MARGARET ATWOOD’S
THE PENELIPIAD

STUDY GUIDE

PREPARED BY: MEGHAN O’HARA
EDUCATION & OUTREACH COORDINATOR, GRAND THEATRE

SEASON SPONSOR
BMO

TITLE SPONSOR
W4W
WOMEN FOR WOMEN

GRANDTHEATRE.COM | 1.519.672.9030 | 471 RICHMOND STREET, LONDON ON | @THEGRANDLONDON
WHO’S WHO?

CAST

PENELlope
MAIDS

SEANA MCKENNA
CLAIRE ARMSTRONG
TESS BENGER
NADINE BHABHA
INGRID BLEKYS
DEJAH DIXON-GREEN
DEBORAH DRAKEFORD
ELLORA PATNAIK
MONICE PETER
SIOBHAN RICHARDSON
PRANEET AKILLA

ODYSSEUS

PRODUCTION

DIRECTOR
CHOREOGRAPHER
SET DESIGNER
COSTUME DESIGNER
LIGHTING DESIGNER
PROJECTION DESIGNER
COMPOSER/SOUND DESIGNER/VOCAL COACH
STAGE MANAGER
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER

MEGAN FOLLOWS
PHILIPPA DOMVILLE
CHARLOTTE DEAN
DANA OSBORNE
BONNIE BEECHER
JAMIE NESBITT
DEANNA H. CHOI
BEATRICE CAMPBELL
LOREEN GIBSON
LORALIE POLLARD
Margaret Atwood is an award-winning Canadian poet, novelist, and literary critic—she is the author of the novel *The Penelopiad*, as well as the writer of the play adaptation, her first work of theatre. Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, and grew up in Northern Ontario. She studied at the University of Toronto’s Victoria College, and subsequently at Harvard University’s Radcliffe College, where she earned an M.A. in English.

Writing since the 1960s, Atwood is an exceptionally prolific literary figure. Over her 60-year career, to date she has penned 16 novels, 8 collections of short fiction, 17 collections of poetry, 8 children’s books, 10 non-fiction books, and numerous other reviews, articles, screenplays, and shorter writings. Many of Atwood’s well-known books, like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Alias Grace*, *The Robber Bride*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Blind Assassin* deal with women who transgress against the systems of power in which they are entrenched.

Atwood first wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985—the novel is set in a speculative future society named Gilead where infertility has become endemic, and the few women who are able to conceive are forced to become handmaids, tasked with providing children to the society’s most wealthy and powerful couples. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been popular since the time of writing, in the recent political climate, the story has taken on new relevance, buoyed by a new adaptation of the story into a Hulu series starring Elisabeth Moss. This is just one example of Atwood’s recent resurgence of popularity: Sarah Polley directed a mini-series adaptation of Atwood’s *Alias Grace* in 2017, and a mini-series version of her *MaddAddam* trilogy of books—a story that follows the events both pre-and-post a manmade global apocalypse—is currently in development.

Across her oeuvre, Atwood gives us a language with which to understand and grapple with the darkness of our times, and an outline of how-not-to exist: *Oryx and Crake* depicts the fall-out of one man’s ego gone wild, *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows us the human consequences of totalitarian rule under a radical theocracy, and *The Penelopiad* shows us the tragedy that occurs at the intersection of power, gender, and class. Her evocative imagery has become pervasive, particularly in post-2016 America: “Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again” has become a popular protest slogan, women have taken to donning the attire of a handmaid in silent protest against legislative decisions that might restrict the rights of women in the U.S., and Atwood is more popular than ever.

Atwood has long been preoccupied with unearthing the stories of women who occupy spaces where they are often erased—making visible the women who were present all along, but relegated to narrative backgrounds. In the current political climate, where debate about reproductive rights, women’s rights, and #metoo rages on, Atwood’s commitment to giving voice to female perspectives seems to have taken on additional relevance for those who have felt themselves silenced, who are now finding in Atwood’s works a certain urgency to ensure their voices are heard.
Much like its source, _The Odyssey_, Atwood’s _The Penelopiad_ presents us with an epic—a story worth telling again and again; rich with so many layers of narrative and so many reflections of our human psyche. Today this story is more relevant than ever. The woman who was rendered a footnote in the saga of her husband’s life becomes the protagonist. And yet she tells us her story, at long last, from Hades. Fighting for a voice, fighting for her story, Penelope must also contend with yet another competing narrative, that of her maids, whose lives—lives lived in service of her own—were sacrificed. The play asks us to examine the intersections of narrative that make up our history, to reckon with that honestly, and to consider the cost of our complicity as we go on to tell and retell our stories.

“The play you hold in your hands is an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo.”

This is how Atwood’s author’s introduction of her play begins. A story that began as a myth, a legend, passed on through generations of orators, written down at some point and rewritten from there, has reverberated through our literary canon for centuries. Eventually, in Atwood’s hands, it shifted perspectives and mediums. For me, it is also an echo of an echo. I came to this work first as an actor, and in my experience, speaking Atwood’s words is like chewing glass. When you’re in her world it is so arresting, sharp, delicate, and dangerous, and yet beautiful and delicious. It is an honour to approach this work as director this time around, and I am thrilled to hear these words brought to life anew here at the Grand. Another echo of this story.

At one point, Penelope states, “I had to use every ruse and stratagem at my command.” The play demands our intelligence and our full attention; it invites us to reconsider, to experiment. And in putting together this production, I used every bit of brilliance and artistry on offer from my team of designers and performers as we put together a stylistic collage to try to tell our story: the story of what these words mean to us today.
Characters:

Penelope – Odysseus’s wife, stays home in Ithaca during the Trojan War and after, awaiting her husband’s return

Odysseus – King of Ithaca, a hero during the Trojan War, and well-known for his lengthy 10-year trip to return home

Telemachus – Son of Odysseus and Penelope, remains in Ithaca

Helen of Troy – well-known for her beautiful physical features, was married to Menelaus (of Sparta), but was kidnapped by (or, in some tellings, eloped with) Paris (of Troy), an act which began the Trojan War

Menelaus – husband to Helen, King of Sparta

Penelope’s Mother – a Naiad, a type of nymph that presides over water

Icarius – Penelope’s father, and a prince of Sparta

Oracle – a person who was in communication with the gods, and could provide wisdom and guidance to citizens

Eurycleia – Odysseus’ nurse from childhood, and servant in his home in Ithaca

Laertes – Odysseus’ father, who takes up a farmer’s life during Odysseus’s absence from Ithaca

Anticleia – Odysseus’ mother, who died of grief waiting for Odysseus to return home

Antinous – one of Penelope’s suitors

Summary:

Margaret Atwood’s The Penelopiad is a re-telling of Homer’s famous epic, The Odyssey. Atwood’s story focuses on Odysseus’s wife, Penelope, who is left at home in Ithaca while her husband fights in the Trojan War, and then spends 10 long years journeying home. The play, based on Atwood’s novel of the same title, shows what’s not seen in The Odyssey—Penelope’s long days spent waiting for her husband to return, attempting to fend off the advances of a crowd of suitors who have arrived in Ithaca. The suitors—depicted here as a loud, raucous, and violent group—presume Odysseus to be dead (after all, he is away from home for approximately 20 years), and they are eager for Penelope to choose a new husband. Known for her loyalty and belief that Odysseus will return, Penelope resists the suitors, continually making excuses and postponing her choosing a new husband. As Telemachus becomes more frustrated, and the maids and suitors alike reach a near-breaking point, Odysseus returns in disguise, challenging the suitors and winning. In his triumph, Odysseus kills the suitors, and orders Penelope’s closest maids—those who have been protecting her, and helping her stave off the suitors’ advances—to be hanged. It is this act that precipitates much of the play’s setting in Hades, where Penelope and the maids exist in the afterworld, an uneasy tension of guilt and suffering among them as Penelope recounts all the events that have led them to this point.
Who was Homer?
- The author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.
- Scholars are unsure if Homer was a single poet, or a name assigned to a collection of re-workings by orators and contributors over time.
- Speculation about Homer’s biography includes claims that he was blind, he was a wandering bard and the son of the river Meles and the nymph Critheïï.
- No one is sure when Homer (or the collective of Homer poets) might have lived—estimates range from 750 B.C. to 1200 B.C.

So, What’s the Story?

*The Odyssey* tells the story of title character Odysseus’ ten year journey home from the Trojan War, a conflict depicted in Homer’s earlier epic, *The Iliad*. When his ships are driven off-course by storms, Odysseus and his crew experience a series of trials and tribulations that serve as obstacles to their homecoming—such as the Lotus Eaters, for example, who render Odysseus’s crew forgetful and unmotivated. In order to make it back home to Ithaca, they encounter and trick a Cyclops; avoid the tempting call of the Sirens, who seek to lure the men to their deaths; narrowly escape Scylla (a six-headed monster) and Charybdis (a whirlpool); and finally, after his men are punished for disregarding several warnings from the gods, Odysseus washes up alone on the beach where Calypso, a nymph, traps him and forces him to remain on the island with her as her lover.

After seven years in her captivity, Calypso is commanded by the gods to release Odysseus, who is returned to Ithaca. However, his return is not how he expects it: dozens of suitors have taken over his home, waiting for his wife, Penelope to choose a new husband, since Odysseus has been presumed dead due to his long absence. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus challenges the suitors and wins, re-establishing his position in his own home.

A map of Odysseus’s journey. Source: schmoop.com
The Odyssey is a narrative that echoes through art, literature, and culture since its composition—myths and epics were shared through oral traditions, re-told across generations. The influence of The Odyssey is undeniable: it is the basis for James Joyce’s literary masterpiece, Ulysses, and has been adapted repeatedly, such as in Daniel Wallace’s Big Fish, and the Coen Brothers’ film, O Brother Where Art Thou?

Indeed, we can find many myths—old and new—in contemporary popular culture. Consider, the modern superhero genre: characters with extraordinary abilities do battle with equally awe-inspiring monsters. In fact, the Marvel series even features two characters drawn entirely from Norse mythology: Thor and Loki. Mythic narratives, whether old or new, typically fulfill our desire for good, or justice, to triumph over the evil threat.

This is, perhaps, part of their continued appeal—in times of uncertainty, what mythic narratives offer us is assurance that the scales of justice will, inevitably, balance. While these old stories resonate differently in contemporary times, and while we may experience them in new ways—in a cinema, perhaps, rather than through oral storytelling —myths represent a collective language and imagination for members of a community. The shared narratives continue to serve as the foundation for the stories we tell, and they tie us to one another and our history, bringing comfort and entertainment across eras.

Exercise – Modern Myths

As a class, make a list of contemporary myths, other than those mentioned above.

What pop culture narratives (from novels, graphic novels, TV, film, etc.) would you describe as “mythic”?

Each student should choose ONE example from the class’s discussion, and use that example to answer to questions below.

Why do you think that your choice is a good example of a myth? Is the story based on a myth, or is it creating new myths?

What characters in your example could be described as “mythic”? Consider their traits, origins, and journeys over the course of the story. What do they have in common with characters from ancient myth?
Ancient Greece had a thriving theatre culture, and thought many of the plays written during that time have vanished, some still remain. Works by playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are still performed today. There are a few conventions that defined the Ancient Greek style of theatre.

Check out this video introduction to Greek Theatre, prepared by the UK’s National Theatre:

Summary:

**Three actors** play all of the roles, changing characters as needed.

Woul feature a **chorus**, a group of 12-50 performers speaking in unison to provide context and comment on the action.

**Masks** were used to mark the different characters.

Plays were performed in **outdoor amphitheatres**, which could seat thousands of audience members.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASRLK7SOG](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASRLK7SOG)
“Now that I am dead, I know everything” – Penelope

Much of *The Penelopiad* takes places in the underworld, Hades, after Penelopiad and her maids have all died. Hades is frequent setting in Ancient Greek myth—here’s what it’s all about!

The Ancient Greeks believed that when you die, your body and soul are separated, and the soul is transported to the underworld. Much like other aspects of life in Ancient Greece, the afterlife is believed to be ruled by a god, who is named Hades. His name becomes a shorthand for the world that he rules over.

**Exercise:**

In addition to Hades, there are many other names associated with places and things in the Underworld.

Have your students research each of the following terms, and create a two-sentence description of its meaning.

Expansion exercise: as a second part of this activity, have students create an artistic representation of their chosen term. This can take a dramatic form, such as a tableau; a musical form, such as a composition or vocalization; it could take the form of dance or movement; or, it could be a work of visual art. This part of the exercise can be as extensive as you like—it could be a large project, or it could be a very brief activity, relying on instinct and thinking on one’s feet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Styx</th>
<th>Charon</th>
<th>Lethe</th>
<th>Acheron</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asphodel Meadows</td>
<td>Elysium</td>
<td>Persephone</td>
<td>Hecate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minos</td>
<td>Cerberus</td>
<td>Thanatos</td>
<td>Nyx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Penelopiad provides us with a look into Penelope’s life from her own perspective. This is rare, if not non-existent, in historical accounts of Ancient Greece, where the documenting and writing was exclusively performed by men. As such, we only have men’s accounts of women’s lives in Ancient Greek society; we do not have access to historical accounts from a female perspective. Unfortunately, this means that we don’t have much information about what life would’ve looked like for Ancient Greek women during the times they spent away from men. However, below you will find some information that describes how women were seen: by men, by the law, and by the society as a whole.

Women’s lives in ancient Greece were strictly controlled—as a child, a woman was under the guardianship of her father, and once she married, that responsibility shifted to her husband. In Athens, women did not have legal personhood—they were not considered citizens, and therefore could not vote, and they could not own property, other than clothing, jewellery, and a personal slave. All other property was owned and managed by the male guardian, and once married, a woman’s husband would have complete control over the family’s finances.

As we see depicted in The Penelopiad, marriage was not necessarily instigated through love. Instead, marriages would be arranged by a young woman’s father, who would choose the partner and receive the dowry. Women typically married young—in her early teens—and was expected to be a virgin when she married. While love was not taken into consideration for the creation of the marriage, it was expected that at least a friendly or familial love would develop between the partners.

Exercise: Creative Writing – Living Life in Ancient Greece

As the article above notes, much of what we know about Ancient Greek women’s lives comes from men’s writings. As such, we have very little insight into how women might’ve interacted with each other when men were not present. This exercise encourages you to use your creativity to imagine what these previously unknown aspects of women’s lives might have entailed.

Writer’s prompt: Explore what life would have been like for women living in Ancient Greece, using any creative writing genre (playwriting, poetry, short story, novel, fictional essay, etc.) Use research to help develop and ground your ideas, but feel free to take some artistic licence in your work.

What types of activities would an Ancient Greek woman take part in during her daily life?

What tasks might your characters do out of necessity, and what acts of recreation might they participate in during their free time?

What conversations might Ancient Greek women have amongst themselves? What topics do you think they would discuss?

What challenges do you expect she might face? What aspects of her life might bring her joy?

Consider how class and wealth would influence an Ancient Greek woman’s life—how would a poor woman’s circumstances differ from those of a wealthy woman? How would a woman’s day-to-day life differ based on her social standing during this time?
Some commentators have referred to *The Penelopiad* as a feminist text; however, Margaret Atwood disagrees, stating that “I wouldn’t even call it feminist. Every time you write something from the point of view of a woman, people say that it’s feminist” (as quoted in the National Post).

### Discussion Exercise

The following exercise combines individual/small group brainstorming and research, with group discussion. Steps 1-3 can be completed solely individually or in small groups. Beginning with step 4, it is recommended to conduct a group discussion using the “pair and share” method, where students first discuss the question in groups of two or three, and then the teacher/moderator opens the discussion to the whole class.

1. What does feminism mean to you? Begin by brainstorming what you believe the term “feminism” means. This work can be completed individually or in a small group.

2. Research feminism. What are its roots? What are some of the key people and events related to feminism? How has feminism been defined differently over time? How do different people define feminism? What might be the cause of these differing definitions?

3. Return to the first question—now that you have completed some research on feminism, what do you now consider to be the meaning of feminism? How would you define it, in a single sentence? Has your perspective changed at all? If so, how?

4. With a strong, clear, and concise definition of feminism in hand, consider the following question: is *The Penelopiad* a feminist narrative? Why or why not? Why do you think Atwood refuses to call it feminist? Is she correct to do so?

5. Is it true that “every time you write something from the point of view of a woman, people say that it’s feminist”? Do you think this is a useful way to categorize stories? Why or why not?

6. Is there a difference between a story—or a particular version of a story—being feminist, and the content of a story being feminist? Why or why not?

7. Reflection – has this conversation changed your perspective on *The Penelopiad* or feminism at all? If so, how?
Many of humanity’s greatest stories have been told and re-told hundreds of times. Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* is one of these great narratives that have lasted the test of time, and been adapted into numerous different forms.

Indeed, *The Odyssey* was likely a widely-adapted text from its beginnings: the tale would have first been told through oral storytelling, and was likely repeated and re-told to new groups of people.

**Exercise: Telling Stories**

1. Have students familiarize themselves with *The Odyssey*’s main plot points.
2. In small groups, students should practice re-telling the story, without any notes in hand, or prompts from group members.
3. In groups, brainstorm ways of adapting and altering the existing narrative. For example, in a second round of narrations, the group may suggest that the orator try telling the story in the style of a movie trailer voiceover, or in the style of a children’s television show. Try on a few different genres and styles, and see how the story changes!
4. Once you have sampled a few different adaptations, reflect in your small group. What changes did you have to make to the story to make it fit the style or genre you choose? What aspects of adapting this story surprised you? Did you discover new ways that the story resonated with you? Were there any plot points or characters that didn’t work? If so, how did you respond to or overcome any obstacles or challenges you encountered?
5. As a class, discuss the various adaptations you experimented with. Were there common themes? Discuss the discoveries your class made, and the challenges they encountered. If the class were going to collaborate on an adaptation, which of the ideas discussed would you choose to proceed with? Why or why not?
Have you encountered *The Odyssey* in any form prior to this? What do you remember about the story?

How does this play’s portrayal of Odysseus differ from the descriptions given in *The Odyssey*, or other versions of this story?

Can you think of other examples of movies, television shows, plays, books, or other forms of art that tell a story from the opposite of the traditional perspective?

What do you think of Penelope? Did your opinion of her remain the same throughout the play, or did it change? If it did change, explain how and where your feelings towards her started to shift.

What did you feel was the most striking or affecting moment in the play? Was this moment plot or production-based? What effect did it have on you? What about this aspect of the play did you find to be notable?

What role does class play in *The Penelopiad*? In what ways do you see class differences impacting the characters? What is the significance of the socio-economic divisions between the female characters? Who gets treated well, and why? Who gets treated poorly, and why?
FURTHER READING

**The Penelopiad.** Margaret Atwood.
You’ve seen the play—now read the book! From Penguin Randomhouse: “In a splendid contemporary twist to the ancient story, Margaret Atwood has chosen to give the telling of it to Penelope and to her twelve hanged Maids, asking: "What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" In Atwood’s dazzling, playful retelling, the story becomes as wise and compassionate as it is haunting, and as wildly entertaining as it is disturbing. With wit and verve, drawing on the storytelling and poetic talent for which she herself is renowned, she gives Penelope new life and reality—and sets out to provide an answer to an ancient mystery.

**Weight.** Jeanette Winterson.
“Condemned to shoulder the world ‘for ever’ by the gods he dared defy, freedom seems unattainable to Atlas. But then he receives an unexpected visit from Heracles, the one man strong enough to share the burden, and it seems they can strike a bargain that might release him ... Jeanette Winterson asks difficult questions about the nature of choice and coercion in her dazzling retelling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles.
Visionary and inventive, believable and intimate, Weight turns the familiar on its head to show us ourselves in a new light.” – jeanettewinterson.com

**Eurydice.** Sarah Ruhl.
“In Eurydice, Sarah Ruhl reimagines the classic myth of Orpheus through the eyes of its heroine. Dying too young on her wedding day, Eurydice must journey to the underworld, where she reunites with her father and struggles to remember her lost love. With contemporary characters, ingenious plot twists, and breathtaking visual effects, the play is a fresh look at a timeless love story.” – Samuel French

**The Song of Achilles.** Madeline Miller.
“Greece in the age of heroes. Patroclus, an awkward young prince, has been exiled to the court of King Peleus and his perfect son Achilles. Despite their differences, Achilles befriends the shamed prince, and as they grow into young men skilled in the arts of war and medicine, their bond blossoms into something deeper - despite the displeasure of Achilles’s mother Thetis, a cruel sea goddess. But when word comes that Helen of Sparta has been kidnapped, Achilles must go to war in distant Troy and fulfill his destiny. Torn between love and fear for his friend, Patroclus goes with him, little knowing that the years that follow will test everything they hold dear.” - Bloomsbury
**Girl Meets Boy. Ali Smith.**

“Girl meets boy. It's a story as old as time. But what happens when an old story meets a brand new set of circumstances? Ali Smith’s re-mix of Ovid’s most joyful metamorphosis is a story about the kind of fluidity that can't be bottled and sold. It is about girls and boys, girls and girls, love and transformation, a story of puns and doubles, reversals and revelations. Funny and fresh, poetic and political, *Girl Meets Boy* is a myth of metamorphosis for the modern world.” – goodreads.com

**Lavinia. Ursula LeGuin.**

“In a richly imagined, beautiful new novel, an acclaimed writer gives an epic heroine her voice. In *The Aeneid*, Virgil’s hero fights to claim the king’s daughter, Lavinia, with whom he is destined to found an empire. Lavinia herself never speaks a word. Now, Ursula K. Le Guin gives Lavinia a voice in a novel that takes us to the half-wild world of ancient Italy, when Rome was a muddy village near seven hills... *Lavinia* is a book of passion and war, generous and austerely beautiful, from a writer working at the height of her powers.” – goodreads.com

**Medea. Christa Wolf.**

“Medea is among the most notorious women in the canon of Greek tragedy: a woman scorned who sacrifices her own children to her jealous rage. In her gripping new novel, Christa Wolf explodes this myth, revealing a fiercely independent woman ensnared in a brutal political battle.

Medea, driven by her conscience to leave her corrupt homeland, arrives in Corinth with her husband, the hero Jason. He is welcomed, but she is branded the outsider—and then she discovers the appalling secret behind the king’s claim to power. Unwilling to ignore the horrifying truth about the state, she becomes a threat to the king and his ruthless advisors; abandoned by Jason and made a public scapegoat, she is reviled as a witch and a murderess.

Long a sharp-eyed political observer, Christa Wolf transforms this ancient tale into a startlingly relevant commentary on our times.

**Ulysses. James Joyce.**

Loosely based on the Odyssey, this landmark of modern literature follows ordinary Dubliners in 1904. Capturing a single day in the life of Dubliner Leopold Bloom, his friends Buck Mulligan and Stephen Dedalus, his wife Molly, and a scintillating cast of supporting characters, Joyce pushes Celtic lyricism and vulgarity to splendid extremes. Captivating experimental techniques range from interior monologues to exuberant wordplay and earthy humor. A major achievement in 20th century literature.