

## Five Ways of Looking at *The Penelopiad*

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As the lights go down in the great church of St James, Piccadilly, a voice speaks eerily out of the darkness somewhere off to the side: ‘*Now that I’m dead I know everything.*’<sup>1</sup> And then a single spotlight reveals centre stage a small grey-haired female figure robed in black sitting on a throne; she begins to speak. This is Margaret Atwood, doubly imaged here in performance as Penelope, for I am describing a staged reading of part of *The Penelopiad* by the writer herself.

*The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus* is one of the first three books in a new series, *The Myths*, published by Canongate Press in the United Kingdom and simultaneously in 32 other countries. The other two books are Karen Armstrong’s *A Short History of Myth* and Jeanette Winterston’s *Weight*, a retelling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles. It is Canongate’s intention to publish one hundred of these myth revisions by 2038. Atwood has been rewriting classical myths ever since her first privately published volume of poems *Double Persephone* back in 1961, and in this context her recent comments on myth are significant:

Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don’t die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embodiment themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings.<sup>2</sup>

This talk of resurrection, shape-changing, and surreptitious returns from the dead reminds us of Atwood’s fascination with the Gothic, and true to form, *The Penelopiad* is her Gothic version of Homer’s *Odyssey* told through the voice of Penelope, speaking from beyond the grave as she tells her life story in the form of a confession, spinning ‘a thread of my own’ (p. 4) in self-defence and self-justification. However, Penelope’s is not the only voice here; her tale is frequently interrupted by the voices of her twelve hanged

maids, those nameless slave girls who have nothing to say in *The Odyssey*, and whose hanging is a minor element in the story of Odysseus's homecoming. Yet Atwood remarks, 'I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.' (p. xv. And so, we might add, is Odysseus.) It seems that Atwood is using Penelope's story to tell another story within it: the story of the hanged maids, who, like the Handmaids of Gilead, have been relegated to the margins of the epic narrative: 'From the point of view of future history, we'll be invisible.'<sup>3</sup> Writing against this erasure, Atwood uses her novelistic imagination to expand Homer's text, giving voice to this group of powerless silenced women. Not surprisingly, their stories are very subversive, not only of the masculine heroics of *The Odyssey* but also of Penelope's True Confessions. Through their songs and burlesque dramas Atwood speculates on possible answers to two questions raised by her reading of *The Odyssey*: 'what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?' (p. xv). Atwood is aware of the power of a good riddle or an unsolved crime to generate reader suspense (just think of *Alias Grace*), while she describes her writing of *The Penelopiad* in true sleuthing fashion as the opportunity to 'explore a few dark alleyways in the story that have always intrigued me.'<sup>4</sup>

There are many alleyways in *The Penelopiad* that we might explore, and in this essay I shall investigate a few of them: Atwood's narrators and narrative techniques, as well as the connections between myth, fictive autobiography, Gothic tale, and domestic drama, all testifying to her fascination with the processes of storytelling and myth construction. I shall make my progress along these alleyways by following her own design for the Introduction to a volume of the new editions of H. G. Wells in Penguin Classics, 'Ten Ways of Looking at *The Island of Dr Moreau*.'<sup>5</sup>

Here are Five Ways of Looking at *The Penelopiad*.

### 1. Negotiating with the Dead

As Penelope often reminds us, she is a ghost speaking from beyond the grave, trapped in her 'state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness' (p. 1) and trying to make herself heard as she tells her tales about ancient

Greece and about the other ghosts down with her in the Underworld, 'But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl' (p. 2). It is curious how many of Atwood's female storytellers turn out to be disembodied voices. We only hear Offred's story two hundred years after she is dead, while Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, Iris Chase Griffen in *The Blind Assassin*, and Oryx in *Oryx and Crake* have all disappeared by the end of their life stories—into death or back into the text—and only their voices remain. This obsession with the transgression of boundaries between the living and the dead, which is one of the markers of Gothic sensibility, has characterized Atwood's poetry and fiction from its beginnings, and for her the creative writing process itself is haunted by intimations of mortality:

All writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld and to bring something or someone back from the dead. You may find the subject a little peculiar. It is a little peculiar. Writing itself is a little peculiar.<sup>6</sup>

It is usually the writer or her living protagonists who have to negotiate with the dead (in narratives of memory or repressed secrets, for 'the dead persist in the mind of the living'). In *The Penelopiad* this pattern is reversed, for it looks as if the dead are negotiating with us, the living. This is only an illusion of course, for it is Atwood who is negotiating with the ghosts of literary tradition and with Homer in particular: 'All writers learn from the dead ... Because the dead control the past, they control the stories ... so if you are going to indulge in narration, you'll have to deal, sooner or later, with those from previous layers of time.'<sup>7</sup> And it is Atwood who resurrects Penelope's ghost who speaks to us: 'Life of a sort can be bestowed by writing.'<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, there is something disconcerting about Penelope's description of what it is like to be dead, wandering in the Underworld outside time and place and seasons and longing for life again, as the ghosts flock squeaking to the blood sacrifices described in *The Odyssey*: 'There was a lot of pushing and shoving, a lot of slurping ... However it was glorious to feel the blood coursing in our non-existent veins again, if only for an instant' (p.

18). Atwood modulates between Homeric description and her witty parodies of the ways ghosts have found to look in on the world of the living, either as revenants at spiritualist séances or even travelling via the internet. Even more disconcerting is her emphasis on ghostly female bodies—her own and that of the hanged maid whose feet never touch the ground, though she switches to comedy in Penelope's exchanges with Helen of Troy, whose seductive powers have survived her physical death. She is still being pursued by hordes of eager male spirits: “‘Desire does not die with the body,’” said Helen. “‘Only the ability to satisfy it’” (p. 155). Evidently female jealousy and malice also survive, judging from these women's sharp exchanges. In Atwood's *Underworld*, contrary to Homer's assertions, ‘The waters of Forgetfulness don't always work the way they're supposed to’ (p. 189). Her ghosts seem to remember everything, retaining the same passions they displayed in life on earth, so that the Underworld is represented as a site where every situation is a replay of something which is ‘secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it.’<sup>9</sup> Atwood's *Underworld* is the Gothic territory of the Uncanny.

## 2. Revisioning Myths

Myths can be used—as they have been so frequently—as the foundation stones for new versions, new renderings—renderings that have, in turn, their own contexts, that find their meanings within their own historical moments.<sup>10</sup>

Atwood's project is to retell *The Odyssey* as ‘herstory’ as she engages in the kind of feminist revisionist mythmaking at which, in common with Hélène Cixous and Adrienne Rich, she is so adept. As the critic Sharon R. Wilson has remarked in her study of Atwood's mythological intertexts, ‘Atwood has used mythology in much the same way she has used other intertexts like folk tales, fairy tales, and legends,’ replaying the old stories in new contexts and from different perspectives—frequently from a woman's point of view—so that the stories shimmer with new meanings.<sup>11</sup> In Atwood's poems and short fictions there are many women who speak out of ancient myths and legends, given a voice for the first time through her literary imagination to dissent from the cultural myths imposed upon them: Circe and the Sirens

in ‘You Are Happy’ (1974), Eurydice in ‘Interlunar’ (1984), Athena, Daphne, and Helen of Troy—who goes counter dancing—in ‘Morning in the Burned House’ (1996), Helen of Troy (again) and the Cumaean Sybil in *The Tent* (2006). All of these women's voices are sceptical, irreverent, and assertive as they refocus the grand narratives of ancient myth.

Penelope belongs to this Atwoodian sisterhood as she ‘talks back’ to Homer, but as Atwood reminds readers in her Introduction and Notes, though *The Odyssey* is her main intertext she has drawn on other more scandalous stories about Penelope, to be found in Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*. Graves retails ancient gossip that Penelope slept with her suitors—perhaps with all of them—during the twenty years that Odysseus was away fighting in Troy and then ‘wandering around the Aegean Sea’ (p. xiii) having adventures. Atwood's Circe had warned Odysseus that Penelope was ‘up to something, she's weaving / histories, they are never right’<sup>12</sup> and thirty years later Penelope tells us her version of ‘the plain truth’ (p. 139). But how true is it? Atwood is playing with two levels of myth here: the Homeric myth of ‘faithful Penelope’ and cultural myths about women as either submissive and domestic, or as duplicitous schemers and *femmes fatales*—and which is she? Atwood focuses on the contradictions posed by these gender stereotypes as she peers into the gaps in Homer's narrative, using the same techniques she employed as a historiographer in *Alias Grace*.<sup>13</sup> Like Grace Marks, Penelope remains an enigma, her name buried under the accumulated weight of centuries of gossip and rumour, though, unlike Grace, she was a legendary figure to begin with. So Atwood is free to reinvent her, as Penelope vigorously parodies male myths of heroism and comments irreverently on the gods ‘diddling around on Olympus, wallowing in the nectar and ambrosia and the aroma of burning bones and fat’ (p. 135). Her subversive narrative represents Atwood's dialogue with *The Odyssey*, as through the ironic mode mythic experience is drained of the supernatural. Odysseus's adventures with monsters and temptresses are reduced through popular rumour and gossip to the level of tall tales. The Circe legend stands as a case in point, coming at the end of an increasingly fabulous list of adventures:

Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; she'd turned his men into pigs—not a hard job in my

view—but had turned them back into men because she'd fallen in love with him and was feeding him unheard-of delicacies prepared by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam. (pp. 83-4)

If such mischievous debunking of myth suggests to us a postmodern scepticism, then Atwood would agree; as she comments on writing historical fiction, 'Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age'.<sup>14</sup> *The Penelopiad* pays attention to the details of cultural life and belief in ancient Greece as retailed in *The Odyssey*, while recognizing the gap between that world and our own. It is both a celebration and a subversion of myth in a self-conscious revisioning process, as Atwood enmeshes mythic patterns in a recognizable network of contemporary human relations.

### 3. Penelope's Tale

It is Penelope's voice speaking from the dead which sparks the connection between ancient myth and contemporary reality, for her story is grounded in the domestic details of her life as daughter, wife and mother, and then as a queen who has to manage her husband's estates on the island of Ithaca for twenty years single-handed. (As Atwood has remarked, she must have done a great many other things besides the weeping and weaving which Homer attributed to her.) Penelope comments on her problems with her mother-in-law and Odysseus's old nurse, Eurycleia ('She was always Odysseus's biggest fan,' p. 106), on Odysseus's desertion and on her difficulties as a single mother with their teenaged son Telemachus: 'Whether ancient Greece or the contemporary world, it's all just the usual family dynamics. Remove the fancy language, and that's what it is.'<sup>15</sup>

Penelope's narrative, however, though conversational and engaging, tells us a great deal more than the realistic details of her everyday life, for this is her story of resistance to all those other stories, both the eulogies and the scandals, which have been imposed upon her. Now at last it is time for her to spin her True Confessions, weaving her web of words as deftly (and as

dupliciously?) as she wove her father-in-law's shroud. Though dead, her voice is remarkably alive with its ferocious wit and caustic humour. This is the same crone voice we have heard in Iris Chase Griffen's memoir in *The Blind Assassin*, for Penelope like Iris is an old woman haunted by memories where life writing does become ghost writing, or more accurately ghost speaking, as she in turn has to negotiate with the dead. Worse still, she is continually meeting her ghosts as they all wander in the fields of asphodel—the beautiful Helen (alias 'poison on legs,' p. 79), her arrogant suitor Antinous whom she reprimands ('You don't have to blather on in that fatuous manner down here,' p. 100), and her twelve favourites, the hanged maids who remain at the centre of her anguish—but more of them later. Ironically, the only person whom she rarely sees is Odysseus, who drops in occasionally but then rushes off into the River Lethe 'to be born again ... Some force tears us apart' (p. 189).

Penelope's story belongs to Atwood's favourite genre of fictive autobiography, a duplicitous if not an impossible genre as Paul de Man reminds us, for autobiography whether fact or fiction is always a discourse of 'self restoration' in the face of death and the power of mortality, and therefore subject to distortion through the chosen rhetorical mode of presentation. 'Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration, and disfiguration.'<sup>16</sup> Though Penelope is strictly speaking faceless, it is her words which restore her identity through her narrative of self-justification. Taking us into her confidence, she sets up the confessional dynamics, seducing us with her promise to tell us '*everything*.' Paradoxically, she seeks to establish her authority by confessing that sometimes she makes things up ('Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better,' p. 8), or else she confesses her innocent duplicities when she has to appear to be surprised—at Telemachus's secret departure to look for his father ('I had to appear to be surprised,' p. 122) or on Odysseus's return disguised as a beggar.<sup>17</sup> Here Penelope contradicts *The Odyssey*, which asserts that she did not recognize her husband though Eurycleia did (Book 19). In Atwood's version she recognizes him immediately, 'as soon as I saw that barrel chest and those short legs' (p. 136), though she does not reveal it: 'It's always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness' (p. 137). Penelope may reflect on Odysseus as a

trickster and a liar ('I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me,' p. 2), but by her own admission, so is she. If she delights in his storytelling it is because she can spin a good yarn herself, as she often does in devising alternative explanations for events which make her feel uncomfortable or unloved. The climax comes with their blissful reunion when they take up their old habits of telling each other stories, and Penelope makes a shocking confession to the reader: 'The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either of us believed a word the other said' (p. 173). The reader has to wonder whether Penelope is the latest in Atwood's long line of duplicitous female storytellers—beginning with Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, and continuing through *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Oryx and Crake*—who seduce and delight us with their lies. Perhaps we should heed Atwood's warning in one of her poems: 'Don't ever / ask for the true story,'<sup>18</sup> especially when we hear the handmaids' tales.

#### 4. The Handmaids' Tales

Penelope's confession is ironically undercut by the voices of the maids, 'Those naughty little jades!' (p. 151) who haunt her narrative from the beginning to the end. They blame her for their deaths and they accuse her of repeated infidelities with the suitors, always maintaining that she connived in their hanging because they knew too much. In the London staged reading several representative brightly dressed maids sang and danced around Penelope's immobile form, and even in the text they might be described as flitting around her narrative, singing their edgy little lyrics and sea shanties, performing their burlesque dramas; they will not go away and they refuse to be silenced. They transform *The Penelopiad* into a polyphonic narrative where their dissident voices counter the authenticity of Penelope's confession. Indeed, it is the maids and not Penelope who have the last word, defaming (to use De Man's terminology) the Homeric monument to male heroism and female fidelity. In *The Odyssey* we never hear the maids speak, though Odysseus overhears them on his return as they go out to meet their lovers among Penelope's suitors; as Homer tells us, 'Odysseus's gorge rose within him' (Book 20). Under his orders, Telemachus hangs twelve of them the next day on the advice of Eurycleia. Their hanging is not extraordinary

in the myth context, and it is relegated to a single paragraph in the Penguin prose translation of *The Odyssey* (the paragraph which appears as the second epigraph to our text). However, this event is lifted out and its significance entirely transformed in Atwood's contemporary version, where she makes their hanging the central mystery of the text, and perhaps the main motivation for Penelope's narrative. Their tale-telling highlights gender and class issues which go unchallenged in *The Odyssey*: the physical and sexual exploitation of servant girls (and here we think of those nineteenth-century domestics in *Alias Grace*), male violence against women (of which *The Handmaid's Tale* is only one example), and also, more shamefully, women's betrayals of other women (compare *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, and *The Blind Assassin*). Penelope does not rescue her maids, pleading from Homer's script that she did not know; like all the other women she was locked out from the slaughter of the suitors in the hall and had fallen asleep. However, she advances so many excuses for her own behaviour toward her favourites and so many alternative explanations for why they were hanged that we begin to suspect that she protests too much. How blameless was she really?

These maids are Atwood's 'unpopular gals,' the nameless female victims who have 'never had a turn.'<sup>19</sup> Now at last they have their turn, but how can their stories be told? Atwood reimagines their lives through a dazzling variety of narrative forms. There are the sinister little lyrics like the first one

We are the maids  
the ones you killed  
the ones you failed (p. 5)

which become increasingly threatening as the story progresses, until their prose poem at the end, disguised as a love song, 'We're Walking Behind You'. This is really a stalker's song, for the maids are stalking Odysseus through the Underworld: 'We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you' (p. 193). In addition, the maids stage a burlesque drama, 'The Perils of Penelope', they act out an anthropology lecture which is a parody of the cult of the Great Mother Goddess, and most surprisingly they make a videotape of Odysseus's trial.



(In a satire on patriarchal institutions, he is being tried not for their murders but for the slaughter of the male suitors, and the maids' case is laughed out of court.) As Atwood commented in her Introduction, the maids are like the Chorus or the satyr plays of Greek drama, though the sheer variety of their narratives draws our attention to the different generic conventions through which stories may be told, so that the interaction between Penelope's confession and the maids' shifting narrative forms cast doubt on the absolute truthfulness of any single account, including Penelope's. With so many competing narratives, what is fact and what is fiction? The riddle of the handmaids' hanging is never solved and their tales persist, for their fates represent the dark underside of the heroic epic and their voices celebrate the uncanny return of the repressed.

##### 5. The Penelopiad as Performance

We read *The Penelopiad* as a written text like all Atwood's other texts, perhaps comparable with her experimental short fictions in *Murder in the Dark*, *Good Bones*, and *The Tent*,<sup>20</sup> but it can also be read as the script for a play. Just as *The Handmaid's Tale* was transformed by being turned into an opera by Paul Ruders in 2003, so the staged reading of *The Penelopiad* added an important performative dimension, for this was storytelling as theatrical entertainment. Penelope's dramatic monologue delivered in the famous Atwoodian monotone was punctuated by the songs and dances of the Maids, who also took on the voices of Penelope's mother the Naiad with her enigmatic advice to the bride: 'Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does' (p. 43), and the voice of Odysseus on their wedding night: 'I've been told you're a clever girl. Do you think you could manage a few screams? That will satisfy them' (p. 44). Their burlesque performances added a kind of music hall gaiety to the reading, while highlighting the changes of tone between the serious and the playfully parodic.

Turning back to the text with this dramatic dimension in mind, it is easier to pay attention to its paratextual elements, which comprise the materials on the margins of the main text (or of the spoken dialogue in the play). These paratextual elements are the devices which structure the readers' expectations

and guide their interpretations; in a printed text they are there to be read, and in a play they are translated for us by the director. Paratextual elements include epigraphs, introductions and notes, chapter titles, and in this case stage directions. It is worth noting that many of Atwood's novels have included paratexts as well—think of the epigraphs, dedication, and Historical Notes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or the mass of preliminary materials plus Author's Afterword and Acknowledgements in *Alias Grace*—though the performance dimension to *The Penelopiad* highlights the function of such materials. Consider the significance of the two epigraphs from *The Odyssey*, one referring to the 'faithful Penelope' and the other to the hanging of the maids—women seen through men's eyes. The eulogy to Penelope is delivered by Agamemnon's ghost from Hades, and we might wonder if this is as much praise of Odysseus's cleverness as of Penelope's fidelity, while in the second epigraph the hangman is referred to simply as 'he'. (Is it Odysseus, or Telemachus, or a more generalized comment on male violence against women? The Maids' feet 'twitched' like their hanged sisters' dangling feet in *The Handmaid's Tale*.)<sup>21</sup> Both Penelope and the maids are silent in these passages from *The Odyssey*, though in Atwood's woman-centred revision the perspective is entirely reversed. Atwood emphasizes her feminist inflections in her Introduction with her reference to *The Odyssey*, indicating that her story comes to us already framed by the Homeric intertext. She is not however, as she tells us here and in her Notes, simply retelling *The Odyssey*, but going to other sources as well, for there was no one version of ancient Greek myths: 'a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another.' (p. xiv). She stresses that this is her version which, as I said earlier, dislocates the official Homeric myth in order to speak instead about the condition of women of all classes in *The Odyssey*.

The 'play script' quality is evident in the chapter heads referring to the maids, who are always billed as 'The Chorus Line.' Sometimes a chapter head wittily alludes to their fate: 'The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme' (p. 5), but most often the allusions are musical: 'The Chorus Line: The Wily Sea Captain: A Sea Shanty' or the 'Love Song' at the end. Stage directions and costume changes are also coded in: at one point the Maids are 'in Sailor Costumes' (p. 93) and at another they are wearing tap-dance shoes (p. 151). The Furies also appear: 'They have hair made of serpents, the

heads of dogs, and the wings of bats. They sniff the air' (p. 183), and the Maids make their final exit not with a the customary curtsy but with an Ovidian gesture of metamorphosis:

too wit too woo  
too woo

*The Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls.* (p. 196)

Stage directions give way to fantasy here, reminding us of the artifice of storytelling, for this is Atwood's postmodern version of ancient myth in a form which is both complicitous and parodic, and where boundaries are blurred between genres, between text and performance, between true stories and lies, between the voices of the living and the dead. Like the ancient myths, this story has no ending, for the Maids continue to run from Penelope without answering her questions (though "'Run" isn't quite accurate', p. 190) and they haunt Odysseus through eternity: 'We'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids all in a row' (p. 193). As Penelope's voice ceases and the Maids fly away, Atwood's act of literary reclamation comes to an end, for Penelope and her Maids, like the mythic figures in Prospero's masque, 'were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air,'<sup>22</sup> perhaps ready once again to change costumes and as Atwood reminds us, 'to take on other meanings.'

## NOTES

- 1 The quotation is the first sentence of Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), p. 1. All further references to this text are given in parentheses within the essay. The London production referred to took place on 26 October 2005, directed by Phyllida Lloyd, who also directed the 2003 opera of *The Handmaid's Tale* in Toronto. Indeed, there are strong similarities between *The Penelopiad* and that novel, which I shall sketch in this essay.
- 2 Margaret Atwood, 'The Myths and Me', *Read: Life with Books* (Random House) 6.1 (2005), 35.

- 3 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986; London: Vintage, 1996), p. 240.
- 4 'The Myths and Me', 38.
- 5 Atwood's 2005 Introduction is reprinted in her *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970-2005* (London: Virago, 2005), pp. 383-96. Her title obviously derives from Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.'
- 6 Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 140.
- 7 *Negotiating*, p. 160.
- 8 *Negotiating*, p. 154.
- 9 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14 (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 368.
- 10 'The Myths and Me', 36.
- 11 Sharon R. Wilson, 'Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood's Works', in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), p. 215.
- 12 Margaret Atwood, *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-1995* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 173.
- 13 See 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', in *Curious Pursuits*, pp. 209-31, where Atwood describes her postmodern methods of rewriting history.
- 14 *Curious Pursuits*, p. 210.
- 15 Guy Dixon, 'A Desperate Housewife in Ancient Greece: Interview with Margaret Atwood', *The Globe and Mail: Review*, 22 October 2005, R12.
- 16 Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979), 926.
- 17 See Nathalie Cooke, 'The Politics of Ventriloquism: Margaret Atwood's Fictive Confessions', in *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels*, ed. Lorraine M. York (Toronto: Anansi, 1995), pp. 207-28, for an analysis of the power dynamics of the confessional form.
- 18 *Eating Fire*, p. 245.
- 19 Margaret Atwood, *Good Bones* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1992), p. 25. See also Sharon R. Wilson, 'Fiction Flashes: Genre and Intertexts in *Good*

- Bones*', in *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, ed. Sharon R. Wilson (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2003), pp. 18-41.
- 20 See Reingard M. Nischik, 'Margaret Atwood's short stories and shorter fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), pp. 145-60.
- 21 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 289. In the Salvaging episode the Handmaids had to pull on the rope to signify their complicity in these hangings, which raises a suggestive parallel with the maids' accusations of Penelope's involvement in their deaths.
- 22 Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1.149-50.

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## The Riddle of the Text: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

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In an essay written in the 1930s, Bertolt Brecht referred to the dangers of accepting too readily received ideas of the 'eternal truths' concerning ancient tragedies. As an example, he argued that most productions of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* perpetuate highly questionable assumptions about the nature of 'the tragic hero':

The individual whose innermost being is thus driven into the open then of course comes to stand for Man with a capital M. Everyone (including every spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a performance of *Oedipus* one has for all practical purposes an auditorium of little Oedipuses.<sup>1</sup>

This comment reflects the distinctive ideas about theatre that Brecht was then developing, both in direct theoretical discussions and in his own theatrical practices. In the period that saw the rise of Fascism in Germany, his project was to create a political theatre. Among other things, the historical materialist basis of Brecht's politics encouraged him to replace universal statements about the nature of 'Man' with direct engagements with historical specificities both past and present.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, his scepticism is directed towards the supposedly universal and unchanging truths about human life that are enshrined in the figure of Sophocles' Oedipus. Both as writer and director, Brecht sought to replace the idea that an ineluctable fate determines the tragic hero's destiny with more 'progressive' concepts. To do this, he felt it necessary to re-align the relationship between stage and auditorium by changing the passively receptive spectator of current and traditional theatre (which he labelled 'Aristotelian') for one who was politically and intellectually alert.<sup>3</sup> Brecht refused what he considered to be the pacifying agency of Aristotle's *catharsis*—whereby the audience's pity and fear in the face of the tragic spectacle are somehow calmed—and wanted to produce instead a theatre-going public that would debate the rights and wrongs of what was