

THE PENELOPIAD AND PHOTOGRAPH 51 ESSAY

'The Penelopiad' by Margaret Atwood and 'Photograph 51' by Anna Ziegler both confront audiences with the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies. The vastly different settings of Ancient Greece and centres of scientific research in mid twentieth century Britain are both strongholds of patriarchal power, in which the female protagonists of both texts suffer injustices and challenges at the hands of men. The reality they faced in terms of not having their own story heard is challenged by both authors, who, through their work, grant the women more powerful voices. The notion of status and power in a male dominated society and the subjugation of women is also explored, as well as the expectations imposed on women to conform to societal standards. The difficulties of being a woman in both ancient and modern times is addressed by each author as they apply a feminist lens to the stories of Rosalind and Penelope.

Both Atwood and Ziegler challenge the male dominated tradition of storytelling by giving the protagonists the chance to voice their own stories. Rosalind is excluded from the historical narrative which described the discovery of the structure of DNA ultimately because she was a woman in a heavily dominated male-dominated world of science, where powerful patriarchal forces guaranteed her name and contributions were not remembered. Ziegler's retelling of Rosalind's story challenges the historical invisibility of women, just as Atwood's novella grants the character of Penelope the opportunity to do her own "storymaking" and address the rumours about her. Penelope's modern language challenges the validity of 'The Odyssey' upon which 'The Penelopiad' was adapted. 'The Odyssey' endorsed traditional notions of gender identity and focused on telling the story through a largely male perspective. This is further signified through the derivation of the ancient book's name from the predominant male character, Penelope's husband, Odysseus. Atwood attempts to overcome the traditional silencing of women's roles by naming the novella after the prominent female character instead, enabling the character to overcome some of the inherent challenges of simply being heard as a woman. Similarly, 'Photograph 51' is named after Rosalind's most promising piece of work, the photograph that should have "secured her place in history". The literary style of the play enables Rosalind to also overcome the challenges of historical silencing, though her voice is still often overpowered by her male colleagues as Ziegler specifies "their lines should run over some of hers; they're talking over her". In this way, Ziegler challenges modern society by suggesting that the challenges faced by many women in terms of the inequality between genders is still yet to be overcome. By granting the female protagonists more power to tell their own story, both authors examine the challenges faced by women in both ancient and modern times in being heard in a largely male-dominated world.

'The Penelopiad' and 'Photograph 51' also offer an insight into how status and power operated in a patriarchal society and the subsequent subjugation of women. Penelope's responsibility and authority in taking over the palace when Odysseus was forced to go to war in Troy is often overlooked. She "built up a reputation" and became proud of her work in "building up the estates of her husband", only to be denied recognition upon his return and immediately having to hand all authority back to him. The status of a woman in ancient Greece, and even as modern as mid-twentieth century Britain, favour the idea that males held all authority and the contributions of women are not as important. In the same way that Penelope was denied the recognition she deserved for twenty years of work in Odysseus' absence, Rosalind's contributions are often overlooked and taken-for-granted. During the 1951 colloquium on the structure of nucleic acid, "Wilkins gave a lecture and referenced 'his' DNA work", omitting the fact that he was working in a team and ignoring that Rosalind had made comparatively greater rides in the work than he had.

The challenges Rosalind faced in terms of unacknowledged recognition for her work is ultimately a result of the fact that her scientific genius coincided with an insurmountable gender bias in a society where men held a higher status than women. Similarly, Penelope isn't valued or respected highly as a wife or as a mother, as the novella continually reiterates the disincentive for women to display their intelligence in society. The misogynistic attitudes of the men around Penelope manifest even in her son, Telemachus, as he grows older and begins to "defy [her] parental authority". As Telemachus aligns with the societal expectations of men to be more powerful than women, he begins to stray from the influence of his mother and believes he has to "get out from under the thumbs of the women" in order for his father to be proud of him. The authority of Penelope as a mother and as a woman is undermined by the attitude and behaviour of her son, just as Rosalind is disrespected by men who ignore her status as "Dr Franklin" and continue to refer to her as "Rosy" or "Miss Franklin", refusing to acknowledge she is there equal. The misogynistic attitudes of the men in both texts challenge the rightful recognition and respect that female characters deserve, even as the women often amount to the same, or even greater, achievements than the men who marginalised them.

Through both texts, the expectations of women are revealed, which presents an immense challenge and pressure to conform to societal standards. Rosalind is viewed negatively by her male colleagues because she fails to conform to the expectations of how a woman should dress and behave. Her lack of interest in feminine clothing signify her disregard for gender roles in the workplace but elicit, however, criticism and snide remarks from men. Watson in particular, labels her as a "right old hag". Furthermore, Rosalind demonstrates that she values hard work and dedication above that of traditional ideas of femininity by continually insisting they simply "get on with the work". In a similar way, Penelope's appearance often becomes the subject of "slanderous gossip" about her, and she is often valued less because intelligence is not seen as a "quality valued in a wife", certainly not above beauty. While physical beauty may empower women such as Helen, her relentless taunting of her "little duckling" cousin Penelope, indicates that beauty can also be an instrument of oppression. It is wielded not only by men but also by ignorant women who blindly conform to those men's expectations of them. As expected for young women from rich families in ancient Greece, marriage is also forced upon Penelope. She recalls from The Underworld, where she currently presides, being "handed over like a package of meat" and hauled onto a boat to travel to her new home with her new husband. The inherent challenges associated with arranged marriages involved women like Penelope having to face adapting to a new life alone and without support from anyone but her husband, whom she had just met. Unlike Penelope however, Rosalind does have some control over her life. She chose not to marry and could follow her ambition to become a scientist, even though she was initially discouraged from it. The expectation of Rosalind to be married however is still present, as Gosling makes the assumption that there is a "Mr Franklin" before Rosalind corrects him. The construction of female characters who either adhere to or reject traditional expectations of women in society reveal the difficulties women face in the patriarchal societies of both texts.

Both 'The Penelopiad' and 'Photograph 51' examine the challenges women face in both ancient and modern times in a predominantly male dominated society. The feminist lens that each author adopts allows them to ridicule traditional gender roles and expectations of women. It grants their protagonists more storytelling authority in order to overcome the challenges they faced in their daily lives in a society where men held the utmost status and power.