DIALOGUE
The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

The Odyssey and Its Odyssey in Contemporary Texts: Re-visions in *Star Trek*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and *The Penelopiad*

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Abstract:

Homer's *The Odyssey* is the archetypal quest story. The dialogue began with Homer, and contemporary texts and popular culture media have continued the tradition of deconstructing and recreating stories, addressing issues related to the human psyche. As Hardwick and Stray note, the relationship between ancient and modern is "not merely inherited but constantly made and remade," one that we see in the following varied genres and versions that retell the Odyssean myth, relating re-visions of characters, relationships, structures, and themes. The original *Star Trek* episode "Who Mourns for Adonais" is an allegory of the Odyssean quest for human knowledge, while Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* presents a modern magical story of love, and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a story of "slippery truth," debunking the heroic and romantic.

Beyond instilling aesthetic appreciation in our students, Odyssean stories indeed offer a plethora of rich pedagogical material. A comparative approach to the texts offers our students the ability to further their own analytical and critical insights. As the stories deal with issues of identity, self-knowledge, sense of place in the cosmos, and human relationships and communities, they provide perception of psychological and philosophical insights into both our human-ness and our present preoccupations in our world. Rather than view the Odyssean epic as "exclusive," a constructive pedagogical approach is to explore the blurred spaces and/or gaps between the past and the present. Thus while texts are set in different and distinct times and spaces with varied purpose, story, and genre, what makes classroom discussions vital and vibrant are the similar issues raised, which explore our constant yearning to discover our human-ness, and following that, examination of the meaning of love, war, fate, meaning of life, and death, quintessential matters that are transcultural, universal, and timeless.

Homer's[1] *The Odyssey* is the archetypal quest story, where following the end of the Greek-Trojan war, the clever and resourceful hero Odysseus journeys for approximately ten years with the purpose of returning to his homeland, to his faithful wife Penelope and his only son Telemachus. On his quest, the ever-adventurous Odysseus faces and overcomes many obstacles and much adversity, such as the intense wrath of the gods, disastrous weather and sea conditions, monsters and generally strange and treacherous creatures, and enticing goddesses/enchanting witches. In true heroic fashion, Odysseus even journeys into the underworld and emerges back to the living world, armed with information from the shades in Hades. Shortly thereafter, Odysseus' wish to reach home is realized. Although there are various versions suggesting the continuation of his story, *The Odyssey* ends with the return of Odysseus to his island, with order restored in Ithaca, and with Penelope and Odysseus reunited.

The dialogue began with Homer, and contemporary texts, including popular culture media, have continued the tradition begun by classical writers of deconstructing and recreating stories, addressing ontological issues related to the human psyche, to our very existence. Invocations of the past with their plethora of characters, stories, and meanings, classical myths and folkloric tales are open to embellishment, alteration, interpretation – and as the past communicates with the present, all texts and representations become richer when viewed in terms of both influence and reception. Students learn how to acquire, critique, make connections, and apply knowledge, and further, how to share ideas in the academic classroom and community.

As James Machor and Philip Goldstein state, reception study examines literature's historical influence and the socio-historical contexts or changing conditions through which texts are constructed and received, further noting that combining "classics" or canon with feminist writings and popular culture explores interpretive activity of readers and "a text's significance and aesthetic value" (xii-xiv). Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation theory, works are deliberate "extended re-visitations of prior works" (xiv) and have a context of time and place and of society and culture (xvi).[2] Yet myths also address the issue of what it means to be human. Joseph Kovach eloquently notes the "perfect songs" of Greek antiquity, of Greek myths and literature that speak to us "across millennia through the common humanity we share with them"; of stories that relate "universal aesthetic inclinations of humanity and the individual self-recognition through the innermost realities of emotional resonances, which assure the timeless appeal of art" (42). And as Lianeri and Zajko note,

> the temporal status of the ancient concept needs to be seen as one of becoming rather than being. Its classical identity is not a direct manifestation of timelessness, but one that continues to be mediated and configured by changing historical circumstances, which present the construction of the classic as a historical relationship between past and present. (4)

Indeed, this very concept of the continuity and relevance of classical myths is what offers us such rich pedagogical material as we are teaching Classics courses and courses in the Classics in contemporary contexts.[3] According to Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*, "Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life" (22). What classical myths offer is a foundation to tell a new story, one which when viewed comparatively may allow for enhanced insights on our human-ness. Contemporary characterizations, plot twists, use of irony, and introduction of contemporary aspects of popular culture may add humor and be entertaining, yet may further critique present times while dealing with such themes as human relationships and experiences, destiny, meaning of life, and death. This comparative and continuous story may thus offer political, psychological, and/or philosophical insight into the "human spirit." Of significance here is the concept that comparing the stories and the past with the present encourages students to use their imaginations, "to engage in the critical pursuit of personal and political meaning and living" (Leonard and Willis 2).

Our students then may, as David Frauenfelder notes, "recognize that good stories have a profound effect on all cultures and that comparison of similar stories from different cultures can illuminate both sides in ways otherwise impossible" (210). While the ancient versus contemporary story is set in a different time and place, human emotions and philosophic queries concerning love, war, fate, life, and death remain mirrored quintessential constants and provide rich materials for contemplation in the classroom setting. Students learn more if their learning experience is enhanced by encouraging active engagement, where they have discussion, conversation, queries, and debate. Rather than straight lecturing, during class discussion we may also employ the Socratic method: "a learner can be 'nudged' by a teacher who does not spoonfeed, but asks questions or gives prompts in the right kind of way" (George 171). As Dugdale notes in his article "Classics Pedagogy for Teaching in a Liberal Arts College," in the liberal arts, the interdisciplinary classics curriculum (comprised of art history, literature, philosophy, religion, science) has enjoyed a "privileged position" as the foundation of the liberal arts system – yet its relevance now rests on "speaking to the issues of today" (128). Certainly, these discussions fusing the past with present preoccupations are a sound pedagogical approach to employ with our students, who are enriched by connections, overlaps, and spaces.

Myths further comprise integral threads in the fabric of humanity's quest for self-understanding, what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "timeless cognitive models by which we make sense of our world and of human action in it" (242-3). In contemporary popular culture, innovative twists in characterization, storyline, and ending, including portrayal of heroic characters, offer varied, fascinating possibilities and captivating narratives. For example, in *Star Trek*, we have the concept of the community or family as heroic; in Niffenegger's work, the "contemporary Penelope" shares the role of hero with her Odysseus; while in Atwood's version, Penelope in the underworld arguably shares the role of hero alongside the maids. Julie Sanders notes that "part of the sheer pleasure of the reading experience must be the tensions between the familiar and the new, and the recognition both of similarity and difference, between ourselves and between texts" (14). What I especially like in Sanders' view is this emphasis on the pleasurable aspect of comparing texts, pedagogically (as Aristotle would say) both an informative and enjoyable experience, which we may thus share with our students.

This paper is comprised of three contemporary works of varied genres that employ the story of Homer's *Odyssey* as a foundation to tell a new story, chronologically beginning with the odyssey motif of the original *Star Trek* series and the episode "Who Mourns for Adonais" (1967). Two more works that have revisited and re-visioned *The Odyssey* in the early part of the twenty-first century representing different genres are Audrey Niffenegger's novel *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003), a sci-fi or fantasy love story, also adapted into film; and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), a feminist novella.[4] While Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* presents a modern Odyssean magical tale of love and romance focusing on the Penelope/Odysseus relationship, in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's version of the Odyssean tale is fraught with "slippery truths" that culminate in a debunking of the heroic and romantic.

The examples in this paper refer to fascinating yet diverse texts concerning the odyssey myth that "re-vision" (Adrienne Rich's term) it, that involve the act of looking back, of seeing with a fresh gaze, "of entering an old text from a new critical direction" ("When" 369). While they are culturally and politically diverse in terms of purpose and views, what these texts have in common is that they all invoke the concept of the heroic journey, return to homeland, and reunion between traveler and waiting wife, yet with very different twists and outcomes. What we also see in*The Odyssey* is the constant underlying preoccupation with the effect of war and violence on humanity, which was also such an important theme for post-Trojan War tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In "Who Mourns for Adonais," the characters choose friendship, loyalty, and freedom over a life of eternal pleasure yet oppression. In *The Time-Traveler's Wife*, it is ironically the violent potential or consequence of the hunting and gun culture in the United States that kills Henry. Finally, in *The Penelopiad*, the war is depicted as having a devastating effect on both the public and the personal level. For our students, comparing and examining these texts on this issue of war (and others) may lead to fostering unique and interesting insights on varied text purposes and messages.

In popular culture, ironic twists in character choices, including portrayals of the hero, as well as in story lines and endings, often postulate an ironic, satiric – even critical – glance at contemporary identities and issues. The concept of the classical Greek hero, for example, is one which is re-visioned in *Star Trek*, an American television series that advances a paradigm shift in the meaning of the hero operating in the interest of "honor," "social good," and/or "justice."[5] While employing classical myth motifs and the concept of the classical hero, the original *Star Trek*expresses common themes and concerns of our times. Bruce Meyer speaks of mythology being ever-present in the book and what he calls its offspring, television, keeping fresh the expression of human desires and imaginative structures and providing the spectrum of heroic types, thus showing how the heroic spirit is constantly regenerated and reformed (27-8). What we thus see is a remaking of the hero in modern context, ever-struggling to make sense of the world and ever-grappling with human concerns such as identity, love, and justice. This concept of the hero and the heroic pattern is also a topic of class discussion and can serve as a point of comparison between ancient and contemporary thought.

With the syndication of American television worldwide, we witness "America as an imaginary descriptor,"[6] as her culture acts and interacts with global spaces. Popular media is, after all, in the Aristotelian sense both entertaining, as new genres such as science fiction and comics allow for the extreme, the bizarre in the case of both characters and events; and informative, as often allegorically they allude to and provide social and political reference and commentary. As Paul Cantor notes, "television is constantly creating the myths of contemporary America, stories that exemplify our common experience and that therefore might help us reflect upon those myths" (7). The construction of imaginary worlds, with allusions to, or contrasts of, our own existence also initiates thought-provoking, often exciting concepts and class discussions.

The original *Star Trek* aired in 1966 and continued until 1969, for seventy-nine one-hour episodes, all beginning with the refrain that the Starship Enterprise is in the 23rd century on a "five-year mission to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before" (Prologue to*Star Trek*). We may note here the close linguistic resemblance about learning and exploration that begins *The Odyssey* with its invocation to the Muse: "Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven/far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel./ Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of" (*Odyssey* I.1-3). The difference here is that in *Star Trek*, it is the galaxy that becomes the new space for the heroic quest of learning. Perhaps *Star Trek*also evokes Tennyson's words about journeying and learning from the poem "Ulysses," where Odysseus is given a voice in Ithaca that remembers, "For always roaming with a hungry heart/Much have I seen and known; cities of men/And manners, climates, councils, governments,/Myself not least" (95). Our students benefit by tracing and making connections amongst stories, and in this particular case, the emphasis on the significance of education, of experiences and adventures, in addition to the importance of constant learning and self-introspection, is especially relevant for discussion.

One noteworthy episode from the original *Star Trek* television series, which involves Greek mythological content, is titled "Who Mourns for Adonais," where the Starship Enterprise meets with the Greek god Apollo.[7] In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' problematic, obstacle-ridden, perilous journey began because he had angered the gods Athena and Poseidon. In *Star Trek* there are various adversaries and enemies, but in this particular episode it is Apollo who is the antagonist. Although Apollo offers them a life of leisure as long as they stay to worship him (shadings of the Lotus Eaters or the Calypso episodes in *The Odyssey*), he is perceived as an oppressive opponent to the continuation of their mission, their odyssey.

Joseph Campbell notes, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (*Hero* 30). What we see in *Star Trek* is the similar heroic pattern of leaving the known world, journeying into the unknown, facing problems, vanquishing the monster(s) and/or underworld/death, and re-emerging into the world victorious in quest purpose and with knowledge to better the plight of humankind. However, what we further see in *Star Trek* is the democratization of the concept of hero, where the hero is no longer an individual, but all of the crew, as they work together. Lincoln Gerharty speaks of the group working together cooperatively, thus exhibiting the "best" American ideals as they visit morally bankrupt alien worlds reminiscent of Earth's own history. While each of the starship crew performs functions in his/her respective roles, the crewmembers come together and unite in facing enemies and adversaries who attempt to separate them from one another, and from their mission. The voyage of the Enterprise on *Star Trek* is itself on an odyssey to explore new planets in the galaxy. Instead of there being only one hero though, all of the characters embody heroic aspects, and the homecoming occurs at the end of each episode where they have collectively vanquished a foe, returned to the starship united, and ventured once more on their voyage.

We may thus consider Captain Kirk and the Enterprise crew as on an Odyssean journey for knowledge, as they keep discovering details about their lost home and about humanity, as they encounter monster aliens, experience many adventures, and travel through strange, unknown, often threatening and treacherous territory. At the end of their journey, together once more intact on the starship, they often evaluate their experience. Like Odysseus, after facing obstacles, enemies, and challenges bravely, they learn about their universe and gain insights into what it means to be human. The main hero, Captain James Kirk, embodies classical heroic qualities, as he is courageous, clever, and resourceful, and like Greek heroes such as Heracles and Theseus, his actions focus on communal good rather than individual glory. And while we may consider the mythic element of the series, also relevant is the allegorical comparison to our world, as constant queries concerning politics, war, racism, colonialism, relationships, meaning of life and death are invoked, questions which make the series relevant to an academic classroom. [8]

In "Who Mourns for Adonais," which first aired in 1967, the Starship Enterprise is ensnared by the "hand" of Apollo, the Greek god who wills them to stay and worship him as humanoids did some five thousand years ago. In this episode, we are introduced to the idea that the Greek gods were space travelers who faded away and returned to the galaxy when the Earth changed. Once the gods ceased to be revered, feared, and worshipped, they vanished; as Apollo insinuates, without love "Even for a god there is a place of no return." Apollo seems to be the only remaining god when Captain Kirk, Chekhov, Scott, and the female archaeologist Lieutenant Caroline Palamas arrive. It is interesting to note that Caroline Palamas' name may allude to the Greek poet Kostis Palamas, an important modern Greek poet who wrote the words to the Olympian hymn. A compelling thought is that the name "Caroline Palamas" could signify the fusing of the classical world of the past with the futuristic Earth travelers, in the same way that Kirk's middle name reflects back to the Roman emperor Tiberius (42 BCE to 37CE).

While Apollo has no wish to harm the Enterprise crew, comparing them to past heroes such as Agamemnon, Hector, and Odysseus, he holds absolute power and wishes them to remain and worship him. This scene reminds us of Odysseus' encounter with Calypso in *The Odyssey,* where Calypso offers Odysseus love, pleasure, and immortality. However, like Odysseus, who chooses "human-ness" and to carry on with his journey, so too does Palamas choose humanity and to continue on the Enterprise odyssey. Apollo also appears to suggest that their remaining in his cosmos is what would secure his very existence. We may consider this, on the one hand, to be a statement of the devastating effect that loneliness and lack of love may have, but at the same time, as a kind of oppression when love and friendship is forced. Kirk and the crew, with the exception of Palamas, turn down his request and attempt to find his energy source in order to force his release of the Enterprise. While Apollo offers Palamas eternal love, Kirk reasons with her that she must consider the mission, her humanity and ultimately, her freedom. Palamas thus eventually rejects Apollo's love (we may view this as a role reversal of Odysseus who ultimately leaves Calypso), while Kirk and the others, with the help of Spock operating the starship, use Apollo's own wrath to destroy his energy source (the Greek temple). The Enterprise is thus released from Apollo's grasp.

This episode offers some startling and thought-provoking dialogue. While Apollo protests, "I would have loved you," before he fades away, Kirk's response is, "we've come a long way in five thousand years" and "we've outgrown you – you asked for something we can no longer give"; that "the time has passed" and "mankind has no need of gods." Without love or anyone to worship or believe in him, Apollo fades away into the cosmos (in an image like Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, thus joining the other gods). As the characters beam up to the spaceship, it is clear they have all experienced a sense of loss. They also all display heroic qualities: Scotty's bravery saved Lieutenant Palamas' life even while knowing he had lost her love, Kirk's ingenuity freed the Enterprise from Apollo's grasp, and Palamas surrendered the eternal love of Apollo for the Enterprise and for the mission. And like Odysseus, while they were offered paradise, they chose freedom, at great possible peril, and loss.

While McCoy and Kirk lament the tragic loss of Apollo and the lost golden age, echoing the title of the episode, which comes from Percy Shelley's poem "Adonais" (published 1821, the same year as the Greek uprising against the occupying Turks), they ponder, "the Greek civilization gave us so much…would it have hurt us…just to have gathered a few laurel leaves?" Perhaps these references to the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire reflect a reverence for the classical Greek world of poetry, drama, philosophy, and science. Like the Greeks who rose up against oppressive rule, so does the Enterprise crew vanquish Apollo, who may well have been a benevolent ruler but would have ruled with absolute power as a dictator. As such, their democracy and freedom intact, the Enterprise crew have achieved the heroic outcome necessary to free themselves not only from the grasp of Apollo, but also from the world of the irrational, from magic, oracles, and belief in gods. When Kirk proclaims we no longer have a need of gods, he is essentially reinstating his faith in humanity as fostering and furthering human progress and development. This is made clear in the scene with Lieutenant Palamas, where acting as wise heroic leader, he encourages her to remember her loyalty to their mission and to maintain her "human spirit," her right for freedom.

> C. Scott Littleton has said that *Star Trek*,
>
> like myths generally, is a projection of both the society which created it and the mythopoeic context in which it is supposed to unfold. Just as Homer's *Iliad* is at once a fusion of early eighth century [BCE] Ionia (that is, Homer's own society) and the half-remembered glories of the late Mycenaean era, so the milieu of Kirk and his crew reflects both contemporary American society as well as what its creators believe will be the future shape of that society. (38)[9]

Gene Roddenberry (*Star Trek* producer and screen writer) has stated, "I've been sure from the first that the job of *Star Trek* was to use drama and adventure as a way of portraying humanity in its various guises and beliefs" as it challenged war, prejudice, ecology, and misuse of power (qtd. in Porter and McLaren 15).[10] Apart from examining these important themes as listed above, an interesting discussion to hold with students is to ask them to consider if in present times, we have in fact developed or advanced our humanity, our "human spirit."

The next two texts shift from the Odyssean motif of travel to include the role of the waiting Penelope. In her article "Classical Studies, Patriarchy and Feminism," Marilyn Skinner notes that female classicists working in a "conservative, hierarchical and patriarchal academic field" (181) need to find "something of value" from it, to "discover how this can be done may be our destined, and wholly meaningful, contribution to the feminist reconstruction of knowledge" (186). Hence my next choices of texts, which are particularly engaging to female students as Penelope shares the role of, or replaces, Odysseus as the hero.

In *The Iliad*, the weaving Helen is conscious of herself as creator of poetry that will be eternal: "for the sake of dishonored me and the blind act of Alexandros/we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future"(6.356-8). [11]Penelope is also a weaver and story-teller in *The Odyssey*, and her story is "reimagined" (Elaine Showalter's term) by many contemporary women writers. Though her story may be linguistically or culturally diverse, contemporary women writers are afforded an opportunity, drawing on Helene Cixous, to place themselves into the text: "woman must seize the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history…to write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon" (351). Various recent classicists, such as Lillian Doherty, Marylin Katz, Nancy Felson-Rubin, and Barbara Clayton, in examining scenes such as the contest of the suitors, the incident with the marriage bed, and the recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus, cast Penelope into an active role. This re-creation of mythic figures comes from female classicists revisiting the world of heroic myth, and the concept of Odysseus traveling while Penelope stayed at home allows for alternate stories, as we see in these contemporary versions by Audrey Niffenegger and Margaret Atwood.

Audrey Niffenegger's re-vision of *The Odyssey*, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003), in terms of characterization and storyline, works on the characters Odysseus and Penelope, as well as with the theme of journey and reunion, with a very different twist. A quirky genre mix of science fiction and love, *The Time Traveler's Wife* presents a modern Odyssean magical tale of love and romance, focusing on the Penelope/Odysseus reunion(s). Except for the comparative study of characters and theme, which we may discuss with our students, this work also follows the double narrative structuring of *The Odyssey*, as both Henry (Odysseus) and Clare (Penelope) share the role of narrator in the novel. As in *The Odyssey* we have narratives of war and post-war adventures juxtaposed with narratives of the homeland, so too in this novel are Henry's time travel adventures involving danger interspersed with Clare's home life experiences of waiting and creating art. And woven throughout the novel, as we see in *The Odyssey*, is the motif of a double narrative, of two stories intertwining into one narrative.

The Time Traveler's Wife relates the story of a research librarian, Henry deTamble, who has a genetic disorder called "Chrono Impairment" that takes him to different times (as suggested by "chrono") and to various places in his own past and future. Oftentimes he finds himself in precarious, even perilous positions because he arrives there naked and must steal in order to survive. When they meet in the present, where Clare is twenty and Henry is twenty-eight, having met him during her childhood, Clare reveals to him that she has been waiting for him (he had time-traveled and met her when she was a child). They fall in love and marry – yet the Odyssean Henry continues to time-travel to experience what seem to be important events in his past and in his future. Added to this is the ironic fact that it would seem that he is caught in the Oedipal dilemma, as nothing of the past or the future can change, all is destined.[12]

Clare spends her time making art, weaving sculptures, and waiting, like Penelope. After many miscarriages, with the help of a geneticist, Clare gives birth to Alba, who inherits her father's disorder but is better able to control it. Henry dies at forty-three, shot by Clare's father in a hunting accident, and at the moment of death he transports himself back to his home, into Clare's and Alba's arms. While Alba, who inherits the time-travel gene meets with her father at various times, Clare and Henry only meet once again many years after his death, when Clare is an old woman.

Although they had met at other time periods, their great love affair essentially begins when both characters are in their twenties. What is especially interesting is the intellectual culture, both literary and musical, that they share: from A.S. Byatt's fascinating mystery/love story *Possession*, to new wave/punk culture, to modern poetry. A research librarian (books, art, and history it would seem, are a grounding force), Henry's time-travels in the novel often take him to museums where he is surrounded by physical objects and by history. Like Odysseus, Henry often finds himself in danger, yet with his resourcefulness and intelligence, he is able to overcome challenges. As an artist, Clare uses different papers and materials to model birds and angels, weaving them with wings. Like Penelope, while waiting for Henry to return, Clare engrosses herself in her art. The wings she fashions could signify her wish for flight, for movement, yet like Penelope's weaving, could also symbolize a contemporary parallel to the act of weaving or creating art, in addition to being an act of constancy and love. One particularly memorable scene is where an inspired Clare makes a winged sculpture after Henry loses his feet to frostbite. This motif of frostbitten or tired feet evokes the concept of Homeric hospitality (Eurycleia to Odysseus) and the paradox of supernatural travel involving a magical means of movement. Clare's creative act is indeed a declaration of love that brings Henry back from the dark space he is in, as she notes: "It is only the wings that I want to give him. I draw in the air with thin metal, looping and weaving" (461). Here her art reflects longing for Henry to have movement again.

From the first time they meet in the present, like Penelope to Odysseus, Clare represents home to Henry. In the letter Henry leaves Clare after he dies, Henry alludes to Clare and his love for her as the constant place of return, in an image of her as Ariadne leading him out of the time-travel labyrinth with her love: "Our love has been the thread through the labyrinth…the only real thing in this strange life of mine that I could ever trust" (503). Pervading their love story, though, and certainly dominating, is the Odysseus – Penelope myth, to which they both allude and seem aware of, in relation to their own life circumstance. In the "Prologue," Clare's narration begins with these thoughts that emphasize how like Penelope, she often waits:

> It's hard being left behind. I wait for Henry, not knowing where he is, wondering if he's okay. It's hard to be the one who stays […] Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water, scanning the horizon for the tiny ship. Now I wait for Henry. He vanishes unwillingly, without warning. I wait for him. Each moment that I wait feels like a year, an eternity. Each moment is as slow and transparent as glass. Through each moment I can see infinite moments lined up, waiting. Why has he gone where I cannot follow? (1)

During one of Henry's disappearances, when Clare is attempting to create her art, she notes the mythic element in her artistic endeavors: "The compelling thing about making art – or making anything, I suppose – is the moment when the vaporous, insubstantial idea becomes a solid there, a thing, a substance in a world of substances […] Every day I work, but nothing ever materializes. I feel like Penelope, weaving and unweaving. And what of my Henry, my Odysseus?" (274). During Henry's absences, like Penelope's weaving, one function of Clare's art is to help her pass the time until Henry's return, and metaphorically, artistic creation is linked with material appearance.

In the letter he leaves for Clare, Henry further declares that he has appreciated her love and constancy amidst the turmoil of his often tumultuous experiences time-traveling, stating: "What an uncertain husband I have been, Clare, like a sailor Odysseus alone and buffeted by tall waves, sometimes wily and sometimes just a plaything of the gods" (503). The novel ends with the reunion of Henry and Clare just before Clare's death, a reference to the final scenes in *The Odyssey* where Penelope and Odysseus are united. What Audrey Niffenegger does in her novel is present a romantic retelling of the Penelope/Odysseus story, where both are cast as heroes.

The film, not unsurprisingly a much-condensed version of the novel, presents a more orderly sequence. Predominantly focused on the present, it presents Henry's travels in flashbacks and flash-forwards. Many of the minor characters play lesser roles, such as Clare's family, Henry's surrogate mother, even their friends, as the film seems to focus more on the main characters and their relationship. In the film, many of the darker undertones found in the novel have been omitted, such as the doctor's child with Downs syndrome; the affair Clare has with a friend after Henry dies; the violent scene involving Clare's abusive ex-boyfriend; Henry's ex-girlfriend's suicide; and the amputation of Henry's feet, which in the novel signified the symbiotic relationship of movement with survival. Also unfortunately lacking in the film are interesting allusions to the punk and politics culture of the time, which in the novel express a liberal perspective promoting community and art. One thread of the story that ties *The Time Traveler's Wife* with the anti-war and violence sentiment expressed in *Star Trek* is that *The Time Traveler's Wife*, both in the novel and film form, has a pervasive underlying tone against violence. Clare's father and brother are hunters (in the film, they are further identified as Republicans). It is their hunting expedition that results in the accidental, yet violent and tragic death of Henry.

Of particular interest in the film are the scenes which retain or enhance the mythic elements of the story. The opening scene of the film depicts the car accident in the snowstorm that takes the life of Henry's mother (in true Greek heroic fashion, Henry loses his mother at a young age) and exhibits his first time-travel experience as a child, portrayed in a blurry sepia colored atmosphere enriched with the operatic voice of his mother singing in a mesmerizing tragic tone. The recognition scene between Clare and Henry is also effectively portrayed in the film, with Clare in the position of foreknowledge and Henry in the dark concerning their eventual future together as a couple. When they make love, scenes of their prior meetings flash before Henry, flashbacks thus filling in past events. Also interestingly portrayed is the subway scene, which acts as the corresponding Hades scene in *The Odyssey*where Odysseus speaks with his mother, making inquiries about Penelope – though here Henry meets with his mother and tells her about Clare, explaining her role as his "anchor" offering him safety and home.

Though their marriage is portrayed as overall fulfilling for both of them, it is fraught with moments of loss and sadness, as they experience time apart with Henry's disappearances (depicted in the movie as flashes of Henry's dissipating body, replaced with piles of clothing) and as they face increasing despair about not being able to have a child (because of the time-travel gene in the embryos, Clare initially seems unable to carry a child to term). Perhaps one of the most touching scenes is when Henry meets the 10-year-old Alba (their as yet unborn daughter) on a fieldtrip, and she recognizes him as her father. While the scene offers Henry the fabulous news that he and Clare are in fact able to have a child, and one who is able to control the time-travel affliction, paradoxically he also learns about his death (again, the inevitability of changing the future is apparent). When he experiences hypothermia and loses his ability to run, Henry feels the end coming and unlike the novel, seizes the chance to say goodbye to his friends and to Clare, telling her not to wait for him (a rather melodramatic scene). This ending is rather less enthralling than that of the novel, which concludes with 82-year-old Clare waiting for Henry to take her to the afterlife, shadings of an inverted version of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth.

Cynthia Grenier calls this "a love story for the ages"; Olivia Glazebrook "a straight love story with a quirk"; Michiko Kakutani "a story about the magical ability of love to transcend time." Apart from the love story, what gives this narrative a richer quality is its basis on mythic story and characterization, especially its reimagining of the Odysseus-Penelope tale, enhanced as it is with contemporary quirky sci-fi and feminist twists. The love story, the sci-fi genre, and the feminist overtones are all fascinating topics for class discussions. Like the aforementioned texts, *The Time Traveler's Wife* allows for comparison and contrast of myth in terms of story, characters, and themes of love, heroism, and human relations. Of particular interest to examine with students is the concept of double narration, as we see in *The Odyssey*, and the theme of the supernatural world of adventure embedded in the "real" contemporary punk culture world.

In contrast to Audrey Niffenegger's love story is the more cynical one told in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Atwood also gives Penelope a voice to tell her story, one interspaced with poetic injections from the twelve maids killed by Odysseus. In Atwoodian style, the personal world of Penelope and the once "voiceless" maids blurs with the returning war heroes, and alternate stories thus emerge. *The Penelopiad* echoes a motif prevalent in many of Atwood's other novels: the theme of women attempting to carve their identity within patriarchal society, who are given a voice to express their identity.[13] Sue Ellen Case has termed this as "taking back the myths." And as in many of her other works, Atwood explores the concept of words, of language, of *aletheiai* (truths), oaths, promises, words that twist, lie, betray, and/or are hollow or meaningless.

When I asked Atwood about her choice of telling the story of Penelope (who is after all, the archetypal faithful wife), which seemed a rather unlikely preference, Atwood replied that it was because Penelope had not had the opportunity to tell her story in the same way that Helen, or even Clytemnestra had.[14] Interestingly enough, Atwood's protagonist Penelope is given the novel genre as an arena to tell her story here as a ghost or shade of the "gloomy halls of Hades" (17). Drawing not only from the Homeric *Odyssey,* but also from various versions of the oral and local tradition, Atwood focuses on Penelope and on the twelve maids as narrators in an attempt to answer two questions: "what led to the hanging of the maids and what was Penelope really up to?" (xv). These two questions tell two stories and address both gender and class issues. The first question as to what led to the hanging of the maids is left unanswered, as the only one who knows the answer is Odysseus' nursemaid Eurycleia, and she avoids and eludes Penelope even in the underworld.

The second question would *seem* to be answered except that as the novel unfolds, although Penelope's story seems plausible, her emphasis on the slippery nature of language and words somehow pervades, leaving us wondering about how much of the story she actually knows, reveals, even conceals. Penelope herself seems to experience no revelation of the whole truth about Odysseus and his wanderings, and while she begins the story with the words "now that I'm dead I know everything," she then proceeds to undercut this statement saying, "This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes, it failed to come true" (1). It would thus appear that right from the start, Penelope is conscious of herself as inventing her narrative, of weaving her own story.

Penelope's narrative also expresses an inversion of the myth of the faithful, waiting Penelope – she disparages her role and what she came to represent to women: "And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with" (2). As a shade who has witnessed herself become an archetype of admirable womanhood to the patriarchal world, she has come to despise her role. She describes her marriage to Odysseus stating, "and so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat" (39). After their procession to the wedding chamber, where they shared stories about their negative experiences as children, Penelope wryly notes that they eventually became close rather out of necessity, "all the more reason we should stick together and not be too quick to trust others" (47). While she eventually developed strong feelings for Odysseus, she expresses uncertainty as to whether or not her passion was reciprocated. Unlike the romantic loving relationship Niffenegger's Clare and Henry share, in Atwood's tale we witness a lack of love and trust between Penelope and Odysseus. Their short-lived marriage, interrupted by the war, leaves Penelope in Ithaca, waiting for the ships, waiting to hear news of Odysseus.

Although Penelope delights when she hears the minstrels sing about Odysseus' inspiring speeches and plots and at news the war is over, she despairs at learning of his secret meeting with Helen and at stories of his journey toward home which include possible exploits with other women. As resourceful as Odysseus, surrounded by the suitors who were after the kingship and the palace treasures, Penelope weaves her shroud as a delay tactic, and when Odysseus returns, she relates how she orchestrated the entire recognition scene. While Odysseus, true to *The Odyssey*, remains a wonderful, powerful storyteller, Penelope is his counterpart in this novel and, as Penelope discloses, his counterpart in mythmaking as well: "The two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long-standing. It's a wonder either of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other" (173).

Their relationship does not end in Ithaca. At present in Hades, Odysseus continues his journeys into life as various "heroic" figures in history, escaping the murdered maids who are hounding him in Hades and visiting the ever-waiting Penelope from time to time, an interesting inversion of Odysseus in Plato's Myth of Er (*Republic*10). In contrast to Odysseus, whose reincarnations are great historical figures, just as in life the prudent, or fearful, Penelope is unwilling to reenter the sphere of life, choosing to remain in the underworld for eternity. In *The Penelopiad*, just as in *Star Trek*, pervading the story is the underlying devastating effect of war, both on the public and personal level; the public loss of lives and cities; and the personal loss of families and relationships (topics for class discussions). War also affects the individual – for Penelope, the world of continual warfare signifies a terrifying space. With the rather famous dry humorous twists found in Atwoodian heroines, Penelope notes: "Even with my limited access I can see that the world is just as dangerous as it was in my day, except that the misery and suffering are on a much wider scale. As for human nature, it's as tawdry as ever" (188).

Just as the structure of her novel is that of classical Greek drama, with Penelope as the central tragic hero and the maids as the chorus decrying their misfortunate lives, so too is its theme, as Atwood explores the classical motif of the power of words and language to hurt or soothe, betray or heal, conceal or reveal. Penelope, telling her story as a ghost, can also be a symbol of the story of oppressed women, granted a voice finally to tell her version, and the maids sing their own song of the oppression of the servant/slave class as a Greek chorus. Like Christa Wolf, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Colleen McCullough, to name a few other women writers who give voice to women retelling the story of Troy and the devastating aftermath of war,[15] Atwood also explores the maids' hanging as the symbolic overthrow of matriarchy with the establishment of the patriarchal world. Perhaps the most interesting thought of all is that Penelope, though given a voice to narrate her "real" or "true" story, chooses only to tell a part of it. As Atwood's main character Iris from her novel *The Blind Assassin* notes, a narrative may be fragmented and flawed with interruptions, omissions, presenting a "truth" that is arbitrary. In postmodern fashion then, Atwood blurs the boundaries of humor and pathos, of the personal with the historical, of the poetic with the political, of the mythical with the individual, and, finally, of the classical with the contemporary. These "blurred boundaries" offer exciting discussion opportunities for our students. As Szegedy-Maszak notes, "Just as in *The Odyssey* the blood of a sacrificed bull enables the ghosts in Hades to speak, our own ideas, as scholars and students, provide 'blood for the ghosts' of antiquity" (8).

To conclude, the original *Star Trek* episode, "Who Mourns for Adonais," is an allegory of the Odyssean quest for human knowledge and a statement about the significance of love and friendship over aggression and oppression. While Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* presents a modern magical Odyssean story of love and romance, focusing on the Penelope-Odysseus archetype of marriage and happy reunion(s), in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, the tale addresses both gender and class issues, and, narrated by the voices of Penelope and the maids, is a story of "slippery" truth debunking the heroic and romantic. The myth of Odysseus and his odyssey, and classical myths in general, indeed, offer a plethora of rich teaching materials as we examine, analyze, and compare prevailing and persistent characterizations, stories, themes, and structures, peering at spaces between present circumstances and past events. In "Popularization, Pedagogy and Scholarship," Leon Golden contends that joining instruction of Classics with humanities may result in "an impressive pedagogical and scholarly synergy" (106). Myths offer a foundation to tell a new story, and as these new narratives deal with human relationships and experiences, with themes that explore issues of human identity and our place in our cosmos, they continue to express timeless and universal political, psychological, and philosophical insights. While stories are set in different times and places, what emerges is our constant yearning to discover the question of what it means to be "human," and following that, exploration of the meaning of love, war, fate, meaning of life, and death, quintessential matters that are universal and timeless.

Endnotes

[1] Whether Homer is the name of one writer, many writers, or a sort of verb meaning "to transfer," as some classicists suggest, is not being dealt with here – this introduction is meant to summarize *The Odyssey* and to emphasize the significance of the Odyssean myth through time. For further reading, a good overview is provided in Edith Hall's *The Return of Ulysses* (Baltimore, 2008).

[2] In their Introduction to *Rewriting Texts, Remaking Images*, editors Leslie Boldt, Corrado Federici, and Ernesto Virgulti note that study of re-adaptation of texts and images contributes to our understanding of the nature of the functions of re-contextualized texts and images, both in terms of their reception and the intention of the artist (ix).

[3] Further, the relationship between ancient and modern is "not merely inherited but constantly made and remade" (see Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, Introduction to *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, Oxford, 2008).

[4] *The Penelopiad* has also appeared as a live performance, both in London, UK and in Toronto, Canada.

[5] Another revision of *The Odyssey* is the beloved, long-running television comic, *The Simpsons*, where one episode titled, "Tales from the Public Domain," presents Homer as Odysseus and Marge as Penelope in a darkly humorous look at the aftermath of war as it depicts Homer's definitely non-heroic journey.

[6] This passage was in the Call for Papers for the *Is It 'Cause It's Cool?: Affective Encounters with American Culture* conference for the Austrian Association for American Studies, Salzburg, November 4-6, 2011.

[7] There are other examples of classical themes on the original *Star Trek*, but I chose this one because of its immense appeal to my students, as it deals with love and power. Three other notable episodes are: "Elaan of Troylus," a re-vision of Helen of Troy's story of wedding and war (which includes Klingons); "Bread and Circuses," dealing with gladiatorial games in ancient Rome; and "Plato's Stepchildren," a remarkable inversion of Greek philosophy.

[8] See William Tyrell's interesting article, "*Star Trek* as Myth and Television as Mythmaker." Tyrell notes that *Star Trek* has taken American myth and "clothed it in the garb of science fiction" to present a positive and possible future.

[9] Ironically, and unfortunately, America's hegemonic role as peacemaker, or country that stands for justice, has been argued by many as not indicative or suggestive of their role on the world stage since the Second World War.

[10] Nicholas Sarantakes in "Cold War Pop Culture and the Image of U.S. Foreign Policy: The Perspective of the *Original Star Trek* Series" has suggested that the series was used to critique Unites States' foreign policy, specifically, that the United States should refrain from using force in a way that would undermine their international image. Beyond the mythological motifs, certainly political shadings as suggested here are present in the series (and a great conversation point with our students).

[11] My translation – this concept of Helen as creative agent comes from a paper I wrote on Helen titled "Helen and Her Lovers" from *Le Mythe d'Helene*, editors Michel Broze et al. (Brussels, 2003), 203-219.

[12] For further reading on the theme of fate (moira) see William Chase Greene's *Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought* (Gloucester MA, 1968).

[13] For further notes on the identity theme in Margaret Atwood's works, see my paper "Margaret Atwood's Heroines: Triumphant Survivors?" in *Canadian Identity through Literature*, edited by Mary Koutsoudaki (Athens, 2002), 35-49.

[14] I had the pleasure of hearing Margaret Atwood read from *The Penelopiad* at St. James Church in Toronto, 2006, when the novella was first published, and raised this query during the question period following.

[15] These works were examined in my paper "Re-visioning Myth: Women's Retellings of the Greek-Trojan War" in *Thieves of Languages*, edited by Eleonora Chiavetta (Palermo, 2003), 143-151.

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Reference Citation:

MLA:
Economou Green, Mary. "*The Odyssey* and Its Odyssey in Contemporary Texts: Re-visions in *Star Trek*, *The Time Traveler's Wife,* and *The Penelopiad*." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy.* 1.1 (2014). Web.

APA:

Economou Green, M. (2014). *The Odyssey* and its odyssey in contemporary texts: Re-visions in *Star Trek*, *The Time Traveler's Wife,* and *The Penelopiad*. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. 1*(1). http://journaldialogue.org/issues/issue-1/the-odyssey-and-its-odyssey-in-contemporary-texts-re-visions-in-star-trek-the-time-travelers-wife-and-the-penelopiad-2/

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