

ENGLISH – TRIAL EXAM COMPARATIVE ESSAY

Margaret Atwood and Anna Ziegler celebrate the power of marginalised voices in challenging and superseding an established narrative. Both authors examine how by reiterating a story from their own perspective, forgotten characters are able to drive their struggles and plight to the forefront of an oppressive tale. The authors also question whether the ostracised voices must speak for themselves or another influential voice to add objectivity and credibility to their struggles. Atwood and Ziegler, however, also postulate that the power of marginalised voices may be undermined by their own uncertainty of their narrative.

Atwood and Ziegler evince the individuals who have been silenced in history are able to garner greater attention to their stories because it highlights a plight which previously was not acknowledged. In The Penelopiad, the Maids denounce their prescribed epithet as 'whores', instead arguing a case that they were vulnerable girls suffering an injustice when already 'hard work is [their] destiny'. Unlike The Odyssey, the 'authority on this subject', which the Maids claim render them as 'dirty girls', the collective of twelve's fragmented narrative portrays the plight of sexual objectification and slavery. Their struggle of 'hoist[ing] their] skirts for every prick and knave' and 'do[ing] as [their] told' highlights to the 21st century reader the injustice of Homer's tale in silencing the plight of the vulnerable, which has been disseminated for centuries. By drawing their challenges to the forefront of their own stories in form of a Greek 'chorus', the Maids position the modern reader to feel guilty and complicit in the silence of their struggles which 'was not fair'. Thus the power they wielded is of guilt over their unacknowledged trauma. Similarly, Wilkins' woes over Rosalind's suppression in scientific history, like Hermione from The Winter's Tale who is forgotten because 'she didn't stand out'. Rosalind's identity is attempted to be rejuvenated by the collection of male scientists who reconstruct 'what happened', but the reader sees that it is Wilkins' guilt of being 'unfriendly' and 'offer[ing] [the photograph] up like a leg of lamb' to the opposition, without Rosalind's permission, that prompts him to draw attention to her 'remarkable' identity. While Atwood advocates that the power of storytelling originates from revealing an unknown trauma to an audience complicit in its suppression, Ziegler avers that it is the characters within the narrative itself who attempt to augment the voices of the forgotten to provide rightful acknowledgement which has been erased from history.

Both writers posit that the influence of marginalised voices in subverting predetermined stories by telling their own is based on objectivity and the power of silence. Penelope questions the credibility of Homer's narrative by presenting 'another idea' of the purported version of events. This inquiry into the veracity of the preordained tale suggests that flaws within the established narrative are created by author subjectivity and biases, such as Homer's need for a metaphysical undertone with the 'one eyed Cyclops', and thus, instead, objectivity is valued. Therefore, Penelope's power to challenge the 'authority' of the oppressive and dubious Homeric tale stems from the fact that 'now [she's] dead, [she] knows everything'. While Penelope does claim to know 'more' in Hades, a great proportion of her influence lies in her silence. Like the 'oracles', Penelope recognises the authority of '[not] tell[ing] everything' to keep her audience 'coming back for more' out of a desire to learn the truth. In light of The Penelopiad, the compound of Penelope's knowledge and choice to withhold it demonstrates her power to challenge Homer's tale with her own series of events which is seemingly more accurate. In a similar fashion, Gosling acts as the most objective voice in Photograph 51 by presenting the 'facts' and timeframes of key turning points, such as 'the cold winter in January'. However, Gosling's seeming objectivity does not augment his voice but Rosalind's by holding his fellow male colleagues accountable of presenting the 'truth' than 'what [they] would like to see'. Such a contrast, Ziegler contends, underscores that marginalised voices, in environments where the dominant male voice is active, requires a fellow voice of the hegemony to offer objectivity to augment the forgotten voice.

While forgotten voices can wield power over a preordained sequence of events, both authors suggest this power is limited by the individual's own uncertainty of their narrative. Penelope is depicted as an unreliable narrator at times, questioning 'where was I?' and claiming she 'like[s] this version better'. The uncertainty of Penelope remaining focused and true to her narrative begins to undermine her all-knowing disposition and credible influence in revising Homer's tale. In Photograph 51, Wilkins' propensity to 'start over' until he 'get[s] it right' demonstrates how his own perfectionism and insecurities subvert his authorship of Rosalind's tale. Ziegler posits that it is others' subjectivity and uncertainty of story making which cast doubt on the authenticity of a forgotten character's tale, unlike Atwood who claims that the fault lies with the apprehensive marginalised voice itself.

Atwood and Ziegler present an insight into the influence of ostracised characters over their readership with their ability to elicit guilt and present a more objective narrative to the established version. Ziegler also places emphasis on the role of dominant male authors in propelling acknowledgement of marginalised individuals.