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## Maids: A Resurrection Of Forgotten Women

Isabel Catherine Bennett  
*Bard College*

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Maids: A Resurrection of Forgotten Women

A Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Arts of Bard College

by

Isabel Bennett

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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### MAIDS

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<i>Created by Isabel Bennett</i>	
<i>In collaboration with Emma Webster and Annie-Garrett Larsen</i>	

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## I. Why *Maids*?

History has a selective memory. Some get written and rewritten into the foundation of our cultural identities, and others get conveniently misplaced, forgotten, and lost in the cracks of our societal consciousness. I think Margaret Atwood would agree with me when I say that history, myth, and legend, prefer to remember and forgive men more easily than women. *MAIDS* was born from a desire to tell and to show, it was a task of remembering and making space. It was about remembering these women and pulling them out from the suffocating margins of the Odyssey. It was about giving space to women. It was about giving space to women on the stage of the LUMA Theater. It was never a question for any of us that we wanted to be in the festival and work exclusively with women. It was an instinctual need brought on by a desire for representation and a desire for opportunity. Our project was created in reaction to our experience and what we know of the experiences of our peers and friends who continue to wish that women had more space to be seen and to be heard. Even within our own theater department women encounter such obstacles. In the eight department shows I have witnessed there have been no female playwrights, few female directors, and most casts have been male-led even though the department is made predominantly of female students. We were proud to be a team of three female creatives and wanted to extend all the performance opportunities in our piece to women. Therefore, when our advisor Jorge questioned us as to why we were casting all women even though there were male roles we couldn't articulate an artistic justification. We sat in his office and stuttered and fumbled for an intelligent answer. We just knew with such vehement conviction that it was the right choice and none of us were willing to change that. If being the playwright taught me anything it was the value of killing your darlings, but in this case we were stubborn, and in the end Jorge conceded that we were right.

## II. The Discovery and Role Division

I stumbled upon Margaret Atwood's book *The Penelopiad* by accident in the incredibly poorly organized Drama section of the library. I can't even remember what I was looking for but I saw that title and zeroed in on it like a laser beam. Atwood has always been one of my favorite authors since I'm a huge fan of dystopia and science fiction. I love science fiction because it is not naturalism. Because the genre has to create new rules and new worlds, imagination is vital. This imagination allows for greater freedom than the setting of our natural world and the possibilities of that freedom are exciting to me. Atwood herself prefers the term "speculative fiction" for her work which she defines as "stories that take place on earth, and employ elements that already exist in some form."<sup>1</sup> *The Penelopiad* is a perfect example of speculative fiction. It is a novel that contemplates events and characters from the past and reinvents what they may have been experiencing. The fact that we have provable knowledge of the male experience in the *The Odyssey* and can only speculate as to the female experience is just another example of the inequality in our cultural memory. Speculative fiction makes room for and embraces a certain kind of plasticity because it is an exercise of the imagination. I believe this was important as it allowed Emma, Annie, and I to each be imaginative in our roles and the choices we got to make in design, writing, and direction. An example of how that creative license manifested was through the casting choices. Since we were only going to cast women we knew we would have to double cast the male roles which gave a fluidity to the characters. The six that were playing the maids and suitors, and I who was also playing Odysseus could visually morph from one

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<sup>1</sup> Kirtley, David, and Joseph Adams. *Margaret Atwood / Political Agendas (with Paolo Bacigalupi) Podcast 94*. Podcast audio. Geeks Guide To The Galaxy. MP3, 12:35. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://geeksguideshow.com/2013/09/18/ggg94-margaret-atwood/>

character and one gender to the next. The genre of our source material enabled a creative and innovative approach to characters that are already recognizable in our literary culture.

Because of my obsession with the genre, I was sure I would love the book. After having demolished it's pages in a single day I mentioned it to Emma and Annie and we all agreed it needed to be our senior project material. This needed to be staged. I was drawn to this book because it told me a story I had no idea needed to be told. I knew the name "Penelope" but I knew nothing about her suitors, the senseless death of her maids, and her role in bringing that about. The tone of the first chapter hooked me right away and I was struck by the way Penelope indicts her husband's and her own legacy:

"Many people have believed that his [Odysseus'] version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters [...] And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with."<sup>2</sup>

Penelope is not blameless and she's not a victim and I wanted to show how complicated her relationship with her maids is. She is the cousin of Helen of Troy, and while Helen is praised for her beauty, Penelope is revered for her intelligence and her strategy and so I found her treatment of the maids fascinating. I didn't understand how a person could have so much forethought and not anticipate the consequences of their actions. She does not see that by following her orders to sleep with the suitors, she is condemning them as guilty traitors to Odysseus who will murder them because of it. However, I suppose one should never assume that intelligence will lead to compassion.

After our source had been decided we turned to our roles. When we wrote our senior project proposal we had said that we would all be directors which was honestly a horrible idea

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Book Ltd., 2005), 2.

and I don't know why we didn't fix it earlier. Eventually it was decided that Emma would direct, Annie would design and do dramaturgy, and I would write and act (although I didn't agree to act until later). These roles perfectly fit our capabilities and talents but I feel as though becoming the playwright happened to me by default. None of us considered ourselves to be writers. One of our biggest trepidations was: how would we turn this book into a script? For Emma and Annie it was a decisive no, they were *not* going to write. I was terrified of the responsibility of writing but they felt my slight hesitation and took that as a sign that I was slightly more willing than they were, and so I became the writer. Someone had to do it and it may as well have been me. I suppose they had more faith in my writing ability than I did.

Before we left for the summer we each went through the book and picked out chapters that we were interested in. The final say was up to me as writer but for the most part we were in agreement. The book had several musical interludes and originally we all wanted to include those. However we discovered that while the songs might have been aesthetically pleasing, they didn't serve the story and would slow down the rhythm. Given that we only had twenty five minutes we cut them all out which helped give the play it's fast and urgent pace that lead more swiftly to the violent climax (plus we didn't have to worry about casting people who could sing). A major design component of the play, the sound, came about long before the script. One Wednesday evening we were sitting with Joanne Akalaitis and her friend Bruce Odland at Zocalo. Odland told an incredible story about a water tank in the middle of the Colorado desert that created out of this world music. Annie and I went back to our dorm to google it immediately and there we found such eerie, beautiful, and cosmic soundscapes. We both remarked, "This sounds like the underworld!" We showed Emma and the genius of the water tank sounds



couldn't be denied. Without evening having a script yet we knew that we wanted this to be the sound of the underworld where the maids and Penelope were stuck for eternity. We crossed our fingers to be placed first in the program so we could use it as pre-show music and set the tone for the audience. Luck was in our favor, we were the first show and we could extend the soundscape of the underworld for a full fifteen minutes before the play began. I found it incredibly helpful to have that design element chosen before the script was made as it put me in the world I wanted to create and gave me a feeling I could put words to. I often listened to the track "Lightyears" on repeat while writing to create the ambiance of the underworld.<sup>3</sup>

### III. Becoming The Playwright

*The Penelopiad* was written to tell the story of Penelope, but we also wanted to focus on her twelve maids. The parts of the book that we wanted to stage were those centered around the maids, the suitors, and Odysseus. We wanted to give the maids voices and names and allow for each actor to create their own character. If one reads *The Odyssey*, the disparity in importance between the maids and the suitors is blindingly obvious. There is almost an entire book dedicated to describing the gruesome and grueling deaths of the suitors. Pages stretch on detailing who they were and how they died. The maids are never named. All twelve of their deaths get a paragraph so brief and simple that it's easily missed:

"He [Odysseus] made a ship's cable fast to one of the bearing-posts that supported the roof of the domed room, and secured it all around the building, at a good height, lest any of the women's feet should touch the ground; and as thrushes or doves beat against a net that has been set for them in a thicket just as they were getting to their nest, and a terrible fate awaits them, even so did the women have to put their heads in nooses one after the

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<sup>3</sup> "Ray of Life, by Friends Of The Tank," tanksounds.bandcamp.com, last modified January 01 2012, <https://tanksounds.bandcamp.com/album/ray-of-life>.

other and die most miserably. Their feet moved convulsively for a while, but not for very long.”<sup>4</sup>

I was horrified by how unemotional and procedural this passage sounded. None of us couldn't believe the ease with which this unprovoked violence was swept under the rug. While the rest of *The Penelopiad* is beautiful and poignant we thought that this violence was particularly important to show as it has been so underrepresented. We resurrected this lost moment in *The Odyssey* to highlight the ruthless power of Odysseus and the severe injustice done to the maids.

I thought I would write the script over the summer, but my best efforts fell short and I didn't really begin until September. Luckily, I discovered I was a fast and furious writer. Annie, Emma and I live in the same apartment (it's a miracle we're still friends), and so we never needed to have formal meetings. Usually we'd be having dinner, or watching TV, or drinking gin cocktails and one of us would casually bring up an idea and we would talk about it. Many times a scene got written because we would agree on a change that needed to be made, then I would disappear to my room for ten or fifteen minutes and emerge with a draft for them to read. My writing process was like that of a sprint runner. I would work in short but intense bursts rather than focussing on the script for hours at a time. I would shut out everything for half an hour at most to produce a new scene and then I would put it out of my mind for a while and go again.

Through the process I learned about the dynamic of a playwright and a director. Because of our roles, Emma and I were more in synch during the writing process than I was with Annie. Any changes I made I would send to both Annie and Emma for their opinions, but it was often Emma's directorial eye that could give me more constructive critique. In turn, what I wrote

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<sup>4</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 453-54.

informed her vision of the staging and we fell into a comfortable symbiotic relationship while the script was being formed.

I struggled with my desire to be faithful to the original text and to make my own version of it and consequently the script didn't feel like mine for several months. I was stuck on the idea of adapting the book as it already existed, but it wasn't until I had all but severed my connection to Margaret Atwood and taken on the characters in my own imagination that I felt I was finally in charge. At first I was copying the style of the book and falling into a trap of exposition and long-winded monologues that sounded pretty but were stagnant and empty. Most of the lines were direct copies of Atwood's words but simply re-arranged. At the end of November I realized that Jorge was right (as he is about most things). He'd warned me against being in the department show that semester because it would divide my attention. I dismissed him at the time, but as soon as the show was over I realized how much I had been neglecting my own script. I find it's impossible to give one's full emotional, physical, and creative energy to more than one project at a time, and while I was involved in *These Young Men And Women* I was stuck in that psychological headspace. When I returned to the script with no distractions I understood that I had to stop thinking of this project as an adaptation of Margaret Atwood, but rather as something *inspired* by her. That way I could get rid of her lines and replace them with my own words. As I began to work on this I noticed an even bigger problem. I had barely included the suitors. Penelope is complicit in the maids' fate because she instructs them to sleep with suitors and uses her power to subject them to rape and abuse for her personal gain. The suitors needed to be turned into speaking characters in order to include this vital part of the maid's story. By this point I had put *The Penelopiad* aside, but in order to write the suitors I took some direct quotes

from the book that Penelope sites as “a few examples” of their language to create their characters: “First prize, a week in Penelope’s bed, second prize, two weeks in Penelope’s bed. Close your eyes and they’re all the same - just imagine she’s Helen, that’ll put bronze in your spear haha!”<sup>5</sup> From these words I went off on my own, basing the rest of their dialog on the disgusting feeling of those lines (although I kept those lines verbatim because they were just too perfectly sinister). With that inclusion the script took a major turn and right before winter break I came to rehearsals with a final draft. The read through of this new version took our cast by surprise. It now felt darker and more ominous, and I think several of them were nervous about the prospect of playing violent and abusive men. When we finished reading one of them turned to me and said: “Wow it’s really...um...different.”

“Trust me,” I replied, “It’s better this way.”

#### IV. An Actor’s Analysis Of Character

I originally thought I wasn’t going to act in this play. Acting has always been my focus and I thought I wanted the opportunity to be just an outside creator. Emma apparently had other ideas. She always knew she wanted to cast me as Penelope and was just waiting for me to realize that she was right. When auditions came around and we didn’t see anyone we liked for the role I gave in. I’m very happy I did, but it was much harder than I expected. The problem with being the playwright and an actor is knowing when you’re which. In rehearsals my brain was split down the middle by these two roles. When I was rehearsing a scene part of me would always be on high alert for the sound of the lines, trying to find the places that felt awkward, and archiving changes I wanted to make later. I felt a distance from the cast which I feel was appropriate and

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Book Ltd., 2005), 105.

useful given the alienation between Penelope and the maids. I was simultaneously talking to the maids and monitoring what they were saying, observing, commenting, and judging much like Penelope would do. As much as I was connected and bonded to the cast I was isolated by this division. Being the only senior in the cast and also one of the project heads further complicated my role as a cast member and separated me from them. I had to balance the more objective analytical work of the playwright with the subjective emotional work of the actor. It was quite frankly, exhausting. I often left rehearsals feeling frustrated and annoyed with myself because I felt I was doing a terrible job as an actor. I felt like I couldn't be in the scene with the maids and could never be just one of the cast members because of the creative responsibility I had over them. I even apologized to Emma that I seemed to be lackluster in rehearsals, but in my words: "I'm sorry I'm sucking. I promise I'll get better." With her true directorial confidence she never doubted me (or at least never let it show). I suppose it was fitting that I felt so removed because however much Penelope may have relied upon her maids, she was never their equal, and their experiences aren't the same. I began thinking about the disparities between them that must be examined in order to understand their fraught relationship.

It would be completely irresponsible to ignore the dynamic of class difference between Penelope and the maids. The perspective of Penelope in the book paints her as a woman oppressed by the patriarchy and the gendered inequalities of our historical memory. While this is true, it is crucial to recognize the power that she does have over the maids who are not only oppressed because of gender but also because of class. The maids are poor and uneducated and Penelope is the opposite, therefore she holds a significant power over them. To ignore this would be to, as Audre Lorde states, create a "pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the

word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.”<sup>6</sup> According to Lorde, this is common mistake of white women within the women’s movement. Emma, Annie, and I were all very aware of the fact that we were three white women making a play based on a book by a white woman, describing the experience of a white woman, and casting almost all white women in the roles of the maids regardless of what their races may have been. I find Lorde’s arguments all the more relevant because of this since the criticisms of white feminism pertain directly to my experience and choices within our project, particularly regarding Penelope’s character. Lorde writes that within a patriarchal power system “white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power.”<sup>7</sup> This is exactly what Penelope does. She is married to Odysseus and believes that she can share in his power, however the way she wields that power is just as oppressive to her maids as perhaps Odysseus would have been. She is acting with the pretense that she shares his authority as head of the household. While he is gone she is sharing in his socio-economic power but she is never Odysseus’ equal. Because she is a woman, she is still a goal and an object and does not have total authority. The suitors recognize this and that is why she can’t get rid of them. She takes advantage of the maids in order to save herself but in doing so she perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

The cognitive dissonance necessary to behave like one’s own oppressor is remarkable, but it’s a common phenomenon. Penelope’s own hypocrisy is reminiscent of our present moment, particularly of how fifty three percent of white women voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. I remember being horrified when I learnt this but it made sense to me when we

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<sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 2007), 116.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 118.

discussed it with Jorge. He spoke about how oppressed people will often try to be close to power in the hopes that some of it will rub off them. There is a seductive promise of power that comes with aligning oneself to the most powerful. This false promise might make people sacrifice their morality, or at least entertain some strong delusions so that they don't realize they are colluding with their oppressor. Investigating the mystery of collusion added a whole new layer to my understanding of Penelope and enriched my exploration of her in the rehearsal room. It also informed my portrayal of Odysseus. I now knew that he had to be the most dominating of any person on the stage. He had to be so formidable and so dangerous that people could sympathize with Penelope's choice to stand with him rather than against him.

#### V. A Realization

While it was important to have one clear authority in rehearsals, there were huge benefits to having two extra sets of eyes present. Early in February we were rehearsing the scene between the maids and the suitors, Emma was up with the cast giving notes, and Annie and I were sitting and observing. We both felt that something was wrong. The scene felt off. I crept over to Annie and whispered to her: "Is this too funny?" She agreed with me and it hit us that we had been rehearsing this scene with entirely the wrong tone all along. The suitors have to be ominous, scary, and oppressive, but as it stood they were goofy, over-exaggerated caricatures of frat boys. I was comfortable watching them, and that was bad. To our dismay, we had accidentally played directly into the Homeric interpretation of the suitors. *The Odyssey* doesn't portray the threatening nature of the suitors that we wanted. A book of analysis by Nancy Felson-Rubin describes Homer's characterization of the suitors: "Homer lessens the suitors' automatic blameworthiness by diverse ploys. First, he paints them as immature and unschooled,

as well as intrinsically flawed. He individualizes them, so that some seem more salvageable and less reprehensible than others.”<sup>8</sup> The suitors are definitely not blameless in our retelling and so anything that made them somehow sympathetic or endearing was detrimental to the point of our piece and would lessen the impact of the maids’ deaths. In order for the scene to work and to drive home the idea that what Penelope made them do was horrible, the suitors had to be scary. We talked to Emma about this and we all decided we had to spend extra time working only on that scene.

Emma did character work with the actors and the scene improved greatly. The cast members finally discovered the weight of the scene. The maids were raped by the suitors but there’s nothing they could do because they were ordered to make themselves vulnerable and give up all agency in order to procure information for Penelope. Those rehearsals were hard work for our cast as at times it was a triggering experience for them. This scene was another reason we didn’t want any men in the cast. It made it bearable for the women to play this scene and they would not have been comfortable or felt as safe if it wasn’t an all female cast.

While the tonal shift of the suitors improved and their scene with the maids was now properly creepy, I still felt odd in the scene between Penelope and the suitors. Perhaps it was because I am so much taller than all of them and just based on that visual difference they had a hard time making me feel threatened. This difference was so apparent that when I came on stage during a performance one audience member audibly said: “Wow. She’s tall.” I was worried that the suitors and I looked ridiculous, that we looked unbelievable. Those fears weren’t alleviated until the performance when we were visited by a friend of Emma’s. She shared her impression

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Felson-Rubin. *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.



that it didn't matter that the suitors weren't so scary because they are secondary to Odysseus who comes in as the biggest, strongest, tallest, and most intimidating male force. The comparison to the suitors makes Odysseus all the more scary. I was pleased to hear this as Odysseus arrival and the maids' death is the climax of the play and so it made sense that his was the scariest presence.

## VI. Self-Conscious Performance

The layers of the who's playing who were often hard to untangle. Setting the play in the underworld made it intrinsically meta-theatrical. Every character already knows their fate and they are aware that their actions are just a performance. The emotions they experience are real but aren't happening in real time with the action. When Penelope is with the suitors she feels less of a threat because she knows she is in a moment of reenactment and that it's really the maids playing them. The moment when Penelope is most afraid is in the final scene during the confrontation with the maids. In this scene the maids are no longer performing and everything they feel is in real time, that is why they are able to affect Penelope and force her to listen to them. She is afraid of her guilt, afraid of what she has done, and she can only see the wrongs done to her.

The maids on the other hand are exhausted. Since they've all been dead for hundreds of years, we imagined that they've tried to explain to Penelope before, they've tried to make her see what she did was wrong and to acknowledge that, they've tried to educate her. Audre Lorde raises a similar issue of the burden of educating:

“It is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining

ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.”<sup>9</sup>

The maids waste all their energy on attempting to educate Penelope. The interesting twist in this case is that it is women educating a woman, not a man, as to how she has oppressed them. Their relationship is not as black and white as male vs. female and that adds to the heartbreak of the maids. Penelope should be able to understand, eventually she does, but it takes such a toll on her and the maids and in the end nothing is resolved. It’s too late for them to redefine themselves and construct a future because they are dead, but in retelling their stories in this project we are attempting to help that redefinition. If their experience can become general knowledge then perhaps a new future can be constructed for them.

We hoped that this final scene would be the emotional climax of the play. This took many rehearsals to get right and I think part of that struggle was due to the confusing nature of the layered timelines and double-cast characters. During the re-enactment (which is the majority of the play) the maids are acting past versions of themselves and so they are at all times aware of their own performance. I received many questions about whether or not they were performing in a certain moment or experiencing the emotions for the first time. While I was writing I didn’t even think about what a challenge that would be but as soon as I saw it from an actor’s perspective I realized I’d set quite a hard task. While the maids are acting as the suitors they are also commenting on them. They portray them as empty-headed and abusive in order to indict them through performance. However while they are acting as their past selves they are not doing so with any aim at commentary, they are simply showing their experience. This challenge took

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<sup>9</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 2007), 114-115.

many rehearsals and explanations to find the balance, but our cast were truly dedicated to figuring out their characters and worked meticulously to untangle all these intricacies.

#### VII. “Who Run The World? Maids!”

I have never felt so indebted and connected to a cast then I do to the twelve women we worked with. It was particularly meaningful for me that our cast was made up of freshman and sophomores (with the exception of myself and one other). I remember how hard it was to feel any sense of a theater community as a freshman. This sentiment is shared by many here and I’m glad that our senior project was something that gave our cast a sense of belonging and formed so many lasting friendships. Most of them had little or no experience being part of a show at Bard and I have so much sympathy for that early time of college, trying to making connections and find opportunities. If theater is a service then I believe that our project was a service to our cast and I am so humbled by that. I make it a point to never cry in public (or I do at my own mortification), but before our Friday night performance I was driven close to tears by our wonderful cast. Before every rehearsal we always did a “check-in” where we’d go around and all share how we were doing or anything relevant in our lives we needed to talk about. We continued this before every show and on Friday night we did our check-in in the greenroom smushed on couches and against each other. As we went around there was an outpouring of appreciation and love from all the cast members. They all expressed gratitude that we had created a powerful community where they all felt respected, loved, safe, and proud of what they were a part of. Emma, Annie, and I exchanged incredulous glances. Did we really make this happen? We couldn’t believe they liked it so much. At the cast party that weekend a group of them were dancing and singing along to Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” but switched the words until

the whole room was filled with the chant: “Who run the world? Maids!” As I danced along to their rallying cry I remember thinking that these women could literally take over the world.

Endings are difficult. It was difficult ending the show and disbanding our cast, it was difficult to end the script, and it’s difficult to end this paper. I feel a pressure to wrap everything up, to conclude neatly and solve all problems, but that would be impossible. Endings aren’t always neat and questions aren’t always answered. However I believe that given what our project was questioning and responding to, we succeed in making our own small impact. We created the opportunities we desired and forged our own little community, and we successfully brought attention to characters that people know little or nothing about. Storytelling is a strategy for teaching, and we were able to teach people with this project. However when I think about the source of this project I know that it has no ending. The erasure of women will continue. Abuse and violence against women will continue. I struggled to find an appropriate ending for the script but decided that it couldn’t be that simple. Neither Penelope nor the maids know how to make things right, they don’t have the answers. The maids ask Penelope: “But we existed, what else could we do?” to which Penelope can only reply “I don’t know.”<sup>10</sup> Sometimes simply existing is all one can do, and in that case how do you protect yourself and make yourself heard? How do you even begin to fix injustice? There is no last word and no final victory in the play because nothing was solved. We haven’t solved anything. We don’t pretend to know the answers and left it open ended so that people wouldn’t mistake our intentions as moralistic or condescending. The story of Penelope and the maids is just one of so many similar stories and many of them may never be written. This isn’t to say that we should not be striving. I believe that every resistance

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<sup>10</sup> Isabel Bennett. *Maids* (Bard College), 40.

and every challenge to the patriarchy will create a little more space, a little more room to breathe and exist. The story we told may only be one but I hope it will make way for another.

**MAIDS**

a play by

Isabel Bennett

inspired by “The Penelopiad” by Margaret Atwood

**Characters:**

PENELOPE / ODYSSEUS

MINERVA

ISIDORA

EVANIA

HELENA

ALESSANDRA

LUCIA

MELANTHE / MORIS

LYSANDRA / AMBROSIO

ALTHEA / KYROS

ANDRINA / IGNATIOS

DELIA / ARSENIO

SOPHIA / ANTINOUS

**Setting:**

The Underworld.

Scene 1.

[“*Asphodel Theme*” plays.]

SOPHIA

Hello! Welcome to the Underworld.

ALTHEA

Hi! It sucks! I don't know if you know this, but being dead is boring.

LYSANDRA

Murdered.

ALTHEA

Ok yeah. We were murdered. Whatever.

EVANIA

And now we're stuck down here forever. Literally for-e-ver.

MELANTHE

Wanna know how we got here?

SOPHIA

We'll tell you. Are you ready? Does everyone have their lines?

ISIDORA

I'll go get Penelope.

DELIA

Noooooo. Do we have to? I don't wanna.

HELENA

Oh, come on. Get onstage.

DELIA

I'm tired. And this is boring. We've done it like SO many times.

MINERVA

Yeah but we've got an audience now. Come on, this is embarrassing.

DELIA

Fiiiiiiiiine.

SOPHIA

Our scene is Ithaca, a palace. The time is...unimportant.

*[ Delia reluctantly comes onstage. Light Shift. There are three groups onstage. Lights come up on the first group. ]*



Scene 2.

LYSANDRA

Don't worry, you'll settle in fast, just a few things to remember.

ANDRINA

Odysseus has been gone for years, so his wife Penelope runs the place

MELANTHE

By herself?

SOPHIA

She has us. Ladies don't clean. But she's alright for a lady.

LYSANDRA

Very touchy about her husband.

SOPHIA

So don't mention how he might be dead, or unfaithful, or whatever you've heard. Just don't mention Odysseus at all.

ANDRINA

And don't be surprised if she starts crying.

LYSANDRA

She's a downer.

ANDRINA

We have to keep the house ready in case he comes home. Cellars fully stocked, beds made, etc.

MELANTHE

Got it.

LYSANDRA

Oh and one more thing, since Odysseus is gone we've been getting some visitors.

SOPHIA

A bunch of young lords have been hanging around, trying to get in Penelope's pants. They wanna get their hands on her money.

MELANTHE

But she's still married?

ANDRINA

They're assuming Odysseus is dead, they're probably right.

MELANTHE

What're they like? Are they...nice?

SOPHIA

Nice! [*laughs*] That's cute.

MELANTHE

Sorry I didn't...I mean...How do I....Do we talk to them?

LYSANDRA

Not unless you're told. Take orders from Penelope. Not them.

SOPHIA

They're persistent little fuckers. Like cockroaches.

ANDRINA

And they drink too much.

SOPHIA

But you'll get the hang of it. Stick with us.

*[lights dim and come up on the next group of three Maids. The first four maids exit.]*

HELENA

Did you hear about the cyclops?

ALTHEA

Yes! I heard he stabbed it in the eye!

LUCIA

And the sea monsters? They say he survived two of them. Odysseus is one lucky bastard.

HELENA

I dunno... The war ended ages ago and he still isn't home. And *two* sea monsters? Seems kinda excessive.

ALTHEA

I guess. It's probably all bullshit anyway.

HELENA

Penelope buys it.

ALTHEA

The last messenger said Odysseus had sex with Calypso. I thought Penelope would stab him.

LUCIA

I can't believe she's still waiting for him.

HELENA

Ugh. We *always* talk about Odysseus. Isn't there any other news?

ALTHEA

He's all anyone else wants to talk about. It does get old.

LUCIA

Very. [*pause*] Oh wait just one more though. Trust me this one's actually funny. Did you hear about the pigs?!

HELENA

Pigs?

LUCIA

Apparently his ship stopped on some island and they got kidnapped by a sorceress who turned them all into pigs!

ALTHEA

Where'd you hear that?

LUCIA

I don't know. Around.

ALTHEA

I hope that's true. What fucking idiots.

*[The three maids exit and the lights shift again to Penelope and the other five maids.]*

PENELOPE

Were there any messengers today?

ISIDORA

No, my lady.

PENELOPE

Still no news?

EVANIA

Nothing, my lady.

MINERVA

I'm sure he's alive. He's a good fighter.

ALESSANDRA

Probably on his way home right now.

PENELOPE

The war's over! They won! What's taking so long? Perhaps the / rumors...

ISIDORA

*[quickly]*  
/ Don't listen to gossip.

EVANIA

I'm sure he's not really fighting monsters.

MINERVA

Or seducing goddesses like everyone says.

ISIDORA

He would never be unfaithful.

PENELOPE

Hmmm...after ten years I have my doubts.

ALESSANDRA

Let's think about something else.

ISIDORA

Take your mind off your husband and focus on the present.

PENELOPE

*[pause]*  
Yes, the present. Are my suitors here?

EVANIA

Yes, my lady.

PENELOPE

You'd think they would have found something better to do by now.

MINERVA

They say they won't leave unless you marry one of them.

DELIA

*[under her breath]*

Or fuck one of them.

PENELOPE

I can't avoid them forever, but the longer I can fend them off the better. *[pause]* I've got a task for you. All of you.

ISIDORA

Yes, my lady?

PENELOPE

I need you to buy us some time. If I keep them waiting around I'm afraid they might get violent.

MINERVA

They're probably harmless.

PENELOPE

I won't risk it. You must keep them busy and keep an eye on them for me. Make sure they're happy.

DELIA

Happy?

PENELOPE

You know, satisfied.

*[The Maids give her blank looks]*

You have certain...talents that will please them.

*[she gestures vaguely at their bodies. The Maids hesitate.]*

You're the only people I trust.

ISIDORA

Yes, my lady.

PENELOPE

All right. Time to meet my fans.

[*Penelope and Maids exit.*]

Scene 3.

[*Enter Suitors.*]

IGNATIOS

Alright let's make a bet. First one to get some will win / ...

AMBROSIO

/ I'll put money on my chances with Penelope!

IGNATIOS

One hundred says I'm first in her bed.

MORIS

It doesn't matter who she sleeps with idiot! It's who she *marries*.

ANTINOUS

Fuck her all you want, then *I'll* marry her and be richer than all you twatwaffles.

KYROS

Two hundred says I beat you to it!

ANTINOUS

You're on, asshole.

[*Enter Penelope and Maids*]

PENELOPE

Gentlemen. I see you've made yourselves at home.

ARSENIO

Penelope! My lady, the verse of great Apollo himself is unworthy to sing your beauty. There is more radiance in one of your eyes than...than in...um..

[*suitors laugh at him and push him aside*]

AMBROSIO

Nice try moron.

PENELOPE

I'm flattered.

MORIS

My lady, we were just saying how worried we are. And anxious for your safety with Odysseus away.

PENELOPE

Anxious, huh?

ARSENIO

So terrible that he left you alone, with no one to defend you and your fortune.

ANTINOUS

With no one to keep you warm.

PENELOPE

I'm surviving, thank you. My husband will be home soon.

KYROS

I doubt it.

IGNATIOS

What are the odds?

ARSENIO

He's drowned for sure.

ANTINOUS

Or starved to death.

MORIS

Or beheaded by Trojans!

ARSENIO

Tossed on Poseidon's boiling sea, surely no mortal could withstand the monstrous trials of the divine....

AMBROSIO

Shut up!

PENELOPE

I hear news. Stories. He's not / ...

ANTINOUS

/ Why would he come back?

KYROS

If he's stupid enough to leave his wife and home then he's too dumb to steer a ship.

ISIDORA

*[whispers to Penelope]*

You see, my lady? They're idiots.

AMBROSIO

Silence! We're talking.

ANTINOUS

Bring us wine and something to eat! We've come with large appetites.

*[Laughter. The Maids hesitate and look to Penelope who signals them to do as they're told. Maids exit.]*

AMBROSIO

Penelope, Odysseus is gone. We know it, and you know it.

ARSENIO

You wanna live without a husband?

PENELOPE

Would you be his replacement?

ARSENIO

Of course! You have a lovely home. It should be filled with children.

IGNATIOS

Don't your sheets feel cold? Your bed must be so large and empty.

PENELOPE

I'm old enough to be your mother.

ANTINOUS

*[aside]*



I bet she could still squeeze out one or two little brats.

PENELOPE

Finally, an honest opinion.

ANTINOUS

You want honest? Alright. No more sweet talk “my lady.”

KYROS

We’re not leaving. Not until one of us is your husband. We’ve got a bet going and someone has to win.

MORIS

Do you think we’d come all this way to go home empty-handed?

PENELOPE

I was hoping you would.

ARSENIO

Well, that’s not very hospitable. You have so much to offer. And if you refuse to give, we will take it.

ANTINOUS

We’re losing our patience, Penelope. We won’t be this nice for long.

*[Maids reenter with food, wine, tablecloth. The Suitors fall upon the food.]*

IGNATIOS

Finally! Let me at it. I’m starved.

MORIS

Pass the wine.

AMBROSIO

Get it yourself dickhead.

*[The Suitors become frenzied over the food and drink. The Maids stand back with Penelope and survey. Penelope whispers into their ears and sneaks away.]*

EVANIA

Hey hotstuff!

ARSENIO  
You still here? We need more.

*[waving the wine bottle at her]*

EVANIA  
Don't worry we have plenty.

ARSENIO  
*[with mouthful]*  
Where's Penelope? I was just getting somewhere.

AMBROSIO  
Liar! She barely looked at you.

ARSENIO  
Not true!

AMBROSIO  
No one wants to look at your nasty face.

KYROS  
A face not even a mother could love.

ANTINOUS  
Shut up, you son-of-a-bitch!

LUCIA  
Drinking makes Penelope tired, she needs to sleep.

ISIDORA  
Give her time to grieve her husband. Then she promises she'll marry one of you.

AMBROSIO  
Which one?

HELENA  
We don't know. You'll have to win her over.

EVANIA  
But that can wait. In the meantime we're here to keep you company...if you like..

ISIDORA  
I'm sure we could provide entertainment.

ALESSANDRA

If you tell us your plans to steal Penelope. We could advise you, get you on her good side.

*[Suitors confer with each other]*

ARSENIO

Why not? She's not going anywhere. Let's have fun.

MORIS

Some of them aren't very pretty.

IGNATIUS

Close your eyes! Then they're all the same.

ANTINOUS

If you get an ugly one just imagine she's Helen of Troy. That'll put bronze in your spear!

*[Returning to maids.]*

ANTINOUS

Well isn't that sweet of you. We'll take your offer.

LUCIA

Wonderful.

MINERVA

We're so glad you accept.

ISIDORA

What an honor.

Scene 4.

*[Maids and Suitors come together and end up lying in pairs around the stage. Lights shift and Penelope enters. She goes to one of the Maids and wakes them up. The others slowly wake up and join when they hear talking. Suitors stay asleep.]*

PENELOPE

Well? How was it?

LUCIA

*[yawning]*

Fine, my lady.

PENELOPE

Did you find anything useful? They're getting impatient. Should I be worried?

LUCIA

They're not leaving. But we said you were in mourning, so that should buy you some time.

EVANIA

Do you wanna hear what they say, my lady?

*[Penelope nods]*

ALESSANDRA

They say: "It's been years. Fucking get over it already."

MINERVA

"What a tease. I should just grab the bitch and make off with her."

ISIDORA

And so on.

PENELOPE

Well at least they're distracted for now. Hopefully you can keep them that way till Odysseus comes home.

ISIDORA

We live to serve.

PENELOPE

Yes... I mean... um... thank you.

ALESSANDRA

It was easy enough.

MINERVA

They were wary at first but they came around.

ISIDORA

They think sleeping with us is like stealing from Odysseus himself.

EVANIA

And that got them very enthusiastic.

LUCIA

[*to another Maid*] Imagine how excited they'd be if they actually got Penelope.

HELENA

[*laughing*]

They'd literally explode!

PENELOPE

Stop that. You'll wake them. Clean this mess up and keep an eye on them. I need to rest.

[*Penelope exits. Maids start cleaning.*]

HELENA

Oh she needs to rest, does she?

EVANIA

What the hell did she do?

ALESSANDRA

*I'd* like to lie down. On my own.

[*MINERVA and EVANIA exit with the tablecloth, food, etc.*]

ISIDORA

Well you know what they say, we'll sleep when we're dead.

[*Enter Maids speaking in loud whispers*]

MINERVA

Oh my god oh my god oh my god!

ISIDORA

What? What happened?

EVANIA

He's here, he's here! *He* is here.

ALESSANDRA

Wait. You can't mean...

EVANIA

Odysseus!!

HELENA

Shut up! Seriously?!

MINERVA

We just saw him with Penelope. He came in disguised as a beggar probably just to mess with her. You shoulda seen her face!

ISIDORA

Oh shit! *[pause]* Should we warn our friends?

EVANIA

Hell yes.

*[The Maids go to the Suitors and gently touch their faces to wake them up.]*

MINERVA

Rise and shine, hot stuff.

LUCIA

Did you sleep well?

ARSENIO

*[groggy and probably hung over]*  
Hmmm what? Dammit woman lemme sleep.

ALESSANDRA

I'm afraid we can't do that.

EVANIA

We have a wonderful surprise for you.

ISIDORA

A special guest.

ANTINOUS

What are you talking about? Is it Penelope?

HELENA

No. But someone's here.

MORIS

Who?

MAIDS (ALL)

*[Standing up and yelling triumphantly]*

Odysseus!

*[The Suitors jump up and panic. The Maids howl with laughter as they scramble to exit.]*

ANTINOUS

What the fuck?! He's dead! He should be fucking dead!

KYROS

Wasted my time with whores and no prize to show for it.

MORIS

We could challenge him!

AMBROSIO

He's a war hero dumbass. Fight him if you want but you'll die.

ANTINOUS

I'm getting the fuck out of here.

ARSENIO

With nothing?!

ANTINOUS

We'll leave with our lives if we're lucky

IGNATIOS

Outta my way!!!

Scene 5.

*[The Suitors scramble over each other as they exit. The Maids stand, unsure of what to do as offstage they hear chaotic noise, sounds of the Suitors' death, then silence. Odysseus enters slowly with blood on him and trailing behind him in his clothes.]*

ODYSSEUS

What a homecoming!

I was hoping for a party rather than a slaughter but oh well.

Ladies, I'm afraid I've left a bloody mess out there. Go clean it up, would you.

*[The Maids exit with MINERVA the last to leave. Before she can go ODYSSEUS grabs her and pulls her back.]*

Not you. You stay with me. I wanna catch up and see what I've missed around here. Have you been helping my wife while I was gone?

MINERVA

Yes, my lord.

ODYSSEUS

Good good. And what about those dead young men? Were they friends of yours?

MINERVA

Not friends, my lord. They weren't welcome.

ODYSSEUS

Oh but they were. They had quite a welcome so I'm told. You gave them my wine, my beds, you even gave them yourselves.

MINERVA

That was Penelope's orders, we / didn't...

ODYSSEUS

/Don't blame someone else. Take responsibility. You let them in, you slept with them didn't you?

MINERVA

It wasn't.../

ODYSSEUS

/Didn't you!

MINERVA

Yes my lord.



*[ODYSSEUS lunges at MINERVA and chokes her. The other eleven MAIDS enter. ODYSSEUS kills the MAIDS. The lights shift and "Asphodel theme" plays again. Enter Maids.]*

Scene 6.

MELANTHE

So yeah. That's it. That's how we got here.

LYSANDRA

Penelope's down here too now. But she got a nice death, old age. Lucky.

*[Enter Penelope crossing the stage. Trying to avoid the Maids. The Maids share a conspiratorial look and start to follow and surround Penelope. They corner her.]*

MELANTHE

Hello.

PENELOPE

What? What do you want?

EVANIA

Oh nothing. Good maids don't want things.

PENELOPE

Look, I did what you wanted. I went along with your little reenactment now just leave me alone!

ISIDORA

We want you to remember exactly what happened. We wanted to set the story straight so there's no confusions later.

PENELOPE

I told you, I was asleep! I passed out when I saw the bodies and all the blood. I was unconscious. I didn't know he would do that, I didn't know, I swear I didn't.

SOPHIA

After all we did for you, you did nothing for us.

MINERVA

You don't seem sorry. You slept with him the night he murdered us.

PENELOPE

Of course I did. He was my husband and I still loved him.

SOPHIA

Oh yes, you loved him.

PENELOPE

He feels remorse, I'm sure of it, but I can't talk to him because he won't stay. He has to keep being reborn just to get away from you haunting him. You're the reason he can't stay with me.

MAIDS (ALL)

You're the reason we're dead!

PENELOPE

We're all dead now! What does it matter?

ALTHEA

*We* were murdered. *We* were forgotten. But Odysseus is remembered, he's fine.

DELIA

Even your dumb suitors are more famous than we are!

PENELOPE

You want fame?

DELIA

We want to exist! We want to be myths and legends.

HELENA

We want to be hot gossip!

LUCIA

We want to be general knowledge!

ALESSANDRA

We want a fucking encyclopedia page!

PENELOPE

I don't know how to help you.

MAIDS (ALL)

Not good enough!

PENELOPE

Please, leave me alone.

MINERVA

Why did *we* die? We were just discarded. You didn't even bury us.

ISIDORA

After what you made us do you owe us at least that.

PENELOPE

I couldn't.

ISIDORA

Why not?

PENELOPE

I...I don't know.

ALESSANDRA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

I was afraid...

LUCIA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

I didn't want to look at the bodies.

HELENA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

*Your* bodies.

MINERVA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

He would've stopped me.

MAID(S)

Not good enough.

SOPHIA

WHAT?!

PENELOPE  
I just couldn't.

SOPHIA  
That doesn't matter.

EVANIA  
*He* doesn't matter.

MELANTHE  
This isn't about him.

ALTHEA  
Everything is always about him!

DELIA  
*We* were MURDERED.

SOPHIA  
And you got to live.

ISIDORA  
We just want to know why.

ANDRINA  
We want people to ask why.

PENELOPE  
What for?

LYSANDRA  
Because we were real. And now we're not.

DELIA  
We didn't slay monsters. We didn't topple cities.

MINERVA  
But we existed. What else could we do?

PENELOPE  
I... [*She stutters. The maids lose their patience, dismiss her, and exit. She turns, confused and abandoned.*] ....I don't know.

**End of Play**

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