

FROM THE ODYSSEY TO THE PENELOPIAD

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Like millions of others, I anxiously awaited the release of Christopher Nolan's new version of *The Odyssey* this summer. I was imprinted with these stories at an early age - as kids, our oldest brother read to us Greek myths as bedtime stories, and whenever *Jason and the Argonauts* or *Hercules* came on TV, we had a front row seat with popcorn in hand. We all slogged through the classics in school, and in recent years, frequent trips to the Art Institute of Chicago kept the embers of my imagination glowing with paintings and sculptures of mythological creatures and Greco-Roman artifacts.

Regarding *The Odyssey* film, I was inspired by the non-traditional casting choices, and will reserve opinion on how well they may have served the story until after I see the movie for my birthday later this month. But I have to do some eye-rolling at all the pearl-clutching – or more appropriately, chest-thumping - around Lupita Nyong'o being cast as Helen of Troy, a criticism by some as being a violation of the truth of the story. Creative casting is nothing new. Going back centuries on the stage, it had been common practice to cast men in women's roles because women were forbidden to be performers. It would be hard to find an actor to more brilliantly portray Mark Antony in the mini-series *Rome* than the very British and British-sounding James Purefoy. And Misty Copeland as the principal ballerina for the American Ballet Theater shattered the myth that a Black woman could not climb and conquer the summit of this most European of art forms. So the casting of a Black actress as a fictitious character who came into the world by way of an egg, after her mother was

raped by a god posing as a swan, does not seem so much of a stretch; calm down people - we're already through the looking-glass.

Creative casting and re-imagining of the classics invites more of humanity and each new generation into these timeless stories. Years ago, seeing *King Lear* performed by an all-Black cast at the Folger Shakespeare Theater in Washington DC was a joy and a revelation, renewing my curiosity about Shakespeare and the Elizabethan age - with all its courtly splendor, political complexity, and nascent colonialism. *Hamilton* continues to go strong after 10 years on stage; it bumps up against America's 250th anniversary in a way that breathes new life and urgency into our national motto 'E Pluribus Unum'.

The extensive public discourse on Christopher Nolan's epic has had the beneficial effect of renewing interest in Homer's classic text, in the various scholarly translations that have emerged over the past 400 or more years, and in re-imaginings of the events of Odysseus' quest that give other characters their due. My imagination was set afire last year upon my discovery of *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood. Published in 2018, the novel has been adapted and performed on stage by various companies, including by Chicago's own Goodman Theater in 2024. *The Penelopiad*, like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, is written in a style that lends itself to public recitation. Through Atwood's prism, we see Penelope as she lingers in the Underworld and relates the events of her life, starting as a young girl subject to the scheming of her male relatives and capricious deities. She was wed to Odysseus at the age of 14 and was surprised to discover in him a husband who was tender, temperate in his habits, witty and gently persuasive. The familiar threads of Homer's tale – of interfering gods and goddesses, of Penelope's strained relations with his family and her son, the haunting presence of Helen of Troy, the oppressions Penelope endured from her endless suitors during Odysseus' long absence at war, and his stunning return - are interwoven with brilliant and complex portrayals of Penelope's maidens. They are rendered not as background props, but as artful partners in survival – at turns innocent, shrewd, joyful, or beguiling in their dealings with the demanding suitors who invaded their estate. But the power dynamics are always churning at the surface, and the maidens-as-Greek-chorus often sing of the trials and degradations of their mistress and themselves.

Atwood's Penelope is a witty, artful teller of her own truth, mixing her life story as a mortal with wry observations from her current perch in the afterlife. Penelope riffs on the genius of lightbulbs and in-home-shrines dedicated to flat screen TVs (is this how

the gods speak to mortals now?); she is mystified at why moderns spend time in marble palaces gawking at centuries old gold and silver trash dug out of dirt or harvested from sunken ships, only to go to the marketplace in a corner of the palace and spend valuable coin on cheap replicas of the same trash. Throughout, the sly, elegant language is full of the irony one would expect of a woman setting the record straight on a life that has been misrepresented and misunderstood for 3,000 years.

Perhaps nowhere does Atwood's telling sting more sharply than in the aftermath of Odysseus' return, when the maidens are executed by hanging for 'betraying' the household by 'submitting' to rape by the suitors. Penelope's macabre vision of the maidens after they were killed sends chills. At this point, the dead maidens so haunt and hound Odysseus that even Penelope rises to his defense. Penelope yells at them, begging them to explain why they continue to torment Odysseus even after he has tried to make amends:

"Why can't you leave him alone?" I yell at the maids. I have to yell because they won't let me get near them. 'Surely it's enough! He did penance, he said the prayers, he got himself purified!'

'It's not enough for *us*,' they call.

'What more do you want from him?' I ask them. By this time I'm crying. 'Just tell me!'

But they only run away.

Run isn't quite accurate. Their legs don't move. Their still-twitching feet don't touch the ground."

(Margaret Atwood, The Penelopiad, p. 190. 2018 Canongate Books)

This is nothing short of the irrepressible cry for justice, a cry that pierces the heart, the grave, the memory, the ages. Toward the end, the 12 maidens perform a chorus line for Odysseus, for all abusers, for all time:

"We can see through all your disguises: the paths of day, the paths of darkness, whichever paths you take – we're right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke, like a long tail, a tail made of girls, heavy as memory, light as air: twelve accusations, toes skimming the ground, hands tied behind our backs, tongues sticking out, eyes bulging, songs choked in our throats...Why did you murder

us? What had we done to you that required our deaths? You never answered that...We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row."

(Margaret Atwood, The Penelopiad, p. 192-193. 2018 Canongate Books)

This ending is not solely an ending, it's a reminder that past is prologue, or as my high school history teacher used to say, whatever has happened can happen. Classics become classics in part because they contend with themes around the human condition that are stubbornly universal. Like the lives of so many women, The Penelopiad contains multitudes – love, loss, duty, family, yearning, jealousy, power, persuasion, deliverance, danger. Opinions on the new Odyssey film and arguments about interpretations will roil on until another sparkly blockbuster snatches our attention. But for those who want a break from the click-bait, a slow, deep dive into Atwood's luminous vision of the women of the ancient world provides a journey through our own lives that resonates through time and circumstance.