

## 摘要

具有“加拿大文学女王”美誉的玛格丽特·阿特伍德是加拿大当代最负盛名的作家之一。她迄今为止已发表了超过 50 部作品，涉及长篇小说、短篇小说、诗歌、文学评论等各类题材。阿特伍德的作品享誉国际，并被翻译成 40 多种语言出版，她本人也曾多次夺得包括布克奖、加拿大总督文学奖在内的 50 多项文学奖，并数次获得诺贝尔文学奖提名。

20 世纪以来，国际文坛涉及经典重述的作品层出不穷，其中对传统神话传说的改写最为显著。2005 年苏格兰坎列格农出版社联合世界知名作家推出全球“重述神话”系列，其中就包括了阿特伍德改编自荷马史诗《奥德修斯》的中篇小说《珀涅罗珀记》。其实，阿特伍德在她早期的短篇小说和诗歌中已尝试过经典重述这一文学手法，例如模仿莎士比亚戏剧《哈姆雷特》而创作的短篇小说《葛特露德的反驳》，以诗歌形式改编的希腊神话传说如《塞壬之歌》、《脱衣舞女海伦》、《达芙妮、劳拉以及其他》、《欧瑞狄刻》等等。在这些经典重述作品中，女性主义的观点贯穿始终，阿特伍德将现代女性的独立自主注入这些依附男人生活的旧式女性思想之中，将她们重塑成为有灵魂的独立个体，并通过她们之口，对传统的男尊女卑、歧视妇女等男权思想观念进行质疑与批判。

本篇论文共分六章。第一章概述部分对阿特伍德的生平、文学成就以及她的经典重述作品作了较为详细介绍，并回顾了国内外文学评论者关于阿特伍德经典重述作品的研究成果，最后介绍了本论文的内容和结构。第二、三、四章是论文的主题部分。第二章围绕《珀涅罗珀记》展开，首先分析了荷马原著《奥德修斯》中的珀涅罗珀、十二个女仆、海伦等传统女性形象，并将其与阿特伍德作品中重新塑造的女性形象进行对比；其次从两部作品在男女叙事角度上的不同进行讨论；最后揭示了阿特伍德重述这部作品所反映的女性主义理念。第三章首先分析《葛特露德的反驳》中皇后葛特露德和奥菲莉亚这两个女性，并同莎士比亚原著《哈姆雷特》中同名的两位传统女性形象进行对比，最后通过阐述阿特伍德作品中女性叙述的主导地位来揭示《葛特露德的反驳》所反映的女性主义论点。第四章阐释了阿特伍德在诗歌方面的经典重述，从新旧文本中女性形象的差异着手，并且通过探讨两者不同的叙事角度来发掘阿特伍德诗歌所反映的女性主义思想。第五章介绍了戏仿这种文学手法在阿特伍德的经典重述作品中所起的重要作用。第六章结语部分全面回顾了论文结构及内容，总结并补充说明各章节，同时指出该篇论文的限制性，并表达了论文作者今后对此课题进行更为深

入研究的愿景。

关键字：阿特伍德；女性主义视角；经典重述

## Abstract

Known as the “Queen of Canadian Literature”, Margaret Atwood is one of the most notable contemporary Canadian writers with world-wide reputation. As a prolific writer, she has delivered more than fifty works including novels, poetry collections, short fiction collections, children’s books and so on, which have been translated into more than forty languages. Her remarkable literary achievements have won her over fifty literary prizes such as the Booker Prize and Governor General's Literary Awards as well as the nominations of Nobel Prize.

Since the very beginning of the twentieth century, many writers have tried canon rewriting, and mythological rewriting is part of this trend. In 2005, as a novelette adapted from Homer’s epic *Odyssey*, Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* was released by the Scottish publishing press Canongate. In fact, Atwood has already begun canon rewriting ever since her early writing career. For instance, her short fiction *Gertrude Talks Back* adapts the story of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and many poems such as *Eurydice*, *Siren Song*, *Helen of Troy does Counter Dancing*, *Daphne and Laura* and so forth retell many legends from the Greek mythology. Feminist topics as eternal themes in Atwood’s canon rewriting have always been under discussion. Through the exploration of women’s problems, Atwood remodels these conventional women characters into modern ones by putting contemporary elements such as equality, independence and sense of freedom into their minds. Meanwhile, according to the denouncement from these rewritten women characters, Atwood queries and criticizes the conventional sense of male chauvinism.

This dissertation has six chapters. The first chapter serves as a brief introduction to Atwood’s life, her literary achievements, her canon rewriting and a literary overview on her canon rewriting by critics at home and abroad. Chapters Two, Three and Four constitute the fundamental part of the whole dissertation. Chapter Two analyzes the theme of *The Penelopiad* by comparing Atwood’s new women images of Penelope, Helen and twelve maids with the traditional ones in Homer’s *Odyssey* as well as by illustrating the changed narrative angles from the male point of view to the female point of view. Chapter Three elaborates the difference between the new images of Gertrude and Ophelia in Atwood’s texts and the old images in Shakespeare’s play and exposes the

woman-controlled narrative angle from Gertrude's point of view for the sake of exploring the feminist concerns. Chapter Four emphasizes the distinctions of a series of female characters between the Greek mythology and Atwood's rewritten poems, the changed narrative angles and the discussion of the feminist views. Chapter Five introduces parody, a frequently used writing technique in Atwood's canon rewriting and its functions. Chapter Six is the conclusion which summarizes the whole dissertation concerning both content and structure, points out its inadequacy and accordingly, expresses the author's willingness to do further literary research on this subject.

**Key Words:** Margaret Atwood; Feminist Approach; Canon Rewriting

# Chapter One Introduction

## 1.1 Margaret Atwood and Her Life

### 1.1.1 Her Brief Biography

Though Margaret Atwood's reputation as a writer has grown steadily in international literary circles, this versatile woman plays different roles in her life. "She is a writer but there is also Atwood the literary celebrity, media star, and public performer, Atwood the cultural critic, social historian, environmentalist, and human rights spokeswoman, and Atwood the political satirist and cartoonist." (Howells 1) Through her works, Atwood keeps exploring Canadian's cultural traditions in attempt to make her motherland a nation of the world as well as its literature a profound presence on the world stage.

On November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1939, Margaret Atwood was born in the city of Ottawa, Ontario. She is the second daughter of three children of Carl Edmund Atwood, a biologist who pursued his entomological studies and Margaret Dorothy Killam, a former dietitian and nutritionist. Atwood spent her early childhood in northern Quebec and went back and forth between Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie and Toronto, for her father continued his research on forest entomology. In 1946, the whole family moved to Toronto and Atwood did not attend the full-time school until 1950. From then on, she has become voracious to reading: pocketbook mysteries, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Canadian animal stories, and comic books, which stimulated her strong interest in literary creation. Actually, Atwood began to write when she was only six and wanted to be a professional writer at the age of 16. With a determination to write she began studying English Language and Literature at Victoria College in the University of Toronto in 1957. At that time, she wrote for the literary journal, the college newsletter, and the dramatic society. There her professors included Jay Macpherson and Northrop Frye. Macpherson, a good friend and mentor to the young Atwood, was an outstanding poet and scholar who had the "fairly extensive library of Canadian poetry," (Staines 14) and Frye was the major figure of Canadian criticism and he advised Atwood to go to graduate school, where she would have "more time to write." (14) Frye really influenced Atwood a lot and she graduated in 1961 with a Bachelor's degree of Arts in English and minors in philosophy and French. In late 1961, Atwood won the E. J. Pratt Medal for her first published collection of poems, *Double Persephone* and began her

graduate studies in English Literature with a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at Radcliffe College in Harvard University. There she studied with the renowned Victorian scholar Jerome Hamilton Buckley. After two years at Harvard, she began her lectureship at the University of British Columbia (1965) where she finished her first novel draft of *The Edible Woman*, then returned to Harvard for another two years but failed to get a doctoral degree, for she couldn't complete her dissertation on *The English Metaphysical Romance* in 1967. Later on, she started her teaching career at Sir George Williams University in Montreal (1967-68), University of Alberta (1969-79), and York University in Toronto (1971-72). Besides, Atwood continued to write poetry while she was pursuing her doctoral studies, wrote even more in her two years away from Harvard. Since the end of the 1970s, Atwood began her professional writing career. For more than forty years since the publication of her first volume of poetry *Double Persephone*, Atwood has produced more than fifty books that have been translated into over forty languages.

### 1.1.2 Her Literary Achievements

Atwood's productive period can be divided into two parts. The first period started from 1966 to 1976. During this period, Atwood tried to draw an objective and emotionless description to express the essence of her works and highlight the common themes lay in her uncertainty about this dark, shallow and deceiving world. Once she commented "one of the things I would like to squash underfoot like a cockroach is the idea of art as self-expression. You must say something about the world at large." (Freedman 25) The major works of this period are the poetry collections such as *The Circle Game* (1967), *The Animals in That Country* (1968), *The Journals of Susanna Moodie: Poems* (1970), *Power Politics* (1971), and novels such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *The Lady Oracle* (1976), etc.. In 1972, she published her criticism, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which helped all the Canadians "distinguish Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared and confused." (Atwood 24) Besides, she also raised a theme of victimization, in which she discussed "the great Canadian victim complex" (12) and compared the Canadian stance towards the world with the female situation in the male-controlled world. During the second period, with the publication of *Selected Poems* (1976), *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (1987), Atwood gradually began

to vary the themes of her works, for instance, the dichotomies between the natural and human worlds. The major poetry collections in this period are *Two-headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and the novel *Bodily Harm* (1983). Later on, the worldwide popularity of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* opened a new and broader way leading to dystopian fiction and political themes. Atwood also started to participate into social and political activities and became a firm believer in human rights and social campaigner, writing many articles with radical humanism. (Shen)

Coral Ann Howells once praised Atwood's writing style as "the combination of high seriousness and witty ironic vision which is the hallmark of Atwood's literary production" Truly this internationally celebrated author is worth a special position in contemporary history of world literature. "she is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Prince of Asturias Award for Literature, has been short-listed for the Booker Prize five times, winning once, and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Award seven times, winning twice." (York 28) When Atwood discovered her voice as a Canadian writer of poetry, fiction, and literary criticism, she helped the country discover its own life as a literary landscape. As she has mentioned in *Survival*, "everything was interesting, but the important thing was discovering the fact of our own existence as Canadians."

## **1.2 *The Penelopiad* and Other Short Works Concerning Canon**

### **Rewriting**

#### **1.2.1 *The Penelopiad***

*The Penelopiad*, as one of a series of rewritten classic books, was a novelette released by the Scottish publishing house Canongate in 2005. As a rewritten ancient Greek mythology, *The Penelopiad* is based on Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells a story happening among the main characters like Penelope, a chorus of the twelve maids, Penelope's heroic husband Odysseus, their son Telemachus, together with her beautiful cousin Helen. The whole novelette is mainly narrated by Penelope with the alternating interludes of the twelve maids' who interrupt Penelope's story-telling in order to expose their views on events. "The maids' interludes use different genres each time, including a jump-rope rhyme, a lament, an idyll, a ballad, a lecture, a court trial and several types of songs."(Chen 139)

This book has been translated into 28 languages and has almost been released by 33 publishing companies simultaneously. It is number one among the best sellers in *MacLean's* and number two in *The Globe and Mail*. "Some critics found the writing to be typical of Atwood, even amongst her finest work, while others found some aspects, like the chorus of maids, disagreeable. An adapted version was performed at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa during the summer and falls of 2007 by all female characters and was directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo." (Yuan)

In Homer's *Odyssey*, after twenty years, Odysseus returned to his home kingdom: Ithaca. During the first three years, he fought in the Trojan War and in the next seventeen years, he tried to return home while struggling against all the obstacles around the Aegean Sea. On his way home, with the protection of his divine helper Pallas Athene, he conquered the hardships, killing the monsters and finds ways to get rid of the goddesses. "The character of 'wily Odysseus' has been much commented on: he is noted as a persuasive liar and disguise artist---a man who lives by his wits, who devises stratagems and tricks and who is sometimes too clever for his own good." (Atwood 13) Penelope, daughter of Icarius of Sparta, and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy used to be portrayed as the faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy. While waiting and praying for the return of Odysseus, she wittily deceived all the suitors who came to propose to her by weaving a shroud that she secretly unraveled at night in order to delay her remarriage process. The whole book ended with the successful slaughter of the suitors by Odysseus and Telemachus, the hanging of the twelve maids who deserve the penalty by having slept with the suitors as well as the happy reunion of Odysseus and Penelope. However, "Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral and also local---a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another." (14) Atwood mentions her aim in rewriting the canon in the preface: "I have drawn on material other than *The Odyssey*, especially for the details of Penelope's parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumors circulating about her. I have chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in *The*



*Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I have always been haunted by the hanged maids, and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself." (14) Evidently, Atwood negates the female images of Penelope, Helen and the twelve maids in the traditional version and writes this novelette for a total subversion of these conventional ones in Homer's epic.

### 1.2.2 *Gertrude Talks Back* and Poems Concerned

Though Atwood's short fictions are less important than her major novels and poem collections, her short stories has been hailed by the German critic Helmut Bonheim in 1981 as "the most active ambassador of Canadian literature abroad." (M.Nischik 145) "Her short stories are remarkable both in their thematic variety, their tremendous intellectual astuteness and in their almost uniformly high literary quality." (145) Atwood tries reinterpretation as a new writing technique in her short fiction collection: *Good Bones*. Among them "*Gertrude Talks Back*" is a typical example. It is a rewriting version of one of the greatest dramas of world literature—Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The original play concentrates on its protagonist: Hamlet, who speaks more than half the text---in dialogues as well as in numerous monologues while the female character such as Ophelia, Hamlet's lover and Gertrude, his mother, rarely speak or say very little words "even in the famous 'closet scene' with Hamlet." (156) In Atwood's short dramatic monologue *Gertrude Talks Back*, "she rewrites Shakespeare's plot, promoting Gertrude to a position of prominence, making her the title figure, and giving her freedom of speech---to such an extent that she now indeed embarks on a monologue, reducing her son and supposed dialogue partner Hamlet to passive silence: we can only infer his reactions from what Gertrude says in her monologue. Apart from this drastic reversal in the basic speech situation, Atwood also takes various other aspects of the Shakespearean pre-text and parodically inverts them in the smallest of spaces." (157) Here Atwood revises and modernizes Shakespeare's play, changing the original figures of Gertrude and Ophelia who act as the passive sexual victims of the male figures.

In the western literature, poets always prefer searching their inspiration from the Greek and Roman mythology and the Bible. Margaret Atwood reaches great achievements in rewriting Greek mythological poems through the feminist perspective in order to subvert

a series of decayed and controversial women images in the conventional, men-controlled literature.

Her rewritten poem *Orpheus and Eurydice* is adapted from the Greek mythology *Eurydice*. Eurydice, an oak nymph and one of the daughters of Apollo, was the wife of Orpheus who loved her very much. One day, she was pursued by a satyr, bitten by a snake and then died. Orpheus sang mournful songs that made all the gods and nymphs cry, and the latter ones gave him the suggestion of traveling to the underworld to get his wife back. Orpheus followed the advice and Hades and Persephone, the emperor and the queen of the underworld were deeply moved by his soft voice. They allowed Eurydice to take Orpheus away only if she never looked back until they reached the upper world. However, Eurydice did look back and vanished forever. Eurydice is an ideal woman with incredible beauty, and that is why she is always pursued warmly by the male gods. However, this beauty keeps silence and never dare to speak in the original story. Ironically, though she is not the story-teller, her legend goes around throughout the world. Her real thoughts and feelings are buried under the male narration. Therefore, this woman is not a real person but a puppet controlled by men. On the contrary, in Atwood's *Eurydice and Orpheus*, Eurydice is no longer the silent beauty and she has wakened up from a thousand year sleep. She gains the right to speak by monologues and conversations with the male gods. The whole poetry is narrated from the Eurydice's perspective, which indicates her independent sense about the outside world.

Another poem named *Daphne and Laura and so Forth* from Atwood's poetry collection *Morning in the Burned House* is an adapted story of Apollo, Daphne and Cupid. Once upon a time, Cupid wounded Apollo with a golden arrow, leading him to fall in love with Daphne, the nymph daughter of the river God Peneus. Meanwhile, Cupid hurt Daphne with a lead arrow which made her hate all her lovers. Apollo pleaded with Daphne all the time to fulfill his desire and Daphne always attempted to flee. Therefore, she ran away while Apollo pursued her wherever she went. In the end, Daphne cried out to her father and begged for help. The father made her daughter turn into a laurel tree; however, Apollo still embraced the tree. He cut off some of the branches and made a wreath. In this original version, the same as Eurydice, Daphne is also a silent beauty, who failed to struggle against her fate but fled passively when being trapped into plight. However, in Atwood's

adapted poem, Daphne shows her bravery to express her real intentions and accuses Apollo as a sexual invader. Regarding herself as a dead person while living as the laurel tree, Daphne is willing to maintain the current situation because she finds herself safer and freer while being a tree.

Another two poems which are adapted from the Greek mythology are *Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing* and *Siren Song*. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Helen was condemned to have caused the Troy War because of her tremendous beauty. In contrast, Atwood recreates the image of Helen as a dancing girl who seduces men for a living in the current commercial society. Here Helen starts a monologue that exposes her proficiency of tempting men by using their own weaknesses—desire and cruelty. In Homer's *Odyssey*, sirens were three dangerous bird-women who owned enchanting voices on an island called Sirenum scopuli. They always sang music on the rocky coast to compel the sailors and then ate them brutally. On the contrary, in Atwood's *Siren Song*, these three bird-women sing enchanting songs for the purpose of calling the sailors for help so as to save them by taking off their feather clothes. Atwood intends to reveal a truth that the reason why the sirens are irresistible to the sailors is because of men's own weaknesses: human frailty and overbearing behaviors.

### **1.3 On Canon Rewriting**

#### **1.3.1 Definition**

Canon rewriting belongs to the domain of post-modernism, where parody is frequently used. As Marjorie Perloff has put it, postmodern story "is no longer the full-fledged mythos of Aristotle...but a point of reference, a way of alluding, a source...of parody." (Hutcheon 108) A brief introduction will be given about the definition of canon rewriting and parody.

The literary resources of Atwood's canon rewriting mostly originate from the Greek mythology and Shakespeare's drama: *Hamlet*. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word "canon" as "refers to a group of literary works that are generally accepted as representing a field or the works of a writer that have been accepted as authentic". Many contemporary literary figures try to retell the classic stories by changing the plots, contents and structures, converting the narrative angles as well as adding modern elements and

personal ideas and attitudes into the original ones. Borges has once stated that “literary is certainly that everything has already been written.” (Borges 470) Atwood’s canon rewriting can be regarded as a great combination of post-modernism and feminism. (Hutcheon 107) In general, “both feminisms and postmodernism ‘situate’ themselves and the literature they study in historical, social and cultural contexts, challenging conventions that are presumed to be literary ‘universals’, but can in fact be shown to embody the values of a very particular group of people—of a certain class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.” (110) For instance, in *The Penelopiad*, Atwood reflects on the past history on the basis of feminism by transforming narrative angles from the male point of view to the female point of view. Women characters break the silence to retell her story for the purpose of express their views on culture and history.

### **1.3.2 The Technique Used: Parody**

Parody is a use and abuse of convention. Linda Hutcheon has once defined it as “is ostentatiously not a single, unique utterance of an original genius.” In detail, “Parody signals a kind of textual collectivity, as well as a textual history: they deliberately recall other texts. They undercut the notion that authorial authority rests on a single meaning, fixed in the past, by materially reminding us of the process of reinterpretation that we call the act of reading.” (Hutcheon 138)

Parody plays an important role in many women’s fictions today, as it seeks a feminine literary space. Parody is one way of deconstructing the male-dominated culture, and “its simultaneous use and abuse of conventions that have been deemed “universal” works to reveal the hidden gender encoding.” (138) Parody, as Nancy Miller defines, is a way of “marking what has already been said, of making a common text one’s own.” “Like many feminist theorists too, Atwood is challenging male definitions of selfhood as applied to women. She destabilizes or de-centers the “normal” notions of subjectivity—female subjectivity: becoming defines being.” (139)

## **1.4 Literary Reviews on *The Penelopiad* and Other Works Concerned**

### **1.4.1 Literary Overviews Abroad**

Since the first critical essays appeared in *The Malahat Review: Margaret Atwood: A Symposium*, edited by Linda Sandler, the foreign literary research on Atwood and her

works has passed for more than thirty years. The collection “is designed as a tenth anniversary tribute celebrating Atwood’s 1967 Governor-General’s Award for *The Circle Game*.” (Howells 6) For many years, a number of critics and the academic circles have studied on Atwood and her works both in Canada and many other foreign countries. The followings are some of the important articles on Atwood’s latest novelette *The Penelopiad*.

On Dec. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005, a critical article named *Myths Made Modern* was published in the *The New York Times Book Review*. The author Caroline Alexander poses the concept of myth by giving the fact that myths have been readdressed, readjusted and reinterpreted through the ages. Besides, she illustrates the relationship between people and the mythic events they celebrate in story. In this article Caroline introduces Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* as “universal and timeless story that reflect and shape our lives”. However, as she mentions, Atwood rewrites a wholly unconvincing Penelope as both a 15-year-old Spartan princess bride and meanwhile the older and wiser survivor who has lived to outmaneuver the suitors. On Mar. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Diana Hendry wrote an article titled *Laughter in the Howling Wilderness* on *Spectator*, which regarded *The Penelopiad* as “a splendid mix of tales, retellings of myths, fables and fairy stories, a couple of poems and what the blurb describes as ‘fictional essays’.” Meanwhile, Eric Ormsby presents an article titled *Penelope with Attitude: A Retelling of Homer Overshadowed by Indignation* on *Literary Review of Canada*. The article mentions that *The Penelopiad* might have given back to the contemporary world the lost voice of an ancient woman who shows her views on certain facts. Besides, the author also concludes that though the twelve maids are innocent victims of some archaic machismo, they are also chorus girls piping out ditties. Valerie Miner once wrote an article named *Fictions and Frictions* on September, 2006 in *The Women’s Review of Books*. The author points that Penelope demonstrates more agency and complexity than in most versions or interpretations of Homer’s epic poem, *The Odyssey*. The article regards Penelope as a meta-fictional narrator who comments on stories within stories from her position of hindsight in Hades. In conclusion, Valerie indicates that Atwood’s Penelope “is more than the devoted, chaste wife who waits twenty years for heroic Odysseus to return from his adventures with Trojans, sirens, nymphs, goddesses, and the Cyclops...and she is “by turns witty, lonely, raging, catty, sanguine, bitter, entitled, grieving, dignified, and ever-alert.” On Dec. 2006, Bridie Lonie wrote an article named *Karen Armstrong, A Short*

*History of Myth on Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*. In this article, the author elaborates the female characters, the female narrative angle that Margaret Atwood has used to rework the story of Penelope. She puts forward several evidences to prove her arguments. For instance, she takes advantage of Karen Armstrong's contribution to the Myths series to conclude that Atwood's canon rewriting can be known as the continuing power of ancient myth over the modern imagination. On spring 2007, Mihoko Suzuki presented a critical essay titled *Rewriting the Odyssey in the Twenty-first Century: Mary Zimmerman's Odyssey and Margaret Atwood's Penelopiad on College Literature*. The article compares the two novels together and gets a conclusion about the similarities between the two. For example, both writers follow the reassessment of the Odyssey initiated by feminist critics of the epic in the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, both may have found inspiration in the Odyssey's representation of the creative process as feminine--as exemplified by Athena's sponsorship of Odysseus's stratagems to find his way home to Ithaca and of Penelope's weaving and unweaving of Laertes's shroud as well as her plotting to keep the suitors under control. Besides, Zimmerman's *Odyssey* and Atwood's *Penelopiad* both redefine the relationship of women readers and women writers through canonical texts.

“Margaret Atwood's short fictions are the themes and concerns which are always present in different shapes in her longer works, and which can be recognized as the distinctive Atwood signature.” (Sturgess 87) Charlotte Sturgess from University of Strasbourg wrote an article about *Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction*, in which themes of Atwood's short fictions have been discussed such as “Canada's status as a victim of American domination,” “power relations between men and women” and “women's marginalization in culture and society.” In this article, the author says that meanings and modes of representation are challenged through the rewritings and revisions of fairy tales and myths that permeate many of these stories and gives an example of *Bluebeard's Egg* which is inter-textual in as many ways as its fairy-tale encodings are multiple. Another article written by Reingard M. Nischik presents Margaret Atwood's short stories and shorter fictions. This article mentions that Atwood has applied her technique of gender-oriented revisioning irreverently to one of the greatest works of world literature, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Here Atwood rewrites the plot, as the author indicates, promoting

Gertrude to a position of prominence, making her the title figure, and giving her freedom of speak to such an extent that she now indeed embarks on a monologue, reducing her son and supposed dialogue partner Hamlet to passive silence: the reader can only infer his reactions from what Gertrude says in her monologue.

Foreign literary critics gradually pay more attention on Atwood's poetry the same as they do on her short fictions. Lothar Honnighausen from University of Bonn states her poetry from 1966 to 1995 and some traits which endear Atwood the poet to her readers: "her nimble intelligence and her comic sense, her precision and scientific curiosity, her inexhaustible productivity, and her insistence on shaping rather than shouting. If her literary personae hardly ever appear in a tragic predicament, they are often plagued by doubt and revulsion, but fortunately many convey a wry sense of humor." Another article about Atwood's poetry and poetics is written by Branko Gorjup. He mentions that most critics have approached Atwood's work in terms of what Sherrill Grace has described as the aesthetics of "violent duality" and mainly argues her interest in the transformative power of the imagination, in evidence throughout her poetry, overrides the rigid boundaries of a dualistic universe and allows for the emergence of the protean self.

#### **1.4.2 Literary Comments in China**

It is not until the early 1980s has Margaret Atwood been introduced to China. In 1983, her short fiction *The Man from Mars* was published in *World Literature* (Column Six) for the first time. At that time, very few Chinese critics wrote comments on her works except several translations of her poems and short fictions which were attached with a brief introduction about her life and achievements. Later on, more and more Chinese scholars published their critical articles on periodicals such as *Women Literature* and *Canadian Literature*, which promoted more people to know and read Atwood's works. In 1981, with the introduction of Atwood's female protagonists, Zhu Hong posed the idea of "women literature" in *World Literature* (Column Four) and put the notion as a new literary genre with the core idea of "women's consciousness". (Xu)

With the publication of *The Penelopiad* and its Chinese version in 2005, some Chinese literary critics have begun writing essays on this rewritten novelette. In the year 2006, two important critical articles were published in the magazine of *Contemporary*

*Foreign Literature*: the first article, written by Chen Rong, was named *The Adaptation of the Traditional Greek Chorus in Atwood's The Penelopiad* and the other one was titled *The Canon Rewriting from the Feminist Perspective---On Margaret Atwood's novella The Penelopiad*, written by Yang Lixin. The first article regards the chorus of twelve maids as the complete subversion of the male-controlled culture, because female singers take up the function of the traditional Greek chorus, a symbol of patriarchy which used to be exclusively consisted of male members. Besides, the article points out that the twelve maids no longer sing hymns on the significant undertakings of the heroes and the male gods but the ordinary lives of the slaves, which totally violates the original function of the Greek chorus that serves for the principal. It is concluded that with these reversions, Atwood puts the polyphony into this novelette which deepens the readers' thoughts about several subjects like the female destiny, women's self-identity and the relation between the female and the male in the patriarchal society. The other article talks about the feminist theme in *The Penelopiad* by associating the feminist view of values with the post-modernist background. It discusses about the possibilities of starting conversations between different views of history and culture and giving the opportunity of letting "the other" express their minds. In 2007, published in the same magazine, Zeng Xiaotan wrote an article: *The Narrative Strategy in Atwood's The Penelopiad*, in which the narrators and narrative structure have been explored in order to expose the characteristics of the feminist themes through the post-modernist perspective. At the same time, in the magazine of *Comparative Literature*, Que Ruixi published a critical paper: *Review the Rewritten One so as to know the Classics---On Atwood's The Penelopiad*. This article compares the two versions: Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Homer's *Odyssey* from six parts: the title, the persons, the background, the narrators, the structure, the language and draws a conclusion that the new version rewrites the original one by adding fresh ideas and therefore furthers the circulation of the classic one. A month later, in the magazine *Chinese Comparative Literature*, Li Juan wrote an article about *The Myth Series from the Canongate Books Ltd.* in which Atwood's *The Penelopiad* has been mentioned. The follow-up version, as the author says, is a great literary impact on the original one. To sum up, canon rewriting is a win-win strategy that not only makes the old one full of vitality but also keep the new one unique. Meanwhile, Pan Shouwen explained the reasons of rewriting the classic by writing



an article *Why Did Atwood Rewrite the Mythology?* in *Foreign Language Education* on March, 2007. With the theory of mythological criticism, the article compares *The Penelopiad* with *Odyssey* by relating to the current condition of the Canadian race and the post-colonialism existing in Canada, the two themes which continually appear in Atwood's novels. The critic thinks that *The Penelopiad* indicates an expression of the unconscious Canadians and this book thoroughly reflects their desire of maintaining justice and peace in the world together with their reluctant attitudes toward the hegemony actions of the U.S.A. In 2008, Yuan Xia published an article in the periodical *Movie Literature* titled *The Combination of the Ancient Greek Theatrical Arts and the Modern Movie techniques—On the Drama The Penelopiad*. In her opinion, even though the adapted play well embodies Atwood's *The Penelopiad* both in plots and contents, it possesses its own features on the base of the original novella. For instance, all the performers are female, a symbol indicating the complete subversion of the patriarchal senses.

In Chinese literary circle there is only one paper written about Atwood's short fiction *Gertrude Talks Back*. In 2006, Fu Jun and Han Yuanyuan wrote an article in *Contemporary Foreign Literature* named *On the Loss and Regaining of the Rights of Speak—Analysis of Atwood's Gertrude Talks Back*. This article uses post-structuralist Foucault's *Theoretical Analysis of Power and Discourse* to analyze Atwood's *Gertrude Talks Back* as well as its comparison with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By depicting the two female images Gertrude and Ophelia, the article discusses the frequently used literary technique—parody. The authors come to the conclusion that the subversion of the traditional women images in Shakespeare's plays lies in entitling Gertrude the right of speak: a new and modern Gertrude is created who always scorns the traditional woman Ophelia and insists her own way of life.

Chinese critics seldom touch upon the field of Atwood's poetry. The major article concerning Atwood's poetry is published on the magazine of *Contemporary Foreign Literature* on April 1991 by Mo Yaping. This article is a general introduction of Atwood's poems and four specialties in her poems. In the paper, the first specialty lies on the relationship between human beings and the nature; the second one is about her feminist approach; the third one contains her concern about the politics; the fourth one mainly discusses her writing techniques of super-realism. Among four of them her feminist

approach to the poetry really relates to several poems she has written, including her rewritten poems about the Greek mythology, for example, *Siren Song*. The author illustrates that “Survival”, as the basic theme in Atwood’s poems, mostly relates to women’s survival in the male-controlled society, a notion which was posed by Atwood at the late 1970’s. In the writer’s opinion, in the past savage era, it is common that women belongs to men without “self” in their lives while in the modern society, women still receive more limitations than men do in many fields, such as job-hunting. It is concluded that Atwood integrates the essence of the early Canadian feminists with her own sense of feminism: not only does she choose women as the protagonists and narrators in most of her works, but more importantly, she persuades women to pursue their social rights on breeding, job opportunity and so on.

## 1.5 The Plan of My Dissertation

The whole dissertation is consisted of six chapters.

Chapter One serves as a general introduction to Margaret Atwood’s biography and literary achievements, a detailed description about her canon rewriting and brief literary overviews abroad and in China.

Chapter Two, Chapter Three and Chapter Four constitute the main part of the thesis, separately exploring Atwood’s canon rewriting in terms of novelette, short fiction and poetry. Chapter Two analyzes the feminist ideas expressed in Atwood’s novelette *The Penelopiad* by comparing new women images like Penelope, Helen and twelve maids with the original ones in Homer’s *Odyssey* and explaining the changed narrative angles from the male point of view to the female point of view. Chapter Three illustrates Gertrude and Ophelia in Atwood’s short fiction *Gertrude Talks Back* in comparison with the old women images in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the female point of view for the purpose of exposing the feminist concerns. Chapter Four emphasizes the distinctions between a bunch of women such as Eurydice, Helen in Atwood’s rewritten poems and those ones in the Greek mythology, highlights the female point of view in order to expose the feminist views.

Chapter Five as a separate part elaborates a frequently used writing technique in Atwood’s Canon Rewriting: parody, together with its functions.

Chapter Six is the conclusion part which sums up the whole dissertation in terms of content and structure, highlights its inadequacy and voices the author’s expectation to

further the literary research on this subject.

## Chapter Two A Feminist Approach to *The Penelopiad*

### 2.1 Women in Homer's *Odysseus*

The archetypes of the women images such as Penelope, Helen and the twelve maids in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* are derived from Homer's *Odysseus*. However, in the rewritten version, they have been entitled with different characteristics and status. In general, three features can be discussed about these women images in Homer's *Odysseus*.

To start with, Penelope is the embodiment of virtues. She is the symbol of all the kind-hearted and intelligent housewives who meet men's requirements of being a competent wife. In Homer's epic *Odyssey*, Penelope, the wife of the protagonist, Odysseus, king of Ithaca, awaits her husband's return from Trojan War, refuses and evades repeated marriage proposals. Remaining faithful to Odysseus all the while, Penelope cleverly deceives, tricks, and delays her suitors, by pretending to weave a funeral pall for her father-in-law Laertes, upon which completion she promises to choose a suitor. Furthermore, "While Odysseus fights at Troy and struggles to freed his way home, an absence of 20 years offered Penelope power, prerogative, and ability to exercise agency, Penelope stays at home, raising their son, weaving a shroud for her father-in-law and maintaining her chastity in the most trying of circumstances. She was a thoroughly Hellenic woman. Her name and reputation were maintained in Latin texts and her fame spread beyond the continent. As a literary figure, she is typically seen as a symbol of fidelity and chastity." (Casey) In the original version, Penelope receives her acclaims mostly because of her tolerance and intelligence. However, as Margaret Atwood suggests, "Penelope is rarely valued for her cunning ability to outsmart her male suitors."

What is more, they are bound women. The twelve maids belong to their hostess and are doomed to lose personal liberty, whereas Penelope and Helen, whose status are as high as princesses, are still bound physically and spiritually in the ancient society. Because of the 10-year Trojan War and 10-year sailing on the sea, Penelope's husband loses contact with others and is eventually told dead by the public. Therefore, Penelope is swarmed around by many suitors who force her to marry one of them so as to win the Palace and the whole fortunes. Therefore, it is evident that Penelope is imprisoned physically: fist she is ordered by her husband and then is controlled by the suitors. In addition, she is also

suffered from the spiritual imprisonment which is caused by the distrust of her husband and the control of her son. Though she is the symbol of a loyal woman, her husband and her son ignore her virtue, treat her as a housemaid and keep wariness to her. During the twenty years' of his father's absence, Telemachus controls the whole imperial family, shows no respect to his mother, for example, he often scorns on Penelope's "seemingly ignorance". Besides, when knowing that Odysseus has returned to his homeland, Telemachus conceals the fact for the purpose of recapturing the authority from the suitors, and he totally ignores the fact that Penelope is long for the return of her dear husband. Meanwhile, even though Odysseus has kept a seven-year relationship with the fairy maidens in the sea island, he still believes the rumors and slanders from the public and suspects his wife's loyalty. Furthermore, he would rather reveal his identity to the slaves by showing them his scars and telling them his revengeful plan than confess himself to Penelope. Men's deceit and defense toward women reflect the suppression from men: men are the masters of the family whereas women are excluded and imprisoned elsewhere both physically and spiritually. Another woman that has been imprisoned is Helen, who is said to have destroyed a whole city with her tremendous beauty according to the Greek folklore. Actually, she is the victim of men's competition, whose beauty remains the prize for the champion. In other words, she is imprisoned by men's lust for beauty. Hence, it is really ridiculous to impute her as the one who causes disaster and leads wars because she is only an innocent and powerless woman, while men should be put the blame on starting the wars, for they are the real rulers dominating the world. Helen is only an idol of a perfect-looking woman, the same as other victims of the war and her fate is imprisoned by men all the way.

Lastly, all the women in *Odyssey* have been treated as private property, in other words, they are deprived of rights to speak. In the male-controlled world, women, together with other objects, are the private property belonging to men. Because of the power in leading wars, men gain the authority and reputation. On the contrary, women lose the initiative and are force to remain in the condition of aphasia. They do not have the opportunity to express their will and are treated as products plundered by men or the precious gifts given and sent among the male. Women, who are different from other ordinary belongings, gradually become the blasting fuse of the war. Menelaus wins the competition and marries Helen, who represents dignity and triumph of Menelaus. When she is seduced by Paris and runs

away with him, Menelaus gathers all the members to make a strategy by raising a war to Trojan in order to gain his wife back. The reason is because Paris' robbery of Helen violates Menelaus' principal: his private property is stolen by another man, which indicates his dignity and respect have been ruined. Menelaus may love Helen, but he only treats her as his own property and never cares about her real needs and thoughts. Another example is Penelope. Odysseus takes the crown in the race contest and thus wins Penelope. When he returns and finds that the suitors want to propose to Penelope, he kills them all in attempt to eliminate the risks of losing one of his fortunes: his wife. Property is the driving force for men to fight with and to defeat others during the war, while women remain in silence at the same time.

## 2.2 Women in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope is given honor and glory as: "How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icaria's daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honor of the constant Penelope." (Atwood 1) Here Penelope meets all the requirements of a wife belonging to a hero: she is loyal, tolerant and virtuous. Besides, she can be found smart and intelligent from the example of lying to her suitors by weaving the shroud. However, in *The Penelopiad*, Atwood twists the while story, "not in accord with its own internal logic but in keeping with present-day attitudes." (Ormsby) She creates a completely different Penelope. Initially, her loyalty and virtue is questioned. In the chapter *Slandorous Gossip*, Penelope indicates that the various items of slanderous gossip are completely untrue and gives the explanation of her deliberate seduction to the suitors. Then in the next chapter, *The Chorus Line: The Perils of Penelope, A Drama*, the twelve maids expose the reality of Penelope's virginity loss. The maids narrate Penelope's adultery with Amphinomus, one of her suitors, her betrayal of her husband Odysseus, the concealment of her dirty behavior as well as her entreaty of Eurycleia, her nanny, of helping Penelope get rid of the bad situation as well as Penelope's cruel treatment on the twelve maids (hang them). Here the maids portray Penelope as "who is sometimes in a good, or else bad, humor." (45) Penelope makes a defense for herself by denouncing "while he (Odysseus) was pleasuring every nymph and

beauty, did he think I'd do nothing but my duty? While every girl and goddess he was praising, did he assume I'd dry up like a raisin?" (45) The new Penelope no longer behaves like a silent and obedient wife who follows her husband's instructions all the time. She dares to ruin all the injustice social rules and standards for women and to criticize her husband's disloyal behavior. Penelope is no longer modest and virtuous, and she boasts weak points as well. For example, she is somewhat loose and shameless. Her constant competition with her cousin Helen reveals her strong jealousy—she envies women who are more beautiful than her. Besides, Penelope presses the maids to sleep with and spy on the suitors, a witty conspiracy that finally succeeds in letting Odysseus hang all the maids in order to hide her disloyalty. "At her hands the poor maids turn into puling victims without any dignity of responsibility for their acts."(Casey) Penelope is not the glorious goddess in *The Odyssey* any more, but she is a totally ordinary woman. The transformation makes Penelope from an excellent signal to a real human being, who owns both merits and shortcomings. "There's more to Atwood's Penelope than the devoted, chaste wife who waits twenty years for heroic Odysseus to return from his adventures with Trojans, sirens, nymphs, goddesses, and the Cyclops. Her manner is by turns witty, lonely, raging, catty, sanguine, bitter, entitled, grieving, dignified, and ever-alert."(Valerie) In Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's attitude toward her husband is changed: she no longer adores Odysseus, in contrast, she dislikes him from the first impression "barrel-chested one, his clothes were rustic; he had the manners of a small-town big shot, and had already expressed several complicated idea the others considered peculiar." (Atwood 31) Penelope regards this great hero as a mean vagrant. In her mind, though her husband is clever, but "he was too clever for his own good." (31) His sophistications are just tricks while the chorus sings hymns for him so as to receive more rewards. Furthermore, in Penelope's opinion, his well-known heroic adventures are not worth mentioning: "the Land of the Dead" is only "a gloomy old cave full of bats" and "the alluring Sirens where the half-bird, half-woman live is just a "high-class Sicilian knocking shop." (91)

The other part of the story is told by the twelve maids, who are rarely mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. It is really a revolutionary restatement by entitling them the rights to speak. Atwood gives prominence to the maids, who appear in various "Chorus Lines"—referring sardonically to Homer's description of how in their final moments,

"Their feet danced for a little, but not for long" (Suzuki 90)--to lament the injustice of their violent fate:

we danced in air  
our bare feet twitched  
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch  
from there to here  
you scratched your itch  
we did much less  
than what you did  
you judged us bad

you had the spear  
you had the word  
at your command. (Atwood 5-6)

Since they have won the rights to speak, they begin to accuse the injustice from both gender and class: they are caught in the trammels of the social level and never expect to gain the equal position as others. Though they have been told lazy, dirty and humble, they find another way to lead an optimistic life. Even if they are finally killed by Odysseus, their ghosts tangle him all the time in order to regain the dignity and equality that they have been deprived. In this rewritten story, the maids, as the major roles, sharply expose the injustice and social discrimination at that era, which slashes the male-centered society and the power of the ruling class.

Another dramatic figure in the story is Cousin Helen, a notoriously more comely Spartan. When demonstrating her beauty all the while, she taunts, teases, and infuriates Penelope throughout her life and even after death. "She tilted her head towards me, looking at me whimsically as if she were flirting. I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice." (34) Therefore, Penelope chastises Helen for her vanity and superficiality, calling her, "poison on legs." (67) Penelope's coup de grace comes in Hades. "I understand the interpretation of the whole Trojan War episode has changed," she tells Helen. "Now they think you were just a myth. It was all about trade routes." Though Helen still behaves as "lovely vase" during the story, more and more characteristics have been explored to enrich this female image. On the contrary, her real feelings and intensions are seldom revealed in *The Odyssey*.



## 2.3 Changed Narrative Angles from Women's Point of View

Two points of view have been used in this novelette: one is from Penelope: the personal point of view and the other is from the twelve maids: the group point of view. The two points of view alternate from one chapter to another and make a contradictory function both in contents and facts. In general, Margaret Atwood rewrites the story of Penelope from a woman's point of view. After her death, Penelope speaks from Hades where the shades of the protagonists are visible and occasionally communicative. She describes her birth as the child of a naiad, and her father's attempt upon her life, based on a misreading of a prophecy around the weaving of a shroud. Then there is the long wait for her husband's return, her strategies for putting off the suitors who would claim her inheritance and her life among the women in the women's quarters. From the personal point of view, Penelope uses "I" to retell the story and many other words such as "you", "our time", "You should know" and "in the chorus" to show what she has told is totally different from the original epic poem. For example, in Chapter "*Yelp of Joy*", Odysseus was dressed as a dirty old beggar and returned to Ithaca in order to kill all the suitors. No one knows the news except Penelope, who recognizes her husband from the first sight. However, she keeps the secret, because "if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognize him" (137) and cooperate with him on the quiet. In the original version, Penelope is an ignorant woman who knows nothing, not mention helping her husband and her son get rid of the troubles. The female point of view determines woman's dominant status in the story. Through Penelope's statements, her original image is reverted and she gains initiative and becomes the key point of solving all the severe problems. Besides, Penelope begins to denounce the injustice she has met from her father, her husband, her suitors and even her son. All the men in the story treat her as a subsidiary thing that stands in the position of a dependency. They regard her as a way to win property and power, for example, her father spoils her because she is equal to a large amount of dowry and her husband Odysseus covets her background and family property and she knows "it isn't me they are after, not Penelope the Duck. It is only what comes with me-the royal connection, the pile of glittering junk. No man will ever kill himself for love of me." (29) Her son hates her because he thinks it a waste of his heritage if the suitors continue living in the palace.

The suitors come to ask her to marry them because every young man wants to marry a famous and rich widow. Through her narration, Penelope here is not an ignorant woman any more, but she has her own sense and insight, her own judgment and inner thoughts. Compared to the original image, Penelope is a real woman, whose characteristic is close to the modern one; she protests about and struggles against her doomed life.

One of Atwood's significances in this rewritten novelette is that "she places the horrific episode of Penelope's hanged maids, from Book 22 of *The Odyssey*, at the heart of her narrative...By contrast, their killing occupies less than a dozen lines of the original." (Ormsby) The voice from the twelve maids is another point of view: the group point of view. They restate the facts in a more angry, more condemned and more ironical way. For example, they sing in the Chorus Line: *A Rope-Jumping Rhyme* like this:

We are the maids  
The ones you killed  
The one you failed

We danced in air  
our bare feet twitched  
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch  
from there to here  
you scratched your itch

we did much less  
than what you did  
you judged us bad (5)

Margaret Atwood satires and condemns Homer's works all through the maids' denouncement. The maids belong to the lowest class of the society and receive double persecution from the outside world. As slaves, they must do backbreaking labor and run risks of starving to death. Besides, they have to tolerate the humiliation from the male aristocrats. In their owners' eyes, the twelve maids are only property or tool while their existence is not for themselves, but for their owners. One function of the group point of view is the double criticism toward Odysseus and the whole male society whereas the other function lies in the doubts about whether their Princess is as loyal and pure as she has said. While Penelope keeps safeguarding her reputation and chastity by her narration, the twelve maids' statements seem to imply the hidden facts in the story.

## 2.4 Theme

If the epic *The Odyssey* is a hymn that Homer wrote to celebrate the hero Odysseus, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a rewritten female story about Penelope and other women. In the male-centered society, the female stand in the border of politics, economy and ideology, lose their rights to speak and gradually step off the stage of history and finally become "the other". The loss of speaking rights of the female means the loss of expressing themselves, getting rid of the opportunity to gain benefit and running the risk of being mistreated by men. Virginia Woolf once commented the women's existence in history and she thought that the male-centered history marginalized the female history step by step. The solution as she has suggested, is to evoke the public attention on the female living condition by literary writings, which means "to rewrite women's history in the fictional writing in order to expose some facts that have been concealed and altered by the male." (Susan 37) That is the two questions Atwood has mentioned at the beginning of the story: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? Here Atwood shows her determination of bringing more rights to speak for the female, even though she fails to eliminate the class difference in the story.

The theme of the story is quite clear. It ends with the twelve maids' chorus and they sing like this:

we took the blame  
it was not fair  
but now we are here  
we are all here too  
the same as you  
and now we follow  
you, we find you  
now, we call  
to you to you (195)

The original version ends with the final killing of all the suitors and maids as well as Odysseus's gathering with his wife. However, Atwood abandons the previous happy ending by leaving a melancholy one: When Penelope lives in the Hades, sometimes Odysseus returns from the earth to gather with her, but they are always separated by a miraculous power—the twelve maids. The maids protest against the injustice that is done to them, together with the protest from Penelope—these female voices come together and

consist a symphony of women's awaking and struggle. Attwood's text also acknowledges the argument that the story holds within its weave the destruction of the matriarchal religions, and that the twelve maids were Penelope's priestesses. "The myth's strength: its vivacity and in some ways its very ambiguity, allow a new reading that makes it relevant for today's concern with motivation and with the complexities of women's ambiguous relations with their roles within marriage." (Bridie)

## Chapter Three A Feminist Approach to *Gertrude Talks Back*

### 3.1 Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In Shakespearean time, men dominated the world while women were forced to comply with men's requirements and disciplines. A woman had to obey the rules of her father before getting married and after that; she has to take orders from her husband. Ophelia and Gertrude are two typical examples of that era. Two features can be discussed here.

At the outset, these two women keep in silence all the time through the play. Ophelia, a golden-hair beauty, is pure, innocent and full of emotions. Her love to Hamlet is dreamy and miraculous. However, with defects in her characteristics and incapability of making decisions, she is not brave enough to protect herself, which causes her to become the victim of the imperial fighting. Her father cheats her by concluding that Hamlet's passion to Ophelia is transient and makes her convince that Hamlet never falls in love with her. Because of the opposition from her father and brother, she submits to the patriarchal power and breaks off with Hamlet thereafter. Her rights to speak have been deprived and marginalized, with no words to resist the imposed wills and no strength to fight back her fate. Finally, this girl becomes insane after being severely shocked by losing her love as well as the death of her father and eventually gets drowned in the river. Gertrude has also been portrayed as a timid woman without any political ambition and become the slave of lust. She exchanges her marriage with the fulfillments her endless satisfactory of fame and gains, without any will to resist the temptations from men. Therefore, after the death of her husband, she marries Claudius, speaks in defense of her remarried husband and keeps living in peace with her new identity. As a mother, she loves Hamlet but her irresolution makes her feel reluctant to identify the real murderer. It is only when she is dying by drinking mistakenly the poisonous wine does she realize that she has misunderstood her son. However, her regrets come too late.

What is more, these two women have been smeared and disparaged. In fact, Hamlet narrates the whole story and all the descriptions come from his point of view. In his mind, Gertrude is absolutely meritless while his lover Ophelia is only a simple stupid girl without any judgment. Take Gertrude as an example. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude has different identities:

she performs as a queen, a mother, a woman, a widow, a remarried woman and a sinner. When she shows up in every act, (for instance, in the first act, she pleads to her son for not leaving; in the second act she cares about her son's spiritual condition; in the third act she gives blessing to Ophelia; in fourth act she exculpates her son's manslaughter to Claudius and in the last act she tries to defuse the hatred between Hamlet and Laertes in Ophelia's cemetery,) it seems that she is a responsible mother as well as a competent queen. However, Hamlet denies all the contributions made by his mother. For example, in the first act, her son accuses her by using a metaphor "Frailty, thy name is woman". (Shakespeare 15) Later on, he compares Gertrude to "a beast, that wants discourse of reason, Would have mourn'd longer", (16) which satires Gertrude's remarriage with Hamlet's uncle. Later on, in order to expose Gertrude's penalty of incest and other immoral behaviors, Hamlet points out directly that "within a month: Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears. Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, She married. O, most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" Gradually, the image of an irresponsible and guilty woman is established. Her blemish in characteristics is amplified and her virtue is totally ruined.

### 3.2 Gertrude in Atwood's *Gertrude Talks Back*

Gertrude is one of Shakespeare's most elusive female characters and her image has been debated for a long time. The common opinion on her would be "a lustful, adulterous and incestuous woman." (M. Nischik 156) In 1992, Margaret Atwood has extracted *Gertrude Talks Back*, a rewritten story imitating one scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in her famous collection of short fictions, *Good Bones*. The differences between the old and new versions lie in the rewritten plot, the changed characteristics of the major roles and Gertrude's right to speak. "The character of Hamlets' mother has posed problems of interpretation to readers, critics and performers, past and present, and has been variously or simultaneously appraised as a symbol of female wantonness, the object of Hamlets Oedipus complex, and an example of female submissiveness to the male principle (Hamlets as much as Claudius)." (Dominguez) Like other revisionist rewritings produced by women writers in the last few decades, Margaret Atwood's short story challenges received concepts of the female, and particularly the definition 'Frailty, thy name is woman' that has marked so much canonical literature." (Shakespeare 14)

In *Gertrude Talks Back*, Gertrude becomes the major figure and boasts the freedom of speech by giving the whole monologue. Here the timid queen turns out to be a modern, rebellious woman who is full of energy and desire while pursuing her true love. She advocates her personality, behaves and talks whatever she wants to and dares to love and to hate through her spontaneous feelings. There are three significant features worth discussing here. The first one is about Gertrude's public criticism on her husband and Hamlet. She speaks with considerable self-confidence about her two husbands and her son. The whole monologue starts with the reference of giving a stupid name to Hamlet by Polonius:

I always thought it was a mistake, calling you Hamlet. I mean, what kind of name is that for a young boy? It was your father's idea. Nothing would do but that you had to be called after him? Selfish. The other kids at school used to tease the life out of you. The nicknames! And those terrible jokes about pork.

I wanted to call you George. (Atwood 15)

Here Gertrude complains straightly about her husband's idea of giving her son's name as Hamlet, for she thinks that it is a mistake that has already been proved because all the kids tease Hamlet by giving nicknames to him such as something relating to pork. She brands the fact that the whole thing is due to Polonius's selfishness. Compared to the former Gertrude who is always submissive and addressing her royal husband as "my lord", the new Gertrude uses a mighty voice to denounce her husband's behavior, behaving as the real lord of the family. Besides, her complaint about Hamlet as a naughty boy is another evidence to show her independence of talking freely to the patriarchal power. In the original text, Hamlet satires Gertrude as "the Queen, your husbands brothers wife, and, would it were not so, you are my mother." (Shakespeare 16) However, in Atwood's story, from Gertrude's description Hamlet is a youngster who "moves awkwardly ("That'll be the third mirror you've broken"), and a student of uncleanly habits who lives in a 'slum pigpen' and does not bring laundry home often enough. Even his somber clothing, "so inseparable of the characters psychological portrait, is parodied through his black socks, which now read simply as one of the many fashions young people are tempted into in contemporary society." (Dominguez) What's more, Hamlet's very wish to take revenge on Claudius is deflated in Atwood's, and their antagonism transforms into the average friction between a grown-up stepson and a newly-acquired stepfather: "By the way, darling, I wish you wouldn't call your step-dad the bloat king. He does have a slight weight-problem, and

it hurts his feelings" (Atwood 16).

Another feature concerning Gertrude is her teasing to Ophelia, Hamlet's lover. She scorns at Ophelia as a conservative girl who keeps distance with Hamlet and always holds a touch-me-not expression, which, as Gertrude mentions, will never bring real happiness to her son.

And let me tell you, everyone sweats at a time like that, as you'd find out if you ever gave it a try. A real girlfriend would do you a heap of good. Not like that pasty-faced what's-her-name, all trussed up like a prize turkey in those touch-me-not corsets of hers. If you ask me, there's something off about that girl. Borderline. Any little shock could push her right over the edge.

Go get yourself someone more down-to-earth. Have a nice roll in the hay. Then you can talk to me about nasty sties. (16)

Gertrude thinks that Ophelia is too serious to be a girl friend. However, in the original text, Ophelia is regarded as the embodiment of angel: beautiful, pure, tender, virtuous, together with her pure love to Hamlet. A contradictory description has been raised: the angel-like Ophelia versus the stone-like old maid. Here Gertrude even gives suggestion that Hamlet should find another normal, open-minded girlfriend who owns a strong sexual desire thus Gertrude will discuss about "nasty sties" with her son.

Reingard has once mentioned that Gertrude in Atwood's short fiction is "the freer, more self-determined Gertrude, who fits better into a century in which a woman's self-image no longer depends on how she sees herself mirrored by men, but where she can look in the mirror herself---and can be satisfied with what she sees." Here is the third feature of this rewritten story: Gertrude begins to own the right to speak and to defend for herself. The best example is her protest against the criticism toward her remarriage.

I know your father was handsomer than Claudius. High brow, aquiline nose and so on, looked in uniform. But handsome isn't everything, especially in a man, and far be it from me to speak ill of the dead, but I think it's about time I pointed out to you that your dad just wasn't a whole lot of fun. Noble. Sure, I grant you. But Claudius, well, he likes a drink now and then. He appreciates a decent meal. He enjoys a laugh, know what I mean? You don't always have to be tiptoeing around because of some holier-than-thou principle or something. (Atwood 16)

After thoroughly examining the textual evidence, Rebecca Smith concluded that the traditional depiction of Gertrude is a false one, because what her words and actions actually create is a soft, obedient, dependent, unimaginative woman who is caught miserably between "two mighty opposites", her "heart cleft in twain" (Smith 156) by divided loyalties to husband and son. She loves both Claudius and Hamlet, and their constant conflicts render her bewildered and unhappy. (194) Here Atwood's modernized



Gertrude strongly rejects such gender inconsistencies, openly acknowledging that Hamlet's father is a failure in bed who can not fulfill her sexual desires. Besides, she also criticizes men's strict ethical standards on young women. "The manner in which Atwood's Gertrude dismisses Hamlet's father on account of such sexual reasons, not only serves as justification for her remarriage, but also upgrades female sexuality, which had previously been reduced to passivity, and places it in the center of attention." (M.Nischik 157) Gertrude is no longer the silent mother or queen in the play. In contrast, she acts beyond the stage and shows her real psychological activities to the audience that she is just an ordinary woman who requires more sexual satisfaction. Meanwhile, she points out that her remarriage is not a forced activity but is her own decision to marry another man who can provide her with better physical and mental life. It is concluded that the rewritten Gertrude subverts the original queen and Atwood entitles the novel one with the independent ways of thinking and saying as well as a modern personality the same as a normal human being.

### 3.3 Changed Narrative Angle from Gertrude's Point of View

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet speaks more than half of the text—in dialogues as well as in numerous monologues and asides. "The figure of Hamlet, therefore, provides the perspective through which we view the action, as well as being the focus of our sympathies. This takes place at the expense of the drama's female characters: Ophelia, Hamlet's platonic lover, and even more Gertrude, his mother. She rarely speaks, and when she does so, says little, even in the famous 'closet scene' with Hamlet." (M.Nischik 156)

In *Gertrude Talks Back*, Atwood omits the major plots of the play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* such as the accidental murder of Polonius or the apparition of the Ghost and focuses on the confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude. However, the whole Atwood's story is not expanded as an interactive dialogue between these two, on the contrary, Gertrude controls the whole dialogue and her voice is the only one that the readers can be heard. Here Atwood gives Gertrude the articulateness she lacks in the play. She has been given a position of prominence and the freedom to talk whatever she wants to. Here Hamlet's voice may not be heard, but it is there:

Darling, please stop fidgeting with my mirror. That'll be the third one you've broken.  
Yes, I've seen those pictures, thank you very much. (Atwood 16)

Apparently, the above monologue happens between Gertrude and Hamlet. It supposed to be the answer of Hamlet alternates between them, but the answer is ignored by Atwood which may give the readers the space of imagination. Besides, the whole speech is not continuous; it is “rather a number of utterances separated by pauses, thereby announcing that this is in fact an exchange, part of which has been left out.” (Dominguez) The reader may find the whole fiction an intermittent monologue, because the sections correspond to Hamlet’s words are elided. Therefore, women’s voice dominates the whole text while men’s voices are totally ignored. The changed narrative angle (from Hamlet’s narration to Gertrude’s narration) clearly exposes the theme that Atwood wants to show.

### 3.4 Theme

Atwood turns the canon into “non-canonical revision” that forces the readers to reconsider “the very values that lie at the heart of that reading....in a way, she is asserting Gertrude’s right to be lustful and denying Hamlet/Shakespeare the power to pass judgment on her. She has rewritten him/them as other.” (Dominguez)

The title of the short fiction “talks back” by an inversely conceived Gertrude almost four hundred years after the fact is “an appropriate and necessary counterattack to Hamlet’s ‘frailty, thy name is woman’ ”. Instead of being mirrored by a man, a woman can look at the mirror by herself, meanwhile, be satisfied with what she has seen. Even in the end of the story, Gertrude openly acknowledges that actually she is the one who murders her husband:

Oh! You think what? You think Claudius murdered your Dad? Well, no wonder you've been so rude to him at the dinner table!  
If I'd known that, I could have put you straight in no time flat.  
It wasn't Claudius, darling.  
It was me. (Atwood 17)

The unexpected ending causes a final inversion that Gertrude openly proclaims her guilty, while the original Gertrude always represses her emotions. The new Gertrude contradicts, defends and justifies herself, while the original one often remains silent even “when under fire from Hamlet’s patriarchal declaimed accusations in the ‘closet scene’.” Here Atwood’s Gertrude boasts a zest for living and robust self-confidence; “she is concerned mainly with her own needs, and without beating about the bush accepts responsibility for her own actions. She represents, then, the modernized polar opposite of Shakespeare’s Gertrude.”

(M. Nischik 157)

## Chapter Four A Feminist Approach to Poems Concerned

### 4.1 Women in the Greek Mythology

It seems that in the Greek mythology, women such as Siren, Helen, Daphne and Eurydice, can be defined into two types. The first group of women belongs to “the fatal monster” and the second one is called “the silent beauty”

The Siren song is a very famous story happening after the ten-year Trojan War when Odysseus, together with his army, returns to his hometown Itacha. On the way home, they pass the island of Circe, where three Sirens live in and sing glamorous songs to seduce the sailors to eat them. Odysseus uses wax to seal his company’s ears and ordered them to bind him on the mast. Therefore, they become the sole survivors. Here Sirens are portrayed as mysterious and disastrous, seductive and dangerous. They use their attractive body, their charming voice, delicious food and comfortable residence to lure the heroes and kill them. Sirens are the combinations of feast and danger. They boast the magic and fatal power which brings disaster to the male and the whole society. Therefore, Sirens have burdened such crime for thousands of years. While mentioning them, people will think that they are evil and horrible and are the chief culprits of bringing wars and conflicts to the world. The denial opinion from the male to these evil women is actually people’s depression to their real desire and fear. Another woman who belongs to “the fatal monster” is Helen. Helen is a name closely related to the fall of a city and the sacrifice of countless heroes. Her beauty raises the struggles among the kings and heroes; her elopement with Paris causes the ten-year war of Troy. People lay all the blame to Helen, but never thinking about the real reason is that the male fight for the war in order to win the property and authority.

The other kind of women in the Greek mythology belongs to “the silent beauty”, and Eurydice and Daphne are two examples. Both of them are beautiful, charming and virginal. They are as beautiful as the fatal monsters, but they never become the devastation of men. They are the symbol of virtue and innocence, the expectation of men to the ideal, perfect woman. However, they are incomplete human beings, for they seldom say anything during the story. Eurydice is the queen of Orpheus who admires her beauty, youthfulness and vitality. The whole heroic story centers on Orpheus’ great undertaking of rescuing his dead wife, his impressive affection as well as his grievous feelings toward his wife’s death.

Eurydice, however, can be remembered only for her foolish behavior of turning her face back and becoming a stone figure thereafter, which makes the whole lifesaving falls through. In general, Eurydice is a silent beauty, who disobeys men's order and fall into a tragic end. Meanwhile, it seems that the other silent beauty does not deserve the same tragic end because she does nothing wrong. She is forced to flee for the pursuit of Apollo and without any method she begs her father to save her by turning her into a laurel tree. In the story, Daphne never thinks about fighting back her destiny and all she could choose is to flee from her misfortune. In front of the unfair love pursuit, she always keeps silent and becomes a tree, without accusing the crime belonging to Apollo and Eros, who arrange and start the whole ridiculous love game. Because of lacking the rights to speak, the original victim finally pays for punishment and Apollo and Eros still lead a joyful life.

## 4.2 Women in Atwood's Rewritten Poems

Atwood includes "Siren Song," into her 1974 poetry collection, *You Are Happy*, a story borrowed from Homer's *The Odyssey*. In Atwood's recreation, the Siren is changed into a simple female woman. At the beginning of the poem, Siren realizes the power of her art:

This is the song everyone  
would like to learn: the song  
that is irresistible:  
the song that forces men  
to leap overboard in squadrons

The above three stanzas show the magic power of Siren's glamorous song which leads men to death. It seems that Atwood tells the same story as Homer does, but then Siren starts to reveal the fact:

Shall I tell you the secret  
And if I do, will you get me  
out of this bird suit?  
I don't enjoy it here  
...  
I don't enjoy singing  
this trio, fatal and valuable  
I will tell the secret to you  
...  
This song is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

In the original text, Siren song is always connected with something dangerous and adventurous while Siren is the representation of a fatal and seductive woman. Here Siren is no longer a fatal monster, and she is just a fragile and helpless woman who has been caught in the island and been forced to wear “bird suit”, and her song is actually the symbol of SOS. She explains that she is unhappy and asks for help to escape her situation—to get out of her “bird suit.” For this, she is willing to betray the other Sirens by revealing the secret of the song and, thus, rendering them powerless. Then the narrator gives the reasons for her unhappiness. While outsiders may view her as “picturesque and mythical,” (Atwood 195) this Siren claims to be miserable; she doesn't like to sing and she characterizes her two cohorts as “feathery maniacs.” (195) “By sharing her feelings of unhappiness with the reader and distancing herself from the other Sirens, the narrator presents herself as a sympathetic figure rather than as an uncaring and deadly creature.” (K.Ruby)

The same as Siren who has always been regarded as “fatal, dangerous and seductive woman”, Helen always sits in the core of literary debate: on one side, her tremendous beauty conquers all men and the whole world; on the other side, her unforgivable crime of bringing wars and disasters to Troy causes countless condemnations. Atwood re-describes Helen and puts her into her 1996 poetry collection *Morning in the Burned House*, where she rebuilds the image of Helen as a dancing girl (actually an ecdysiast). Here Helen is no longer the noble queen of Sparta or the wife of Menelaus; she is an ordinary pretty woman who sells her body to the men been seduced by her:

Like preachers, I sell vision,  
like perfume ads, desire  
or its facsimile. Like jokes  
or war, it's all in the timing.  
I sell men back their worst suspicions:  
that everything 's for sale,  
and piecemeal. They gaze at me and see  
a chain-saw murder just before it happens,  
when thigh, ass, inkblot, crevice, tit and nipple  
are still connected. (Atwood 33)

Helen knows that it is quite dangerous to contact with these “beery worshippers”, for there is “such hatred leaps in them”. Through the background music, she begins to expose the real scene of the war:

when all the rape’s been done  
Already, and the killing,  
And the survivors wander around  
Looking for garbage  
To eat, and there’s only a bleak exhaustion. (Atwood 34)

Beneath the surface of these men who leave their home to seek pleasure and to dance with her, Helen hears the violent desire and conspiracy of these “dangerous birds”. She knows that these husbands plan to pretend the swans: “My mother was raped by a holy swan” (35) all the time and she will finally become the next victim and be deprived of her magic power. Here Helen no longer keeps silent while being treated as a property captured among men; she is a woman living by herself, with a clear mind to look through men’s evil purpose and exposes the real fact that the war is caused by man himself: their lust for authority and power and their cruel, violent behaviors. She is among the female victims who burden the infamy for thousands of years for men’s own crime.

The fatal monsters are reduced to ordinary, simple women, while the silent beauties begin to speak. Atwood rewrites the story of Orpheus and Eurydice includes it into her *Selected Poems* in 1977. The first poem *Orpheus* criticizes the mythical lover Orpheus for his self-centered need disguised as love: he forces Eurydice to leave Hades without considering her desires. The whole poem is narrated by Eurydice, who keeps complaining her situation:

I was obedient, but  
numb, like an arm  
gone to sleep; the return  
to time was not my choice.  
By then I was used to silence. (Atwood 45)

Here Eurydice describes herself as “obedient” and “numb” and as a mere “hallucination”. She thinks herself “the image of what you wanted me to become: living again” (45), in which Eurydice demonstrates that Orpheus fails in his rescue of Eurydice because of his inability to truly see her as a person. This failure begins with his decision to manipulate Pluto by the power of his singing, including Eurydice in this manipulation through his lack of interest in the fact. Actually she is literally disembodied, unable to relate to Orpheus’s

'flesh voice', and she feels like an extremity rather than a whole person. Eurydice knows that she makes no decisions about her fate. Her reborn, in her mind, "was this hope of yours that kept me following." (45) Through the poem, Eurydice's psychological activities can be heard: her self-consciousness is awakened and her self-independence is raised. At the end of the poem, Eurydice announces that "I had to fold like a gray moth and let go. You could not believe I was more than your echo" (45), which indicates her determination of getting rid of Orpheus's bondage and winning her own freedom. In the poem of *Eurydice*, the third person narrates the whole story and shows Eurydice's real willingness: "you would rather have gone on feeling nothing, emptiness and silence... which is easier than the noise and flesh of the surface." (46) Here Eurydice would remain "emptiness" and "silence" than be alive again. She wants to be a real living entity rather than a memory of the woman Orpheus loved on earth.

The other silent beauty appears in Atwood's poem *Daphne and Laura and so Forth*. In this poem, Daphne is no longer the fearful girl chased by Apollo all the time or the innocent one tricked by Eros' love game. Here she speaks out her real thinking:

I should not have shown fear,  
or so much leg. (Atwood 26)

Daphne denounces what Apollo and Eros have done for her, changing her from a pretty fairy lady into a laurel tree. However, it seems that she never complains about her present condition:

It is ugly here, but safer.  
I have eight fingers  
And a shell, and live in conners.  
I'm free to stay up all night.  
I'm working on  
these ideas of my own:  
venom, a web, a hat  
some last resort. (26-27)

Though being deprived of anything that used to belong to her, Daphne thinks that she owns her own freedom at least. She is safer than before, because nobody chases her and nobody harasses her. She is free to do whatever she wants to do and to think whatever she feels like to think. Till now, she has become a real woman who possess her own thinking and behaviors, which nobody else will rap. Here Daphne seems to uncover a fact: being a laurel tree is better than being a woman in the situation of the male-controlled society.



### 4.3 Changed Narrative Angles from Women's Point of View

As is known for all, in Homer's *Odysseus* or the Greek mythology, men are the centre of almost every heroic story, meanwhile, women, stand behind their men, keeping silent and being "the other" all the time. Therefore, men are usually the protagonists of the books and they control the way of narrating the story while women follow behind men as the subordination. However, things have been changed since the publications of Atwood's rewriting mythological poems, where she entitles every woman the right to speak and the right to re-narrate the same story from her point of view. *Siren Song*, for example, is told from the first-person point of view of a Siren. In Homer's *Odysseus*, all the descriptions about Sirens are from the sailors' legend: they are the magical half bird half women monsters who seduce the sailors with their glamorous songs. However, no one ever know what causes Sirens to stay in the sea island all day long and how do their power of magic voices come from. Sirens' appearances are told by others, but never by themselves. In *Siren Song*, they finally get the opportunity to tell everyone that the voices they have made are the symbol of asking for help and they really wish someone could understand their songs and help them release from the bird suit and win the final freedom. Atwood wisely uses voice and tone in this poem to convey the secrets behind the Siren's words and the source of her power. Through the sirens' vision, Atwood emphasizes her point about the fallibility of men and the deceitful nature of men's assumption about women's being feeble and delicate. Another poem which breaks the rules of male-centered narration in Homer's *Odysseus* is *Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing*. In the original text, Helen seldom speaks anything during the story, but she is the only one who seems to deserve the most severe criticism from the whole world, because she does a rebellious thing that no other woman dare to do—elope with another man. In Atwood's rewritten poem, Helen turns out to be a pretty, ordinary dancing girl, who sells "vision, desire or its facsimile" for men. From Helen's point of view, she exposes the lust of every man and hears the secrets of their inner world: wars and desires for power and property are hidden inside.

One of the significances in Atwood's rewritten poems lies in her recreation of many women in the Greek mythology, some of who keep silent all the time. Therefore, no one knows what they really think and what they really want. This time Atwood puts them on

the prominent positions and releases them to talk as freely as they can. Eurydice is the best example. Compared with the one who fails to control her own fate, the new Eurydice makes a long monologue during the poem. In *Orpheus*, Eurydice denounces what Orpheus has done for her: he arranges everything for her, even including her death and reborn, but he never asks for her opinion. Eurydice indicates her obedient situation: whether to return to the earth is not her choice, and Orpheus has always arranged everything for her. She exposes the real fact that his love for her is only the reflection of his own desire: to build the image of what he appreciates. From Eurydice's point of view, her real requirement heads above water: she would rather fold like a gray moth and let go than stay with Orpheus, for she is unwilling to be the echo of her husband and she needs more: freedom, self-respect, self-independence and so on. Another good example is Daphne. The common story about Daphne is narrated by a third person and the focus usually lies on Apollo and Eros whereas Daphne, as the only victim, is just the subordination. The readers may get interested in this legend, but no one cares about her destination and no one ever asks how she feels after her death. In Atwood's *Daphne and Laura and so forth*, Daphne tells her true feelings after she becomes a laurel tree, besides, she blames bravely on the harassment Apollo and Eros have done for her. From her point of view, she prefers being a tree instead of turning out to be a girl again, for she thinks being trees is safer, freer, but being a woman, she has to face more dangers from men.

In these poems above, Atwood uses women's point of view to narrate the same old story, which leads a great impression: she changes women's positions from the subordinate ones to the prominent ones. Besides, through the changed narrative angles, women's true thinking and feeling can be heard and understood.

#### **4.4 Theme**

Helen Cixous, the major French feminist, raises an idea of a feminist essentialism, which means "the peculiarly feminine characteristics that differentiate woman from man." (Zhu 136) In her article *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she mentions Medusa, who in classical mythology is a woman known for her beauty and evil, in anthropology represents "both fascination and abhorrence of man towards woman in the tradition of the matriarchal society to the patriarchal, in Freudian psychology is the castration threat to the boy." From

the example of Medusa, it seems that woman is always negatively defined. Cixous argues that woman should break loose from “the naiveté”, the “monster”, the “self-disdain” imposed by the “parental-conjugal phallo-centrism,” and “speak out” her “strength” with her own “writing”. Women in Atwood’s rewritten mythological poems, such as Siren and Helen boast the same characteristics as Medusa’s and are restricted in the same situation as Medusa is. They are defined as the fatal ones by the male historians and get no opportunity to make a formal defense for themselves. Thousands of years later, Atwood rewrites those canon women, entitling them the right to speak. It is the first time that those stereotypes were changed: Helen and Siren accuse the injustice which the matriarchal society has given to them as well as their tragic fate that is caused by men.

Virginia Woolf is the forerunner of feminism and the “mother” of the contemporary Anglo-American feminism. In a speech, she calls on women to kill “the angel in the house”, a traditional image of women (charming, unselfish, pure, and above all mindless). Another type of women in the Greek mythology such as Eurydice and Daphne belong to this type of women—the angel in the house. However, these angel-like women only exist in the past history. In the present, women are no longer silent, pitiful ones who are always waiting for men to protect or lose their own strength to decide their destiny. Atwood creates the new image of such women; she rewrites Eurydice and Daphne, renders them the new characteristics, for example, self-consciousness, self-independence and sense of freedom. They overthrow the forced decisions made by men, claim the same rights equal to those possessed by men, and pursue the real freedom in life.

## Chapter Five Parody in Atwood's Canon Rewriting

As mentioned in the introduction of Chapter One, parody is one of the most common writing techniques used by Atwood in her canon rewriting.

Parody is defined by critic Simon Denith as "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice." In this dissertation, parody is a kind of literary imitation trying to rewrite the canon works for other purposes and it is no longer the reappearance of the original text, but deconstructs, or even satirizes the ideas expressed by the original one. Nowadays, parody is "one of the most popular feminist 'modalities' " or what Nancy Miller calls ways of "marking what has already been said, of making a common text one's own." "It is one of the ways of investigating the position of women within the tradition, as a way of discovering possible positions outside the tradition." (Hutcheon 109)

Margaret Atwood's canon rewriting can be regarded as a great combination of post-modernist ideas and feminist ones. She uses parody to break the stereotyped female figures in the original text, as Linda Hutcheon has mentioned, "Parody is one way of deconstructing that male-dominated culture; its simultaneous use and abuse of conventions that have been deemed "universal" works to reveal the hidden gender encoding." In Atwood's canon rewriting, parody is not the simple imitation of the former text but the creative expansion of the old, traditional literary form. There are two things being discussed in the following lines.

First of all, parody is an effective method for Atwood to better express her idea of feminism. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood parodies the twelve maids by adding right to speak to them. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the twelve maids are portrayed as disgraceful and licentious. However, in the rewritten text, Atwood alters their images and puts them into the dominant position in Chorus, which symbolizes they stand in the equal position as Penelope does. By singing in the Chorus, the twelve maids cry out their sufferings and miserable lives as the humble servants. In *Gertrude Talks Back*, Atwood parodies the plot about the murder of Hamlet's father. Unexpectedly, Gertrude hints at the end of the monologue that she is the real murderer who kills her husband, but not Claudius. The reason is simple, her husband can not meet her sexual requirement but Claudius can. Gertrude struggles to get rid of her

stereotyped image and her murder of her husband is a symbol of the brave modern women who dares to end her marriage with her husband and lives a new and hopeful life. In Atwood's rewritten poems, more evidences can be discussed about parody. For example, in *Siren Song*, Atwood parodies the story of the half-bird women who sing beautiful melodies to attract and kill the voyagers. Siren is no longer the fatal monster but the victim who asks for help all the time and singing becomes her protection. By using parody, Atwood beautifies Siren and breaks her stereotyped image that used to terrify humankind. Siren is now a female helper who begs people to save her and help her get rid of men's control.

Secondly, satire, which is caused by the modern imitation of the original text, deepens what the author wants to express. In *The Penelopiad*, Helen has been regarded as the chief culprit of the Trojan War. However, she lives happily as usual after the war. Men still pursue her beauty, without considering the huge cost they have to pay. Compared with Penelope, the modern people would rather summon Helen, such as Doctor Faustus. Presently, men still admire Helen while ignoring the morality Penelope owns. Atwood uses satire to expose the fact that modern people's discriminative ideas about woman—they care more about women's appearance rather than women's intelligence and morality. In *Gertrude Talks Back*, Gertrude scorns at the angle-like girl Ophelia by describing her as "pasty-faced" or "any little shock could push her right over the edge". (Atwood 16) From Gertrude's point of view, Atwood satires the traditional-defined pure women and points out that the real woman should be "more down to earth" (16); she should sense and require for what she needs as any other normal man does, but not a shy girl who dare not reveal her true feelings. More examples about satire can be found in her poems. For example, in *Eurydice*, Eurydice charges that "the return to time was not my choice" (45) and it is "the image of what you wanted me to become: living again." (45) It is really satirical because Orpheus' profound love toward Eurydice has been admired and praised by humankind for centuries. However, from Eurydice's monologue, Atwood points out that Eurydice is forced to return to the earth, because Orpheus dominates her sense and decision and she is just his "echo". (45) Here by using the satire, Atwood dispose men's unyielding control over women in every aspects of life. By the strong contrast between the original text and the modern one, satire raises, which help the author deepen the theme.

## Chapter Six Conclusion

Finally it comes to the end of this dissertation. Canon rewriting belongs to the category of post-modernism in which anti-traditional methods are frequently used. Writers rewrite the canon, rethink the defined notions and challenge the traditional systems and principles. Therefore, canon rewriting, as an influential literary genre, is used by the authors to express their original and unconventional ideas.

Through rewriting the Greek mythology, Atwood voices her new concept of value and history—her feminist ideas. She always situates herself in the historical, social and cultural contexts, challenging the patriarchal ideology and embodying the values of “the other”. Her ideas and values about women are well presented in her canon rewriting in forms of novelette, short fiction and poetry. In the novelette *The Penelopiad*, from the eyes of Atwood’s Penelope and the twelve maids, men’s control of women resembles Penelope’s web, the mental shackles men have forged for women. Women suffer from the gender bondage and are forced to use their intelligence to linger on in this male-controlled world. In the short fiction *Gertrude Talks Back*, Atwood’s Gertrude gets rid of her stereotype and conveys her inner world, where her feminist senses are expressed: she is the superior while her son dare not say anything to rebut. Besides, she supports sexual freedom and advocates the unity of soul and body. In Atwood’s rewritten poems, the silent Daphne and Eurydice finally speak out their inner world for the first time—Atwood entitles them the right to speak, and they accuse the crimes men have done for them, the crimes that leads them to the bottomless chasm. Besides, Atwood’s Siren and Helen are no longer fatal beauties who murder the male in the original text. On the contrary, they are forced to seduce men and they are constrained to live in such a situation by men’s lust.

In addition, parody is a writing technique that is frequently applied in Atwood’s canon rewriting. It aims to disclose the essence of canon rewriting and owns two functions in achieving this. Not only does parody advance Atwood’s expression of feminist ideas, but it also deepens the feminist themes revealed in her works.

Presently, though many countries have enacted law for the equality between men and women, the male-centered values still exist in the public or hidden form all over the world. By employing the women images borrowed from the canon works, Atwood seems to

express her determination to spread feminist ideas through writing when the real gender equality comes true.

All in all, this dissertation attempts to explore Atwood's canon rewriting through feminist approach. By choosing some of Atwood's most representative works, such as her novelette *The Penelopiad*, her short fiction *Gertrude Talks Back*, and her rewritten poems like *Eurydice*, *Siren Song* and so on, the author of this dissertation tries to analyze her canon rewriting in terms of character, point of view and theme.

However, the author of this dissertation is fully aware of the inadequacy of her research, and is determined to continue her efforts to do further studies in this field in the future.

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