

The Feminine Loss of Glorious Battle: The Emerged Voice of the Ithaca Queen

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Abstract

In the course of epics and their retellings pointing out characters specially the females who had been suppressed either by some intent or not; hard to name, they hold also significant place. Their roles got the desired attention late but in the retellings by the writers of their category. These writers realised and raised the voices of the females from the bottom to the top using a strong, dignified language while writing the roles uplifting. This paper discusses how feminist epic retellings reclaim the silenced voices of women through the language used in texts, especially in which the female characters are portrayed, offering a powerful subversion of patriarchal narratives in Margret Atwood's '*The Penelopiad*', and examining how Penelope and her long-confined margins in Homer's *Odyssey* reclaims her story and repositions herself as both the narrator and critic of the epic tradition. They reorient the epic not towards glorification but critique, reminding the readers that the silence of women in epic narratives is not accidental but structural and that reclaiming voice is a political act. Text like '*The Penelopiad*', the new narrative forces the reader with questions such as class, injustice, and power. Atwood's work not only gives voice to the voiceless, who are historically voiceless—willingly or unwillingly, but also critiques the literary canon's complicity in maintaining hierarchies of gender and class.

Keywords: Epic, Narrative, Portrayal of Female Characters, Rewriting Epic, Evolution of Culture, Hierarchy of Gender and Class.

Introduction

What are the points which can be considered as the highest form of human endurance from the past to the present? Epic literature has long stood as a monumental space where valour, conquest, and heroic endurance are celebrated as the highest forms of human achievement. Within these grand narratives, battles are glorified, warriors immortalized, and masculine strength enshrined as the centre of cultural memory. Yet beneath this radiant surface of heroic triumph lies another history one shaped not by victory but by waiting, endurance, and unacknowledged suffering. The feminine presence in epics, though indispensable to the narrative structure, is frequently confined to silence, patience, and loyalty. Women remain central yet unheard visible yet narratively restrained. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope occupies a space that is both powerful and limited. She is the faithful wife, the guardian of Ithaca, and the emblem of constancy. However, her interior struggles, her anxieties, and her interpretations of the events unfolding around her remain largely mediated through the masculine epic voice. The war that establishes Odysseus' glory simultaneously produces Penelope's prolonged isolation. While the battlefield becomes a site of masculine fame, the domestic sphere becomes a site of feminine loss. This contrast exposes a structural

imbalance within epic storytelling one that privileges action over endurance and conquest over survival. Contemporary feminist retellings, particularly Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, intervene in this imbalance by relocating narrative authority. The retelling does not merely re-narrate events; it interrogates the tradition that framed them by allowing Penelope to speak in her own voice, the text transforms her from a symbol within the epic into a commentator upon it. Her narration repositions the epic from unquestioned celebration to reflective critique. Through irony, memory, and self-awareness, she exposes the constructed nature of heroic glory and reveals the cost borne by those left behind.

The inclusion of the twelve maids further unsettles the epic's moral stability. Their collective voice introduces concerns of class, injustice, and institutionalized violence, expanding the discussion of marginality beyond gender alone. In this way, the retelling not only restores a suppressed feminine perspective but also challenges the hierarchical structures embedded in canonical literature. The emergence of the Ithacan queen's voice signifies more than narrative revision; it signals a re-evaluation of epic authority itself. The glorified battle, once viewed as the pinnacle of cultural achievement, is re-examined through the lens of feminine experience, where loss replaces triumph and endurance replaces spectacle. The act of speaking becomes an act of reclaiming, and the previously confined margin becomes a site of critical visibility.

Epic Glory vs Feminine Loss

Epic narratives traditionally celebrate war as a space of honour, courage, and immortal fame. In classical epics like Homer's *Odyssey*, battle becomes the highest proof of masculine strength. Warriors are remembered for their bravery, their victories, and their endurance in dangerous circumstances. Their names are preserved in poetry, and their struggles are narrated with admiration. War, in this framework, is not only a political event but a cultural achievement. It creates heroes and builds legends. However, while epic literature glorifies battle, it rarely pays equal attention to those who suffer its consequences outside the battlefield. The war that brings fame to the warrior often brings uncertainty, fear, and loneliness to those left behind. This difference creates a sharp contrast between heroic glory and domestic suffering. The epic celebrates movement, conquest, and action; yet it remains largely silent about waiting, anxiety, and emotional endurance. Penelope's position in the *Odyssey* clearly reflects this imbalance. Odysseus becomes the celebrated hero of Troy, known for his intelligence and bravery. His long journey home adds further glory to his name. But Penelope's story is defined not by adventure but by waiting. For twenty years, she remains in Ithaca, surrounded by suitors, pressured by society, and uncertain whether her husband is alive or dead. Her struggle is continuous but invisible. Unlike Odysseus, she cannot travel, fight, or openly express anger. Her resistance is quiet and strategic. She weaves and unweaves the burial shroud to delay remarriage, using intelligence rather than physical power. Yet even this cleverness is framed within her role as a faithful wife rather than as an independent thinker. This difference shows how epic tradition values certain kinds of experiences over others. Masculine suffering in war is presented as noble and meaningful. Feminine suffering in the domestic sphere is treated as natural and expected. The battlefield becomes a place of recognition; the home becomes a place of silence. The emotional labor of waiting, fearing, and maintaining stability does not receive the same admiration as physical combat. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* directly challenges this imbalance. By allowing Penelope to narrate her own story, Atwood shifts the focus from heroic adventure to personal loss. Penelope speaks not as a symbol of loyalty but as a woman who has endured confusion, isolation, and social pressure. She questions the way her story has been told and re-examines the meaning of heroism. Through her voice, the "glorious"

war appears less romantic and more destructive. The long absence of Odysseus is no longer only a heroic journey; it becomes a period of emotional abandonment and political instability and the twelve maids introduce another layer of feminine loss. In the original epic, they are executed for alleged disloyalty, and their deaths are briefly justified. In *The Penelopiad*, however, they speak collectively, expressing their anger and demanding justice. Their perspective exposes the violence hidden beneath heroic restoration. The return of the hero results not only in order but also in punishment and death. The epic ending, which once symbolized triumph, now appears morally troubling. Through this retelling, the contrast between epic glory and feminine loss becomes clear. What was once praised as victory is revealed to carry emotional and social costs. The heroic narrative depends on silence especially the silence of women and servants. When these silenced voices begin to speak, the meaning of glory changes. War is no longer only a site of honour; it becomes a source of separation, trauma, and inequality. The shift from epic celebration to feminine narration does not merely add another viewpoint; it transforms the understanding of the epic itself. The battlefield may produce fame, but the home bears the weight of its consequences. In recognizing this imbalance, feminist retellings question the traditional hierarchy that values action over endurance and conquest over survival. Penelope's voice, therefore, does not simply retell the story; it exposes the hidden losses that made the hero's glory possible.

Narrative Authority and the Politics of Voice

In epic literature, authority does not only belong to kings and warriors; it also belongs to the narrator. The one who tells the story controls how events are understood, which characters are praised, and which experiences are minimized or ignored. In traditional epics like Homer's *Odyssey*, the narrative voice is external, elevated, and largely aligned with masculine heroism. The poet determines what is important, and this structure naturally privileges the journey of Odysseus over the experiences of those who remain in Ithaca. Thus, narrative authority becomes a powerful tool in shaping cultural memory.

Penelope, in the original epic, is spoken about more than she is allowed to speak. Her faithfulness is described, her beauty is admired, and her cleverness is acknowledged. However, her inner doubts, frustrations, and interpretations are filtered through the epic voice. She functions within the story but does not control it. Her identity is constructed through the expectations of loyalty, patience, and obedience. In this sense, her silence is not simply a personal condition but a structural outcome of how epic narratives is designed. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* disrupts this structure by shifting narrative authority directly to Penelope. The story is no longer told about her; it is told by her. This change may appear simple, but it carries deep political implications. When a previously marginal figure becomes the narrator, the hierarchy of importance begins to change. Events that were once central may become secondary, and overlooked experiences gain prominence. By speaking in the first person, Penelope transforms from an object within the epic to a subject who evaluates and questions it.

This shift also exposes how storytelling itself can sustain power structures. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is repeatedly allowed to narrate his own adventures. His version of events becomes accepted truth. In contrast, Penelope's perspective remains absent. Atwood's retelling challenges this imbalance by allowing Penelope to comment on the myths surrounding her husband. She questions his faithfulness, his motives, and even the heroic image that tradition has preserved. In doing so, she does not simply add another voice; she interrogates the authority that once silenced her. The politics of voice becomes even more complex with the inclusion of the twelve maids. In Homer's epic, they are executed for alleged betrayal, and their deaths are briefly justified as necessary punishment. They are denied explanation, defense, or

individuality. In *The Penelopiad*, however, they speak collectively through songs, poems, and dramatic interludes. Their chorus challenges the legitimacy of their punishment and demands recognition. Their voices reveal that justice in the epic world often serves those in power. By granting them space to speak, the retelling questions not only gender hierarchy but also class hierarchy.

Voice, therefore, is not merely a matter of expression; it is connected to authority, legitimacy, and power. To speak is to interpret, to define meaning, and to challenge dominant narratives. When Penelope narrates her own story, she reclaims interpretative control. She reshapes her identity from the silent, faithful wife into a thinking, remembering, and judging subject. Similarly, the maids' collective voice exposes the violence hidden beneath heroic restoration. What once appeared as the return of rightful order now appears as a continuation of structural injustice. The language used in *The Penelopiad* plays a crucial role in this political shift. Atwood employs irony, humor, and modern expressions, which create distance from the solemn tone of epic tradition. This stylistic choice prevents the narrative from becoming another unquestioned legend. Instead, it invites readers to reconsider the reliability of heroic myths. Through this language, Penelope is not idealized; she is humanized. She acknowledges jealousy, resentment, and vulnerability. This honesty strengthens her authority because it refuses the simplified image imposed by tradition. Thus, narrative authority becomes central to understanding feminist retellings. By transferring the power of storytelling from the heroic center to the marginal figure, the text performs a structural reversal. The once-silenced character gains control over representation, while the celebrated hero becomes subject to scrutiny. This reversal does not erase the epic; rather, it reinterprets it. It shows that stories are not neutral records of events but constructions shaped by those who hold the right to speak.

In this way, the emergence of the Ithacan queen's voice represents more than personal expression. It signifies a challenge to the literary canon's authority and to the cultural values embedded within it. The act of narration becomes an act of resistance not through confrontation alone, but through reinterpretation. By reclaiming her voice, Penelope reshapes the meaning of heroism, loyalty, and justice. The epic tradition, once centered on masculine glory, is compelled to confront the voices it had long confined to silence.

Conclusion

The movement from epic celebration to feminine narration marks a significant shift in how classical texts are understood and interpreted. In traditional epic literature, heroic glory stands at the centre of meaning. War, adventure, and masculine endurance are elevated as the highest expressions of human achievement. Yet, this celebration depends on a silence that remains largely unquestioned – the silence of women, servants, and those who endure the consequences of conflict without recognition. The glory of battle is made visible, but the cost of that glory remains hidden within the domestic sphere.

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* challenges this imbalance by repositioning the narrative lens. By granting Penelope the authority to tell her own story, the retelling disrupts the hierarchy embedded within epic tradition. Penelope no longer appears merely as the faithful wife who waits patiently for the hero's return. She becomes a reflective voice who re-examines the meaning of loyalty, justice, and heroism. Through her narration, the epic is no longer an unquestioned monument of masculine triumph; it becomes a space of inquiry and critique. The inclusion of the twelve maids further intensifies this transformation. Their collective voice exposes the violence concealed beneath the restoration of order. Their deaths, once briefly justified in the epic, are now presented as acts of injustice shaped by both gender and class hierarchy. In allowing them to speak, the retelling expands the discussion of marginality and reveals how

structural power operates not only through silence but also through narrative omission. Thus, the emergence of the Ithacan queen's voice represents more than a literary revision. It signifies a broader re-evaluation of how stories are constructed and whose experiences are validated. The feminine loss that once remained in the shadows of heroic glory is brought into focus, compelling readers to reconsider the moral foundation of epic narratives. Reclaiming voice becomes an act of restoring complexity to history and literature. It challenges the assumption that glory is universal and reveals that triumph for some often entails suffering for others. In this sense, feminist epic retellings do not aim to erase tradition but to question its priorities. By transforming silence into articulation, they demonstrate that the margins are not empty spaces but sites of suppressed knowledge and experience. The voice of the Ithacan queen stands as a reminder that narrative authority shapes cultural memory, and that revisiting canonical texts through marginalized perspectives is both a literary and political act. Through this reclamation, the epic is not destroyed; it is redefined – no longer centred solely on battle and conquest, but attentive to endurance, injustice, and the unseen cost of glory.

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