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THE ODYSSEY'S RE-VISION: FEMALE AGENCY AND WOMEN SHAMING WOMEN IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S "HELEN OF TROY DOES COUNTERTOP DANCING" AND THE PENELOPiad

By

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Homer’s *Odyssey* details not only the trials of the legendary man Odysseus, but also the customs and culture of Ancient Greece. The *Odyssey*’s story began in oral form, passed down from generation to generation, constantly reinterpreted and revised first inherently by the nature of oration and later by authors who translated and transformed the classical text. However, these interpretations and revisions have always been created by a man: the women’s voices in the *Odyssey* have rarely been heard. Margaret Atwood, in her contemporary writings, has attempted to provide alternative perspectives on the *Odyssey* by giving voice to Penelope in her novella *The Penelopiad* and Helen in her poem “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing.” The *Odyssey* acts as one of the foundational texts of the literary canon, and although it cannot be used as a direct historical text, it does reflect many of the cultural tendencies of Ancient Greek society. Since many Western countries have been founded on the ideological and cultural aspects of Ancient Greece, imagining and examining the voices of Penelope and Helen helps to show history from an alternate perspective thereby influencing the way we view cultures of the past and present. The roles assigned to women can be, to a great extent, traced back to Ancient Greek ideas and have developed over time; Atwood’s contemporary texts work to reveal the way that women have begun to escape and transcend those roles assigned to them. She throws women’s roles in Ancient Greece versus today into stark contrast. Her works not only outline the ways in which women have been able to gain some semblance of power and tear down patriarchal ideology, but also reveal what women still need to do in order to gain full agency.

Atwood’s rewritings follow in the footsteps of many female authors intent on revising male-written canonical literature, such as Sylvia Plath, H.D., and Louise Gluck. By writing Penelope and Helen’s perspectives, Atwood sets these historical women up to gain agency and power, to transcend the ideology of the patriarchy, through two main forms of agency retrieval:
giving Penelope and Helen voices to speak their perspectives and having Penelope and Helen reclaim their bodies after men have tried to appropriate them. In Penelope’s narration, Atwood asserts Penelope’s voice into the world and calls into question the veracity and completeness of the *Odyssey*’s account. Penelope challenges the authority of the author, thereby both calling into question her own authority as an author while also setting up her account as one point of view amongst many. Penelope also reveals the ways in which her body has been appropriated and speaks against this commoditization. Similarly, Helen addresses the commoditization of her own body; she gains agency by reversing the male gaze and asserting her body as whole. Atwood shows Helen as a woman with the power to rise above the social constructions of “woman” and assert herself as a completely new figure. While Penelope tends to work within the structures already set up for her within the patriarchy in order to gain power, Helen attempts to transcend the patriarchal confines altogether. Through these revisionist myths, Atwood takes characters previously silenced and subjugated by the patriarchy and begins to give them their own agency.

However, both Penelope and Helen’s agency is threatened by the presence of women shaming women in both texts. In essence, “shaming” occurs when a woman berates or judges another women for her behavior, undermining the shamed woman’s agency and bolstering the shamer’s supposed power. This shaming occurs in Atwood’s texts on two different levels: patriarchal women shaming subversive women with agency and women with agency shaming patriarchal women. The former category shows the women in “Helen of Troy” immersed in the patriarchy protecting the ideology of the patriarchy from Helen in order to protect the privileges they gain from its existence. The latter shows Penelope shaming *The Penelopiad*’s Helen for upholding the ideology of the patriarchy; Penelope attempts to gain power through the subjugation of another, which is exactly the system that she is trying to escape from. Atwood
uses both types of shaming to comment on the one missing piece necessary for agency: women supporting other women. This gynocentric misogyny ultimately works against Penelope and Helen as it does not allow for them to reach their full potential as women with agency.

WOMEN IN ANCIENT GREECE

"...a song of loathing / will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation / of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous." (Homer 24.200-02)

A crucial aspect of Atwood’s rewritings, especially in Penelope’s perspective, is women’s roles in the past as seen by contemporary eyes. The Penelopiad acts as Penelope’s forum to comment on her role in Ancient Greece with the knowledge and understanding that she has as a contemporary woman (albeit one who is in the Underworld). Likewise, Helen in “Helen of Troy” is a modern-day stripper, alive and active in the contemporary world, but her role in Ancient Greece follows her into this context. Therefore, understanding the background of women’s roles in Ancient Greece is not only important for understanding the roles that both Penelope and Helen once had to subscribe to, but also important for understanding the ways in which they eventually subvert and transcend those roles.

According to Hesiod’s Works and Days and Theogeny, two texts that relate the Ancient Greek creationist mythology, woman was created as a punishment for man. In this well known creation story, woman was only created in retribution against man and she is already set out to be a bringer of evil. When Prometheus steals fire from the gods, they retaliate by creating Pandora as a “gift.” Her body is molded from clay and the gods teach her to weave, charm, and incite desire. Man lived without harm until Pandora “opens up her jar, and scatters all the pains and evils of the world among its inhabitants” (Blundell 23). Womankind begins with Pandora, and
man suffers for her existence; yet man cannot live without woman, unless he wishes to have no successors and no one to take care of him in his old age (23). Such negative outlooks on women pervade historical and literary texts from Ancient Greece. While Hesiod’s texts may not be all-encompassing or entirely accurate (as they were written by one man and ultimately represent that one man’s views), they can be taken to represent the views of women’s roles in Ancient Greece. In other words, Hesiod, as a man connected to society, most likely assimilated the prevailing cultural ideas about women and wrote those ideas down, reinforcing them within society; we can therefore view his works as a reflection of that culture, especially as his ideas are supported by various other Ancient Greek texts.

Much of the historical evidence we have about women in Ancient Greece describes Athenian women, and a significant portion of what we know of Athenian women stems from what we know of Athenian men. A man in ancient Greece was expected to act as head of his household, or oikos, which “Greek writers tend to equate...as an economic unit” (Murray 249). The oikos was more than just a man’s immediate family, but extended to include slaves and any dependent relatives (249). For instance, Odysseus’s oikos in the Odyssey consisted not only of his wife Penelope and son Telemachus, but also of all the slaves and servants. A man’s responsibility to his oikos was not only to be the financial support for the family, but also to act as the maintainer of order, the protector of women, and the religious official to the entire family (Murray 249; Parker 311). In the classical period, men were the public figure of the oikos, representing their entire household to the public and in the political arena.

Homer’s Odyssey gives us a narrative example of the oikos and the roles that both men and women played in its upkeep. When Odysseus left for the Trojan war, the position he had as the public figure and maintainer of order was left without a man to fill it. In many ways, as the
*Odyssey* relates, Penelope took on the responsibilities as head of the *oikos*, but was unable to stop the suitors from taking over the castle and eating up all of Odysseus’s household food. Susan Blundell asserts that “a woman [Penelope] has been playing a man’s role, and though she has shown great bravery, resolution, and cunning – great heroism, in fact – she has not been able to prevent the disruption of the established social and economic structures” (56). Only in the beginning of the *Odyssey*’s storyline, twenty years after Odysseus’s departure, does Telemachus begin to assert himself as the head of the *oikos*. Meanwhile, throughout the course of Telemachus’s life and Odysseus’s absence, Penelope is left at home with the suitors, unable to speak up within her dictated role as a woman and in no way recognized as the head of the household; her temporary role as such is highly irregular and inappropriate in connection to societal norms. Essentially, Penelope recognizes the lack of order in the household, but, because of her role as “woman,” is unable to wield the power necessary to control the chaos. The men – most notably the suitors, but also Telemachus – overpower her when she tries to speak up against them and collectively put her back in her place, which only allows her to weave and silently live her days out (Homer 1.356-364).

Part of the persistence of the suitors, as well as potential conflict with Telemachus, had to do with Penelope’s dowry. Upon marriage, a woman in Ancient Greece was given to her husband along with a dowry; even though the dowry was connected to a woman, her father or guardian was in control of it until it passed into the hands of her husband. If a woman’s husband were to die, her dowry would transfer to her new guardian or husband (Murray 250). When Penelope married Odysseus, she brought with her a great deal of wealth as a dowry from her father, one of the kings of Sparta. If she were to remarry, Penelope’s dowry would belong to her new husband instead of being passed on to Telemachus. It was in the best interest of her
immediate family (mostly Telemachus) for Penelope not to remarry for as long as possible – fidelity and loyalty aside – even though this stalling led to the suitors eating up the products of Odysseus’s household (Homer 1.158-62). In addition to the threat of losing Penelope’s dowry, Telemachus also serves to lose his inheritance of Odysseus’s estate because of the suitors’ imposition.

When a man died in Ancient Greece, his property was distributed amongst his sons; in this sense, the family acted as a determiner of property rights and inheritance. In contrast, a woman was almost entirely without rights. Although Pericles’s citizenship laws, the first of their kind, included Athenian-born women as citizens of the polis, or city, a woman did not have any rights and her status as a citizen mainly served as a way to determine her son’s own Athenian citizenship (Murray 250). Women were unable to “enter into any transaction worth more than one medimnos of barley” or own any property, and they were always “under the protection of a kyrios, a guardian” (250). Before her marriage, a woman’s kyrios was her father or closest male relative. After marriage, a woman belonged to her husband, and it was her husband’s responsibility to protect her. If her husband were to die, the woman’s son or other male relative would become her kyrios. Essentially, a woman was unable to own property as she herself was considered the property of a man. In the Odyssey, both Penelope and Helen are the property of their husbands. When Helen runs off with Paris, Menelaus, her husband, wages war with Paris in order to take back the property that Paris has stolen – not to retrieve his wife who had made a choice to leave. Likewise, the suitors treat Penelope as an object to be purchased or won, not as a woman.

Penelope and Helen’s roles fall more in line with the Athenian ideals rather than Spartan. From what we do know of Sparta, women in Sparta had a lot more freedom. They were able to
participate in state-prescribed public education, could engage in athletics in the gymnasium, and were expected to have wit rather than be silent (Fantham et al. 59, 63). In fact, the act of maternity was seen as a type of servitude to the state much like serving as a soldier (de Beauvoir qtd. in Fantham et al. 56). While these Spartan ideas about women allow for women to have more agency, it is the Athenian ideals that have persisted, which stems to a great extent from the written materials that survived Athens. In Athens, the women in Sparta were seen as an anomaly and their roles in society were generally frowned upon. Aristotle “viewed Sparta as a *gynaiokratia* (that is, a state ruled by women), and as such, contrary to the natural hierarchy in which men were to rule women” (Fantham et al. 65). When Aristotle speaks of the “natural hierarchy,” he is referring to his position that men are naturally better than women based on their anatomy (190). As man’s body temperature is higher than woman’s, Aristotle claimed, man is better able to perform natural bodily functions and is therefore the image of perfection.

Preceding Aristotle’s ideas about woman’s hierarchical place, on the nature of the soul Plato related that man and woman were actually equal.

According to Plato, the soul was the most important aspect of a person’s being; the soul allows for knowledge, an understanding of beauty, and a conceptualization of the Truth. The body, on the other hand, was insignificant and only served to get in the way of true knowledge (Spelman 34). Elizabeth Spelman discusses how Plato believed that man and woman were equal when it came to the soul – each one had the same potential to gain understanding and there was no sexual difference in the quality of one’s soul (34). However, Plato often spoke of women diminishingly because he believed women were only concerned with the body (in terms of beauty and a focus on material things that benefit the body), which is the greatest forsaking of
the soul. Women were therefore less worthy of notice and should have been overpowered by men as only those concerned with the soul can achieve enlightenment and live a good life (34).

These two accounts of woman being less than man come from two of the greatest and most renowned philosophers in Western history. Their words have carried weight and pervaded Western culture and civilization throughout time. More importantly, their words are a representation of the ways in which women were viewed in Classical Greece, ways that women such as Penelope and Helen, as Atwood shows in her writings, have internalized as truth. Internalization, as Amy Allen states, “involves the process, either conscious or unconscious, by which a dominated individual comes to accept meanings and adopt practices that reflect and reinforce the power of the dominant individual” (269). People, both men and women, are a product of their culture, adopting the practices and ideologies that have become the norm within a society; they adopt these ideas, which eventually translates into certain behaviors. Women, as dominated individuals, internalize the roles set out for them by culture – which can and is influenced by various parties, including renowned philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato – influencing their ideas about how they should think and act. In Atwood’s texts, Penelope and Helen have to recognize the roles that have been set out for them in order to consciously break down the ideas that they have internalized.

THE ORIGIN OF THE PATRIARCHY OR THE DISCONNECTION OF MATRILINEAL GENEALOGY

Penelope and Helen have internalized these ideas of “woman,” so it is important to understand their origin in order to eventually transcend them. Many look at Ancient Greece as the origin of the patriarchy, but a great deal of the attitudes towards women seem to trace a bit
further back into Greek mythology. Although it is hard to determine the origin of patriarchal ideas, theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Gail Schwab think it is necessary in order to dispel the notion that the patriarchy has “always already” existed (Schwab 79). The phrase of “always already” refers to the idea that the patriarchy has never not existed, which makes the patriarchy seem as if it is a natural occurrence. When it is seen as such, the patriarchy gains the power of what I would call “natural right”: if it is natural then it should not be disputed. Therefore, without an answer to the origin of the patriarchy and with the assertion of it always already existing, Schwab believes that the tendencies and practices of the patriarchy will continue to be prevalent within society (79); no one wants to fight or transcend a system that seems to be the natural way of mankind and not a product of fallible man.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, argues that woman does not try to become her own subject because she lacks a link with other women (8). Woman, de Beauvoir claims, knows that she cannot survive without the link to man, and often benefits from the privilege that comes from supporting man (8); historically, she has needed man to protect her from harm and, biologically, to reproduce with. Her privileges include having some semblance of power and being taken care of by the men she identifies with. In addition, de Beauvoir discusses how women often identify more with the men that surround them than the other women and therefore have no concrete way to organize themselves; this leads to even more submission (without an alternative) and it often also leads to women policing other women in their behavior (10). De Beauvoir states that man is considered the Subject and woman the Other, but woman is not the only group of people that has been Othered (7). Typically, Othering happens when a group of people represent a minority and when that group has had some sort of historical event that led to their oppression. With these two qualities, these Others can find a way
to reverse the impacts of their Othering and transcend their oppression. Women are not a minority, as they make up half of the human population, and de Beauvoir cannot see any historical event that led to their oppression (8).

Unlike de Beauvoir’s belief that the patriarchy cannot be traced back to any one event, in her essay “Mothers, Sisters, and Daughters: Luce Irigaray and the Female Genealogical Line in the Stories of the Greeks,” Schwab reveals that the common consensus has always been that the origin of the patriarchy was founded on the parricide in *Oedipus*. However, Schwab herself argues that it was, in fact, the matricide in the *Oresteia* that acts as the foundation of civilization. In the *Oresteia*, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, kills his mother, Clytemnestra, in order to avenge his father’s murder. The Erinnyes (or Furies), as protectors of the matrilineal genealogy, seek to kill Orestes for murdering his mother, but Apollo hides Orestes from them. Athena intervenes as Zeus’s representative – and therefore an agent of the patriarchy – and convinces the Erinnyes to give up their power in exchange for being worshipped by man (87). This subsequent surrender of power and denial of protecting the matrilineal genealogy acts as the catalyst for the patriarchal state. In Irigaray’s *Marine Lover*, Irigaray relates the significance of this event by substituting Athena’s name with the term “femininity”: “A murder has occurred—femininity appeases the anger, calls for the blood to be forgotten, lulls vengeance to sleep with sweet words, promises homage, honor…. Femininity doubles the burial of the mother when she buries the chorus. So that Zeus may triumph” (qtd. in Schwab 87). Athena, in this event, is represented as everything a woman should be, which in the end suggests that a woman should uphold the patriarchy and allow for it to triumph over all else (87). In the context of ancient myth, Athena is a character that “neutralizes the threats that the female is felt to pose for the male and enlists female figures as willing participants in stable, male-dominated social structure” (Murnaghan
Athena’s offerings in the *Oresteia* were the “patriarchy’s perennial bribe to all women” as if saying when a woman behaves herself and strips herself of her power then she will gain the homage of men and receive certain privileges that man will afford her (Schwab 88). Furthermore, Schwab suggests that the actual matricide of Clytemnestra – and, tracing it back even further, Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia – shows a disconnection of the matrilineal genealogy, which she argues is the foundation of the patriarchy’s ability to prevail (88).

Typically, Athena is seen as a woman/goddess with agency throughout Greek mythology. However, as the *Oresteia* narrative indicates, as well as the *Odyssey*, Athena only has power in so far as it upholds the ideals of the patriarchy, or the patriarchal figure, Zeus (Murnaghan 63). Schwab also points out the ways in which the female character Electra creates circumstances for or perpetuates male ideals: by supporting the avengement of her father and despising her mother, thereby severing the mother/daughter link (87, 81). Often in Greek mythology, the women who seemingly possess agency only possess the power granted to them by men so that they may be able to uphold patriarchal ideals, or the women who do have agency are written as evil and demonic – they are to be feared. Margaret Atwood, in her essay “The Woman as Writer,” expresses how female writing is always described as bad/female or good/sexless, never good/female (222). Similarly, females in Ancient Greek mythology are either portrayed as bad, sexual beings or as having abandoned their sex and sexuality to uphold the patriarchy; as Murnaghan states, Athena, the exemplar of a female upholding the patriarchy, is a mixture of male and female, “posess[ing] none of the dangerous qualities typically associated with women” and being a virgin outside of the sexual realm (62). While these myths are in no way a historical account of women’s roles in Ancient Greece, they do help to illuminate the prevailing ideas and beliefs about women during those times.
The "always already" concept seems to subsist in de Beauvoir's assertions, but historical evidence suggests that Schwab and Irigaray may be correct in dispelling the notion of the patriarchy having always existed. Neolithic art – as an pre-historical indicator of civilization – suggests that the patriarchy did not exist in Neolithic times¹ (Eisler 442). According to these art depictions, many Neolithic societies were primarily Goddess-worshiping and considered the female to be the head of the clan and household rather than the man (443). The art suggests, and Eisler argues, that the prehistoric communities were actually more equalitarian rather than matriarchal in nature (448-49); the depictions of the Goddess contained none of the ruler/ruled dichotomy and lacked the prominence of weapons, suggesting there was no need for domineering (443). Instead, although women had more authority than men, the men were still seen as a necessary part of Neolithic civilizations, ones whose roles were appreciated in the society. Eisler explains the relationship between women and men as similar to the relationship between a woman and a child: the woman is in power, but that does not mean the child is not valuable (452). The women were the leaders of these Neolithic civilizations, but the men were needed in order for the group to succeed and survive. In addition to the Goddess that they worshipped, in the art there is a male divinity that seems to "affirm and strengthen the forces of the creative and active female. Neither [man nor woman] is subordinate to the other: by complementing one another, their power is doubled" (451). Therefore, Eisler argues that these civilizations cannot be seen as matriarchal as comparable to the current patriarchy, where women are seen as subjugated and lesser (449).

Eisler's research and discoveries indicate that there was, in fact, a time before the patriarchy and it follows that there could be a time when the patriarchy ceases to exist. Although

¹ The Neolithic period was between 4,750-6,750 years before the Trojan war in 1250 B.C. and between 5,250-7,250 years before Homer's time around 750 B.C.
we have this perception of the patriarchal rule having always already existed – making it seem as though it cannot be escaped as it inherently is – communities and civilizations have existed under different circumstances. Significantly, these Goddess-worshipping societies that had matriarchal rulers were not matriarchies as a whole; instead, they were equalitarian in nature. These equalitarian civilizations suggest that the transcendence of the patriarchy does not have to include a domination of men by women in the exact role reversal of current practices. A dismantling of the patriarchy could, and should, entail an equalization of powers. Moreover, these civilizations contained a matrilineal genealogy and a connection between women. Within this context, completely transcending the patriarchy within a text would not consist of a woman dominating someone else, but rather presenting herself as equal in power to others. Atwood in *The Penelopiad* and “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing” sets Penelope and Helen up to gain agency and transcend the patriarchy in giving them voices and having them reappropriate their bodies, but ultimately shows how the disconnection between women prevents them from becoming full agents. Just as the theorists suggest, it is only with equalization amongst all people – including women with other women – that a true transcendence of the patriarchy can occur.

**REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING – SILENCED FEMALE PERSPECTIVES HEARD**

The patriarchy has pervaded the very culture we identify with, yet contemporary culture has only been created by building on to past ideologies. “Indeed,” Eisler writes, “most of what we have learned to think of as our cultural evolution has in fact been interpretation” (441). While Eisler’s assertion is based on the Neolithic art findings that show the possibility of civilization without male domination, her statement also applies to the works of literature throughout history. The rewriting and reinterpretation of foundational texts and of myth by women has become a
popular pursuit for female authors; female authors in the nineteenth century used myths to write about themes forbidden to women, such as sex, rage, and “woman as victim, as artist, and as force for social change” (Ostriker 214). Later, female authors rewrote myths more self-consciously, introducing the female experience into traditionally male-written female characters (215). Revisionist mythmaking, Alicia Ostriker argues, has become “a means of redefining both woman and culture” (211). By giving voice to silenced female characters, female authors are altering the way we view the myths:

so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy or as the pillars of sustaining phallocentric ‘high’ culture. Instead, they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (Ostriker 215)

There are many issues facing the female author, however, that make writing and rewriting a difficult task to accomplish. In “Infection in the Sentence” excerpted from The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar relate the anxieties of authorship that female writers have to face rather than the anxieties of influence that male writers endure. Gilbert and Gubar detail Harold Bloom’s assertion that the literary tradition lies within patriarchy and as such, the authors of these texts, predominantly male, are engaged in a type of “literary Oedipal struggle” to which there is no female equivalent (450). This “literary Oedipal struggle” refers to male authors becoming great by displacing their forefather authors; women are unable to do this as, to a great extent, they are without literary predecessors (450). Instead, female writers must either engage in a revision process, where they rewrite the patriarchal canon with a female
perspective in authorship, or they must enter into a new field that no one has previously established.

Adrienne Rich, in her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” explains that female authors need to partake in a “re-vision” of the writings of the male-dominant literary canon. This re-vision entails “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 190). However, while this concept of re-visioning seems simple, Rich explains how it has taken many authors a long time to change the focus of their writings from Love as their main trouble to Man (191). She relates how it is hard for female writers to open themselves up to a new way of writing, especially as they are used to trying to appear calm and objective (191). Instead of the passive approach, Rich advocates for writing filled with the anger that women have felt being silenced, claiming that the only way to get past that anger is to work through it (199). Writing about the female experience, Rich argues, “is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (190).

In addition to getting past the anger, women writing and rewriting the foundational texts of the literary canon serves multiple important purposes. First, it is important to note that half of the world’s population is female and without the female author and the female perspective, half of the world’s ideas are lost. As Virginia Woolf claims, “a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men” (130). Without both sides writing their own stories, an objective view of the world is impossible; man cannot fully know woman and woman cannot fully know man, but the perspectives they give can help one give insight to the other. Second, many feminist theorists posit that by writing, women actually regain a connection to their body and only when a woman reclaims her body can she realize her true strength and transcend the rule of the patriarch, tearing away from the structure that always
makes her “guilty” (Cixous 418). By reconnecting with their bodies, women reconnect to their
own sexuality and their inherent power that they have lost through years of societal and self-
conditioning (418). Once a whole body again, woman has the power to fight against the
patriarchy and “shatters” her way into history, which according to Cixous, is the only way in
which female writing can affect society: in being explosive. Woman has saved her power and
stored it up within herself so that when her body is realized through writing, the power will
explode and transcend the ideas of man (418). Third, and finally, an imagining of the
perspectives of women in foundational texts gives voices to characters who are otherwise
unheard. The voices that these female characters receive and the development of the female
writer both serve to support and further female agency as it is perceived in the literary and real
world.

Margaret Atwood has asserted herself into the literary world with her various novels,
books of poetry, and critical essays. In her novel The Penelopiad and her poem “Helen of Troy
Does Countertop Dancing,” Atwood gives voice to ancient characters whose voices have been
lost in the multitudes of interpretations and reinterpretations of Homer’s Odyssey. In her texts,
Penelope, Helen, and the twelve hanged maids are all given the opportunity to share their own
stories and perspectives, though I will mostly focus on Penelope and Helen’s accounts. Penelope
is given a contemporary voice, but maintains her ancient position. She tells the story of her life
while dead in the Underworld, partaking in a type of oratory – albeit written down – similar to
that of the Odyssey’s original format. Helen’s voice is more contemporary than Penelope’s, as
Atwood sets her up to be a stripper commenting on and transcending the objectification and
commodification of her body.
Interestingly enough, Penelope in *The Penelopiad* posits oral tradition as an unreliable source of perspective and the written word as reliable and authentic (Richards 169). Instead of portraying herself to be the authentic written word, Penelope as the narrator tears down Odysseus’s account of the events that take place in the *Odyssey* and makes the reader question the veracity of all accounts of mythology, including her own, thereby eliminating the authority of the author, which has traditionally been used to uphold the patriarchy (172-73). With the authority of the author discredited, Penelope prevents the immediate dispelling of her own account of what happens in the *Odyssey*: her story becomes just as plausible or implausible as Odysseus’s. Atwood encourages us, as readers, to think critically not only about the truth of Odysseus’s account (or the account written down by Homer and subsequent interpreters), but also to doubt and challenge Penelope’s story as well, especially with the dissenting voices of the twelve hanged maids reminding the reader of their differing version (Richards 183). Much like Woolf’s assertion that both a man and woman’s versions must be heard to glean the full story, Atwood urges us to consider all sides with the maids showing that even members of the same gender can have alternative stories to tell of the same event. Only when we consider multiple accounts can we potentially begin to understand the truth within the accounts.

Furthermore, Atwood writes into Penelope’s narrative an inherent questioning and refutation of her female authorial predecessors, such as Athena, Arachne, and her cousin Helen, who are also set up to weave their stories (Richards 183). Penelope weaves her own story and teaches the twelve maids to weave as well; she gives the maids the ability to express themselves, which seems to backfire when they blame Penelope for their deaths in their chorus line. As Richards states, throughout *The Penelopiad*, the action of weaving is a metaphor for female authorship (166). However, this metaphor and subsequent blame actually uphold the idea that
one should consider multiple perspectives before even trying to ascertain truth; *The Penelopiad* "[rejects] the feminist rewriting practice of 'recovering' a single female voice as if it can be made to speak for the experiences of all women" (Richards 185). As Ostriker asserts, revisionist myths, such as *The Penelopiad*, are "enactments of feminist antiauthoritarianism opposed to the patriarchal praxis of reifying texts" (235). As a canonical text, the *Odyssey*, a male-written and interpreted story, has been widely regarded as Truth. Penelope and the twelve hanged maids' tearing down of each other's accounts actually serves as a bolster for their stories' perceived credibility in relation to the *Odyssey*.

Veracity aside, Penelope begins her story with an admission of her own complacency in her silence; she says, "I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his [Odysseus's] praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 3). Now that she is in the Underworld, she is ready to tell her side of the story and gain agency, even though she knows that so many people throughout history have already discredited her account (3). Penelope says she realized "how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty" (3). In this way Penelope gains agency: she asserts her voice in contradiction to man's. *The Penelopiad* is Penelope's delayed response to those stories about her; she has decided that it is time for the world to know her version. By speaking out her account, Penelope gains the agency she is denied in the *Odyssey*.

Helen, in "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing," also gains agency by taking back her voice. In Atwood's contemporary poem, Helen is a stripper, revealing her inner thoughts to the reader about the people she sees around her. Traditionally, Helen has been seen as the woman
who caused the Trojan war, the ideal woman in beauty and stature yet with a negative connotation as her sexuality incites men to turn against one another. However, in “Helen of Troy,” Atwood writes Helen’s perspective as having more depth and intentionality in her acts. Atwood subverts the complacent woman subject to the will of man into the woman with agency, critical of her surroundings and capable of looking back at the men who have objectified her with their gazes.

Helen claims that it is the smiling that tires her out the most,

This, and the pretense
that I can’t hear them.
And I can’t, because I’m after all
a foreigner to them.
The speech here is all warty gutturals,
obvious as a slab of ham,
but I come from the province of the gods
where meanings are lilting and oblique. (51-58)

Throughout the poem, Helen has changed the meanings associated with the language of man, including the social constructions of the idea of “woman” that lays within the poem’s words as signs. Helen has repurposed man’s language to something that functions at a higher level and adopted a kind of *écriture féminine* that Helen Cixous claims allows the speaker to be “a kind of perennial freedom-fighter in an anarchic realm of perpetual opposition […] sniping at the centres of power” (qtd. in Barry 122). Through her use of language alone, Helen makes progress in redefining what it should mean to be a woman. As Monique Wittig relates, the only way to escape the oppression of the “woman” that has been naturalized by society, one must become a
being that is non-woman and non-man (105). Helen goes one step further and makes herself out to be a non-human, as a goddess with lilting language, one which is above the social constructionism. In this way, by transcending the traditional language created and maintained by man, Helen gains agency, and it is only through this revisionist mythology that Helen’s agency reveals itself.

**APPROPRIATION AND REAPPROPRIATION OF THE BODY**

Penelope and Helen both gain agency having their voices heard, but this is only a step in the right direction rather than a completion of power. Another way in which these women gain agency – but do not necessarily become full agents – is through the reappropriation of their own bodies. In “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing,” Helen relates that the men see her as “a chain-saw murder just before it happens, / when thigh, ass, inkblot, crevice, tit, and nipple / are still connected” and this connectedness incites hatred in them (28-30, 31). Helen asserts that the men would like to “reduce her to components,” “crush out the mystery” of her wholeness, and “wall [her] up alive / in [her] own body[,]” but they are unable to compartmentalize her. Men are only able to exploit women when they are viewed in parts, so when the other women in the poem say Helen is allowing herself to be exploited, Helen retorts, “yes, any way / you cut it” (17-18). Helen asserts that yes, women are exploited when they are cut into fragments, or essentialized, because then they are not one full body or person. She then refuses to be exploited by asserting her body as whole.

By fragmenting the body, Atwood is pointing out the ways in which “woman” is a socially constructed entity, one that ultimately cannot be fully recognized or achieved since she is not an entire being. Simone de Beauvoir has termed the construction of woman as “the myth of
femininity.” Femininity, according to de Beauvoir, is an Idea that exists as a static myth, one that is considered an absolute Truth regardless of its application in flesh and blood. If a real woman is to contradict this Idea, then she is wrong, not the Idea (266). It is because this myth is impossible to obtain – as it contains impossible standards – that men and women alike see the female as fragmented. Women are able to meet some of the qualifications of the socially constructed “woman” but often these qualifications contradict one another. When they contradict, one has to see a woman in a fragmented view as her “parts” do not fit together; one qualification of “woman” must be negated for another to exist, and this ultimately leads to fragmentation.

Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller, researchers from Princeton and Stanford University respectively, assert that when people essentialize others they “see the [differences] as entrenched, and therefore will be neither curious about one another’s thinking nor optimistic that they can change each other’s minds” (134). Helen points out that the men have been unable to “see through [her]” since “nothing is more opaque / than absolute transparency” (Atwood, “Helen of Troy” 73-75). In other words, men have been trying to cut her into parts, to view her as fragmented and therefore have power over her, and their essentializing is preventing them from viewing her as a whole person. It is easier to validate women’s subjugation when they are essentialized, and it is easier to not make a change to one’s subjugation of another when the Other is not conceived as whole.

The men in “Helen of Troy” try to see Helen as fragmented in order to justify woman’s subjugation; if one woman is whole, than it is possible for all women to be whole beings deserving of equal rights and position. In part, the men’s hatred also stems from their subconscious recognition that they are dependent on Helen, with “upturned eyes, imploring / but ready to snap at [her] ankles” (34-35). They cannot define themselves without viewing women as
fragments; the men view their fragmentation of women as essential for their own self
identification (as a type of comparison). In her essay “The Female Body,” Atwood writes of how
man is actually in search for wholeness and recognizes it in the female body (493). Man is
“searching for the other half, the twin who could complete him” and finds it in the ripe,
wholeness of the female body, which symbolically indicates a return to the mother and the
source of life (493). Therefore, once men have found that wholeness, or possess that wholeness,
they feel the need to lock it up to keep it for themselves, which they do through the appropriation
of women’s bodies and lives (493).

Collette Guillaumin, in *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*, discusses the ways in
which women are appropriated by men: appropriation of time and of the products of the body,
sexual obligation, and the physical charge of disabled members of the family as well as the male
members (181). Most relevantly, Guillaumin discusses women’s sexual obligation to man,
stating that in marriage and prostitution the physical sexual usage establishes a man’s ownership
over a woman’s body (184). In the case of Helen, Helen’s body is objectified through her
stripping. Yet as Guillaumin asserts, “sale limits the physical usage to sexual usage,” so Helen is
actually limiting the amount that her body can be appropriated (184). Helen will “take the
money” for her dancing, selling a vision of herself that does not actually exist (Atwood, “Helen
of Troy” 19). She reappropriates her body and begins to redefine her relationship to men by
using their sexual objectification against them. She recognizes and willingly portrays the
characteristics associated with “woman,” but instead of letting this idea dictate her behavior, she
uses the social construction and the appropriation of her body to her advantage. Helen as the
speaker has shown us what it is that the men see and expect of women; once we are able to see
this expectation that the men have for her, she is then able to object to the male gaze and look back.

Helen takes on an active role when she is essentialized, turning the fragmentation back on men. She characterizes the men as “warty gutturals, / obvious as a slab of ham[,]” and as either “beery worshippers” or “a bleary / hopeless love” (55-56, 32-33). Ultimately, Helen presents herself as an uncut woman: in body, mind, and spirit. She cannot be contained within sections of her body as men have tried to contain her. By being whole, Helen makes the men question what they have prescribed as “woman” and she admonishes the men for sitting complacent in their past, for participating and upholding the social constructions that have tried to limit her as a woman, as an Other. Helen therefore asserts herself as a goddess above these constructions of “woman.” Woman as goddess, Helen has declared herself whole and able to rise above the male hegemony, to “hover six inches in the air / in [her] blazing swan-egg of light” (78-79). The “swan-egg of light” not only refers to the rape of Leda and Helen’s subsequent birth, but also indicates that Helen has been rebirthed through her recognition of, operation within, and redefinition of the social constructions associated with the idea of “woman” (79). Although the swan-egg birth of Helen represents Leda’s rape and the patriarchal construction of women’s roles, Atwood has Helen reappropriate this image to show her transcending the previously patriarchal connotation; Helen takes possession of the swan-egg and subverts its use.

One could argue that Helen has only been able to take what men have been willing to grant her, that “[she has] taken nothing, [she has] only received” (de Beauvoir xix). Yet this argument rests on the assumption that “the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women” due to the nature of social constructionism (xxiv). Helen has at least made herself a goddess to man’s demigod and therefore has taken her power rather than just
received it. While Helen does have to operate, to a great extent, within the confines of the male
hegemony, she uses the assumptions and meanings contained within the idea of “woman” to her
advantage to create an outlook on “woman” that defies the norm. Helen has shown man what a
whole woman looks like and questioned how they could have perceived her as anything Other.
Through exploiting the means by which men appropriate her, Helen turns the male gaze around
and asserts herself as a woman with agency.

Atwood approaches the issue of bodily fragmentation and women’s agency in an entirely
different way in *The Penelopiad*. At the beginning of *The Penelopiad*, Penelope fears that her
story will not be heard because “[she] can’t make [her]self understood, not in your world, the
world of bodies, of tongues and fingers; and most of the time [she has] no listeners, not on your
side of the river” (4). Atwood separates the living body into parts, indicating the fragmentation
present in the living world that serves to prevent understanding. It is in the living world that we
see Penelope’s body being treated as a commodity. Penelope describes the competition that took
place when Odysseus won her hand in marriage; she says, “It was more as if [the other suitors
had] failed to win an auction for a horse” rather than a bride (41). Penelope has no say in her
marriage and Atwood reveals how she is also disconnected from her own sexuality. The maids
tell Penelope that in the bridal chamber, she “would be torn apart as the earth is by the plough,
and how painful and humiliating that would be” (42). Penelope has been taught that sex is a duty
performed by a wife, that her body will be used by her husband.

Penelope’s commoditized body acts as the other side of Collette Guillaumin’s sexual
obligation aspect of the appropriation of women in comparison with Helen. While Helen uses her
body to reverse the appropriation, Penelope’s living body is entirely appropriated. Not only is
Penelope affected by sexual obligation, but also two of the three other ways that Guillaumin says
a woman can be appropriated: through the products of her body and in her time (Guillaumin 181). After her marriage, Penelope’s main objective as a woman and wife is to bear a son, which is an idea reinforced by the people around her. According to Penelope, Eurycleia relates this while trying to be nice, saying, “We’ll have to fatten you up, […] so you can have a nice big son for Odysseus! That’s your job, you just leave everything else to me” (Atwood, The Penelopiad 63). Having a child is not merely an option, but an expectation that Penelope has no say in. Furthermore, Penelope has no other responsibilities and is given no other means to be a productive part of society. Eurycleia takes over all of the tasks that Penelope could potentially find some sort of fulfillment in, which is especially detrimental to Penelope’s psyche when Odysseus goes off to war.

Penelope’s time, then, is the most obvious of the ways that she is appropriated: she waits twenty years for Odysseus to return from war, performing her limited duties as a wife and staying loyal to him the entire time. Before he leaves, Odysseus warns Penelope that if she ever was unfaithful to him, he would “chop [her] into little pieces with his sword or hang [her] from the roof beam” (74). However, while gone, Odysseus has multiple affairs, showcasing the double standard present between man and woman, husband and wife. While Odysseus’s affairs are never questioned or truly discussed, Penelope’s faithfulness is constantly upheld in praise, used as the exemplar of how a woman should act. Yet when Atwood writes Penelope’s perspective, Penelope’s thoughts on this appropriation of her time become clear: “Don’t follow my example, [she wants] to scream in your ears – yes, yours! But when [she tries] to scream, [she sounds] like an owl” (2). She freely admits that she kept silent and played an active role in upholding the patriarchy and the patriarchal idea of a “happy ending,” but now asserts her voice and her agency through the telling of her story (3). In addition to revealing the double standard, Odysseus’s
threat to Penelope also shows his perennial patriarchal prerogative to subjugate her. By threatening to chop her into pieces, he is fragmenting her body, not allowing her to be whole, which Others her.

While Helen in “Helen of Troy” achieves agency by presenting herself as a whole body, Penelope shows herself as a whole being without a body. In the afterlife, she has “[achieved] this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness” (1). She is whole in that she has no body at all, nothing for man to view in pieces or fragment her with; there is nothing for man to appropriate or threaten. The Underworld acts as a leveler of gender, erasing the hierarchical structure of the patriarchy and making Penelope equal to all others. While living, Penelope was a participant of the patriarchy; now in the Underworld, she is able to escape from the ideologies and expectations of the patriarchy and assert her own agency, providing a cautionary tale against complacency.

WOMEN SHAMING WOMEN

Penelope and Helen are given agency in Atwood’s texts through the act of writing and sharing their own perspectives on the events that occurred in the *Odyssey* and through the reappropriation of their own bodies. Atwood gives voice and wholeness to her characters, rewriting roles that previously were silenced within a canonical literary text. She has successfully “re-vised” as Adrienne Rich calls for in her comments on women’s writing, letting us “know [the writing of the past] differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich 190). The *Odyssey* is conceived as a type of Truth within society, a text that we take at face value and use as evidence for historical analysis. Atwood points out through her persona writing that the events and ideas we have regarded as Truth have another side. Her characters are knowledgeable, strong, and agents of their own lives, much to the contradiction of
the *Odyssey*’s account. However, there is one theme that runs through both *The Penelopiad* and “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing” that calls into question the assertion of these characters’ agency: the idea of women shaming women.

It is significant that during my research the only way to find critical material on women shaming women was to equate this theme to female friendships. As Virginia Woolf relates, when she “tried to remember any case in the course of [her] reading where two women are represented as friends,” she was unable to do so (130). In both Atwood’s novel and poem, the female characters are in no way connected or even friendly with other women. In “Helen of Troy,” Helen notices the other women shaming her, and in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope constantly berates Helen for her behavior. Both women are either partaking in or the victims of what Alanna Callaway calls “gynocentric misogyny,” or women’s hatred of women, which Callaway relates as also a main focus of Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (9). Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and “Helen of Troy” relate this gynocentric misogyny on multiple different levels and challenge the forms of agency that the characters have gained.

The first level of women shaming women occurs with other women shaming Helen in “Helen of Troy.” In the opening lines of the poem, Helen relates, “The world is full of women / who’d tell me I should be ashamed of myself / if they had the chance” (1-3). Essentially, the women who do not have their own agency and who subscribe to the patriarchy are the ones who shame Helen for defying these norms. This form of gynocentric misogyny is not only expected, but also understandable: the non-agents shame the subversive women so as to protect the system from which they benefit. In other words, the women who shame Helen are members of the patriarchy who have not transcended the patriarchal rule; as members, the women are privy to
certain privileges that come along with membership, such as physical protection by men and a higher place within hierarchical society (de Beauvoir 757).

As de Beauvoir states, “refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers upon them” (10). When a woman, like Helen, transcends the system, she is posing a threat to the other women’s privileges. Therefore, they are likely to try to shame Helen into behaving as the system dictates she should in order to preserve the privileges that they are so accustomed to and deem necessary for survival in the world. While these women shaming Helen is unfortunate, it is not altogether surprising; the women are unaware of the benefits of transcendence and afraid of a world where the patriarchal rule they are accustomed to does not exist (765).

Penelope’s participation in the act of gynocentric misogyny is more controversial as she shames and berates Helen in The Penelopiad. Most of Penelope’s comments have a judgmental tone and to a great extent, indicate Penelope’s jealousy of Helen. For instance, Penelope discusses how no man would “ever kill himself for love of [Penelope,]” stating “I was not a man-eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquests just to show she could” (29). Penelope feels the need to differentiate herself from Helen’s behavior and to build herself up as better than Helen despite her beauty and fame. Moreover, she questions Helen’s ability to act in such a way and never be punished; she says,

Helen was never punished, not one bit. Why not, I’d like to know? Other people got strangled by sea serpents and drowned in storms and turned into spiders and shot with arrows from much smaller crimes. Eating the wrong cows. Boasting. That sort of thing. You’d think Helen might have got a good whipping at the very
least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. But she didn’t.

Not that I mind.

Not that I minded. (22)

Penelope is bitter about the fact that Helen was able to act in such a “dishonorable” way and not be punished by the gods like so many others, even while in other sections Penelope doubts the gods’ existences. She essentially compares her own situation to that of Helen, feeling that she herself has been punished with having to wait twenty years for her husband to return and fend off the suitors while Helen is constantly fawned over, even in the afterlife. Penelope followed the values of the patriarchy in order to receive the privilege that were supposed to accompany being the “good wife”; therefore, Penelope finds it unfair that Helen is not punished — but rather worshipped in a sense — for not adhering to the patriarchal ideas of how a woman should act. Penelope’s repetition of the “not that I mind” in reference to Helen not being punished for her actions creates an insincerity to the words; moreover, her change in tense from “mind” to “minded” shows Penelope correcting herself to say that she did not mind back then but now she does. This caring about Helen’s lack of punishment is especially evident since Penelope constantly returns to shaming Helen throughout the novel. What is interesting is that Penelope chooses to shame Helen rather than being angry at society for the roles she has internalized.

This shaming of Helen is problematic because it shows Penelope, as a woman with agency, feeling the need to assert dominance over another woman and criticize that woman’s behavior. Penelope’s admonitions show us a woman with agency rebuking the behaviors of a woman under the rule of the patriarchy. However, this act is just as socially dictating as the women who shame Helen in “Helen of Troy” and just as unhelpful. Penelope does nothing to try
to help Helen in *The Penelopiad* gain her own agency. Moreover, Penelope thinks that Helen
should be punished for her behaviors that uphold the patriarchy, that she should have been
“strangled by sea serpents” or “turned into spiders” (22). She does not want to uplift Helen, she
wants to tear her down. In tearing her down, we as readers are forced to acknowledge that
Penelope, in fact, seems to gain another level of power.

By shaming Helen, Penelope asserts both her dominance over Helen and her authority on
“proper” behavior. Much like how a man asserts his superiority over a woman, Penelope makes
herself out to be better than Helen. Partaking in this gynocentric misogyny creates an even
greater rift amongst women and does not allow for a mutual support system to develop. As
Cixous advises women, “don’t denigrate woman, don’t make of her what men have made of
you” (420). Women shaming women poses the problem of women only gaining power and
agency through the same means that men do; however, women like Penelope should be forging
their own way in agency-gaining rather than following man-made methods. The man-made
method of action will not suit the creation of a matrilineal genealogy and connection that many
feminist theorists deem necessary for the equalization of women in society.

Harkening back to the origin of the patriarchy, Gail Schwab asserts that the disconnection
of the matrilineal genealogy, of women’s connection to each other, is what has allowed for the
patriarchy to sustain itself throughout history. Therefore, Penelope and the women shaming
Helen in Atwood’s writing, while representative of the reality of women’s relationships, is
damaging to the agency that they both worked to gain in Atwood’s rewritings of their stories.
Much like the way that women have to forge a new way in the literary canon by rewriting from
new perspectives or attempting new plots, in order for Penelope and Helen to transcend the
patriarchy, they must find new ways to assert their agency without shaming other women in the
process. Moreover, Atwood’s characters must find a way to reconnect with other women to transcend the patriarchy.

While ultimately Penelope gains agency through her telling of her story and Helen gains agency by taking control of her body and asserting herself as whole, each one’s power is threatened by the disruption of the connection between women. Atwood’s characters are on the right path towards sustained and inherent agency, but her narratives seem to point out a flaw in the system they are working within: even when transcending the rule of the patriarchy, women are still shaming one another for their behavior. This shaming is indicative of the power that the patriarchy still holds ideologically, and a new system must be put into play in order for these women to truly gain full agency.

A NEW SYSTEM OF IDENTIFICATION

As an Other, a woman trying to transcend the patriarchy is essentially trying to assert herself as a Subject, but this is not a solitary act. Cassandra Denise Fetters relates that in order to gain subjectivity, humans need to be able to mutually recognize another subject (15). Intersubjectivity, as Fetters calls it, is necessary for agency and a lack of it is what causes ideologies such as the patriarchy’s to persist (2). Yet part of the difficulty of mutual recognition amongst women is the habit of needing to categorize women as one single thing with no room for difference. “The fractures [in subjectivity and society] ensue when difference is erased, silenced, ignored, or idealized,” and this fracturing occurs in tandem with the human tendency to classify things and people in terms of binaries (Fetters 1-2, Fox 328). Our immersion in the patriarchy extends its reach to the very way we classify concepts, which is necessary for processing information (Fox 328).
Melodie J. Fox in her article “Prototype Theory: An Alternative Concept Theory for Categorizing Sex and Gender?” questions the practicality and validity of current methods of gender classification and examines prototype theory as a possible replacement. Currently, and for the most part, humans develop concepts on the basis of classical theory, which was developed by ancient Greeks, such as Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle (329). Classical theory dictates a binary type of classification, where concepts are divided into A/Not-A and must fall into one category or the other (328). Not-A is defined as not containing all the qualifications of A, rather than being the direct opposite of A (328). For example, in the A/Not-A dichotomy of the virgin/whore, a woman would be considered a whore as soon as she did not meet one of the necessary qualifications of being a virgin, such as wearing inappropriate clothes.

However, as Fox points out from her research, a binary system is not a realistic way to go about classifying something as changeable as social identifications, such as sex and gender (329). She evaluates prototype theory, which contains a list of characteristics that are neither necessary nor sufficient for classification, but provide a general guideline to what qualities typically are part of a classification. Essentially, by classifying people, and gender, through prototype theory, the stringent confines of the binary system would be eliminated and allow for a more holistic conception of what it means to be a particular gender. As Fox states, “a prototype conceptualization would find that a network of qualities common to ‘woman’ exist, yet none of those qualities are required or even central, provided some of the other features typical to that class are present” (331). In other words, a conceptualization of ‘woman’ would exist, but one

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2 In short, prototype theory dictates that a concept have defining characteristics that are neither necessary or sufficient to classify that concept. For example, a robin is a prototypical bird: it has wings, an S-shape, and a beak, and it is small like most other birds. A penguin, on the other hand, is not a prototypical bird: it cannot fly, is fairly large, and not S-shaped. Yet a penguin as a concept is still classified as a bird, even though it is not prototypical (Aitchinson 253).
that would allow room for difference between women. When a woman did not necessarily meet one of the ‘virgin’ qualities, she would not automatically be classified as a ‘whore.’

As Fetters quotes of Jessica Benjamin, one needs to “experience sameness without obliterating difference” in order to gain intersubjectivity, and this is what a new way of conceptualization does (19). In order to gain subjectivity, one must recognize the sameness and difference in another human being. Fetters asserts, “in a culture that continues to deny agency and self-assertion to women, the ‘balance’ is disrupted” (16). This denial is counterproductive, as if half of the population is unable to assert themselves as their own subjects (and be recognized as such), then that half is not able to recognize others’ self (17). Society gets caught in a loop where subjectivity becomes fragile because of a lack of mutual recognition. This threatens not only women but also men’s ability to recognize the self.

Moreover, Fetters argues that

Disruptions in this intersubjective dialectic can have brutal consequences; when the discovery process is thwarted, we get what [Jessica] Benjamin sees as a sort of seesaw-type dynamic of domination and submission, with each subject continually attempting to break through to the other. Furthermore, our cultural praise for "our subjective feeling of being 'the center of our own universe'" naturally leads to a social system of domination and submission on which a master-slave relationship is based. And of course, both suffer; the master’s domination and objectification of the slave deprive the master himself of what he needs most, recognition from an other who is strong and independent enough to give it. (18)
When Penelope shames Helen in *The Penelopiad*, she is refusing to acknowledge Helen’s self and agency. Penelope has presented herself as a subject, but will not partake in mutual recognition, thereby entering into a phase of domination and superiority. Viewing herself as superior to Helen, Penelope prevents Helen from becoming whole. As previously discussed, Penelope has set herself up to gain agency, but ultimately does so in the way that follows the patriarchal construction of power: one that calls for the dominating of an Other. As it is, men in the patriarchy are able to partake in intersubjectivity because they can recognize themselves as subjects with other men. However, patriarchal men do not recognize women as subjects (just as the master does not recognize the slave), so women are the only ones who can partake in mutual recognition in order to gain subjectivity. By denying Helen mutual recognition, Penelope denies her own subjectivity. Penelope has attempted to recognize her self as a subject and has recognized other men as subjects, but is limited when it comes to recognizing other women and being recognized by other women and men. We, as the readers, somewhat partake in Penelope’s agency by recognizing her agency in the rewriting of her myth, but this cannot be reciprocated and falls short of wholeness. Penelope only sees difference in Helen, not sameness as well, and this prevents her from fully discovering her own agency.

Likewise, although Helen in “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing” asserts herself as whole in both her actions and in the rewriting of her perspective, she is unable to partake in mutual recognition as the women would tell her she “should be ashamed of [her]self / if they had the chance” and the men view her in pieces denying her subjectivity (1-3). In essence, this means that Helen may have gained some power, but she cannot reach full agency. Helen’s insistence on classifying herself as completely different than all other men and women also contributes to her
lack of intersubjectivity; she needs to be able to recognize some sameness in them in order to be mutually recognized.

Atwood, therefore, writes two strong female characters who attempt to gain agency but fall short of doing so. The rewriting of their perspectives does a lot to give power to these previously silent women, as Ostriker says of revisionist mythology, but in the end, the women shaming women reveals itself as a marker of patriarchal ideology and a source of domination. Sameness and difference have not been recognized amongst women, and this prevents them from establishing themselves as Subjects rather than Other. Ultimately, this fracture in subjectivity and agency represented in Atwood’s works becomes indicative of the fractures in women gaining agency in contemporary society. Atwood’s writings become reflective of the current state of feminist affairs, showing that while women are gaining momentum and power, there is still a disconnect between them. By sharing their perspectives and recognizing themselves as whole, women are halfway to subjectivity. Ultimately, Atwood’s allegorical novel and poem relate the necessity of women recognizing each other as subjects, not just themselves individually.
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