penelope begins outlining the cultural customs surrounding marriage. She emphasizes the fact that marriage was largely a means of exchanging money and status. In the Ancient Greek system, women were used as vessels to transfer inheritances and titles, trafficked as a kind of human currency.

Penelope thinks that the gods often enjoyed making messes with their love affairs. Penelope finds this nasty and childish, and she no longer worries about the repercussions of making such a statement because the gods seem to have "gone to sleep."

Penelope's commentary on the gods shows how their dispositions were very different from the Christian God. She also accounts for their absence in the modern world.

Penelope returns to the subject of marriages, stating that marriages were for having children, and having children was for passing down inheritances and forging alliances. Often men would kill their enemies' babies after killing them or send them far away so that they would not be killed by them later. Daughters, Penelope notes, were only for breeding grandsons. It was important to have lots of men in the family to go to war. Hence, Penelope needed to marry.

Again, Penelope emphasizes how marriages were not love matches, but rather were strategic means of moving money and making allies. Penelope also reveals that the women were used in marriage primarily for reproductive purposes, as their bodies were not considered their own or valuable until harnessed for the purposes of men.

At Icarius's court, they maintained the custom of having physical contests to determine who would marry Penelope. The winner of the contest was then expected to live at Icarius's palace. Through the marriage, the man would become wealthy.

Penelope notes a key difference between her marriage and later ones: while in later marriage systems the wife moved to the husband, in Ancient Greece (at least at this point) husbands were the ones who moved.

Penelope calls the treasures men received in the form of the bride's dowry "trash" because most of them ended up in the bottom of the **sea**. Those that didn't were put instead in palaces with no royals living in them, and that normal people would go to look at (i.e. museums), and then would buy souvenirs in the "sort of market inside the palace" (i.e. the gift shop). Penelope emphasizes that this is why she calls the treasures "trash."

Penelope's description of modern museums and gift shops is a humorous deviation from her discussion of marriage. It also serves to remind the reader that what is "normal" is culturally relative: what seems bizarre to Penelope is totally normal to us, and vice versa.

The ancient customs required the treasure to stay in the bride's family's palace. Penelope thinks that this custom is why, after Icarius tried to throw her into the **sea**, he became so attached to her. Penelope then questions again why he tried to kill her, noting that every time she sees him in the afterlife, he hurries away from her. Penelope thinks maybe she was a failed sacrifice to Poseidon, the sea god.

Penelope again shows how women were used and exploited as monetary vessels when she describes how she believes that, after trying to kill her, her father clung to her in order to try to keep her dowry at his palace. Penelope's relationship to her father is financial, not loving.

Penelope then describes herself as a girl of fifteen, looking out her window at the young men getting ready to compete to marry her. She peeks out from behind her veil through the window quickly, so the men cannot see her unveiled face. She has been made up as beautifully as possible, but she still feels shy. Below, the men laugh and joke. Penelope thinks that it's not her that the men want, but the treasure they would gain in marrying her. No man, she thinks, would die for love of her.

As Penelope describes her preparations for marriage, she notes her preoccupation with not letting the men see her face, suggesting that Ancient Greece had intense norms surrounding female modesty. Meanwhile, Penelope's understanding of the monetary underpinnings of the Greek marriage system leaves her self-esteem low.

This prediction turns out to be true. Helen, on the other hand, loved to make man grovel and feel miserable out of love and desire for her and then break their hearts. Though Helen was prettier, Penelope was kinder than Helen, and cleverer. Penelope muses that men prefer their wives to be clever as long as they are some distance away from them, and that up close they prefer kindness.

Again, and as she will do throughout the text, Penelope compares her good traits to Helen's looks and comes out feeling bad about herself. Penelope continues to hate Helen personally for this, rather than blaming the social system that makes Penelope feel worthless because she is not the prettiest, and that ranks female qualities entirely based on how attractive they are to men.

As Penelope continues to study the men from the window, she tries to figure out who each is and which one she prefers. Several maids accompany Penelope, since until she is married she is at risk of eloping or being kidnapped. The maids gossip, laugh, and joke, gaining information about the bachelors for Penelope.

While the maids in this section are not the Maids that later become confidantes to Penelope, Atwood shows Penelope's women servants to be a constant but also enforced source of female community for her.

Penelope asks about one barrel-chested man below, and the maid tells her he is Odysseus, the son of a lesser King of provincial Ithaca. Odysseus is not considered a serious contender for Penelope, but he is known to be very smart, even potentially deceptive. Odysseus's grandfather, Autolycus, was known to be the same way.

Although marriage is a monetary system, Atwood suggests that Penelope's attraction to Odysseus was genuine. Meanwhile, Odysseus's reputation for lying and deceit is important, as it casts doubt on his later storytelling.

Penelope wonders aloud how fast Odysseus can run, since the contest to marry her is a running race. One maid remarks that he probably cannot run very fast since his legs are so short. Another says he is not fast enough to catch Penelope, and makes a joke about Hermes and Odysseus being a thief. Several other maids join in with sexual jokes and innuendos. They all laugh. Meanwhile, Penelope is extremely embarrassed.

The maids in Penelope's apartment play by their own rules. Rather than acting demure and shyly respecting the male suitors, the maids objectify the suitors, turning the tables of a system that effectively transacts women like money. Their jokes show how speech can be an act of subversion.

Next, Helen approaches Penelope, walking with an exaggerated sway to try to get attention. She is extremely beautiful and perfectly dressed, to Penelope's annoyance. She looks at Penelope in a way that she thinks is almost flirtatious, and Penelope notes wryly that Helen would flirt with anything, even "her bedpost."

As Helen approaches Penelope, Penelope suggests ways in which Helen has changed her behavior in order to be more appealing to men. This shows how the gender system has profoundly affected Helen's whole person.

Helen states that she thinks Odysseus would make a good husband for Penelope, and that if she went to Ithaca with him her life would certainly be quiet. Helen then says meanly that Odysseus and Penelope are "two of a kind" since they both have short legs. The maids laugh and Penelope is upset, having never before thought of her legs as especially short. Helen, though, has a special talent for evaluating people's looks—which ended up getting her in trouble when she left Menelaus for the much better looking Paris.

Penelope has already clearly expressed her dislike for Helen, and it becomes obvious that her distaste is not unmerited. This section shows how Helen actively tries to tear down Penelope's confidence through backhanded comments like this one about the size of her legs. Helen competes with Penelope, and in turn Penelope despises Helen.

The maids look to Penelope to see what she will say in response, but Penelope is speechless. Helen tells Penelope not to worry, and that both she and Odysseus are supposedly clever, so Penelope will be able to understand the things that he says. Helen says she could not, so it is lucky that Odysseus did not win her, reminding Penelope that Odysseus had tried to win Helen's hand in marriage first and had failed, and that Penelope is "only second prize." Helen walks away, and the maids talk admiringly of her beauty and her clothing. Penelope starts to cry and goes to her bed to lie down.

Penelope's hurt is very apparent following Helen's comments, showing how women as well as men perpetuate the damaging societal norms of objectifying women. Helen, in another compliment that is clearly backhanded, says that Penelope can at least keep up with Odysseus's intellect. Helen's tone makes it clear that intelligence is not something valued in women in Ancient Greek society.

Because she was in bed, Penelope did not watch the race itself, which Odysseus won through cheating. Uncle Tyndareous helped Odysseus win by drugging the other contestants' wine and giving Odysseus a performance-enhancing drug. Penelope remarks that in modern times this kind of manipulation has become "a tradition." Penelope wonders why her uncle, who was not friends with Odysseus, helped him.

Penelope's commentary on the fact that drugging is now common in sporting events serves as another splash of humor in this chapter. It also draws parallels between ancient and modern times, suggesting that, in some ways, they are not actually as different as they seem.

Penelope then recounts a rumor she heard that she "was the payment" for something Odysseus had done for Tyndareous during the competition for Helen's marriage. Odysseus made the contestants swear to defend whichever man won Helen in case someone tried to take her away, which allowed her marriage to Menelaus to go smoothly. After his help, he made a deal with Tyndareous that he would get Penelope.

When Penelope says that she was "the payment" in a deal between Odysseus and Tyndareous, she emphasizes again that women are trafficked as money. Moreover, she shows how women's lives can be totally changed and uprooted as a result of men's minor dealings and games.

Penelope, though, has a different idea of what happened. She thinks that Tyndareous, who had to share the throne of Sparta with Icarius, wanted the throne for himself. Odysseus, rather than moving to Sparta, would take Penelope away to Ithaca, keeping Penelope's sons from the Spartan throne.

Again Penelope finds herself in the middle of a series of power struggles between men, power struggles in which she stands to gain little other than a husband and a new life far away from Sparta.

Regardless of why, Odysseus won. Penelope remembers Helen smiling during the marriage, happy that Penelope was moving to Ithaca, which she considered a "dreary backwater." Penelope felt dizzy during the whole ceremony, only looking at Odysseus's legs and thinking how short they were. It made her want to laugh, and Penelope reminds the reader that, at the time of her marriage, she was only fifteen.

Helen's happiness that Penelope is moving to a "dreary backwater" again highlights the competition between the two women. Meanwhile, Penelope's reminder that she was only fifteen at the time of her marriage shows how the gender and marriage system affects children as well as adult women.

CHAPTER 7: THE SCAR

Penelope's first-person narration continues as she describes being handed over to Odysseus "like a package of meat." Penelope reminds the audience that, during her time, meat was actually very highly valued, as they mostly ate meat and bread, and drank wine. Even the gods, Penelope mentioned, loved meat, though the mortals tricked them by giving them only bones and fat. Penelope says that the gods are not a smart as they let on. Since she is dead, Penelope can say that, but she would not have said it when she was alive, since gods would disguise themselves as mortals and could always be listening.

When Penelope describes herself as a "package of meat" being handed over to Odysseus, she emphasizes how marriage in Ancient Greece was a system that objectified women and turned them into prizes rather than people. As Penelope then describes the culture surrounding meat sacrifices to the gods, she expands the reader's understanding of Ancient Greek religion and the behavior of the gods.

At Penelope's wedding feast the guests gorged themselves on lots of free food, eating with their hands as was customary. None of the suitors who lost were upset, since, as Penelope puts it, it was like "they'd failed to win an auction for a horse." Icarius, suspecting that Odysseus had tricked him, got drunk and angry. Odysseus, though, did not get drunk. Later, Odysseus would tell Penelope that only fools brag about drinking, and that drinking to excess leaves a man vulnerable to attack.

When Penelope describes the suitors acting like "they'd failed to win an auction for a horse," she underlines the transactional nature of Ancient Greek marriage and how it degrades women to the point where they are seen as less than human. When Penelope describes Odysseus's aversion to drinking, she expands the reader's understanding of his highly calculating character.

Penelope, meanwhile, was too nervous to eat anything, worried that Odysseus would be disappointed in her when he finally saw her face unveiled and her body unclothed. Anyway, all the men were staring at Helen, not her. Penelope thinks this was actually lucky, because it distracted from her nervousness. Penelope was afraid because of all the stories she'd heard of how painful sex is, knowing that she would be expected to sleep with Odysseus on their wedding night.

Penelope's anxiety regarding her body and sex suggests that the Ancient Greek culture surrounding female body image and sex was somewhat toxic, just as it is today. Penelope continues to compete with Helen, feeling insecure about her own lack of male attention. Meanwhile, stories about sex worry Penelope, as they only depict female pain, not pleasure.

Penelope's mother attended her wedding, sitting on the throne next to Icarius with a pool of **water** from her recent swim collecting at her feet. Penelope's mother made a speech to Penelope as they were changing her dress, telling her that "water does not resist" and encouraging her to be patient, persistent, and flexible like water.

Penelope's mother's speech to Penelope, which encourages her to adopt a mode of getting what she wants that is more traditionally feminine, becomes important later in the book, when Penelope thinks of it as she is devising her scheme to trick the Suitors.

After the ceremony, the party processed to the bridal chamber rowdily. The point of the event was to make the consummation of the marriage seem like a conquest, and so there was a gatekeeper outside to keep the bride from leaving in horror and to stop her friends from rescuing her if she screamed.

The fact that the marriage consummation is orchestrated like a mock rape disturbingly shows how Ancient Greek society normalized and even encouraged certain forms of rape and general violence against women.

When the door was closed on Odysseus and Penelope, Odysseus sat Penelope down on the bed and told her that, unlike what she had heard, he was not going to hurt her, but that she should scream and pretend that he was to satisfy the audience listening at the door. Penelope notes that one of Odysseus's persuasive skills was that he would convince people that they had a common obstacle and needed to work together to solve it. Penelope did what Odysseus asked, mesmerized by his deep voice.

From Penelope's first individual encounter with Odysseus, it is clear that Odysseus, a famed persuader and storyteller, has an excellent sense of his audience —both the people listening outside and Penelope. Odysseus is gentle in this interaction, far from the violent man that he will later become.

Penelope later learned that Odysseus was not the type to fall asleep immediately after sex, which she says was a common experience among her maids. Instead, Odysseus liked to talk, and enjoyed when Penelope would listen to his stories. When Penelope noticed the scar on Odysseus's thigh, he told her the story of how he got it.

Odysseus's natural inclination towards storytelling is apparent as Penelope learns his habit of storytelling after sex. The fact that Odysseus does not just sleep immediately after sex makes him seem sensitive and interested in Penelope as a partner.

Penelope then tells the reader about Odysseus's family history. Odysseus's grandfather, Autolycus, was supposedly descended from the god Hermes, giving him his craftiness. Autolycus's daughter Anticleia was Odysseus's mother, and she married King Laertes. However, there was also a rumor that Odysseus's real father was Sisyphus, a tricky man who fooled Hades twice. If that is true, Odysseus had smart, scheming ancestors on both sides of his family.

Penelope's descriptions of Odysseus's lineage and his legacy of cleverness reflect Penelope's greater interest in generational links and historical connections—like how, in the beginning of her own story, she thinks her story starts at the beginning of time. Penelope sees all stories as highly interconnected.


Returning to the story of Odysseus's scar, Odysseus told Penelope that Autolycus invited him to collect gifts he inherited. Odysseus went to visit Autolycus and went hunting with his sons. A boar gored Odysseus during the visit, leaving him with the scar on his thigh. Penelope suspected that Odysseus was not telling her everything, and that perhaps there was foul play involved and Autolycus was trying to kill him. Penelope liked to think this because it made her feel like she and Odysseus, both almost killed by a relative, had something in common.

As Odysseus tells the story of his scar, Penelope gets the sense that Odysseus is leaving out some key information that casts his grandfather in a negative light. This highlights the fact that storytellers make narrative choices that intentionally or unintentionally obscure, hide, or omit the truth. Penelope's attention to this possibility shows her own cleverness and understanding of narrative.

In turn, Penelope told Odysseus about being thrown into the sea and then saved by ducks. Odysseus sympathized with her, and then she cried. By the next morning, Odysseus and Penelope were friends, and Penelope began to develop loving feelings towards him. Odysseus acted like he reciprocated them.

Odysseus and Penelope connect over narrative and stories initially, showing the reader how their bond is based in this mutual interest. Yet Penelope also casts doubts on Odysseus's honesty about his feelings towards her.

After a few days, Odysseus announced that he would be taking Penelope and her treasures back to Ithaca. This annoyed Icarius, but Tyndareous supported the move. Penelope states that the reader has probably heard that Icarius ran after her chariot as they left and begged her to stay with him. Then, the story goes that Odysseus asked Penelope if she would rather go to Ithaca or stay in Sparta. Penelope then pulled down her veil because she was too modest to state her desire to stay with Odysseus. Penelope says there is some truth to the story, but that in fact she had pulled down her veil to hide her laughter at the fact that her father, who had once tried to throw her into the **sea**, was now running after her. Penelope was happy to leave the Spartan Court and start a new life.

In the official version of Penelope's departure from Sparta, Penelope drops her veil out of modesty. This male-centric narrative assumes that Penelope's actions fit into a stereotypical mold of what is expected of women, unable to imagine that Penelope may have a more complex inner life. Penelope's alternative version of events, which she offers here, shows how the classic, male-centric version of the story flattens Penelope's character and minimizes her father's past sins, while her own perspective reveals her somewhat defiant reaction.


CHAPTER 8: THE CHORUS LINE: IF I WAS A PRINCESS, A POPULAR TUNE

This chapter takes the form of song lyrics and stage directions, to be performed by the chorus of Maids with instruments. The first maid describes how happy her life would be as a princess loved by a young hero. The chorus then encourages the maid to sail across the **ocean**, warning that it is dangerous but that hope will keep her afloat.

While Penelope takes her marriage to Odysseus for granted, the Maids' commentary shows how, to a lower class woman, marriage to a well-respected man would be a dream and a ticket to a much better life.

A second Maid describes her life as a servant running errands for her master and mistress, putting on a happy face with tears in her eyes and making up beds for other people to sleep in. A third Maid then begs the gods to change her life so she can be a hero's wife, but knows that hard work is her "destiny." The chorus repeats its refrain, encouraging the maids to sail away, warning of the **sea**'s danger, and saying hope will keep them afloat. The Maids then curtsy and one maid, Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, passes her hat around and thanks the audience.

When the Maids describe their lives spent running errands and doing chores, it puts Penelope's own life into perspective, highlighting how lucky she is to not have the same "destiny" as the Maids. This emphasis on the idea of destiny also brings in the important concept of fate, which was central to Ancient Greek religion, and was used as a justification for the poor treatment of slaves.


CHAPTER 9: THE TRUSTED CACKLE-HEN

This chapter returns to Penelope's narrative as she describes her trip to Ithaca. Penelope spent most of the trip lying down or throwing up. She thinks she may have been averse to **the sea** because of her bad experience as a child. Odysseus rarely came down to see how Penelope was feeling, spending most of his time on deck. Penelope had developed a very positive opinion of Odysseus since their wedding and trusted his navigation capabilities.

Atwood expands Penelope's complex relationship with water as she describes Penelope's discomfort during her travels to Ithaca. Although Odysseus and Penelope's relationship started out on such a high note, Atwood begins to show that Odysseus is not always as attentive as he first seemed.

When they finally arrived at Ithaca, a crowd of people was at the harbor to cheer for them and get a glimpse of Penelope. That night they feasted with the local aristocrats, Penelope wearing her finest clothes and accompanied by her maid, Actoris, who was a wedding present from her father. Actoris was not happy to be in Ithaca, since she did not want to leave her friends in Sparta. Because she was older (her father did not want to give Penelope any potential rival for Odysseus's attention), Actoris died soon after arriving on the island, leaving Penelope totally alone.

In describing her relationship with Actoris, Penelope focuses on herself and seems generally unconcerned for her slave. The reader, meanwhile, may find the way that Actoris is treated disturbing. Actoris's slave status means she has no choice in her move to Ithaca, which leaves her unhappy until she dies far from her friends. Atwood also highlights the role of female competition when she describes how Actoris was chosen for her older age (and therefore presumed unattractiveness).

Penelope cried often but tried not to let on to Odysseus how unhappy she was. Odysseus continued to be attentive to her needs, and she often caught him looking at her like she was "a puzzle." Odysseus once told her a rumor that everyone had a way into their heart, and that when he was able to find them out, supposedly he would be able to master the Fates and control his destiny. While Odysseus found the idea appealing, he thought it was not actually possible, since not even the gods are as powerful as the Fates.

Odysseus's interest in mastering the Fates through an ability to read people reflects a larger theme in Greek poetry and drama, in which characters often try to escape their fates and then suffer disastrous consequences because of their actions (or even find that their fates have been fulfilled by their actions).


Penelope asked Odysseus if he had found the hidden way into her heart, and Odysseus smiled and told her that she would have to be the one to tell him. Penelope then asked if he also had a door to his heart, and if she had found the key. Odysseus, though, did not answer, distracted by a strange ship that entered the harbor.

Penelope begins to receive hints that, although Odysseus clearly wants her to be in love with him, he may be deceiving her regarding his love for her. This is one such instance, as Odysseus fails to respond to Penelope's inquiry about the key to his heart.

Penelope then goes on to further describe Ithaca, calling it "no paradise" and saying it had very bad weather, and was much shabbier than Sparta. However, the food was good and plenty, and over time Penelope began to adjust. She liked having Odysseus for a husband, as he was so well respected and his advice so often sought out.

Penelope's difficulty adjusting to life in Ithaca shows how the new and increasing trend towards women moving in with their husbands may not be good for women, suggesting that progress for women is not inevitable and society can easily regress.

Odysseus's mother and father still lived in the castle with them, though Penelope suggests that Anticleia would die later, while waiting for Odysseus to come home, and Laertes would leave the palace to become a farmer. Penelope describes her mother-in-law as a sour woman who did not approve of Penelope because of her youth.

Rather than being a friend and ally to her daughter-in-law, Anticleia criticizes Penelope and does not approve of her youth. This shows again how, throughout the novel, women tear each other down rather than support each other.

Odysseus's former nurse, Eurycleia, gave Penelope even more trouble. She had been in the household for a long time and was so valued that Laertes "hadn't even slept with her." Other servants told Penelope that Laertes' restraint was not out of respect for Eurycleia, but rather out of fear of Anticleia's wrath. Eurycleia showed Penelope around and explained how things were done in Ithaca, and though Penelope thanked her, Eurycleia's advice also embarrassed her. Eurycleia told her exactly how to conduct herself, which was lucky because Anticleia, who did not like her at all, was happy to let Penelope make a fool of herself.

Eurycleia's pride in the fact that Laertes did not sleep with her is disturbing, because it suggests that sex, rather than being a mutually pleasurable, respectful experience, was a way for men to show who they did and did not value. The idea that sex devalues women is a dangerous double standard. Moreover, Eurycleia's comment shows how sex was often not a choice for slave women, who were obligated to sleep with their masters if they showed interest.


Penelope avoided Anticleia and stayed with Eurycleia, who, although condescending, was friendly. She told Penelope all about the local nobility and professed to be an expert on Odysseus's tastes, having nursed him since childhood. Because of this, Eurycleia was possessive of him, and only she was allowed to attend to him. Penelope would try to do some nice wifely task for Odysseus only to be told by Eurycleia that she had done it wrong.

Eurycleia's instructions to Penelope, although intended to be helpful, are an example of how many women in Ancient Greece (at least as described by Atwood) criticized and restricted other women's behaviors, creating a narrow definition of correct femininity that was based around caring for men. This puts enormous pressure on Penelope.

Still, Eurycleia was somewhat kind to her, and encouraging as Penelope was trying to get pregnant. She was the only person Penelope could talk to besides Odysseus, and gradually Penelope got used to her. When Telemachus was born, Eurycleia was a huge help, praying for her during childbirth and delivering the baby. Eurycleia was a self-proclaimed expert on babies, and would talk to them in baby speech. She took good care of Telemachus.

Eurycleia's obsession with performing a perfectly feminine role, which Penelope describes when she discusses Eurycleia's pedantic care for Odysseus, does not stop at caring for a husband. It also includes tending to babies and children, another stereotypically feminine role that Eurycleia embraces.

Odysseus was happy with Penelope when she gave birth to Telemachus, and he told her proudly that Helen had not yet given birth to a son. This made Penelope happy, but also made her wonder why Odysseus was thinking about Helen.

Odysseus's compliment focuses on Penelope's reproductive ability relative to Helen's, reducing her (as does society in general) to her body's capacity to have male children.

CHAPTER 10: THE CHORUS LINE: THE BIRTH OF TELEMACHUS, AN IDYLL

This chapter takes the form of a first person poem narrated by the chorus of Maids. They describe Telemachus's birth, saying how he "sailed" through his mother's blood for nine months in his "boat of himself." This journey is characterized as a dangerous trip from the cave where the Fates live—where they **spin** the threads that determine men's lives and then cut them when it's time for them to die.

The Maids' descriptions of the time before Telemachus's birth link the female body and blood with the sea, further complicating water as a symbol in the book and suggesting that the female reproductive body, like the sea, is powerful and potentially dangerous.

The Maids state that they, who would eventually be killed by Telemachus and Odysseus, made the same journey from the Fates' cave across the **oceans** of their peasant mothers' blood until they came to shore after nine months. When Telemachus arrived on this shore, he cried and was helpless. However, the Maids say, they were even more helpless than he was, because his royal birth was celebrated while their own births were not.

The Maids bring up the Fates, female figures who spin thread to determine the length of people's lives. The Maids' reference to the Fates, like their descriptions of the female body, emphasizes the power of women. Telemachus, meanwhile, is characterized as weak and helpless, inverting normative gender stereotypes.

The Maids describe themselves as "animal young," to be sold or killed at will, and highlight the contrast between Telemachus's lineage and their own. Still, the Maids emphasize, their lives were deeply intertwined with Telemachus's. They played together as children and they grew up together, though Telemachus was much better provided for. Telemachus saw the maids as his property even then, to serve him, or to keep him company, or to have sex with him.

The Maids draw attention to the fact that their parents' slave status made them less valued and dehumanized them, so that people viewed them as "animal young" when they were born. While the Maids and Telemachus grew up together, Telemachus quickly internalized the class system of Ancient Greece and viewed the Maids as objects rather than people.

The Maids state that, as they played together as children, they did not know that Telemachus would one day **kill them**. They wonder if they would have drowned him back then had they known. Since they were twelve and he was only one, it would have been easy. They ask themselves if they would have been capable of pushing his head **underwater** and blaming it on the waves. Then they command the audience to ask the Fates, since only they know how history could have been altered, and only they know the Maids' hearts.

As the Maids entertain the possibility that they could have killed Telemachus as children, thus saving themselves from their later murders, they run up against the Ancient Greek concept of fate, which essentially means that exercising free will does not lead to different outcomes. Still, the Maids do entertain the idea that they may have changed their destinies.

CHAPTER 11: HELEN RUINS MY LIFE

Penelope, again resuming her first-person narrative, describes how she became used to life in Ithaca, despite all the challenges and her lack of authority. Odysseus, meanwhile, was in complete charge of the kingdom, with only minor interference from Laertes.

Penelope's lack of authority contrasts with Odysseus's fully acknowledged rule of the kingdom, drawing attention to how their genders affect the amount of power society allows them.

Penelope found family dinners especially stressful because of the tense family dynamic. Occasionally Penelope would try to speak to Anticleia and Anticleia would respond without looking at her. Eventually Penelope stopped trying, and spent her time instead caring for Telemachus. Eurycleia, though, would only rarely let Penelope be in charge of him, instead taking Telemachus out of Penelope's arms, telling her she was too young to care for him, and commanding her to go have fun.

As she does at several points throughout the novel, Atwood draws attention to female relationships that could have been sources of comfort and community for Penelope, but instead were tense and stressful. Here Atwood displays Anticleia's coldness and Eurycleia's controlling, critical nature and inability to let Penelope make choices.

Penelope, however, didn't have much to do to have fun. Sometimes she would go for a walk, but she was not allowed to go by herself for the sake of her reputation. This made Penelope feel like "a prize horse on parade," since people would stare at her. Penelope had no friends to go with her, so she stopped going for walks as frequently.

Like she did when describing the competition for her hand in marriage, Penelope again compares herself to a horse when she is on her accompanied walks, highlighting how her treatment as a woman makes her feel objectified and dehumanized.

Sometimes, while Penelope was **spinning yarn**, she would sit in the courtyard and listen to the maids laughing together as they did chores. Or she would sit in the women's quarters and weave with the slaves who were working there. Penelope enjoyed the weaving.

Fiber crafts provide Penelope with her only experiences of female community throughout the text. Still, her higher status sets her apart from other women, whose laughter she hears but cannot join in.

Penelope also spent a lot of time in the room she shared with Odysseus. The room had a special bed in it, and one of the posts of the bed was made out of an olive tree whose roots were still in the ground below it, so no one could move the bed. The truth about this bedpost was a secret, and only Odysseus, Actoris, and Penelope knew. Odysseus told Penelope that if anyone else found out about the post he would know that she was cheating on him and would kill her. Though he said this jokingly, it made Penelope genuinely afraid.

While Odysseus has, until this point in the novel, been caring towards Penelope and seemed to be less overtly misogynistic than other Ancient Greek men, Odysseus's supposedly lighthearted mention of the way he would kill Penelope if she cheated on him reveals his underlying capacity for violence, specifically violence against women. This also foreshadows his later murder of the Maids.

In the bed, Penelope and Odysseus enjoyed their time together, either having sex or talking. Odysseus told Penelope many stories about himself and about various heroes of Greek mythology. One of these stories was about how Theseus and Peirithous had abducted Helen when she was not yet twelve, intending for one of them to marry her when she was old enough. According to the story, Theseus did not rape Helen because she was still a child, and eventually she was rescued by her brothers, inciting a war with Athens.

Odysseus and Penelope continue to build their relationship through storytelling, showing how stories can create intimacy and understanding between people. The story of Helen's abduction by Theseus and Peirithous, meanwhile, shows kidnapping to be yet another source of terror for girls and women in Ancient Greece at the hands of men.

Penelope had already heard this story from Helen herself, who told Penelope that Theseus and Peirithous were so in awe of her beauty that they fainted every time they looked at her. Helen took pride in all the men who had died for her in the Athenian War. Penelope thinks that Helen was so often praised for her beauty that it made her narcissistic and a little crazy. Penelope wonders whether if Helen were less vain, she and many others would have been spared a lot of suffering. Helen's ambition, however, made her want to stand out.

Disturbingly, Helen's perception of her abduction as a twelve year old focuses not on how scary the event was, or on how possibly violent it could have been (including the possibility of rape), but rather on how it showed her ability to attract male attention. Helen's perspective of this event shows how badly she has been affected by the fact that women are only valued for their beauty in Ancient Greece.


When Telemachus was one year old, according to Penelope, "disaster struck" because of Helen. A captain from Sparta arrived in the harbor and Odysseus invited him to dinner. During his visit, the captain informed them that Helen had run away with a handsome prince of Troy, Paris. The pair fell in love behind Menelaus's back during a nine-day feast given by Menelaus in honor of Paris. Menelaus did not notice, and when he went away to a funeral, Helen and Paris sailed back to Troy on Paris's ship, along with lots of treasure. Menelaus was furious and, with his brother Agamemnon, demanded Helen's return, but nothing came of it.

The captain's news shows how stories sometimes create or are accompanied by very real consequences, as the information he relays means the beginning of the Trojan War. Meanwhile, Helen's elopement with Paris shows the potential consequences of a marriage system that lacks choice and that is based on transaction and money rather than love. Helen exemplifies real agency and personal choice when she runs away, and she is later blamed for it.


As Odysseus listened to the story, he stayed quiet. That night, however, Odysseus told Penelope that he was upset because he and many other men had sworn a sacred oath to defend Menelaus's rights to Helen, meaning that he and the other men would have to go to Troy and fight to get Helen back. Odysseus predicted that it would be a tough war. Penelope asked if Odysseus must go, upset by the idea of being at Ithaca without him and without any other friends or people to talk to.

This section, which describes the rationale behind the Trojan War, shows the potentially disastrous consequences of a society in which women are viewed as property and certain men are entitled to them. In Ancient Greek society, this dynamic led to a full-blown war, the destruction of an entire city, and the deaths of thousands.

Odysseus insisted that he must, but when the time came he did try to get out of it. When Menelaus showed up at Ithaca with Agamemnon, Odysseus pretended to have gone crazy, putting on peasant's clothes and ploughing a field. Penelope went with Menelaus and his company to the fields to show him Odysseus and his madness, carrying Telemachus with her.

Odysseus shows the extent of his deceptive, cunning nature in this instance. This story of Odysseus pretending to be insane is also recounted in the Odyssey. *As she does throughout the book, Atwood gives an account of the same events as the "original," but through Penelope's perspective.*

Palamedes, however, found Odysseus out. Palamedes put the infant Telemachus in front of the ox and donkey that were pulling the plough, and Odysseus turned the animals away to keep his son from being run over. After that, Odysseus had to go. The other men told Odysseus that an oracle had predicted they could not win without him, and that made Odysseus a little less hesitant.

When the men tell Odysseus that an oracle foretold his importance in the war, the story sways Odysseus and makes the fact that he must go to war easier to accept. This is yet another example of the potential power of stories to influence people, even master storytellers themselves. It also shows Odysseus's pride and desire for fame and glory.

CHAPTER 12: WAITING

Penelope continues her narrative following Odysseus's departure. He was away in Troy while she stayed in Ithaca. Time passed and Telemachus grew older. Over the years they got news of the Trojan war from minstrel's songs about the war heroes. Penelope only cared, though, about news of Odysseus. Penelope relished when his name appeared in songs, describing him negotiating, giving advice, etc. At one point, a song described Odysseus being bathed by Helen, and Penelope did not like that part.

Penelope's description of listening to stories sung about the Trojan War shows how during Penelope's time, stories were not only entertainment, but also a means of relaying news. Penelope's competition with Helen comes up again and leaves the reader wondering about Odysseus's fidelity.


At last the songs described Odysseus coming up with the strategy of building a wooden horse to invade the city, and eventually they received reports that Troy had fallen, creating mass chaos. Finally, the ships set sail for home. After that, there was no news.

Penelope, like readers of the original myths, learns of Odysseus's famous Trojan Horse trick secondhand and through stories. The oracle, it seems, was right, and Odysseus was necessary for the Greek victory.

Every day Penelope would climb up to the top floor of the palace to look for Odysseus's ships, but there was no sign of them. Other vessels carried rumors of what had happened to Odysseus: that he had lost his memory, that he had fought a Cyclops, that cannibals ate his men. Some rumors said that Odysseus had fallen in love with a goddess on a magical island, while others said he was at a brothel.

The contrasting stories about Odysseus's whereabouts following his departure from Troy, which feature one extraordinary version and one more realistic but less glamorous version, suggest how myths might be made through the embellishment of more mundane endeavors.


The minstrels sang these rumors, embellishing them freely. In front of Penelope, they only sang the best versions, in which Odysseus came across as clever and good, only unable to come home because the gods or the Fates were against him. In return for these complimentary but obviously untrue songs, Penelope gave the singers gifts.

When the minstrels sing the most praiseworthy stories for Penelope, Atwood shows how narratives may be altered or constructed differently depending on one's audience. Penelope's payment for these altered stories shows her desire to only believe the best about Odysseus.

Anticleia died during Odysseus's absence, blaming Penelope for everything. Eurycleia and Laertes aged. Laertes turned toward a farming life, and Penelope thinks that he had gone a little insane. This left Penelope to manage Odysseus's estates herself, a task for which she was woefully unprepared. Penelope's mother, who had not spent much time in the palace, never showed Penelope how to manage an estate on her own. Penelope's mother did not often punish slaves, but would sometimes kill one for no reason. She also did not like to **spin or weave**, unlike Penelope, or to take account of food stores, preferring swimming.

As Penelope struggles to manage Odysseus's estate on her own, she emphasizes the absence of female role models in her life. Her own mother's lack of interest in palace affairs makes Penelope's role much more difficult, since she was not able to learn from her. Through this problem, Atwood suggests the importance of women mentoring and teaching skills to other women, especially in fields normally dominated by men.

As a result of this, Penelope had to learn everything on her own. Penelope learned to make inventories and how to instruct the **spinners and weavers** to make clothes for the slaves. She learned how to manage the personal issues that came up among slaves, ensuring that male slaves would not sleep with female slaves without permission. This could be tough because they sometimes fell in love and got jealous, so Penelope would have to sell them. If a child was born from these affairs, Penelope would raise it herself. Among the slave children she raised was Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks.

Penelope's descriptions of how slaves were not allowed to have romantic relationships with each other seems especially cruel considering the fact that female slaves also had no choice in sleeping with nobles who desired them. Meanwhile, as Penelope describes the abilities she developed, it is evident from her tone that Penelope views her self-sufficiency with pride, although she does not explicitly say it.

Through trading for supplies, Penelope developed a reputation as a smart bargainer. She oversaw farms and became an expert at animal husbandry. Her goal was to build up Odysseus's estate for when Odysseus returned, so he would be proud of her, tell her "you're worth a thousand Helens," and hold her in his arms.

Rather than describing the pleasure she seems to take in her own abilities, Penelope frames her satisfaction in terms of hoping to please her husband. It is unclear whether Penelope is telling the truth or just stating her motives the way society wants her to.

Despite her busy schedule, Penelope felt extremely alone. She cried herself to sleep and prayed to the gods for her husband. Eurycleia tried to sooth her with drinks and baths. While she comforted her, Eurycleia would recite sayings to discourage Penelope from crying, much to Penelope's annoyance. During the day, Penelope kept up a cheerful appearance for Telemachus's sake, telling him stories of Odysseus and insisting that everything would be wonderful when he came home.

Following her descriptions of her work, which seem so full of self-satisfaction and independence, Penelope not only frames her achievements in terms of pleasing Odysseus, but she then goes on to describe herself sobbing because she missed him. It seems possible that Penelope is exaggerating how sad she was at Odysseus's absence—but if not, her narrative also highlights the real pain she experienced, something that is barely mentioned in the Odyssey, *which mostly focuses on Odysseus's adventures.*

Progressively, outsider interest in Penelope increased, and foreign ships began appearing in the harbor. People asked Penelope if she would consider remarriage if Odysseus had, in fact, died. Penelope ignored these questions, and news—or rather, rumors—of Odysseus continued to arrive. These stories claimed that Odysseus had been to the underworld, had sailed past Sirens and listened to their song, etc. Others claimed that these stories were only exaggerations. Penelope did not know what to believe, and thought people may have made up the stories to torment her. Still, she continued to listen, until the stories stopped coming altogether.

Penelope continues to receive stories about Odysseus's whereabouts, which vary from tales of Odysseus sleeping with prostitutes and bar fighting to rumors of heroic and supernatural deeds. In addition to showing how myth might grow out of banal events, Atwood also suggests an alternative version of Odysseus's journey through these rumors, one in which Odysseus is not a heroic captain, but a burnt out veteran unable to face his life at home.

CHAPTER 13: THE CHORUS LINE: THE WILY SEA CAPTAIN, A SEA SHANTY

This chapter consists of the lyrics to a song performed by the Twelve Maids while wearing sailor costumes, in which they give their own account of Odysseus's travels as told in *The Odyssey*. The song describes Odysseus setting sail from Troy with his boat full of treasure. His first stop was on the island of Lotus, where the sailors forgot their wartime troubles. Next, the ship sailed to the island of the Cyclops, who threatened to eat the crew. However, Odysseus tricked the Cyclops and put out his eye, then sailed away again. According to the Maids, Poseidon then cursed Odysseus, making his travels difficult.

In this song, the Maids essentially give a synopsis of Odysseus's journey home from the Trojan War as recounted in the Odyssey. *The fact that these events are produced in a song format reflects how many early epic poems would have been sung rather than recited, since, early on, they would not have been written down and so would be difficult to remember in their entirety without an accompanying melody.*

The Maids toast to Captain Odysseus, describing him as "gallant" wherever he is, whether in the trees or in the arms of sea nymphs. Then they describe Odysseus meeting the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, who ate his men. After that, Odysseus sailed to the island of Circe, where he stayed and slept with the goddess for a year. The Maids toast to Odysseus's health again, calling him a "crafty old codger" in no hurry to get home. Next, Odysseus sailed to the Isle of the Dead, where he met the prophet Teiresias and heard his prophecy.

Even as they recount the events of Odysseus's journey home as heroically as possible, the Maids' description of Odysseus as a "crafty old codger" and their commentary that he does not seem to be rushing back to Ithaca suggests that there is an alternative version of the story in which Odysseus is much less admirable and is simply avoiding his responsibilities.

Following that, Odysseus sailed past the Sirens' island while tied to the mast, so he would not be able to be lured to them but could hear their song. He successfully sailed past the whirlpool Charybdis and avoided the monster Scylla. Ultimately, his men turned against him and ate Helios the sun god's cattle, and then they all died in a storm. Odysseus, however, reached the island of Calypso, where he spent seven years in a romantic affair with the goddess.

Even in the most embellished, rosy descriptions of Odysseus's journey home, Odysseus is supposed to have cheated on Penelope with at least two goddesses. This is important because it reveals a double standard for fidelity, especially considering Odysseus's threat of violence should Penelope be unfaithful.

Finally, Odysseus escaped on a raft and was ultimately found by Nausicaa's maids on a beach while they were doing laundry. The Maids say that no one can tell what the Fates have in store, not even Odysseus, and then they toast to his health once more, wherever he is.

The Maids' toasts to Odysseus and their commentary that there is no telling what fate has in store come across as ironic, since they loathe Odysseus for killing them, and clearly know what happens next.

CHAPTER 14: THE SUITORS STUFF THEIR FACES

Penelope resumes her first-person narrative, but deviates from her chronological account of the past to mention a recent run-in in the fields of asphodel with Antinous, one of her suitors after Odysseus's disappearance. Penelope says that usually Antinous struts about and shows off, but that as soon as he saw her he assumed the appearance of his own corpse, with an arrow in his neck. According to Penelope, Antinous was the first Suitor that Odysseus shot when he returned to Ithaca, and Antinous turned into a corpse to show Penelope his contempt for her. Penelope, though, only thinks he is a pest.

Penelope's deviation from her first-person narrative reminds the reader that she is telling her story retrospectively (and after thousands of years), so her perspective may be less reliable than a first-person narrative told in the present. Meanwhile, her meeting with Antinous, who now hates Penelope and blames his death on her, shows how Penelope has shouldered the blame for many of Odysseus's direct actions.

In the underworld encounter, Penelope greets Antinous and asks him to take the arrow out of his neck. Antinous responds that it is the arrow of his love for Penelope, and that the archer was Cupid. He says he wears it in remembrance of his love for Penelope. Penelope chides him, telling him that, now that they are dead, he does not have to keep pretending to have loved her. Antinous calls her merciless in both life and death, but makes the arrow disappear.

Antinous's sarcastic comments about his love for Penelope seem intended to make Penelope feel bad about the fact that Antinous and the rest of the Suitors did not love her. Because women were primarily valued for their beauty and ability to attract men, Antinous tries to insult Penelope by highlighting her inability to do so.

Penelope thanks him and then says that, now that they are friends, he can tell her why the Suitors risked their lives through their behavior towards her and Odysseus, despite warnings from Prophets and from Zeus. She remarks that she was hardly a divine beauty and, at thirty-five years old, she had gotten "fat around the middle," while the Suitors were all still young. Yet still, they all told Penelope that they longed to sleep with and have children with her, even though she was almost past childbearing age.

Penelope's self-deprecating comments about her plainness, her age, her weight, and the fact that she was approaching menopause when the Suitors started courting her suggests that Penelope cannot imagine a romantic relationship in which men are looking for qualities in women outside of their looks and their ability to bear (male) children.

Antinous, using a nasty tone, responds that Penelope probably could have still had one or two "brats," and Penelope asks again about his real motive. Antinous tells her that the Suitors wanted her treasure and her kingdom, since widows are supposed to be lusty and she would probably die eventually anyway, leaving them rich and able to choose from any number of princesses. Antinous calls Penelope "not...much to look at" but says that she was always smart.

Antinous's response confirms Penelope's assumptions about what the Suitors were looking for when they courted her. When he tells Penelope that they were only hoping to gain her wealth through a marriage, Antinous shows yet another instance in which marriage is used to traffic women for money.

Although Penelope had thought that she would prefer straightforward answers, she does not. Still, she thanks Antinous for his "frankness" and tells him that he can put the arrow back, since she feels a surge of joy each time she sees it in his neck.

Penelope's preference for flattering lies rather than the truth sheds light on her willingness to believe the noble but fantastic version of Odysseus's journey home.

According to Penelope, the Suitors did not show up directly after Odysseus left. For the first ten years of Odysseus's absence, they knew he was alive because he was at war in Troy. The Suitors arrived slowly as it began to seem less and less likely that Odysseus was coming back, gradually growing in number by showing up and declaring themselves guests. Because Penelope lacked the manpower to drive them out, they would feast on Ithaca's livestock and order around the maids as if they were in their own homes.

Penelope's hard work at managing the estate and building up the family's wealth is dashed when the Suitors begin arriving to mooch off of the abundance of food, showing an example of how patriarchy works by unifying men to undermine a woman's authority. The men do not listen when Penelope tells them to leave, showing their lack of respect for her as a legitimate ruler.

The Suitors said that they would continue to feast off of Odysseus's estate until Penelope chose one of them as her new husband. They would occasionally make speeches about Penelope's beauty and intelligence, and though Penelope enjoyed the praise, she saw the whole thing as a ridiculous spectacle. Sometimes she would go to the feasts to watch them make fools of themselves, and she admits to daydreaming about which one she would most want to go to bed with.

Penelope's need for male attention shows in her desire for the Suitors' compliments. Penelope's admittance that she daydreamed about sleeping with the Suitors is important because it contradicts a later statement that Penelope makes to Odysseus when he returns, throwing her entire narrative into doubt.

After the feast, Penelope's Maids would tell Penelope the nasty things the Suitors had said behind her back, calling her an "old bitch," comparing her unfavorably to Helen, and imagining killing Telemachus. The Suitors also had all agreed that whoever would marry Penelope would share her dowry with the others. Penelope wondered whether the Maids were making this up to spite her, as they seemed to enjoy when she started to cry.

The fact that the Suitors' compliments turn out to be hollow suggests how, in a system of intense gender inequality, what seems to be a compliment may in fact only be a way of reinforcing the oppressive gender system. Again, the Suitors work together to undermine Penelope.

Penelope's tears meant that the Maids could cry too and console her, which Penelope thinks was a "relief to their nerves." Eurycleia seemed to especially like this gossip, because she was trying to ensure that Penelope would remain faithful to Odysseus.

The Suitors' nasty comments at least allow the Maids and Penelope to forge intimate relationships as they support each other in the face of the men's cruelty.

Penelope could do nothing to stop the Suitors, since they did not respond to her pleas or her threats. Telemachus was too young to defend his mother, and there were too many of them anyway. All the men on the island loyal to Odysseus had gone with him to Troy. Since Penelope did not want a full-blown fight, she did not try to bar them from the palace. Instead, she remembered her mother's advice to "behave like **water**" and "flow around them"—she pretended to encourage the Suitors, but insisted that she must know that Odysseus was dead before choosing one of them.

The Suitors clearly do not respect Penelope as an equal like they would if she were a man, since they do not listen when she asks them to leave and threatens them. Instead, Penelope takes her mother's advice to get what she wants by behaving in a way that is indirect and nonthreatening (and so also more traditionally feminine). Penelope must play into her gender role to thwart the Suitors.

CHAPTER 15: THE SHROUD

As the pressure on Penelope to choose a suitor increased, she spent whole days in her room in the women's quarters, crying and wondering what to do. Telemachus was starting to blame his mother for letting his inheritance be eaten away. Penelope thought of packing up and going back to Sparta, but she was afraid of going to sea again. Telemachus thought this would be a good idea at first, but reconsidered when he realized that he would lose the part of his inheritance that was Penelope's dowry.

Telemachus views his mother like other men have always viewed her—as a means of gaining money or status. While Telemachus does not want to gain money from his mother through marriage, he still stands to inherit her dowry. Clearly it is the money that Penelope represents that Telemachus values, since he is happy to send her away until he realizes that the money would go with her.

Meanwhile, if Penelope married one of the Suitors, the man would then be able to order Telemachus about. Penelope imagines that the best solution for Telemachus would have been if she had died accidentally (but Telemachus could not kill her himself, or the mythological Furies would drive him mad). Penelope asserts that a mother's life is sacred, and states that she did not appreciate her son's attitude towards her.

Penelope's relationship with her son is not especially good. Possibly this is because of Eurycleia's interference, making it so Telemachus and Penelope could not bond when Telemachus was a child—but it's also surely a result of him being raised in a society that values women only for beauty. Penelope worries that, to Telemachus, her life is expendable.

Penelope reminded the Suitors that an oracle foretold Odysseus's return, but the Suitors countered that prophecies are always ambiguous. Finally, in public, Penelope had to agree that Odysseus was dead. However, Penelope never saw his ghost in a dream, causing her to think he might still be alive.

Penelope's belief that if Odysseus were dead she would see his ghost in a dream shows how faithfully Penelope believed in the Ancient Greek religion and concept of the afterlife.

Penelope finally came up with a scheme to postpone her decision. She set up a piece of **weaving** on her loom and said she was weaving a shroud for Laertes and she would not select a Suitor until she finished her work. Laertes did not like this idea, thinking it would prompt a Suitor to kill him to speed things up, and so he avoided the palace from then on. Since Penelope's work was so pious, no one opposed it. All day she worked on the shroud, but then at night she would undo all her work so that she never came closer to finishing.

Penelope's weaving scheme shows how she puts her mother's advice into practice by taking a seemingly harmless women's craft and using it to deceive the men around her. Penelope's scheme also further links storytelling, which is often described as a kind of weaving or spinning, to deceit, since her weaving scheme is an elaborate ruse to trick the Suitors and postpone her decision.

Penelope chose twelve Maids that she had raised since they were children to help her with this task. Penelope enjoyed hearing their young voices laughing and singing, and she trusted them immensely. They helped her for three years to undo her **weaving** at night. One of the maids, Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, would bring in snacks to eat while they worked, and they would tell stories together by the torchlight. Penelope thinks that they were almost like sisters rather than servants and a mistress.

Penelope's description of her relationship with the Maids and the nights they spend together secretly shows how Penelope has finally found a female community in her Maids. Meanwhile, these friendships disrupt the class structure of Ithaca, as the Maids become more like sisters to Penelope than servants (at least in her view).

Ultimately, Penelope states, one of these Maids betrayed her secret **unweaving** of the shroud. She thinks it was an accident, and isn't sure which one did it. In the afterlife the women all shun Penelope, so she cannot ask about it. Penelope thinks that the betrayal was her own fault, since she told the women to spy on the Suitors while keeping them company. Only Penelope and the maids, and not Eurycleia, knew the Maids' instructions, which Penelope states was a mistake.

Though Penelope and the Maids have successfully created their own female community together, the nights they spent together end when a Maid betrays Penelope's secret to a Suitor, perhaps a romantic partner. In such unequal societies, romantic relationships between men and women can threaten female community.

Because she told them to spend time with the Suitors, several of the Maids were raped and others fell in love with the Suitors. Penelope notes that it was not unusual for guests at a palace to sleep with maids, and that providing the guests with women to sleep with was considered hospitable. However, it was thievery for a guest to sleep with a maid without the master of the house's permission. But without Odysseus present, the Suitors had sex with and raped the Maids without thinking twice.

The reader may find Penelope's description of the condoned protocol for raping slaves disturbing. The system of slavery in Ancient Greece meant that women slave's bodies did not belong to them, but to their master. This shows how women of low social status can be especially susceptible to gendered violence.


Penelope comforted the Maids after their encounters, since many of them felt guilty, and the ones who were raped needed to be cared for. Eurycleia would bathe the girls and rub them with olive oil at Penelope's request, although she grumbled about it and told Penelope she was spoiling them.

Although Penelope comforts the slaves after their rapes, she sees no particular issue with the slave system that allows it to happen. Her own high status limits her willingness to protect her maids.

Meanwhile, Penelope continued to tell the Maids to pretend to be in love with the Suitors so that the Suitors would confide in them and the Maids could tell Penelope their plans. Penelope also told them to say nasty things about herself, Telemachus, and Odysseus, to keep the Suitors from suspecting their loyalties. Several of the girls did fall in love with the Suitors in earnest, but Penelope forgave them for this, since they were so young. Anyway, even with their romantic feelings, they still reported to Penelope.

Not only does Penelope not challenge the slave system that allows the Maids to be raped without consequence, but she also continues to send the Maids out to spend time with the Suitors, putting them in harm's way. Even the Maids who fall in love with the Suitors continue to report to Penelope, however, showing how their bond of friendship transcends even their romances.

In retrospect, Penelope sees her strategy as ill considered, but notes that she was running out of time and had to be crafty. When they did eventually find out the trick that Penelope had played with the shroud, the Suitors broke into Penelope's room and caught her undoing the **weaving**.

The Suitors breaking into Penelope's room constitutes a kind of intrusion that metaphorically represents the many violations, physical and otherwise, that women face in Ancient Greek society.

Penelope was forced, after the Suitors' intrusion, to promise to finish the shroud. She states that the shroud became a story very quickly, and that modern people use the term "Penelope's web" to describe unfinished tasks. Penelope rejects the term "web," however, because rather than trying to ensnare men, she was trying to free herself.

The term "web" makes it seem like Penelope was trying to ensnare men when she was in fact trying to escape them. This expresses Penelope's sense of being trapped by men in her feminine role, and also shows how changing a single word in a story can have important repercussions.


CHAPTER 16: BAD DREAMS

Penelope states that this was the worst part of her trials, and that she cried constantly. Odysseus still did not return and Telemachus began ordering his mother around. He started challenging the Suitors, which made Penelope concerned that he would be killed. Eventually, Telemachus secretly left in a ship to go look for Odysseus. Penelope found this very mean of him, but she also worried for his safety, since one of the Maids told her that the Suitors were sending a ship after him to ambush and kill him.

Telemachus, as a teenager, is starting to come into his own male identity, and begins to exhibit traditionally masculine traits like aggression in his behavior toward the Suitors. In a classic example of teenage rebellion, Telemachus leaves Ithaca without telling his mother, distancing himself from female authority.

In the *Odyssey*, a herald named Medon warns Penelope of the Suitors' intention to kill Telemachus. Penelope here sets the record straight, saying that she knew about it first from the Maids, and had to act surprised—so she cried and her Maids wailed too. Penelope chastised the Maids for not telling her about Telemachus's departure until Eurycleia confessed to being the only one to help him. Eurycleia told Penelope that she and Telemachus didn't tell Penelope of his plan because they didn't want Penelope to worry.

Penelope's explanation of her side of the story with Medon is one of many instances throughout the book when Penelope's perspective deviates from the official version of the story. When Penelope chastises her maids, the reader begins to see how, though Penelope loves the Maids, she treats them unfairly and never questions their status as her inferiors.

After her crying fits, Penelope usually fell asleep and dreamed. On the night that Medon told her about Telemachus, she dreamt that Odysseus was having his brains eaten by the Cyclops, that he swam to the Sirens, and that he was enjoying sex with beautiful women—first goddesses, then Helen. The nightmare that Odysseus was having sex with Helen woke Penelope up, and she prayed that it was not a prophetic dream.

Penelope's dreams of Odysseus having sex with Helen show how profoundly the rumors of Odysseus's infidelity seem to have affected Penelope, triggering her insecurity so much that she imagines her archenemy Helen as Odysseus's paramour, keeping him from returning home.

When Penelope finally went back to sleep, she dreamed that her sister, who had been sent by the goddess Athene, stood by her bedside and told her that Telemachus would come home safely, and that the gods did not want her to suffer. When Penelope asked about Odysseus, however, her sister refused to answer. Penelope thought that the gods did in fact want her to suffer, and that the gods prefer human suffering to animal sacrifice.

Penelope's second dream features her sister, who, except for this moment, is never mentioned in the novel (though the dream is also mentioned in the Odyssey*). Penelope's conviction that the Greek gods want mortals to suffer shows just how pessimistic her worldview has become.*

CHAPTER 17: THE CHORUS LINE: DREAMBOATS, A BALLAD

This Chapter is written as lyrics to a ballad sung by the Twelve Maids. In the song, the Maids state that the only time they rest and do not work or get chased by noblemen wanting to have sex with them is during sleep. During their sleep, the Maids dream that they are sailing at **sea**, wearing red dresses, and sleeping with the men that they love.

While the sea terrifies Penelope, the Maids envision the sea as a place where they could be free from the strains of their social class, including the daily threat of sexual violence from their masters and their masters' guests.

In the Maids' dreams, these men take the Maids to feasts and the Maids sing to them at night and take them sailing. There is no pain, only laughter and kindness. When they wake in the morning, however, the Maids return to working and having sex with the men who command them to.

The Maids imagine male companions who, unlike the men that they usually encounter, care about and love them, emphasizing just how negative the Maids' real experiences with men have been.

CHAPTER 18: NEWS OF HELEN

Penelope resumes her narrative, relaying how Telemachus avoided the Suitors' ambush and reached home safely. Penelope welcomed Telemachus, and then yelled at him for leaving without permission, and with no experience sailing. She called him a child and told him that he could have been killed, and then Odysseus would blame her when he returned.

When Penelope and Telemachus fight, although Penelope has been the only parent in Telemachus's life, she still must evoke Odysseus to give herself authority. Odysseus is a patriarchal presence in the family even in his absence.

Telemachus did not take the scolding well, proclaiming his manhood and saying he did not need anyone's permission to take the boat. He then blamed Penelope for letting so much of his inheritance be consumed by the Suitors. Telemachus defended his choice to get new of his father, and insisted that his father would be proud of him for getting out from under the women's (meaning Penelope's) irrational and overemotional command.

Telemachus's speech to Penelope after Penelope chastises him for leaving without tell her shows how Telemachus was been indoctrinated to fulfill his normative gender role. Although Telemachus has never met his father, he allies himself with Odysseus rather than Penelope.


Penelope, wondering how her son could refer to his mother as "the women," burst into tears. She then rebuked his thanklessness, saying that no women should have to put up with that kind of suffering. Telemachus only rolled his eyes and waited for her to finish. The two of them then cooled off somewhat, and Telemachus received a bath and fresh clothes from the Maids.

Telemachus calls his mother "the women," lumping her in with stereotypes of women in general. This section shows how Telemachus becomes inducted into the patriarchy by setting himself apart from his mother through gender stereotypes that infect his viewpoint.


The Maids also provided Telemachus and his two friends, Piraeus and Theoclymenous, with dinner. Piraeus and Theoclymenous had gone on the ship with Telemachus, and Penelope resolved to tell their parents about their wild antics. As Telemachus ate, Penelope thought that she wished she had taught him better table manners—every time she had tried, Eurycleia had stopped her, saying there was time for that later. Penelope regretted that Telemachus had been spoiled.

Penelope's discussion of Telemachus's table manners, which follows her tense argument with her son, seems to be a commentary not only on his etiquette, but also on his larger feelings of entitlement and his lack of respect for women. Eurycleia, in never correcting or checking Telemachus's behavior, reinforced these ideas and left him spoiled.

When the men finished eating, Penelope, still a little hurt from their earlier conversation, asked if Telemachus had discovered anything about Odysseus on his trip. Telemachus informed Penelope that he went to visit Menelaus. Penelope asked if he saw Helen while he was there, and Telemachus said that he did, and that she gave them a good dinner. Menelaus told him, Telemachus stated, that Odysseus was trapped on an island with a goddess and forced to sleep with her every night.

Penelope's question about Helen shows how, even as Telemachus is delivering the first news of her husband in years, she is still intently focused on her cousin. Penelope's competition with Helen clearly verges on obsession, since Penelope seems more interested in learning about Helen than about Odysseus.

Penelope asked how Helen was, and Telemachus said she seemed fine, and that everyone was telling stories about the war at Troy, and that Helen spiked the drinks so everyone had a good time. Penelope asked Telemachus how Helen looked, and Telemachus said that she was "radiant" and "everything she's cracked up to be, and more." Penelope, feeling threatened, suggested that Helen must be getting older now. Telemachus agreed, and then, seeing Penelope's expression, told his mother that Helen did look very old and was not actually that beautiful.

Again, Penelope shows how deeply and unhealthily interested she is in Helen and in general ideas of attractiveness through her questions about Helen's appearance. Telemachus picks up on Penelope's competitiveness with her cousin and uses the moment to soothe his mother. Telemachus and Penelope reaffirm their relationship after their fight by mocking and criticizing Helen together.

Penelope knew that Telemachus was lying, but was flattered that he would lie for her. She thought he had inherited his ancestors' gift for lying. Penelope thanked him and left to pray for Odysseus's safe return.

Penelope's happiness with Telemachus's lies is in line with Penelope's consistent preference for happy lies over painful truth (a trait that Odysseus seems to share as well).

CHAPTER 19: YELP OF JOY

Penelope muses about whether prayer has any effect, picturing the gods mischievously deciding which prayers to answer by casting dice and destroying mortals' lives willy-nilly. Penelope thinks that they pull a lot of pranks because they are bored. For twenty years, Penelope's prayers went unanswered, but after her last prayer for Odysseus's return, he showed up wearing beggar's clothes in the courtyard.

Penelope's description of the Greek gods playing dice together to randomly decide which prayers to answer contrasts with Christian ideas of an all powerful, all knowing, completely decisive God. Throughout the book, Penelope offers points of comparison between the two religions.

Odysseus's rags were a disguise, since he wanted to figure out what was going on at the palace with the Suitors before announcing his arrival. If he had walked in and ordered them all out, Penelope thinks, he would be dead on the spot. Instead, he dressed like a beggar and counted on the fact that the Suitors were all too young to recognize him. Penelope, however, knew it was Odysseus as soon as she saw his barrel chest and short legs.

Odysseus's costume of rags and his disguise as a beggar, a detail that is consistent in the Odyssey *as well, comes across as uncomfortably ironic considering how Odysseus is later able to murder the Maids without punishment or consequence because of their lower class status.*

Penelope did not tell Odysseus that she knew, however, because it would be dangerous and because she did not want to hurt his ego. Penelope could tell that Telemachus was in cahoots with Odysseus, because he was not a good liar, and later introduced Penelope to "the beggar" in a suspicious manner. Before that, though, Odysseus snuck around the palace in his beggar garb while the Suitors threw things and yelled at him.

Penelope's choice not to tell Odysseus that she knows who he is for fear of hurting his ego suggests how frail the male ego can be, requiring women to lie to protect it. It also marks an important diversion from the Odyssey *on Atwood's part, giving Penelope more agency and credit in a subtle and believable way. This lie to protect Odysseus's ego later results in larger problems, and prevents Penelope from protecting her Maids.*


Penelope did not have time to tell the Maids Odysseus's true identity, so they continued to unwittingly insult the family to the Suitors in front of him. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks was especially harsh. Penelope decided to tell Odysseus that the women had been acting at her instruction when the time was right.

As Penelope states that she was unable to warn the Maids of Odysseus's identity or Odysseus of her agreement with the Maids, it becomes clear how, although lying sometimes smoothes things over, it can also cause enormous problems.

When evening arrived, Penelope went to see "the beggar," who claimed to have news about Odysseus and who assured Penelope that he would be home soon. Penelope cried and said that she did not think so, since it was not the first time she had heard that. Penelope described her longing for Odysseus to "the beggar," knowing that Odysseus would believe her more if he thought that *she* thought she was saying it to a stranger.

Penelope clearly shows that she understands how to manipulate an audience when she decides to tell Odysseus how much she misses him while Odysseus still thinks she does not recognize him. As the conclusion of the book draws near, the lies from all the characters begin to add up and come into conflict.

Penelope then asked the beggar for advice, saying that she planned to take Odysseus's bow and challenge the Suitors to a shooting competition, with herself as the prize, in order to bring the ordeal to an end. She asked him what he thought, and the beggar/Odysseus said that it was an excellent plan. According to the song, Odysseus's arrival and Penelope's decision to test the Suitors was a coincidence. However, her narrative corrects that story, making it clear that she was aware of what was happening all along, and that she knew the beggar was her husband.

Here, Penelope notes another occasion in which the original version of the Odyssey *portrayed events incorrectly because they did not have Penelope's perspective. The original version of the story assumes that Penelope was an ignorant, innocent bystander of most of the action, and that assumption, by failing to recognize Penelope's agency, gets the truth wrong. At the same time, though, this change suggests that Penelope's show of faithfulness in front of the disguised Odysseus might have been* just *a show.*

After telling the beggar about the test, Penelope recounted to him a dream that she had had in which an eagle with a crooked beak killed all of her beloved geese, causing her to weep. Odysseus interpreted the dream for her, saying that the geese must be the Suitors, and that one would kill the others. He ignored the eagle's crooked beak and the fact that Penelope loved the geese and grieved their deaths. Penelope states that Odysseus was wrong about the dream, and that while he was the eagle, the geese were her twelve Maids.

Penelope's dream and Odysseus's misinterpretation of it suggests that, when readers encounter texts without considering the female perspective, they can end up arriving at incorrect or incomplete conclusions. The eagle's crooked beak, meanwhile, seems to suggest that, while Odysseus is considered to be a war hero of Greek mythology, he is also a corrupt figure.

Penelope says that in the songs, they often say that Penelope ordered her Maids to wash Odysseus's feet and that he refused because he did not want to be ridiculed by them. Then Penelope told Eurycleia to wash his feet, and she did so, not suspecting that it was Odysseus. When she saw Odysseus's scar on his thigh, Eurycleia yelled for joy and knocked over the **water** basin. Some people say that Penelope did not notice this, but in reality she had turned her back to them to hide her laughter.

Penelope continues on with her version of the events that occurred after Odysseus's return to Ithaca. Again Penelope sets the record straight (and makes Odysseus seem far less impressive and heroic) by clarifying that she had to hide her laughter at his accidentally revealed disguise.

CHAPTER 20: SLANDEROUS GOSSIP

Penelope decides to address the rumors that have been circulating about her since ever she was alive, declaring them all patently untrue. The stories, Penelope says, regard her sexual conduct. According to Penelope, these stories allege that Penelope slept with one suitor that was particularly polite. Penelope admits that she led the Suitors on and made promises to them, but asserts that this was all part of her strategy. She made promises in order to get them to give her expensive gifts and recuperate some of her losses. Penelope insists that Odysseus approved of her behavior.

Penelope's descriptions of the rumors surrounding her cast doubt on her own version of events, which, until this moment, seemed to be a corrective to the events as described in the Odyssey. *Penelope's changes to the understanding of her role in the myth did open up questions of narrative unreliability and lying, but the reader would likely not expect that Penelope's own narrative could be just as unreliable as Homer's.*

One of the wildest stories that Penelope heard was that she slept with all of the Suitors and then gave birth to the god Pan. Penelope wonders who would believe such nonsense. Some people take Anticleia's silence to Odysseus regarding the Suitors in the afterlife as proof that Penelope slept with them. Penelope argues, though, that Anticleia disliked her from the first, and so could have been trying to turn Odysseus against her.

The myth that Penelope gave birth to the god Pan is only as unlikely as the mythological (and more noble) version of Odysseus's journey home, which Penelope seems to believe. This suggests, perhaps, that Penelope should not be so quick to believe Odysseus's embellished version of his own story.

Still other people believe that, because Penelope did not punish the Twelve Maids, Penelope must have been having sex with the Suitors herself. Penelope, however, has already explained that.

The assumption that Penelope must be having sex because she did not punish the Maids shows again how Greeks stigmatize female promiscuity.

Other people allege that Odysseus did not reveal himself to Penelope when he first arrived back in Ithaca because he did not trust her. Penelope states, however, that the real reason was because Odysseus was afraid she would cry tears of joy and reveal his identity. This is why he locked Penelope in her room while he killed the Suitors. Penelope insists that Odysseus would not have wanted to expose her to such sights. She says that if Odysseus had known of these rumors during his lifetime, he would have punished the people spreading them.

Penelope's excessive protest against the rumors of her behavior in Odysseus's absence only casts doubt on the reliability of her narrative.

CHAPTER 21: THE CHORUS LINE: THE PERILS OF PENELOPE, A DRAMA

This chapter, from the Maids' perspective, is formatted as a script for a play. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks speaks the prologue, opening by saying that there is "another story" in which Penelope was purportedly sleeping with various Suitors, and using her tears to distract from her deeds. According to these tales, Penelope conceived the god Pan from these romps. Melantho states that the truth is rarely certain, but suggests that they "peek behind the curtain."

The Maids describe the same rumors that Penelope refers to in the preceding chapter. Their commentary casts even more doubt on her narrative, and they specifically suggest that Penelope's crying was used as a distraction from her happiness at being free from male control and able to do what she wants.

Next, Eurycleia, played by a maid, informs Penelope that Odysseus is back, and that she identified him by his scar. Penelope, played by a Maid, says she already knew who he was from his short legs. Penelope worries he will punish her for her lust, asking rhetorically if he thought that while he was out sleeping with nymphs and goddesses, Penelope was really going to stay chaste at home. Eurycleia suggests that, rather than undoing her loom every night, Penelope used the time she was supposed to spend **weaving** having sex.

In the Maids' play, their portrayal of Penelope points out the double standard of sexual behavior for men and women in Ancient Greece, since Penelope is supposed to stay chaste at home while Odysseus is out sleeping with beautiful women.

Penelope then sends her lover down some hidden stairs and asks Eurycleia to make her look decent. Eurycleia tells her that the only people who know about her affairs with the Suitors are her twelve trusted Maids, and she tells Penelope that they must be silenced or they'll reveal her secret. Penelope tells Eurycleia that it is up to her to save her and to save Odysseus's honor. She tells Eurycleia to tell him that the Maids are disloyal so he will **kill them** before they can talk. Eurycleia agrees. Penelope prepares herself to look like a model wife in front of Odysseus, and she makes herself cry. The Maids end the skit with a tap dance and song, singing "blame it on the maids," telling Penelope to "hang them high," and calling themselves "sluts."

According to this poignant and bitterly ironic play, Penelope threw her maids under the bus to keep Odysseus from punishing her. Notably, Penelope is concerned that Odysseus will kill her, showing how potentially dangerous men and their expectations of female behavior can be. While it is unclear whether this actually happened, Penelope does consistently display the fact that she has difficulty forming and keeping female relationships, and she is willing to compete with and criticize other women to elevate herself.

CHAPTER 22: HELEN TAKES A BATH

This chapter returns to Penelope's first-person narrative. She recounts a recent time when, as she was walking through the asphodel, she ran into Helen, who was followed by a group of men. Helen greets Penelope and asks if she wants to join her in taking a bath. Penelope reminds her that, since they are spirits now, they don't need to take baths. Helen replies that her reason for taking baths is "spiritual," and that she finds it soothing, since having men fight over her is so tiring. Helen tells Penelope she would not know what that's like, suggesting that she is lucky.

Penelope's rivalry with Helen seems to have continued into the afterlife, as has Helen's need for male attention. Helen's comment that she finds her baths "spiritual," when they are clearly a ploy for male attention, is somewhat ironic. Penelope highlights the fact that the Greek afterlife is disembodied again here, a marked contrast from traditional ideas of Christian Heaven.

Penelope sneers and asks if Helen is going to take off her (nonexistent) robes. Helen comments that, since Penelope is known for being so modest, she is sure that Penelope would keep her own robes on to bathe. Helen states that she prefers to bathe naked. Penelope remarks that this must be the reason for the large crowd following her, and Helen says that it isn't that large, and anyway she is used to men following her. Desire, Helen says, does not die with the body.

Penelope's snide remarks to Helen show how, although Penelope makes Helen out to be the aggressor in their relationship, Penelope also actively takes shots at Helen. Helen's comments that desire does not die with the body suggest that sexuality is a social concept as well as a physical phenomenon.

Penelope quips that seeing Helen naked must give the spirits "a reason to live," and Helen calls her witty. They bicker back and forth, with Helen calling Penelope negative and vulgar and Penelope blaming Helen for causing so many deaths. Penelope says that she hadn't realized that Helen was capable of guilt, and Helen replies by asking Penelope how many men Odysseus killed for her. Penelope says it was "quite a lot," and Helen replies that it "depends on what you call a lot" but says that maybe it made Penelope feel prettier. She then bids Penelope goodbye.

Helen and Penelope's competition over how many men have died for them seems totally bizarre and callous, and it shows just how toxic the culture surrounding gender is. In order to be a good woman, according to Helen and Penelope, a princess needs men to actually die for her. Violence seems to be a normal part of gender relations in Ancient Greece.

CHAPTER 23: ODYSSEUS AND TELEMACHUS SNUFF THE MAIDS

Penelope slept through Suitors' killings in the women's quarters, probably because Eurycleia drugged her drink. Eurycleia later described the events to Penelope, telling her how Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, watched as the suitors tried to string his bow for the archery contest. Then, when they failed, Odysseus strung the bow and successfully completed the archery challenge.

Penelope learns of the slaying of the Suitors and the Maids only through Eurycleia's narrative, adding to the sense that the novel is a collage of second- and third- hand stories from different perspectives, each unreliable in its own way.

Then Odysseus shot Antinous in the throat and went on the kill all of the Suitors with the help of Telemachus and two herdsmen. Meanwhile, Eurycleia and the other women listened at the door of the women's quarters. Odysseus then summoned Eurycleia and told her to indicate which Maids had been disloyal. Odysseus made those girls bring the bodies of the Suitors to the courtyard and wash the blood off of the floor.

When Eurycleia points out which of the Maids said negative things about Odysseus, she not only betrays members of her gender, but also members of her class. Eurycleia seems to thoroughly subscribe to the expectations of her class and gender, and she totally lacks solidarity with the other Maids.

Odysseus then told Telemachus to hack the Maids up. However, Telemachus decided instead to **hang the Maids** from a ship's rope. Then Telemachus and Odysseus hacked up a goatherd who had betrayed him. Eurycleia thought that this would make an example for anyone else thinking about treason. When she woke up, Penelope panicked, asking Eurycleia which Maids Odysseus had killed, and Eurycleia told him he killed the twelve Maids who had been especially rude, including Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks. Eurycleia calls them "notorious whores."

Eurycleia seems to support the murder of the Maids. Notably, and ironically, Eurycleia could have been a "notorious whore" herself had Laertes raped her in her youth, as she discusses earlier. While Eurycleia thinks he did not do so because he respected her, it was actually because of Laertes' fear of Anticleia. Though Eurycleia judges the Maids for being rape victims, she could easily be in their place.

Penelope corrected her, saying that Odysseus had hung the rape victims, the youngest, and the most beautiful Maids. Penelope did not reveal that these were also her spies and confidantes. Eurycleia said that it would not have been proper to have such mouthy and untrustworthy girls in the palace anyway. Eurycleia then sent Penelope downstairs to see Odysseus. Penelope bit her tongue, telling herself that **the Maids were already dead**, and she would say prayers for them in secret.

Penelope pushes back against Eurycleia's classification of the Maids as "notorious whores," showing that the way that violence against women gets recounted matters. Instead of slandering the Maids for their sexual promiscuity, Penelope emphasizes their youth, beauty, and their experience of sexual violence, giving a more sympathetic account of their characters.

Penelope wonders if another explanation might be that Eurycleia knew of her Maids' assignments and wanted to **kill the Maids** to maintain her privileged position with Odysseus. Penelope still has not been able to confront her about it because every time she sees her in the underworld, Eurycleia is busy happily tending to ghost babies.

Penelope's conspiracy theory about Eurycleia's knowledge of Penelope's secret espionage with the Maids adds to the sense of the text being comprised of numerous, conflicting narratives without objective truth.

CHAPTER 24: THE CHORUS LINE: AN ANTHROPOLOGY LECTURE

In this chapter, the Maids' commentary takes the form of an Anthropology lecture in an academic setting. The Maids begin their lecture by asking what the number of Maids, twelve, signifies, and then, in turn, what the word "month" suggests to an educated person. Someone in the back of the lecture hall responds, correctly saying that it recalls moons. The Maids insist that this is no coincidence.

In the Anthropology Lecture chapter, the Maids' commentary enters an academic setting, reading the events of their deaths as an anthropological metaphor. In doing so, the Maids explicitly lay out one possible reading of the text with a distinctly women-focused bent.

The Maids suggest that they were ritual sacrifices to Artemis, part of a fertility rite that began with sex with the Suitors and then purification in their blood to renew their virginity. **Their deaths**, then, would be a willing self-sacrifice to satisfy Artemis. The Maids tie this reading of the end of their lives to their hanging on the mast and to the bow used to shoot the Suitors (since Artemis is an archer goddess). The Maids see their hanging from the boat, according to this reading, as a connection to the **sea**, whose tides are dictated by the moon.

The Maids' understanding of themselves as worshippers of a goddess cult in this reading of the text renders the events of the novel more female-focused, centering women and the female experience rather than Odysseus's masculine adventures. Their reading does, however, seem somewhat overly schematic, as they fit each aspect of the millennia-old myth neatly into their reading.

The Maids, supposedly responding to a question from the audience, agree that the number of lunar months is actually not twelve, but thirteen. They say that they were, in fact, thirteen counting the "High Priestess" Penelope. According to the Maids, all together this reading shows that **the Maids' deaths** are a metaphor for the overthrow of a matriarchal cult of the moon by a patriarchal, male-god-worshipping religion. Odysseus's marriage to Penelope was his way of cementing his power, according to the Maids.

The Maids finally make their radical reading explicit here, suggesting that their deaths represent the overthrow of matriarchy by patriarchy. The Maids' argument that Penelope and Odysseus's marriage is Odysseus's way of cementing power over this matriarchal moon cult suggests that marriage is a means for subjugating women.

Responding to a critic in the audience, the Maids deny that their theory is "feminist claptrap." They say that they understand that subjects like rape and murder are unpleasant, but assert that there is plenty of archeological evidence that such overthrows did occur. The Maids associate the axes that the Maids were not killed with to the axes of the Great Mother cult of the Minoans.

The audience member's question seems to call their reading "feminist claptrap." With this comment and the Maids' frustrated, evidence-heavy response, Atwood critiques the high level of resistance to feminist and women-focused readings in modern academia.

Prior to male-dominated society, the winner of the bow-shooting contest that Penelope initiated would have become King for a year and then would be hanged and have his genitals torn off to ensure a good harvest. However, Odysseus did not fulfill this role, and instead tore off the genitals of a goatherd and **hung** the Maids.

The female-dominated society that the Maids describe being metaphorically overthrown, although better for women than Greek society was, seems to have been brutal and oppressive to men.

The Maids state that they could continue to prove their point that the story could be read as an allegory for the male overthrow of female-run society. They then say that, if readers think about the Maids as an allegory and as symbols, they don't have to think about them as real girls who experienced real pain and injustice.

Although the Maids have just laid out this highly metaphorical, radically women-focused reading, they also suggest that such a symbolic reading can distract from their humanity and the real pain of their deaths. It's easy to lose sight of individual human suffering when it's viewed through lenses of history, metaphor, or myth.

CHAPTER 25: HEART OF FLINT

This chapter returns to Penelope's first-person narrative as she describes her feelings after the Suitors and the Maids were **murdered**. Penelope had pretended not to believe that it was Odysseus who had killed the Suitors, continuing to pretend that she had not recognized him. She worried about how she would seem to Odysseus now that she was so much older.

Although Penelope professes to be upset at the Maids' deaths, her actions suggest she is disturbingly unfazed. Instead, she mostly worries about whether Odysseus will find her sexually desirable. This casts doubt on the genuineness of the distress that Penelope says she feels.

When she left the women's hall and went to the main one where Odysseus and Telemachus were sitting, she did not greet Odysseus right away—and Telemachus criticized Penelope for not welcoming him. Although Penelope loves Telemachus, she wished then for a second Trojan War to send Telemachus away to so he wouldn't be there to boss her around. Penelope continued to act coldly towards Odysseus, thinking that her skepticism toward him would make him believe that she had been faithful all those years, and had not just welcomed any strange man into her home.

Penelope does act coldly towards Odysseus when she greets him, so she may hold him accountable for his murders after all. Penelope's wish for a second Trojan War to get Telemachus out of her hair, meanwhile, is peculiar, since Penelope claims to have missed Odysseus desperately during his absence. It seems that Penelope may have enjoyed her independence more than she let the reader know—or else she just prefers her husband that much more to her son.

Penelope told Odysseus that he couldn't be her husband, since he, unbathed, looked so unlike the clean, well-dressed man she knew. When Odysseus returned clean, Penelope then ordered Eurycleia to move the bed in Odysseus's room, the one with the bedpost still in the ground. Odysseus, thinking it had been cut, became furious, and then Penelope pretended like this convinced her of his true identity.

Penelope's desire and need to trick Odysseus and make him believe that she is only just discovering his identity is peculiar, and shows how much their relationship lacks trust and mutual respect. Penelope's secrecy has also led to terrible consequences, notably the murder of the Maids.

Penelope and Odysseus then climbed into their marriage bed, which had gone unused for so long. Before they had sex, Penelope commented on how much older they now were. Afterward, Odysseus told Penelope stories of his travels that feature monsters and goddess, recounting all the lies and stories he told in order to deceive his way out of bad situations. Penelope then told Odysseus about the Suitors and her fake **weaving** project. Odysseus told Penelope how much he missed her, and Penelope said the same, asserting that she had always been faithful. Penelope says that they both were "shameless liars."

Again, it seems strange that Penelope contentedly goes to bed with Odysseus after his decades long absence, his rumored affairs, and his murder of twelve of her friends and confidantes. Along with Penelope's admission that she is a "shameless liar" right after her insistence that she has always been faithful, this suggests the rumors about Penelope's infidelity and scapegoating of the Maids may be at least partly true.

Soon after Odysseus returned home, he left again to attempt to purify himself after the Suitors' murders and pacify Poseidon, and thereby satisfy a prophecy he heard while traveling. Penelope calls it "a likely story."

Penelope's labeling of Odysseus's second departure as a "likely story" is clearly sarcastic, since it seems pretty clear that both Penelope and Odysseus know he is lying.

CHAPTER 26: THE CHORUS LINE: THE TRIAL OF ODYSSEUS, AS VIDEOTAPED BY THE MAIDS

This chapter, taking up the Maids' perspective, takes the form of a transcript of a videotape of an imagined trial for Odysseus. The chapter opens with Odysseus's defense attorney asserting Odysseus's innocence in the **murders** of the Suitors and the Maids. The Attorney suggests that it was justified for Odysseus to kill the Suitors since they had been eating his food without permission and had plotted to kill Telemachus.

In this chapter, Atwood actively engages with the idea of justice, imagining what it might be like if Odysseus were brought to trial in a modern court. This modern court reflects the reader's own headspace while reading The Penelopiad *or the* Odyssey, *as the reader is forced to judge Odysseus for themselves.*

Apparently, the prosecutor finds Odysseus's reaction to have been an overreaction, especially since the Suitors offered to compensate him for his losses. However, the defense attorney notes that the men did nothing to try to respect Odysseus's estate and family, and so their word was not necessarily trustworthy. The defense attorney comments that the Suitors had no reason not to murder Odysseus, and so his actions could be proactive self-defense. The defense attorney asks that the judge dismiss the case. The judge states that he is inclined to agree.

The defense attorney's argument focuses on Odysseus's property rights as an excuse for killing the Suitors—a problematic argument to say the least, especially considering that a significant portion of Odysseus's property was made up of slaves, and slavery clearly conflicts with modern morality and law. But this line of argument is effective in the modern court, however, as the judge agrees.

In response, the Twelve Maids, with ropes around their necks, yell and cause a commotion in the courthouse, alleging that Odysseus **hanged them** as well. The judge says that this allegation is new, and asks to hear the lawyers' arguments about it. The defense attorney says that since the women were his slaves, killing them was within his rights.

The fact that the judge has never heard the Maids' allegation against Odysseus before perhaps speaks to the fact that readings of the Odyssey *have been focused on men and not women. Meanwhile, the defense attorney continues to argue for property rights.*

The judge, unsatisfied, asks what they did to be **hanged**. The defense attorney states that they, the "best-looking" and "most beddable" Maids, had sex without permission with the Suitors. The judge leafs through the *Odyssey*, saying that they need to consult it since it is "the main authority on the subject," even though it has too much sex and violence. The judge points to a passage saying that the maids, who were totally unprotected, were raped, and asks the defense attorney if that is true.

Although the judge seemed taken with property rights arguments initially, he draws the line at slavery as justification for murder. Yet the judge also sees the Odyssey *as the only authoritative text about the murders, and uses the male-focused text, rather than the Maids' own testimony, to "prove" that they were raped.*

The defense attorney says he does not know, since it was three or four thousand years before. The judge calls Penelope for a witness, who says she was asleep, and can only recount what the maids told her, which was that they were raped. The judge asks if she believed them, and Penelope says she "tended to."

Penelope's support for the Maids is lukewarm, as she says she "tended to" believe them, and she cannot verify their statements, despite the fact that Penelope earlier said that she herself took care of the girls who were raped.

The judge notes that the Maids were frequently rude, and asks why Penelope did not punish them. Penelope states that they were like daughters to her. She starts to cry and says she felt sorry for them, but notes that "most maids got raped" at some point. Anyway, Penelope states, it was not their rapes that were the problem, but the fact that they were raped "without permission."

The trial deviates from accusations of Odysseus's murders as the judge focuses on irrelevant details of the Maids' behavior, like the fact that they were "rude"—a classic example of victim-blaming, a practice that (as Atwood points out with bitter irony) has not changed even in "modern" times. Penelope, meanwhile, does not admit that the Maids were spying on the Suitors for her.

The judge laughs and asks if that is not the definition of rape, and the defense attorney clarifies that she means their master's permission. The judge points out that Odysseus was not there to give permission, and that, whether the maids consented or not, they would be forced to sleep with the Suitors. However, the judge concedes that Odysseus's times "were not our times" and that standards of behavior were different. He then states that he would not want to let such a "minor incident" ruin Odysseus's career, and that he would not want his condemning Odysseus to seem anachronistic. Hence, the judge dismisses the case.

As Penelope and the judge discuss the sickening idea of "rape without permission," Atwood highlights how the Maids' slave status practically guarantees that they will experience gendered violence. The judge's familiar, modern statement that he does not want to stain Odysseus's "career" undermines his argument that he cannot judge Odysseus because his times were so different—clearly, they are largely still the same.

The Maids begin to yell, demanding justice and calling on the Furies. The Furies appear, and the Maids ask them to inflict punishment on Odysseus and hunt him down, never letting him rest. The Furies poise themselves to attack Odysseus. The defense attorney then calls on Athene to defend Odysseus's "property rights" and protect Odysseus. The Judge, confused and shocked, demands order in the court as it dissolves into chaos.

When the judge fails to deliver the justice that the Maids hope for, they call upon the mythological Furies, female goddesses whose job is to enact vengeance on men. The modern justice system, rather than rectifying the injustice done to the maids in the past, offers no punishment for Odysseus and so they are forced to call upon more ancient and brutal forces. This scene of Athena vs. the Furies also echoes Aeschylus's play The Eumenides.

CHAPTER 27: HOME LIFE IN HADES

This chapter returns to Penelope's first-person narrative as she describes a recent look into the world of mortals after a medium opened up a connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Penelope says that it's "amazing" how the living will not leave the dead alone, and mentions how, in her own time on earth, Sibyls were the ones who messed with fate and the dead, but at least they had more manners than modern magicians.

Penelope's comments on how the living will not leave the dead alone, and how this trend has continued from Greek time through modern times, suggests how Ancient Greeks and modern people might not be so different in how they process mortality, as they all show interest in the afterlife and communicating with the dead.

According to Penelope, modern people only want to know about the economy and world politics and converse with people like "Marilyn" and "Adolf," who Penelope does not know. Through using these windows opened by magicians, however, Penelope can keep track of Odysseus.

Atwood again slips into a more satirical and even humorous tone as she describes Penelope's experience of the afterlife and modern times.

Penelope then explains how spirits can be reborn by drinking from the "**Waters** of Forgetfulness," wiping their past lives from their memories. Penelope notes, though, that this does not work especially well, and lots of people remember everything. According to Penelope, Helen has used this option a lot, and when she returns she tells Penelope all about the changes in fashion trends, and then about how many empires and men she ruined.

As Penelope discusses the "waters of forgetfulness," she shows an aspect of Greek spiritual life that does not exist in Christianity: reincarnation. Through this ability to be reborn into modern society, the Ancient Greeks track changes in culture that perplex them, just as their culture confuses modern people.

Penelope informs Helen that interpretations of the Trojan War have changed—now everyone thinks Helen was a myth and the war was really about trade routes. Helen tells Penelope not to be jealous, and says that Penelope should come with her to the world of the living so they can take a trip to Las Vegas. She then remarks that Penelope would probably rather stay at home like a good wife since she, unlike Helen, is a "homebody."

Penelope's comment to Helen about how people now think that she is a myth is humorous. It also suggests that, while many myths are likely not true, it's possible that in dismissing these myths people might fail to recognize real history and truth in the stories. Helen and Penelope's competition, meanwhile, continues even thousands of years later.

Penelope admits that she is right, and that she will never drink from the **Waters** of Forgetfulness because she cannot take the risk. After all, the next life may be even worse. Penelope thinks the modern world is just as dangerous as the ancient one, and human nature is as bad as ever.

Penelope's conclusion that human nature has not improved suggests that narratives of progress are incorrect (or at least incomplete), and society has changed without necessarily improving.

Odysseus, Penelope notes, drinks the **water** very often. When he comes back to the afterlife, he acts happy to see Penelope and tells her that home life with her is all he ever wanted. They take walks and tell stories together as Odysseus tells her what Telemachus, also living next lives, is up to. Then, just when Penelope is starting to believe she can forgive Odysseus and they can be together, Odysseus goes and gets reborn again.

Odysseus's choice to drink the water and be reborn repeatedly means that he and Penelope must replay their separation and Odysseus's homecoming over and over again in afterlife. Penelope, though she recognizes this cycle, still gets her hopes up every time, unable to resist the idea of a loving husband.

Penelope thinks that Odysseus means it when he says he wants to be with her, but that "some forces" always tear them apart. Penelope believes this force is the Maids, who will not leave him be in the afterlife. In his rebirths, Odysseus has lived all kinds of different lives, with each of them ending badly. Penelope yells at the Maids, asking why they will not leave Odysseus alone, and what more they want from him. In response, they only glide away with their feet twitching like they did in **death**, not touching the floor.

Penelope's conviction that it is the Maids that drive her and Odysseus apart seems misguided, since Odysseus chose to stay away from Ithaca after the Trojan War of his own accord (or, alternatively, because of Poseidon, but Atwood heavily suggests that this is a lie). Penelope blames the Maids for her separation from Odysseus, scapegoating them even after their deaths.

CHAPTER 28: THE CHORUS LIKE: WE'RE WALKING BEHIND YOU, A LOVE SONG

This chapter resumes the Maid's commentary. First, they call Odysseus a number of names, from "Master of Illusion" to "Mr. Sleight of Hand." They, the twelve chore girls, assert that they are also present and nameless. They list details about their lives as if to jog Odysseus's memory. They ask if Odysseus remembers them and then says that "of course" he does, since they bathed him, did his laundry, made his bed, laughed at his jokes, etc. They then comment on how righteous he felt after **hanging them**.

The Maids goad Odysseus, trying to make him confront the violence that he subjected them to and the fact that, before he killed them, they had complex, real lives. They also reiterate how close they were with Odysseus, since they performed chores for him and served him, suggesting that Odysseus has repaid this service poorly.

The Maids assert that Odysseus should have given them a proper burial. Now, they follow Odysseus wherever he goes, tailing him and appearing accusatorily as corpses. They ask again why he **murdered them**, and then state that it was an "honour killing." The Maids tease Odysseus, telling him to look over his shoulder at them, and saying that they will never leave him alone.

The Maids describe their murders as "honour killings," which are murders of promiscuous women for the sake of a man's honor. By evoking these modern murders, the Maids connect their murders to a global tradition of violence against women.

CHAPTER 29: ENVOI

The final chapter of *The Penelopiad* is in the form of a poem narrated by the Maids. They say that they were voiceless, nameless, and without any choice, and that they unfairly took the blame. Now, they say, they follow Odysseus and call out to him. The Maids transform into owls and then fly away.

In the closing section of the text, the Maids remind the reader that, as slave women, they lacked voices and names to tell their story, and as a result, they were unable to defend themselves against slander. In a nod to other Greek tales of metamorphosis, Atwood then ends her book on this haunting note.

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