



QUEENSLAND
SHAKESPEARE
ENSEMBLE

THE PENELOPIAD

Margaret Atwood

Aug 25 - Sept 10



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ABOUT THE COMPANY

QUEENSLAND SHAKESPEARE ENSEMBLE - WHO ARE WE?

The Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble (QSE) was founded in 2001. Since its inception, the Ensemble has gained a reputation for energetic, accessible and unique productions of Shakespeare's plays. We use Shakespeare as a platform for positive change, via our ongoing programs. These include:

- ❖ Mainstage performances for the general public
- ❖ The Apprenticeship program, supporting emerging artists by offering a 6 month training program
- ❖ *Dare to Share* showing of company training
- ❖ *Shakespeare's Shorts*, touring to schools, festivals, markets and other events
- ❖ The Shakespeare Prison Project
- ❖ Our Shakespeare Beyond program, which includes A Night at the Theatre, Relaxed Performances, and Youth Justice workshops
- ❖ In-School Workshops in voice, Forum Theatre, and performing Shakespeare
- ❖ Actor training, including: Linklater Voice Work, Speaking Shakespeare in Your Own Voice, Theatre of the Oppressed, Shakespeare Scene Study, and the Young Actors Shakespeare Intensive



QSE exists to:

- ❖ Powerfully share epic stories with live audiences
- ❖ Provide world class training opportunities to actors and non-actors
- ❖ Support creativity in contexts and communities where it has been historically excluded
- ❖ Nurture an ensemble of artists managers that drive the company's activities and works together to develop their skills on stage and off

We believe that performing Shakespeare demands the cultivation of the whole self in the service of the communal enterprise, and as such is the ideal vehicle for this exploration. Although the Ensemble performs the works of other playwrights and authors, Shakespeare will always be the home from which we travel.

The Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands on which we work, play and perform - the Jagera, Turrbal and Quandamooka peoples. We pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

THE PRODUCTION AT A GLANCE

THE PENELOPIAD BY MARGARET ATWOOD

Performance season:	August 25th - September 10th 2023
Location:	PIP Theatre, 20 Park Rd Milton QLD
Length:	2 hours plus a 20 minute interval
Suitability:	Years 10 - 12
Content Warning:	This show contains some sexual themes, mild coarse language, and stylised depictions of violence and sexual assault. All moments of threat and violence have been choreographed as a part of a professional, rigorous and respectful rehearsal process.
Key Themes:	Class, gender, power dynamics, giving a voice to the silenced, new perspectives on old stories, storytelling vs the truth, violence, self-expression, war, friendship

Discussion Questions:

- ❖ How is power and status represented in *The Penelopiad*?
- ❖ How does *The Penelopiad* use non-linear storytelling? What effect does this type of storytelling have on the audience?
- ❖ How does *The Penelopiad* reshape and transform the original story of *The Odyssey*?
- ❖ What is the purpose of contemporising the story *The Odyssey*?
- ❖ Was Penelope justified in her actions, even though it led to harm for others?
- ❖ How does Margaret Atwood use the power of language to represent ideas, events and people?
- ❖ What are the dramatic conventions used in the play, and how do they contribute to the story and the audience's experience?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Drama:

The Penelopiad offers a contemporary, female-focused retelling of one of the greatest legends of all time. No longer just a footnote in the “hero’s” journey, the women of Ithica weave their own stories in Margaret Atwood’s play, based on her novella of the same name. Using many dramatic conventions including non-linear storytelling, narration and monologue, stylised movement, and live song and music, *The Penelopiad* challenges the audience to look beyond the surface of a story to uncover the depths of human experiences hidden below.

Styles and Form:

Contemporary Performance
Theatre of Social Comment
Ensemble Theatre

Dramatic Conventions:

Hybridity
Non-Linear
Multiple Roles
Fragmentary props and costumes
Fluidity of time and place
Appropriation – Myths and Legends
Narration and Monologue
Stylised Movement
Use of song and live music



English & Literature:

- Legend and Fables
- Narrative Building
- Comparison of texts around similar themes (see *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*)
- Adaptation (see Margaret Atwood’s novella of *The Penelopiad*)
- Representation – language and identity

SENIOR CURRICULUM LINK (QLD)

General Drama

UNIT 1: Explore drama as a means to tell stories and share understandings of the human experience. Explore a range of non-linear dramatic forms and hybridity of conventions and forms in storytelling.

UNIT 3: Explore how drama can be used to challenge our understanding of humanity over time, investigating dramatic styles that are united by social commentary, and that question their world and advocate change.

UNIT 4: Develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required to make and respond to dramatic works that reshape and challenge meaning and how stories can be enacted.

Drama in Practice Applied Syllabus

Core Topic One: Purposes and contexts: dramatic, real and general contexts.

Production elements and technologies: note the applied theatre technologies, stage management, design, music, lighting, sound, etc.

Electives: The electives provide the focus for the exploration, development and integration of the two core topics, and associated concepts and ideas. They cover broad topics and reflect the current work, community, study and leisure environments in which drama is used.

- Acting (Stage and Screen).
- Directing.
- Technical Design and Production.
- Theatre Through the Ages.”

General English

UNIT 1: Individual and collective experiences and perspectives of the world.

UNIT 3: Explore connections between texts with representations of the same concepts and issues in different texts as they resonate, relate to, and clash with one another.

Literature

UNIT 2: Explore ways literary texts connect with each other — genre, concepts and contexts; ways literary texts connect with each other — style and structure; creating analytical and imaginative texts.

UNIT 3: Students inquire into the power of language to represent ideas, events and people, comparing these across a range of texts, contexts, modes and forms.

General Capabilities:

Critical and Creative Thinking: “seeing or making new links that generate a positive outcome” or “generating open- and far-mindedness” or “inquisitiveness”

Ethical Understanding: Students learn to develop ethical understanding as they explore ethical issues and interactions with others, discuss ideas and learn to be accountable as members of a democratic community.

Intercultural Understandings: Intercultural understanding encourages students to make connections between their own worlds and the worlds of others, to build on shared interests and commonalities, and to negotiate or mediate differences. It develops students’ abilities to communicate and empathise with others and to analyse intercultural experiences critically.

CAST AND CREATIVES

Cast:

<i>Penelope</i>	Liliana Macarone
<i>Maid (Melantho) / Oracle</i>	Rebekah Schmidt
<i>Maid (Tanis) / Queen Anticleia</i>	Meg Bennet
<i>Maid (Kerthia) / Helen</i>	Leah Fitzgerald-Quinn
<i>Maid / Odysseus</i>	Rob Pensalfini
<i>Maid / Telemachus</i>	Riley Anderson
<i>Maid / Eurycleia</i>	Frankie Marington
<i>Maid / Niad Mother / Suitor</i>	Ellie Hardisty
<i>Maid / Icarius / Suitor</i>	Willem Whitfeild
<i>Maid / King Laertes / Antinous</i>	Angus Thorburn
<i>Maid (Iole)</i>	Mikala Crawley
<i>Maid (Celandine)</i>	Sarah Hindle
<i>Maid (Klytie) / Menelaus</i>	Leah Mustard

Creatives:

Director	Rebecca Murphy
Assistant Director	Rebekah Schmidt
Stage Manager	Jordan Ferguson
Assistant Stage Manager	Nikita Walter
Production Manager	Kylii Davis
Music Director	Rob Pensalfini
Singing Coach	Liliana Macarone
Costume Designer	Leah Fitzgerald-Quinn
Costume Assistant	Linda Ogonowski
Set and Props Designer	Josh Murphy
Lighting Designer	Tim James
Movement/Fight Director	Jason Mckell

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Rebecca Murphy, director of QSE's *The Penelopiad*:

Margaret Atwood describes this script as “An echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo” so, welcome to this ensemble’s echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo!

I first encountered *The Penelopiad* in its novella form many years ago (during a solid few years of reading very little that wasn't by Atwood), but was unaware of its play form until last year when one of our Core Ensemble members brought it in for the group to read and consider. We were all immediately curious and excited about its potential.

The Penelopiad is not simply a retelling of The Odyssey. Through a fusion of source material and Atwood's imagination, it brings more dimension to Penelope the person. Usually presented as a mythical woman of virtue and patience, the silent stand-by-your-man type, or as she herself puts it, "a stick to beat other women with" this Penelope has had a couple of thousand years to think about things and isn't satisfied with that version of herself being the canonised one. She's ready to spin a thread of her own...

But it isn't that straight forward because *The Penelopiad* is not simply a retelling of *The Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective. Enter the maids who invite us (or perhaps force us!) to consider yet another perspective. This is one of the things I most enjoy about Atwood's writing and the collective approach that the team has brought to working on it – there is no attempt to tidily transfer hero status from one single character to another single character. We haven't swapped out 'Patient Penelope' for 'Saint Penelope' or 'Martyr Penelope'. That would be too easy and would, in my opinion, let both her and us (the storytellers and the story-hearers) off the hook.

The story, with its lengthy history, multiple perspectives, and explorations of truth and memory, is huge. And we've leaned into storytelling in all its glorious forms to explore it – there are musical numbers (although it's not a musical), ballads, a Tennysonian Idyll, mime and more. The maids draw on the tradition of the chorus from Greek Tragedy and the satyr plays that used to accompany tragedies, in which actors poked fun at them, but they contemporise these traditions by speaking of their own fear, joy and anger as well. It has been important for us during the process to find each of the maids as individuals as well as a collective.

Like all my favourite pieces of art, The Penelopiad asks more questions than it gives answers and I hope you find some interesting ones to chat about afterward. The process of creating this show has been deeply collective, one that I've enjoyed immensely. I would have happily stayed in the rehearsal room for another few weeks watching these actors play, but that would be selfish. It's even more fun to open the doors and invite you and your perspectives to join us!



PLAY SYNOPSIS

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* retells the story of the *Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope and her Twelve Maids. The story is told in retrospect, with Penelope and the Maids in the afterlife reflecting on the events that occurred centuries before. Penelope's first person narrative is a mostly chronological account starting at her birth, while the Maids provide commentary on her narrative.

Penelope's account begins with her deciding from the afterlife to tell her side of the famous story of her marriage to Odysseus after thousands of years. The Maids, meanwhile, introduce themselves through a song that accuses Odysseus of killing them. Penelope begins her account with her childhood, stating that she was born in Sparta to King Icarius and a Naiad mother. According to stories Penelope heard growing up, Icarius tried to kill Penelope in infancy by throwing her into the sea, but Penelope was saved by a flock of ducks. Her mother, meanwhile, was neglectful and cold. In the Maids' commentary on Penelope's childhood, they compare their own lineage, contrasting their slave and peasant parents with Penelope's royal ones.



Penelope next describes the contest for her hand in marriage, a running race, when she was fifteen. Odysseus won the race (supposedly by cheating) and married Penelope that day.

Contrary to custom, Odysseus took his bride back to his home on the island of Ithaca. The sea journey was rough for Penelope, and once they landed things weren't much better. Although Penelope quickly came to love Odysseus, she did not get along with her mother in law,

Anticleia, and found Odysseus's former nurse, Eurycleia, to be very condescending. Penelope had no friends her own age or status. Penelope's only comfort was the birth of her son, Telemachus, and her love for Odysseus.

Eventually, Odysseus received word that Penelope's cousin Helen, whom Penelope despised, had left her husband Menelaus for a Trojan prince named Paris. Menelaus and several other men intended to lay siege to Troy in response. They came to search for Odysseus, who had sworn an oath to Menelaus to protect his rights to Helen. Odysseus tried to feign madness to get out of his obligation, but he was caught in the end. Odysseus sailed for Troy.

Time passed, Telemachus grew up, and Anticleia died. Penelope learned to manage Odysseus's estates in his absence. News came from minstrels about Odysseus's exploits during the war. Then, finally, news came that the Greeks had won the war. Expecting Odysseus to come home, Penelope looked for ships on the horizon, but none came. Minstrels brought strange tales of Odysseus's difficult attempts to get home, until one day

the reports stopped coming. The Maids, during one of their commentaries, give a song-form synopsis of the experiences that Odysseus supposedly had in the Odyssey.

Meanwhile Suitors began to show up at Ithaca, asking to marry Penelope in the hopes of gaining access to her dowry. Claiming that they were guests, the Suitors took everything they wanted from the estate, running it into the ground.

As the time of Odysseus's absence lengthened, the number of suitors grew bigger and they became more impatient. Penelope devised a plan to fend them off, saying that she would not pick one to marry until she had finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes. However, every night, Penelope and her Twelve Maids secretly unravelled the work that she had done that day, prolonging the process and buying her more time. Meanwhile, Penelope told the Maids to spend time with the Suitors and gain their confidence by sleeping with them and saying bad things about Odysseus and his family. The Maids obliged and told Penelope whatever they learned.

The Suitors finally learned of Penelope's trick with the shroud thanks to the loose lips of one of the Maids. They confronted Penelope about it. Penelope promised to finish the shroud quickly and then pick a suitor. Telemachus, growing impatient, secretly left to search for word of his father. When he returned,



Penelope prayed to the gods once more for Odysseus's return. She then found Odysseus out in the courtyard, disguised as a beggar. Penelope did not let on that she recognized him, but sent him to Eurycleia for a bath. Eurycleia recognized Odysseus by the scar on his leg, but did not tell Penelope about his identity, although, secretly, Penelope already knew. During his time in the palace, Odysseus overheard the Twelve Maids saying bad things about his family, unaware that they were acting according to Penelope's orders.

Penelope spoke with the beggar/Odysseus, still pretending not to know who he was. She said that she still missed her husband and remained faithful to him. She then asked his advice on her idea to have an archery contest to finally decide which Suitor should win her hand, knowing that the task she had set was one only Odysseus could succeed in. Odysseus/the beggar agreed this was a good idea, and he won the contest when Penelope held it that day. He then locked Penelope in her room and killed all of the Suitors.

After the Suitors' murders, Odysseus asked Eurycleia to point out the Maids who had been unfaithful to him. Eurycleia pointed to the Twelve Maids who had been spying for Penelope, and Telemachus hung them. Following the hanging, Odysseus "revealed" his identity to Penelope, who pretended to be surprised. Odysseus then set sail again soon after finally arriving back at home, to go on a quest to cleanse himself of the Suitors' murders.

In the afterlife, the Twelve Maids haunt Odysseus, following him everywhere. Odysseus chooses to leave Penelope over and over again in order to be reborn and temporarily escape the Maids. Penelope, meanwhile, stays in the fields of asphodel, and the couple replays their estrangement over and over again in the world of the dead.

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-penelopiad/summary>

THE ODYSSEY - AN OVERVIEW

The Odyssey is Homer's epic of Odysseus' 10-year struggle to return home after the Trojan War. While Odysseus battles mythical creatures and faces the wrath of the gods, his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus stave off suitors vying for Penelope's hand and Ithaca's throne long enough for Odysseus to return. *The Odyssey* ends as Odysseus wins a contest to prove his identity, slaughters the suitors, and retakes the throne of Ithaca.

The *Odyssey* does not follow a linear chronology. The reader begins in the middle of the tale, learning about previous events only through Odysseus's retelling. The first four books set the scene in Ithaca. Penelope, Odysseus's wife, and their young son, Telemachus, are powerless before her arrogant suitors as they despair of Odysseus's return from the siege of Troy. Telemachus is searching for news of his father, who has not been heard from since he left for war nearly 20 years earlier. He journeys secretly to the Peloponnese and seeks out two men who fought with Odysseus in the war at Troy, Nestor and Menelaus, and discovers that his father is indeed still alive.

The second four books (V–VIII) introduce the main character, Odysseus, as he is being released from captivity by the nymph Calypso on the island of Ogygia. He suffers a shipwreck and lands on the shore of Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians. In Books IX–XII Odysseus tells the Phaeacians of the harrowing journey he and his crew endured as they tried to find their way home—including their encounters with the lotus-eaters, Laestrygonians, and the sorceress Circe, their narrow escape from the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus, their ordeal navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, and the final shipwreck in which Odysseus is washed ashore on Ogygia alone.

Finally, Books XIII–XXIV, the second half of the poem, find Odysseus back in Ithaca, facing unexpected obstacles and danger. He meets with his protector-goddess Athena and reveals himself first to his faithful swineherd Eumaeus and then to Telemachus before developing a complicated plan to dispose of the suitors. During Odysseus's absence, Penelope resisted the importuning of more than a hundred suitors—who have stayed in Odysseus's house, eating, drinking, and carousing while waiting for her to decide among them. In order to reunite with his wife, Odysseus kills them all, with the aid of Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius (a servant and cowherd).

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/the-odyssey/the-odyssey-at-a-glance>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Odyssey-epic-by-Homer>

CONVENTIONS OF EPIC THEATRE

Although the story is based on an ancient Greek legend, Atwood's play utilises many conventions of the modern contemporary Epic Theatre movement. Epic Theatre was popularised by the playwright Bertolt Brecht in his plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The purpose of epic theatre is to portray a cohesive narrative of events that fully displays the class struggle between different groups of people. It is also meant to ensure the detachment of viewers from those events. Thus, Epic Theatre is intended to serve as a form of entertainment that serves to divert the viewer's attention while also encouraging the viewer to make social and political changes based on reason rather than emotion. While not a pure Epic play in itself, *The Penelopiad* definitely borrows some of the aspects of Epic Theatre such as:

Alienation:

Verfremdungseffekt (German) or alienation means 'to make strange.' The aim here is to disrupt the illusion that what is occurring on stage as real life, because this does not allow the audience members to reflect critically on the political issues within the play. It is a common misconception that Brecht wanted his audiences not to emotionally connect with the play. What he didn't want them to do is just sit back, being enthralled in the story believing it to be true, but rather question the social injustice within the scene; to watch with a critical eye. Brecht felt that thinking and feeling were intrinsically linked, and the process of the audience learning about a political injustice could lead to anger, irritation, shock, etc. Brecht wanted the audience to have empathy and not sympathy for the characters and situations. Many of the conventions of Epic theatre seek to cut across the building of intense mood and emphasis theatrically to distance the audience e.g. Changing sets or roles in front of the audience. **Alienation is achieved through the manipulation of other Epic Theatre conventions.**

Historification:

Deliberately setting the action of a play in the past in order to draw parallels with contemporary events or using a well-known event from the past and altering time and place or reappropriating the original context for another context with the purpose alienating to achieve the didactic. Historification can be like an 'allegory' or 'metaphor'. The actors are using the audience's understanding of a well-known event to draw a parallel for the audience to make a didactic comment on the action in the play or moment.



- ❖ *The Penelopiad* is set both in Ancient Greece (through Penelope's memories) and Hades, the Greek afterlife. Despite the events of the play happening thousands of years ago, the audience should still be able to draw connections to class and gender struggles of today.

Use of Song:

Songs (live or recorded) can be used to comment on the action, by making the didactic point clearer to the audience. They can be discordant, serious message with humorous and upbeat style, and/or include the reappropriating of lyrics of a well-known song.

- ❖ Margaret Atwood has included many songs throughout the play, often as a way to narrate off-stage events or give the audience an insight to the mind's and experiences of the maids.

Direct Address:

The actor acknowledges the audience by facing out when presenting. This could be in the role of the character or as the narrator with the purpose of alienating the audience and to reinforce the didactic. This also breaks the fourth wall and serves to distance the audience.

- ❖ Both Penelope and the maids directly address the audience often during the play. Although they remain in character, often when the maids address the audience it is directly after Penelope does, to make sure that the audience does not forget their side of the story.



Multiple role-taking:

Actors switching in and out of different roles. This is done to highlight to the audience that they are storytellers in the moment, which alienates the audience because they are reminded they are actors and not the characters. The actor needs to deliberately change their voice, gesture, stance and facial expressions to allow the audience to distinguish between Roles. They also need to ensure the transitions between roles are clear. Symbolic

prop and/or costume items can assist here.

- ❖ Every actor that plays a maid in this production takes on multiple characters, sometimes switching mid-scene with simple but symbolic costume pieces. The design of the show uses minimal props and costumes, with fabric and rope being used to represent multiple different things from a baby to a boat.

(Drama Syllabus 2019 v1.1)

<https://www.dramaqueensland.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Epic%20Theatre%20Conventions.pdf>
<https://study.com/learn/lesson/bertolts-brechts-epic-theatre-overview-purpose.html>

KEY THEMES IN *THE PENELOPIAD*

Class, Womanhood and Violence

Atwood's account of the events of the *Odyssey* through Penelope and the Maids' eyes focuses on the hardship and heartbreak of life as a woman in ancient Greece. Among these difficulties are the social and psychological pressures that women face. Atwood examines them primarily through Penelope, whose first person account gives the reader a sense of

how Penelope feels about the societal expectations of women.

One of the problematic social dynamics that Atwood explores is the intense competition between women. Much of this competition is over male sexual attention, like in the case of Helen and Penelope's



rivalry and Penelope's sense of inadequacy because of Helen's beauty. Penelope spends quite a bit of her narrative taking stock of her own plainness compared to Helen, while Helen repeatedly rubs in her superior beauty. This toxic dynamic results in Penelope's fierce dislike of Helen, whom she calls "that septic bitch." Rather than being allied in their shared status as women, or in their familial relations (Helen is Penelope's cousin), Penelope and Helen are rivals for male attention. This rivalry seems to be the consequence of a society that values women only for their beauty, since Penelope's cleverness and devotion go undervalued.

Some of the competition between women, though, is less focused on male sexual attention, and more on correctly filling a stereotypically female role in general. For example, Penelope finds that her mother in law (Anticleia) and Odysseus's former nurse (Eurycleia) are constantly judging Penelope's performance as a wife. Eurycleia takes Penelope under her wing, but many of her instructions give Penelope unnecessary stress. Eurycleia also controls Penelope's mothering of Telemachus very closely and criticises her independent choices. Through Penelope's narrative, Atwood shows how social norms of women's behaviour and desirable qualities cause Penelope constant stress and make her feel extremely alienated.

While Penelope suffers because of the psychological pressures of her gender, Atwood shows how, in comparison, the Twelve Maids have it much worse. Because of how their class status interacts with their gender, the Twelve Maids suffer even more than Penelope does in the male-dominated society of Greece. Though Penelope still has to fend off the

Suitors that come to marry her after Odysseus does not return, the Suitors at least never threaten to harm Penelope physically. The Maids, however, are often the victims of rape at the hands of these same Suitors. Both Penelope and the Maids discuss rape as an extremely common event in ancient Greece, committed by both the Greek gods and mortal men. While Penelope theoretically is also susceptible to this threat, the Maids' lowly status means that they are totally unprotected from it. When the Maids are raped, none of their rapists are punished for their deeds. On the contrary, Penelope and Eurycleia treat rape as a normal, if unfortunate, occurrence. Still, it is clear that the Maids themselves are extremely affected emotionally and physically by the violation. Penelope describes, for example, how the girls "felt guilty" and "needed to be tended and cared for."

Ultimately, the maids are not only raped, but they are then punished for their rapes with murder. When Odysseus returns and kills the Maids, he says his murders were not a problem because the Maids were "whores." Eurycleia also describes these women as "notorious whores," despite the fact that she knows that many of them were actually rape victims, and did not willingly have sex with the Suitors. The Maids also specifically blame their slave status for their fate, stating that they were discarded because they were "born to the wrong parents."

In sum, while Atwood shows the struggles that women face in Greek society in general, her characterization of the Twelve Maids highlights how low class status exacerbates the violence and psychological trauma that all women are susceptible to.

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-penelopiad/themes/class-womanhood-and-violence>

Storytelling, Textual Authority and Falsehoods

The concept of storytelling is highly important from the very beginning of the play, when in Penelope's first monologue she talks about why she is finally telling her own story and discusses how she had previously remained silent because she "wanted happy endings." Penelope clearly implies that the normal narrative arc towards a happy ending, or narrative structure in general, has silenced her side of the story. In this scene, Penelope also describes many of the stories invented about her infidelity following the circulation of the Odyssey as "scandalous gossip," again linking storytelling with untruth. Penelope then furthers this idea by frequently connecting storytelling to fibre work and her own weaving, which she uses for deceptive purposes.

Furthermore, Atwood's decision to write the play itself could also be taken as a criticism of the idea of textual authority (the concept that the text is sacred, final, truthful, and cannot be questioned). The *Penelopiad*'s very existence implies that Homer's version of the story is somehow misleading or incomplete. Atwood's revision also undermines several major plot points of the Odyssey, including the idea that Penelope did not recognize Odysseus when he arrived back at Ithaca in beggar's clothing. Moreover, to write her revision, Atwood relied on other contemporary Greek texts besides the Odyssey, suggesting that the Odyssey is not the only authoritative account of the myth. In fact, in her introduction, Atwood specifically states that the Odyssey is "not the only version of the story" and discusses how, because of its nature, oral myth is inherently made up of many different voices.

While the reader may assume that Atwood's revision of the myth through Penelope's eyes is a kind of "correction" of the *Odyssey*, the fact that Atwood troubles the idea of a complete and truthful narrative undermines the trustworthiness of her own play as well. Atwood actively engages with this tension, especially through the chorus of Maids whose voices are present throughout the play. The Twelve Maids question Penelope's decisions, suggesting that Penelope is complicit in their murders since she does not reveal to Odysseus that they were helping her all along. Although Penelope attempts to exonerate herself in her narrative, suggesting that there was little she could have done to help at the time, the Maids' chorus condemns Penelope for her lack of action. In opening Penelope's own narrative up for criticism, Atwood suggests that even Penelope's voice cannot be taken as authoritative or definitive.

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-penelopiad/themes/storytelling-textual-authority-and-falsehoods>

Survival

When Penelope marries Odysseus, her Naiad mother gives her important advice that she will later use when dealing with the suitors. She tells her daughter to be like water: "Water does not resist. Water flows". Penelope will rely on this strategy when her life is most at risk, as her palace has been overpopulated by greedy men who want to harm her. She ingeniously comes up with a plot to fend them off and is able to successfully do so until Odysseus arrives to save the day. Penelope's memory of her mother's important advice communicates a major theme throughout *Penelopiad*: that of survival. Throughout the novel, characters are concerned with different kinds of survival: survival of reputation, survival in the family, survival of lineage, and survival in marriage. As Valarie Miner argues, characters in Atwood's stories use whatever tools are at their disposal to survive: "Odysseus survives because of his agility and strength. Helen survives because people covet her powerful beauty. Penelope survives through her patience and wiles."

Strikingly, the twelve maids do not survive. Instead, they are cruelly slaughtered by Odysseus. They are so disenfranchised by their class position that even though they are charming, beautiful, and crafty, they are not afforded the same victorious fate as Odysseus, Helen, and Penelope. Instead, their positive qualities—those same qualities that cause Penelope to choose them in the first place—are the reason for their ultimate downfall.



<https://www.gradesaver.com/the-penelopiad/study-guide/themes>

ANALYSIS OF KEY CHARACTERS

Penelope:

Penelope decides to tell her story to set the record straight, correcting the accepted portrayal that she was the epitome of the loyal, devoted wife. However, Penelope's version of events shows a narrator that is not truly reliable, as she presents her story with her biases and interpretations. Though Penelope resents that she is held up as the model of an ideal wife, she still tries to present herself in as positive a light as possible. However, her own story, as well as the Maids' perspective, calls into question whether Penelope was as faithful as she proclaims to be. Penelope's judgement of others also reveals her negative qualities. She despises her cousin Helen for her beauty, even blaming the entirety of the Trojan War on Helen's vanity. Penelope's resentment shows how deeply her jealousy goes and reflects how women may turn against each other in a male-dominated society.

Penelope also turns against other women to protect herself. Though she claims to love her Maids as if they were her daughters, she still encourages them to spend time with the Suitors, even when the Maids seek her comfort after being raped. In the Underworld, Penelope wishes the Maids would leave Odysseus alone as they continue to haunt him, despite them being wrongly executed at his orders. This shows that, while Penelope may have been more powerful and cunning than mythology lets on, she acted at the expense of other women.

The Twelve Maids:

The Maids provide their perspective throughout *The Penelopiad*, often revealing a contrast between the struggles of women of different classes or contradicting

Penelope's version of events. Though Penelope sees her own life as tragic, the Maids' stories show how women are not



oppressed equally. The Maids have lived as slaves since the moment they were born, wishing they had as much freedom as someone like Penelope and only dreaming of being able to marry someone like Odysseus.

Because the Maids deliver so much of their text as part of a chorus, and we do not learn their names until near the end of the play, the Maids appear largely symbolic. Their lives and their fate show how little women are valued, as their deaths go unpunished and largely unnoticed. The Maids show that the oppression of women is not simply abstract but has real consequences. They also demonstrate the consequences by haunting Odysseus, not only in the Underworld but also in each life he is reborn into. Their haunting of Odysseus shows

that, while men may think their treatment of women may go without retribution, they will not escape punishment in the end.

Odysseus:

Odysseus is traditionally known for qualities associated with the typical epic hero, such as strength and cleverness. While Penelope's version of events does not dismiss these qualities, it shows the flip side of them. Odysseus is indeed clever, but he uses this quality to cheat his way into marrying Penelope and to try to deceive his way out of fighting in the Trojan War. Penelope loves Odysseus, but, looking back on their marriage, she understands that he was likely only acting as though he loved her back. Odysseus's deceit and skilled storytelling call into question all his stories about his time away from Ithaca. While the stories tell of heroic deeds, some versions suggest that he was simply wasting his time on affairs, in no hurry to return home to his wife and son.

Odysseus's murder of the Suitors and the Maids is often celebrated in mythology as a righteous act of justice by a hero protecting his family. However, Penelope's story also casts doubt on whether the murder was justified. Odysseus's guilt then follows him around for the rest of his life in the form of the Maids, who will never let him forget what he did. Odysseus's status as a traditional hero, therefore, may not be entirely accurate, proving that no one story can capture the objective truth.



PREPARING FOR PERFORMANCE

AN ACTOR'S WARMUP

Rob Pensalfini, Artistic Director of QSE, says:

Warm up together as a cast. Let the warm up be a way to connect to your fellow performers so that you are all inhabiting the same world even before the performance begins.



A warm up should bring you gradually from everyday energy to performance energy. Begin with observation of how you feel (physically, mentally, emotionally), and work to free yourself of physical tension and vocal inhibition. Include plenty of yawning and humming, increasing in range and power.

Never move or make sound mechanically. You are not warming up an instrument; you are warming up the connection between your body, your thoughts, your feelings, your intentions, and your voice. Every sound you make is a release of thought, some part of your psyche speaking.

A short group warm up may include activities to:

- ❖ Facilitate self-observation (e.g. a 'body scan' visualisation; or neutral walking through the space, observing weight placement, tension points, and movement of breath)
- ❖ Connect out to members of your ensemble (e.g. Salute to the Sun, or similar repetitive movement sequences that the group works to perform simultaneously)
- ❖ Connect to the space and build energy (e.g. the 'bomb and shield' drama game)
- ❖ Activate your voice, such as:
 - ❖ Gentle yawning, sighing and humming through your range (can be done in combination with spinal rolls)
 - ❖ Massaging the jaw and the sinuses
 - ❖ Stretching the lips, tongue (roll it out over your bottom teeth), and soft palate (create an unvoiced 'k' sound on both in and out breath)
 - ❖ Stretching the ribs (can also use gentle massage / vibration on the chest)
- ❖ A vocal scale - working through combinations of vowels and consonants at varying pitches
- ❖ Tongue twisters (to activate articulators)

BACKSTAGE PASS

INTERVIEW WITH THE ACTORS

Liliana Macarone (Penelope)

Q: What has helped you empathise with and inhabit your character?

A: So many things!

I can very much empathise with her great desire to be heard. In her early life, Penelope had no voice at all. No voice and no choice. I've felt that keenly while playing her. And the frustration of being misrepresented and wanting to set the record straight is something most of us could relate to. I also think many women would be able to relate to the way that Penelope is careful to say and do things that won't rock the boat or upset the more dangerous and volatile characters in her world. We still live in a patriarchal society – here in modern day Australia – and while it may seem less explicit now, you only have to look at the uproar over the Barbie movie to see how men's stories – stories that centre and celebrate men – are still the status quo.

The specificity of the memories we witness or the arguments she makes have been central to inhabiting Penelope. For example, the specific moments of joy, or pride, or despair that we see (or that she chooses to show us) are very telling. Loneliness is a central theme of her life, the different forms of abandonment she experiences makes her attachment to and love for Odysseus completely understandable, and his repeated abandonment of her all the more heartbreaking.

The play moves through time and space in a non-linear fashion, so there are also technical and stylistic elements that help me inhabit the character. The mature voice of Penelope – the version of her that knows everything – is distinct. It's witty and ironic and engages directly with the audience. The way that the Maids in Hades disrupt and undermine her, affects her storytelling, causing her to be responsive – less in control. And the way that the lines between 'the storyteller' and 'the woman reliving her darkest moments' blur, especially towards the end of the play, informs so much of her psychological and emotional life. Lastly, the way that Penelope starts to tell a story and then goes off on a tangent or gets caught up in a particularly interesting detail, before realising and making her way back to the original story – I do that often!

Q: What would you consider your character's greatest strength and weakness?

A: Hmmm... Her greatest strength would be her resilience (I think Penelope herself would agree with that) flowing around an obstacle rather than opposing it. She has a survival instinct that manifests in a deep determination, and is someone who keeps busy and tries to make the best of a bad situation.

She is incredibly intelligent, and quite observant, but avoids confrontation and maintains that status quo by taking care at times not to appear smarter or more capable than the men around her. She also has a blind spot. Like most people of her station, she seems unaware of the great privilege that benefits her as a princess and then a Queen. Combined, these elements cause much harm.

Q: Why are you looking forward to sharing this production with audiences?

A: I love the storytelling element – both in its structure and the various forms it takes (poetry, song, monologues, scenes etc), and the exploration of truth, perspective, exaggeration and what has just evolved over time. It's a kind of theatrical patchwork quilt that tells the story behind the famous Odyssey – and reveals how Penelope's waiting was actually a dramatic story of its own. Putting this patchwork together has been an ensemble effort and we have such a wonderful, inventive cast and director – that I can't wait for audiences to enjoy what we've created! It's also a play that centres women's voices, without preaching, or sanitising the messy bits – which I deeply appreciate and expect audiences will too.

Q: What is your favourite line from the play?

A: Oooh, it's so hard to choose just one - there are many lines that delight me!

"I'm glad it was dark by then, as in the shadows we both appeared less wizened than we were."

"There's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts– "

"When I was little I often tried to throw my arms around her, but she had a habit of sliding away"

"I use head figuratively. We have dispensed of heads, as such, down here"

Rob Pensalfini (Odysseus)

Q: What has helped you empathise with and inhabit your character?

A: I'm not a Greek hero and I don't have short legs (I don't!), so we'll have to look for personal qualities. I think I can say without too much arrogance that I'm cursed with a little charisma and often find myself in leadership positions (usually by accident, or at least without much planning). I also have a restless nature which means I sometimes don't value or nurture what I have, always looking for the next exciting adventure. I'm about the same age as Odysseus was when he returned to Ithaca – and I've recently been through some major changes in my home situation, and we've all just come out of the siege of Troy that was the Covid pandemic. The role seemed timely for me, a reminder to take stock and nurture.

Q: What would you consider your character's greatest strength and weakness?

A: Resourcefulness and an understanding of human nature are his strengths.

A deep restlessness in his soul is his weakness, and pride.

Q: Why are you looking forward to sharing this production with audiences?

A: It's fun, thought-provoking, and deeply moving in equal measure – the trinity! The process of creating it has been of exploration and challenge in a very nurturing environment. A bunch of excellent theatre-makers who enjoy working together very much have come up with this, and to share that exploration, that joy, and that camaraderie with other members of our community is the highlight of my artistic practice.

Q: What is your favourite line from the play?

A: "There's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts– "

PRACTICAL EXERCISES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

GEOGRAPHY OF THOUGHT

Elements of Drama: *Exploring Language, Space, and Movement*

QSE's training encourages actors to physicalise the literal images their characters are describing as they speak the words in early rehearsals. This can be a very useful way of creating personalised connections with the character's words and with their emotional state, as well as bringing the symbolic imagery to life. The below monologue could be explored by one actor with the whole class assisting or in the audience, or the activity could be undertaken in small groups, as a practical exploration of this rehearsal technique.

Suggested classroom activity:

Have one actor read through Penelope's monologue (below).

As a class / group, work through the images in the monologue, discussing briefly what they entail (it can even be very useful to research or print out images that relate to those described, especially for specific references such as the Trojan War).

Have the actor read through the monologue again, this time standing on a 'stage' space; as the actor names each new image, invite other group members to enter the stage and create a freeze-frame of that image (if using a larger group, each image can stay; if smaller groups of 4 – 5, the 3 – 4 non-speaking actors will need to create a simple choreography, moving from one freeze-frame to the next, as appropriate). Encourage large, heightened shapes, incorporating levels, and using the full breadth of the stage space available.

Have the actor playing Juliet speak the speech a third time, this time directly to the relevant images created by their peers. Encourage him or her to move freely among, towards or away from the images / freeze-frames. Invite them to respond with movement if Penelope's words or actions invite this.

Finally, have the image-actors return to the audience and invite the actor playing Juliet to share the speech with the audience one more time, allowing the literalised imagery to colour their movement and vocal delivery.

Discuss with the class whether (and where) this increased the clarity (and their understanding) of the speech, and how it changed their perception of Penelope's emotional state and / or the scene's mood.

The Penelopiad, Scene 13

Penelope: During the days I had work to do. I was now running the kingdom all by myself.

In no way had I been prepared for such a task in my early life in Sparta, so in the palace of Ithica I had to learn from scratch. But learn I did.

My policy was to build up the estate's of Odysseus so he'd have even more when he came back than he'd had when he left - more money, more sheep, more cows, more pigs, more fields of grain, more slaves. I often dream about Odysseus returning, and how I, with womanly modesty, would reveal how well I'd done at what was usually considered a man's business. How his face would shine with pleasure! You're worth a thousand Helens, he would say. Wouldn't he? And then he'd clasp me tenderly in his arms.

We had news of how the war with Troy was going: sometimes badly, sometimes well. Minstrels sang songs about the notable heroes, but I waited only for news of Odysseus. I relished those moments. There he was making an inspiring speech, there he was uniting quarrelling factions, there he was concocting an astonishing falsehood. There he was disguising himself as a runaway slave and sneaking into Troy and speaking with Helen herself, who - the song proclaimed - had bathed and anointed him with her very own hands. I wasn't so fond of that part.

And then finally - after ten long years - the news flashed from beacon to beacon - Troy had fallen.

SCENE IN GIBBERISH

Elements of Drama: *Exploring Language (verbal and non-verbal), Tension and Mood*

Atwood's language is powerful and specific, but it is also visceral – the whole being speaks. These days our experience of language tends to be more disembodied, and actors approaching the words sometimes leave behind their non-textual communication skills like body language, gesture, and tone – which convey the stakes and urgency of what they are saying.

The actors in the scene play out the scene in gibberish, a made-up (on the spot) babble which sounds like language, but sounds like no specific language. They shouldn't try to replicate the scene line by line, but essentially play out the intentions and ideas and actions in the scene. They will be forced to rely on all of these non-verbal strategies to communicate and get their needs met.

Then, immediately go back and play the written scene, this time adding language to the non-verbal expression they have discovered. Keep encouraging them to find the level of intensity and energy they had in the gibberish version of the scene, with the mere addition of the text to further support it, not replace it.

Suggested classroom activity:

As a group, have students read scene 24 – Telemachus's return after taking off and looking for Odysseus. Workshop the scene as a class by having pairs 'present' the scene. The first pair should attempt the scene using the original text; following pairs will attempt the scene using only gibberish (there is no need to hold the script or follow the intent of each line exactly – but they should be attempting to recreate as much of the intention of the original as possible, without sensible dialogue).

After each gibberish performance, elicit feedback on which sections of the scene were clearest, and what gestures, movements, or vocal intonation assisted this. For every two or three gibberish performances, have a pair return to using the original text, incorporating as much of the useful gestures, movement and intonation as they are able.

Discuss as a class how the performance of the scene has changed through the focus on communication of dramatic meaning through non-verbal language and vocal intonation (rather than just through the meaning of the words themselves).

The Penelopiad, scene 24

Penelope: So did you discover anything about Odysseus on your little jaunt? And
if you did, could you possibly bear to share it with me?

Telemachus: Why would you care?

Penelope: I'm his wife.

Silence

Penelope: Was there even the smallest...was there a hint - was there *any* news of Odysseus?

Telemachus: (*self-important*) According to Menelaus...

Penelope: You saw Menelaus?

Telemachus: According to Menelaus, my father is alive and well...

Penelope: The gods be praised!

Telemachus: But he can't get away. He's trapped on a tropical island...

Penelope: With a beautiful goddess who makes love to him night after night. Yes, I've heard those rumours before.

Telemachus: And, of course, I saw Helen.

Penelope: Oh. Yes. Helen.

Telemachus: She gave us a *great* dinner!

Penelope: And how did Helen...look?

Telemachus: As radiant as golden Aphrodite! It was a real thrill to see her. She was everything she's cracked up to be!

Penelope: She must be getting a little *older*, by now, surely?

Telemachus: Not that you could tell, no.

Penelope smiles, and looks away to hide her disappointment. There's a silence.

Penelope: Well, anyway, I'm glad the suitors didn't murder you.

Telemachus: (*softening*) Actually, Helen did look quite old. Way older than you. Sort of worn out. All wrinkly. Like an old mushroom. And her teeth are yellow. Actually, some of them have fallen out. It was only after I'd had a lot to drink that she looked beautiful.

Penelope: (*pleased*) Thank you, my son. Goodnight.

PREPARATION FOR RESPONDING

Responding requires students to:

- ❖ *analyse the use of the Dramatic Languages within a production to create dramatic action and dramatic meaning*
- ❖ *evaluate the success of this creation of dramatic meaning for the audience*
- ❖ *synthesise their understanding of how the use of the Dramatic Languages worked to engage the audience.*

The Dramatic Languages include:

Elements of Drama	Skills of Drama	Conventions of Elizabethan Theatre
Characters / Roles Relationships Situation / Context Place Space Movement Language Symbol Mood Dramatic focus Dramatic tension Contrast	Acting (voice & movement) Directing (responsible for dramatic meaning) Design / Stage craft (set, lighting, costume, sound)	Poetic language Blank verse (iambic pentameter) Rhyming couplets Prose (often used in less emotionally charged scenes) Presentational acting style Soliloquies Asides Eavesdropping Play within a play Elaborate costumes Symbolic (minimal) scenery

Students' process for planning a Responding essay may include these steps:

1. Decide what the overall dramatic meaning of the production was (this may change as you analyse the production further).
2. Decide on the key Dramatic Languages that effectively contributed to the creation of dramatic action and meaning throughout the production.
3. For each body paragraph - choose a moment within the play that contributed significantly to the creation of this dramatic meaning (a moment that made an impact!)
4. Analyse which of the key Dramatic Languages have been used to create this impact
5. Connect (synthesise) the use of element(s) of drama with skill(s) of drama and/or convention(s) of form and style within the chosen moment
 - ❖ You could link a key convention that was present in the chosen moment with an element of drama that has also been effectively used
 - ❖ You could link two elements of drama together where one element impacts on another e.g. dramatic tension often enhances mood
 - ❖ You could link a convention with one of the skills of drama
 - ❖ You could link an element of drama with one of the skills of drama
6. Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the creation of dramatic action and meaning within the chosen moment.
 - ❖ Evaluative words could include:
 - Successful
 - Effective
 - Engaging
 - Disjointed
 - Confusing
 - Heightened
 - Enhanced
 - Confronting
 - Well-developed

RESPONDING SCAFFOLDING TABLE

Your students may use a table similar to this one to link their notes around the use of the dramatic languages within QSE's production of The Penelopiad .

Elements of Drama	Conventions of Style	Skills of Drama	Purpose / Meaning	Examples in the production	Topic Sentence
Dramatic Meaning:					