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. 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’ve 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’ve always been haunted by the hanged maids and, in The Penelopiad, so is Penelope herself. -- from Margaret Atwood’s Foreword to The Penelopiad
Personal Review: The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus (Myths) by Margaret Atwood

Well, this turned out to be an unexpected delight. Told in first person -- with Choir joining in between chapters -- "The Penelopiad" tells the story of what was going on back on the craggy home isle of Ithaca while Odysseus was traipsing around the world.

The story begins with Penelope explaining how she came into the world, and how being the daughter of a king and a Naiad isn't as great as it might seem. Having set the familial background she quickly moves on to the point where she is a young Spartan girl of 15. With Helen labeled 'the pretty one', Penelope's basically left with the 'smart as a whip' label, something she's not entirely happy with. None-the-less it's true, and she makes a rather good match for the older Odysseus who has shown up to compete for her hand in marriage.

We get to follow the couple as they break tradition and go to his home. And it's sweet to see how they become friends and lovers. This affection is what sets the backdrop for the tragedy that follows. Odysseus if you remember, was called away to support Menelaus in his fight to get Helen back from the Trojans. And while he's away actually fighting it's bad enough for Penelope, but nothing compared to when he vanishes while trying to return home. Then the suitors show up, bully her and the staff and... well you no doubt know the rest. (By the way, if you don't know, you should find out before reading this book.)

Penelope relates her tale from the better fields of the Underworld. This afterlife perspective allows Atwood the widest possible leeway in telling the tale. Penelope has, afterall, the advantage of having the final perspective on her life.

Now some people are just not going to 'get' this book. The ancient tale as told after-the-fact, like a post-mortem, just isn't going to appeal to those who need a straightforward story to be entertained.

I however thought the writing and the narrative was not only insightful (in a human sense), but downright hilarious at points.

The people who I think are going to like "The Penelopiad" are readers who are familiar with Homer's classic. And who are open to the idea of a backstory.

Finally, I can't not say something about the commentary about the symbology of the myth which is at the end of the book: simply brilliant!

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