

ENGLISH – THE PENELOPIAD & PHOTOGRAPH 51

Compare the ways in which stories are told and by whom in *The Penelopiad* and *Photograph 51*.

Atwood's novella and Ziegler's play present societies where women are repressed. Whilst the males dominate the narratives in both *Photograph 51* and the *Penelopiad*, Penelope has the power of being the storyteller; contrasting Rosalind. Albeit Rosalind's story is interjected by the males and Penelope's is interrupted by the maids, this indifference brings to question whose perspective presents the truth, and while Penelope's truth seems blurred, the males ultimately paint Rosalind in a good light to cover their own duplicity.

Atwood and Ziegler both play with the traditional stereotype of a woman; revealing that their supposed domestic and submissive archetype is not abided to by all females. Whilst Penelope conforms to this patriarchal structure, Rosalind responds with snark hostility; 'I will not be anyone's assistant'. However, the 1950's has only recently seen women challenge this status-quo; and the men in *Photograph 51* are still bewildered by the notion that 'Miss Franklin' wants to work independently; 'I work best when I work alone'. From the outset of the play, the men can be seen interjecting into Rosalind's story; and her sheer drive for autonomy undermines the males' desire for 'teamwork'. Paradoxically in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope seems willing to 'build up the estates of Odysseus' when he left to 'the Battle of Troy'; demonstrating how different women's lives are and can be. Penelope also aims to 'weave her own narrative' and holds the power of being the storyteller; revealing to the audience what was not told in Homer's *Odyssey*. In doing this, Penelope undermined herself as she portrayed herself as having less than virtuous motives; completely contradicting her view in the Homeric version. Rosalind on the other hand, is presented in a good light; although 'stubborn' and 'less than Rosy', the males who interject and share her story ultimately feel 'guilty' that she didn't receive the recognition she deserved. This disparity, while revealing the tropes of women in different era's, conclusively reveals how it is not always the males who undermine the females, but instead it is up to the storyteller themselves.

Both the main characters in the texts have their stories interrupted; where it is difficult to determine who's perspective presents the truth. Penelope's story is interjected by her 'twelve maids', who pose as a 'Greek Chorus' in the novella. Their ironic songs, chants and dances provide a caustic humour to Penelope's retelling, presenting an alternative view to her story. The symbol of the maids 'fly[ing] away as owls' at the end of the novella presents them as wise, truth-telling moral observers who seem to 'know all'; ironically suggesting that they hold the utter truth to Penelope's story. However, it is the arrogance of the males and females in the text that undermines their voice ever being heard, for they were killed 'too soon'. It is only the audience who ever bears witness to their 'cries'. Not only has Atwood used the maids as a way to reveal the social hierarchy established, but also to impart the notion that women are always undermined by men; even in the 'underworld' their voices cease to exist. This idea is given nuance when viewed in the light of Rosalind's story; where her male counterparts retell her journey to 'discover the secret of life'. While she is portrayed as a 'determined' scientist, it is ultimately the males who interject her story that prevents 'her truth' from being heard, like the maids. It is only the audience that hears her inner thoughts through her monologues; where she expresses her wish to 'be kissed', to 'be a child again' and for her father to 'look at her with uncomplicated pride'. Gosling, who acts as an intermediary, continuously interjects and speaks on behalf of her; 'but instead she said'. Rosalind is left to no option but to say 'I don't know'; revealing how Rosalind was too scared to 'open up' to Crick due to becoming vulnerable and powerless. Concealing the truth is hence apparent in both texts, and, thanks to the characters that punctuate both texts, this

provides an example of what happens when assumptions are formulated; no one knows where the truth lies.

While characters in the stories already have their voices concealed, Atwood and Ziegler aim to ascertain that not every story is reliable. Whilst Penelope aims to 'spin a thread of [her] own' and predispose her audience to believe how she will 'right wrongs', her correction of Homer's *Odyssey* questions this. While making excuses for why she 'missed' the maids hanging, 'I suspect Eurycleia put something in the...drink', Penelope paints an undesirable image for herself where her motives seem ambiguous. Paradoxically, Rosalind is portrayed in a good light by the males who narrate her story. While they seem to mock her femininity with snide remarks, 'she's a cipher where a woman should be', they undoubtedly feel guilty that she didn't get the credit she deserved for her discovery. While this is the only perspective we can gauge, as Rosalind's story is retold with hindsight, it is ultimately an unreliable story like Penelope's. We, the audience, are not able to ensure that the males are painting her in a good light because she was an admirable woman or if it is to cover their own duplicity; for they bathed in, what should've been Rosalind's, glory. Rosalind is denied 'her place in history' because of the males' own drive for 'fame' and, ultimately, 'The Nobel'. Ziegler has exemplified this patriarchal culture by commenting specifically on the damage caused to the victim, Rosalind, by the perpetrators, Watson, Crick, Casper and to some extent Wilkins. Atwood and Ziegler have ultimately aimed to demonstrate the unreliability of one narrator, and that there is always more than one side to a story.

While the males seem to dominate in both stories, Atwood and Ziegler have, together, aimed to break apart this patriarchal conformity that is stereotypically abided to by women. By shedding light on women's voices that have intergenerationally been silenced, both writers have exemplified that misogyny is deeply rooted in society and, as a result, we cannot always trust the men who tell us stories. While Penelope's blurred truth is evident also, storytelling has ultimately been used by both writers to understand the world and let those who have been repressed in the past, 'fly'.