Maids: A Retelling of a Retelling of "The Odyssey"

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MAIDS:
A Retelling of a Retelling of *The Odyssey*

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

by
Emma Katharine Webster

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2017
we had no voice
we had no name
we had no choice
we had one face

-“Envoi”, *The Penelopiad*

Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they
don’t die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody
themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They
speak in new languages, they take on other meanings.

- *The Myths and Me*
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This production, first and foremost, is about forgotten women. This was not something in the front of my mind for most of the process. It only really became a conscious thought when we returned from winter break, and really got down to rehearsing. It’s fairly clear that one of the themes of this show, as well as the book it’s based on, is that history forgets people, in this case women. It forgets their stories, it forgets their deeds, it forgets their existence. Such matters are not of consequence in the history of the world, because of who writes that history. This happens on a smaller scale as well. Creating this show in the atmosphere that we did had a great impact on why we chose this topic. Or rather, why the topic chose us.

The department from which we are graduating has the same problem that I talk about above, that of forgetting or disregarding women. I’ll just give a few examples. To begin with, the department shows over my past four years here have mostly been showcasing the male talent that we have in the department. This is astounding because we have so much more female talent. By that I mean that there are simply more women in the department than men, and therefor, more talent available. And despite this fact, each semester there has been about one or two parts available for a woman in which the character speaks or has any sort of storyline. There is only one instance in the four years I’ve been here that a group of women were onstage and speaking without a man present. And in that moment, each one’s words were indistinguishable from the others. It’s even beyond utilizing the female performers in the department: not a single one of the department shows in the last four years was written by a woman, and only two were directed by women. This is all to say that our senior project was a response to these disparities in the department, and a miniscule filling of the void. A cast of thirteen women, written, designed, and directed by women.
I. We’re Starting A Moon Cult

This all started with Margaret Atwood’s book, *The Penelopiad*. As to how exactly we got there, I don’t really know. It kind of just happened. Before that, we were playing around with the idea of mythology or folk tales, so when Isabel found this, it fit in rather well. We knew from the outset that we wanted to write a play instead of devising, but we also knew that none of us wanted to be the one to write the play. We decided before the summer that Isabel would write it, mostly because she was the least loath to the idea (and also because I knew that she would be good at it), and that when it actually came to doing the show, all three of us would direct, with Annie and myself doing something else as well, like dramaturgy and design. Why no one told us what a stupid idea this was I have no clue. When we got back from summer break, there were no new developments on the whole three-people-directing-a-twenty-minute-piece thing. As I told more people about our roles, and every person winced and said “Do you really think that’ll work?”, it became rather obvious that we had to think a little harder. We came to the conclusion that Isabel would be the writer, Annie the dramaturg/designer, and myself the director. If I reflect on how those roles worked out for everyone, I would say fairly well. It was actually a very pleasant experience to work in tandem with a playwright, especially since I think we coordinated so well. Being able to bounce ideas off of each other was helpful for both of us. Working on a new script was more enjoyable than I expected it to be as the director. Having some sort of say into what would be happening onstage, and not just how it happened gave me a deeper understanding into what we would be doing. It also meant that I didn’t have a single part of the
script that I needed to scrutinize for meaning. But that came later. Before a single word had been written, we had to decide what exactly the show would look like, specifically the cast.

It was never really a discussion that the cast would be twelve women playing the maids, and a thirteenth playing Penelope. The second that we started considering *The Penelopiad* as a source to base a piece of theatre off of, and maybe even before we found it, the gut instinct was to have an all female cast if we could. And I can’t really say that having the actors play the suitors as well as the maids was a discussion either. It was certainly more an idea than an instinct, but it felt like a natural choice for the piece. I forget at what point this happened, but sometime right before auditions Jorge questioned our choice to have the women play the suitors as well as the maids. I think his specific worry was that we were having them play men for no reason other than aesthetics, and he wasn’t exactly wrong at the time. We didn’t have any answer to his question of why we were doing it. For myself, I had literally zero interest in directing any men for several reasons, the most of which was that I had just done it the semester before and performing a lobotomy on myself would have been easier and less painful. There was also the more practical concern that we wouldn’t be able to find six men that were at once talented and pleasant to work with. It was so much already a part of the DNA of this project, however, that I completely disregarded this specific comment, and had forgotten that it happened until it was brought up after Jorge watched a rehearsal. Thank goodness, it was brought up because he was telling us that he now understood our choice to cast only women and have them play men. Even more than that, it made sense. I had always thought so.

When it actually came to casting, finding thirteen women was a rather formidable task, despite the pool of female talent that exists in and outside of the department. We ended up
casting twelve women to play the maids, all except one being a freshman or sophomore. As for Penelope, well… I wanted her to be tall, so that became Isabel’s other, less official, role in this project. In the back of my mind when we started this project, it had already occurred to me that Isabel should play her, if only because the emotional weight that Penelope had was more subtle than the maids, and therefore more difficult to perform. Completely by accident, the group of twelve were rather homogenous: all similar height, all brunette, all average build. Mostly white, all cis. And of course, the three of us are also cis and white. So already, not off to a good start on diversity from just a statistical standpoint. That is not to say that this is a show that requires this sort of cast. Any single one of the characters could be played by a person of any race, and could be played by cis or trans women, as well as female-bodied people not conforming to binary gender. Although I do have to say that I enjoyed the similar heights, especially because Isabel towered above them so much. But with this project, we were conscious the whole time about having it not be “white feminism”. It’s not, nor should it ever be, just about or for white women. It is meant for anyone who’s story has been left behind, whoever’s story has been crushed in the archives of the world.

It was also important to me to have a cast that knew each other to some extent, and I wanted to know them as well. Out of the twelve, I’d only known one of them before the auditions, and with a cast that big, it’s not like we’d be having a lot of one on one time. They were a chorus in many respects, but with the good fortune to be in a play about the chorus. It’s a strange dynamic; I wanted them to feel that they were all needed as individuals, and to create characters for themselves, but they also needed to appear as a collective force onstage. When the script was being rewritten, having their thoughts on their characters from viewpoints came into
the way that I looked at what was being written, although I don’t know if I can say the same for Isabel. The way it was written was just lines, not characters assigned to lines except for when it came to Penelope. I ended up being the one assigning the lines, mostly because I was also the one that had come up with their names, and I felt I could make it more interesting for the cast if they had lines or dynamics with other characters that worked with what they’d discovered in viewpoints. The names they were given were arbitrary, since not once were they used in a line, but this was part of them being individuals and not just “the maids” or “the suitors”.

I would like to say now, although it seems a strange place to say it at the beginning, that this was by far the most incredible cast I have ever been involved with. My goal of having the cast know each other, and for me to know them, came to be even better than I had hoped. The camaraderie that developed over the course of this show, and the friendships that have lasted past it are what I am the most proud of. Annie, Isabel, and I never thought this project would create such a community. In fact, every time the cast expressed collective affection towards us, it was always met with incredulity, because we just couldn’t believe that they liked us. To have brought together this brilliant group of women under the guise of theatre, and to have them accept it so readily was a great thing to watch. If I can speak for the three of us, or at least for myself, knowing that we’re leaving behind a collective of strong female theatre artists (if they want to do more theatre after this, no pressure) makes leaving a lot easier.

II. Women Can Handle It; or Odunai

According to ancient Athenian theatre practice, mimesis is the realm of the woman. The art of imitation or disguise is best suited to those who are perpetually seen as saying one thing
and meaning another, and of whispering in dark corners.¹ This is also due to the fact that any
time a woman is onstage in Athens, she is an illusion. Men always played women on the stage,
and yet, imitation was still a woman’s game. Perhaps this is because anytime they were
represented onstage, it was immediately a lie, a poorly hidden trick on the audience. In truth, it
comes back to the idea that “…femininity, even when adopted by real women, is always a
disguise of sorts, and so subject to suspicion” (Ormand 9). Well then, how handy that I had a cast
of such naturally-born deceivers. Not only would there be women playing women onstage, but
also women playing women playing men, so we would be working with some rather advanced
levels of mimesis. If we can return to the Athenian ideas of femininity onstage for just a moment,
we’ll spot an interesting trend. Male actors playing female parts was the norm; that we already
know. It was a necessity, and therefore the act of impersonating a woman was not an
emasculating one, just further example of an actor’s skill. However, it was the fine distinction
between playing a woman and taking on actual feminine aspects of one’s identity that made the
difference between skill and shame.² A man couldn’t imitate a woman too successfully (that is,
be feminine himself) without being rendered powerless. This was so much ingrained in the
Athenian mindset that it pops up in several plays about Greek heroes, such as Oedipus and
Heracles. In Trachiniae, the death of Hercules at the hands of his wife is performed. Up until that
moment, Heracles is what anyone would expect him to be: heroic, daring, hyper-masculine,
etc… But as his skin is being eaten away by the poison imbued on his robe, he is stripped of
these descriptors. Rather, the language that the character uses becomes feminine.

“Pity me,

¹ Froma I Zeitlin. "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama."
² Kirk Ormand. "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag." (pg. 10).
I who am pitiable to many, crying out like a girl.

Nobody would say that they saw me

Doing this, before now,

but always I have held myself without groaning in the face of evils.

But now, alas, from such a thing I am discovered female.”(1070-1075). ³

At the very moment before his death, and at the peak of bodily pain, Heracles perceives himself as female.⁴ This happens over and over again in Greek theatre: in the moment before death, the man, the hero, is feminine. For Heracles it is his self perception, while for Oedipus it is his exposure.⁵ To be specific, it is Heracles’ self perception of his submission to pain that makes him think of himself as feminine, but it’s not just him linking pain and femininity. This was a common concept in Athenian theatre, and one must assume, Athenian life. “...It is at those moments when the male finds himself in a condition of weakness that he too becomes acutely aware that he has a body - and then perceives himself, at the limits of pain, to be most like a woman” (Zeitlin 69). What stands out the most here is the interpretation that to be aware of one’s body, of one’s physical presence, is a feminine act. To recognize the body, it seems, is a weakness, since in acknowledging one’s body they are yielding to a threshold of pain that can’t be ignored, and to yield at all is feminine. It is a loss of control over the body by admitting that it exists and feels. In short, pain begets awareness that signifies submission, which after all, is the ultimate female space. This was true in ancient Greece, and seems to still be the general perception today. So we are left with this: onstage, the women’s realm is pain and disguise. One could argue that if that is true, then theatre is our realm as well.

³ Sophocles, and Patricia E. Easterling. Trachiniae.
⁴ Kirk Ormand. "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag." (pg. 19).
⁵ Ibid.
So what does it mean for a woman to play a man? In Ancient Greece, that would have been a step up in the world. A woman would play a character with more power and privilege than them, then step back down when she took the costume off. To play a part with more privilege than oneself is to intrinsically comment on the character. For the maids to be playing the suitors within the reenactment, they are representing what they experienced, not exactly what was. It gives them more control over what they are telling people and how they are putting it. By having women play men in this situation also lends more depth to the characters they are playing. It is too easy to have a despicable character be one-sided and completely unlikable. In having women play the suitors, one wants to like them. Every night when they first came onstage, there was always a laugh. But by the end of the show, they are not quite so likable (I hope). This dissonance puts more pressure on the audience to think about what is being enacted onstage. And as for Odysseus: we would never come to like him. But in having the woman playing Penelope to suddenly appear onstage and murder the maids in cold blood is more chilling than a random guy we haven’t seen for the rest of the play. It is in watching someone not shrug off femininity or even try to disguise it that these moments are powerful, because we know that beneath the male guise, there is a person who was subject to these men’s actions in real time and with real consequences.

III. Let’s Just Put a Vest On Her

To have worked on something that was essentially a retelling of a retelling of The Odyssey, it was easy to feel distance from its Greek origins. What we did wasn’t that distant upon reflection, it was just more of a flipped image than a mirrored one. We very much stuck
with the Greek tradition of cross-dressing on the stage, and doing it rather unconvincingly.\textsuperscript{6} I didn’t try to make the actors playing the suitors appear to be men any more than putting them in traditionally masculine clothes and slightly altering their body language. It was always more about the attitude, but that was about as difficult to achieve as making them into bona fide drag kings. Before we had a real script (or rather, when we were in between scripts), I had several rehearsals where it was only my cast and myself, without my other collaborators. Because of the absent script, I used this time to have them run viewpoints, over and over again, then discuss what they’d discovered about their characters from that. Entering on such a basic level, with nothing but an idea of a character for each of them, forced all of us to do more thinking and less doing.

Up until about three weeks before the show went up, the suitors were completely cartoonish, very different from what they would become. The scene with them and the maids around the table looked something more like a college freshman being approached by a bunch of hot senior girls. When we talked about the suitors, it was more about their insecurities than their power, real or perceived. Quite a few girls chose to have their suitor characters be awkward around the maids, unsure of what to do or how to act. The maids were completely in control of the situation they had been thrust into. I let this happen for a long time, because I liked it. It was funny in a show that was serious for the most part, and all of the girls were doing a great job committing to these roles, which I was very proud of. A couple of weeks before the show went up, however, Annie and Isabel came up to me after a rehearsal with the idea that we had to change the suitor scene (which was basically half of the show). The suitors needed to be

\textsuperscript{6} Kirk Ormand. "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag." (pg. 24).
menacing, that was the whole point of their characters, and they had just been funny and awkward so far. I could say with certainty that these choices for the suitors were subconscious, stemming from the fact that playing a predator or a creep is a hard role to inhabit, and more than a little unpleasant for some.

A demonstration of this was a rehearsal we had soon after that, when I’d told them all that their dynamics in that scene would be changing, and that both parties would have to act differently. It was another rehearsal where it was just myself and the cast, and it was taking place in the Old Gym, instead of our usual Resnick. The Old Gym is a strange place to be in when there aren’t a dozen people rushing around to make a show happen by the weekend; it looms over empty space, sound gets absorbed into the walls, and it’s impossible to tell what time of day it is, or even if any time is passing. Our own personal Asphodel. The rehearsal started as they always did: check in, then a physical warm up moving into viewpoints. I told them before that we’d be having a longer viewpoints than usual, since I wanted them to work on inhabiting the new roles they’d been given. When I explained the changes, I had told the suitors all the usual things. They had to be intimidating and sinister, more predatory men than silly, awkward boys. And on the other hand, the maids (the poor maids) were about to lose all power in the situation. Where before they had been in control of what was happening, they now had to be completely defenseless. I remember telling the actors that in this scene, they (their characters) had absolutely no agency over their own bodies. Even now, writing that feels wrong, and saying it out loud to a group of women was even more so. We started viewpoints the typical way, and then moved into them inhabiting their characters, along with me giving them things to do or think about. I can’t remember exactly what I told them, but the gist of it was that each individual
suitor owned everything in the room, they had dominion over anyone and everyone, and the
women they saw were merely objects. As for the maids, I basically told them to react to that sort
of behavior and repression. I don’t think any of us were aware of just how much everyone would
inhabit these roles. It was truly terrifying to watch the suitors prowl around the grid while the
maids shrunk into themselves. Several suitors would approach one maid and corner her, or would
walk up behind her and just stand there, breathing down her neck. The maids never looked up,
their gaze was just aimed further down the closer they were to a suitor. I watched with my hands
over my mouth, and had to remind myself to breathe. Viewpoints ended with about four of the
six maids sitting on the floor and every suitor standing over them. Or rather, viewpoints didn’t
end on its own, it was more me suggesting they find a close because I couldn’t stand to watch
much more. When they broke, one of the girls playing a suitor said, “I think I just triggered
myself.”

“Yeah, sorry about that….” I said back. “Same.”

With this, we come all the way back to theatre’s best friend, mimesis. This was the exact
moment that the attitude I wanted from the suitors appeared, the moment when they first
embodied what was so much a root of this play. This type of male presence in a space was so
readily available in the suitors’ conscious, so common, that all I had to do was give them the
permission to imitate it. And to act as a subject of that presence, as I asked the maids to do, was
even more accessible. To just watch what was happening on stage and be technically “safe” from
it, as the audience is, was a struggle. Even more so when I was not just the audience, but the
person who had made this happen. This wasn’t the first time in the process that I saw parallels
between myself with the actors, and Penelope with the maids, nor would it be the last. But the
guilt that I felt while watching them and even after was so was a very real step into the mind of a character I did not feel any particular closeness to. There is no doubt in my mind that after this rehearsal, no one in the cast had trouble believing the suitors as what they were, rather than who was playing them. Once they had an audience, I’m afraid some of that goofiness came back. But underneath, there was the spirit that I was looking for.

In our other act of reversal to Greek theatre tradition, there is no one moment of pain in the show. The current running through everyone’s actions is pain over lack of justice, pain over what happened to them. The only reason the audience is seeing the show as a reenactment of what happened to the maids is because they are in a purgatory of hurt, and must go through this story again and again, just in the hopes that someone listens. They willingly reenact the most agonizing chapter in their lives. For some of the maids, they are raped over and over, and relive the trauma from that. And as for the maids that play the suitors, they play their own rapists. They go into the mind of their abusers in order to tell their own story. And what’s more, they force Penelope to reenact it with them, attempting to make her understand while implicating her in the process. After all, she’s the one who told them to distract the suitors, and she’s the one who was asleep while they were murdered by her husband. The reenactment of their death is surrounded by pain on both sides: the aforementioned rape, and the confrontation with Penelope. The maids don’t have the luxury that Greek heroes do, of agony only before death. No, their pain follows them into the afterlife.
IV. Toxic Masculinity Ruins the Party Again

In the making of this show, the death was not always going to be the climax. In an earlier version, it was what ended the show, with only a Penelope monologue following it. When Isabel was rewriting the script, we finally landed on the format that this would not be happening in real time, it would be a retelling taking place in the afterlife. Therefore, to end with their death would not be dramatically correct nor would it be fulfilling the story. The moment when they died had to be something more than just the murder, because it had to do more for them than *The Odyssey* did. Isabel and I decided that I would be the one to come up with how exactly they died. Early on, when I was going over what I could do with hanging and how exactly to place it, I looked at *The Odyssey*. The entirety of Book 22 is Odysseus’ reveal and the murders of the suitors. Just the suitors’ death is granted a dozen pages. Then, nearly an afterthought, come the maids.

> “With that, taking a cable used on a dark-prowed ship

he coiled it over the roundhouse, lashed it fast to a tall column,

hoisting it up high so no toes could touch the ground.

Then, as doves or thrushes beating their spread wings

against some snare rigged up in thickets - flying in

for a cozy nest but a grisly bed receives them -

so the women’s heads were trapped in a line,

nooses yanking their necks up, one by one,

so all might die a pitiful, agonizing death…

for a little while their feet twitched, but not for long”(Book 22 491-499).⁷

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⁷ Homer, and Robert Fagles. *The Odyssey*. 

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Nine lines. Their death warrants nine lines. It gave me very little help in staging their deaths, and only served to make me madder than I already was about how little attention was given to them, although I am aware that *The Odyssey* really doesn’t need to be any longer. But if those stupid suitors needed a whole chapter, why didn’t the maids? This passage was one of the parts of *The Odyssey* that inspired Margaret Atwood to write about Penelope and the maids in the first place. Of course, Atwood put the story into the hands of both Penelope and the maids, while we chose to give the maids full rein. But even in *The Penelopiad*, there is very little discussed about the actual event of the maids’ hanging. So here we had the chance to be the most explicit about it.

Before death came its harbinger, in this case the character of Odysseus. Oddly enough, we didn’t think of having his character be played by the same actor as Penelope at the same time as we did with the maids playing the suitors. But of course, it made dramaturgical sense in terms of who is at fault for the maids’ death, and it created a pleasing symmetry. It also did something that didn’t even occur to me until a friend of mine was chatting with me after seeing the show, and we were talking about how convincing Odysseus was as a man (being played by a woman) when compared to the suitors. I thought it was a weird discrepancy that Odysseus was so terrifying and brutal, and suitors were very not. I still have no idea what the suitors actually read as on show days, but without fail, Odysseus was horrifying. My friend said something along the lines of, “Well, that actually works out. Because you see the suitors and think, oh wow, they’re annoying and creepy. But then when Odysseus comes onstage, it’s like, okay, there’s the real threat.” They were two different types of awful, so much so that the suitors, who I wanted to be

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8 Margaret Atwood. *The Penelopiad*. (pg xv).
as bad as possible, faded into a lesser realm than Odysseus. The actions of both parties are deplorable in the play, but somehow, Odysseus is the one to be scared of. I think this is partially due to the way each part was acted, and also to Isabel’s imposing stature.

Before this accidental juxtaposition occurred, we had no idea what to do with Odysseus. He needed to talk, but not to much, and he needed to kill pretty much everyone in the show in a fairly quick time. The impact of Odysseus was greater by having him appear onstage after the slaughter of the suitors, and as for after that… we thought about it for a very long time. The final choice, to have him encounter the six maids but really only interact with one, was done for reasons of simplicity. I would have loved to have Odysseus get his hands on every one of them, but that was tedious and totally unnecessary. I wanted the moment with Odysseus and Minerva, the maid left onstage, to be grounded in reality, since the next moment was so symbolic. I really think one of my favorite moments in the show was the fight between the two of them. This was partly because it was fun to come up with, although it had some roadblocks since I have no training in fight choreography. But it was also because it seemed so much more real, and didn’t have that removed feeling that I wish the show had had less of. Of course, the fight and what followed were the most choreographed parts of the show, so it’s silly to think of the fight as more real. But it was certainly grittier, and juxtaposing that with the death scene was satisfying for me.

V. Stay Sexy, Don’t Get Murdered

When it came to the actual death, I wanted, and still want, to have at least some of the maids be dangling their legs down from the catwalks above the audience. This never would have
worked in LUMA, but I wanted so badly to have some semblance of hanged, twitching feet. That is the lasting image from *The Penelopiad*, after all. I asked the Fisher Center several times if I could suspend anyone in any way, and surprise, the answer was totally no. The obvious conclusion for me was that their death would be movement based, and far more symbolic than realistic. The choreography that ended up onstage happened through experimenting with what movements looked to me like hanging. In getting the collective relevé, it achieved the image of feet that brush the floor as much as was possible without actually suspending them. I wish that there was a way to have every maid’s noose be used in the way the Minerva’s was, to have it somehow be raised to give the appearance of cutting off air supply. But I’m fine with having Odysseus only being with one maid, because then for the others, it’s ambiguous as to whether they are being hanged at the same time or if they have already been killed. Getting the choreography together and perfected took much more time than I expected it to. It also changed about a dozen times. The last few changes happened during tech week, when I had to reconfigure the staging for the death. I also talked to Jack Ferver after the dress rehearsal, and he suggested that the death scene take longer, particularly the other maids walking onstage and them being on relevé (thanks Jack!). I was constrained as to how long they could be doing anything for because of the sound cue and the fight choreography, but any time I couldn’t have before they died was used for after. The mix of grace and brutality that I hope the death scene was indicative of the rest of our show: pretty aesthetically, but context with a punch.

I wanted the death to act as a gray space between the reenactment and their lives in the Underworld. The transition from recreating their deaths, acting/being dead, and getting up and recollecting themselves was important to me. It’s the only time that we see anyone processing
the events that have happened, because most of the show is a performance within a performance.

It was actually one of the cast member’s ideas to have them land and keep their eyes open when they died. In the rehearsal this was suggested in, one of the other actors asked what actually happened when someone was hanged. I told her the basic rundown: eyes bulge out, face turns purple, sometimes the tongue splits down the middle. Surprisingly, none of them knew this, but I think the goriness of what this death would actually look like made it more exciting to perform. And although this was a serious moment (and an especially horrifying way to die), I wanted it to be poignant, as well as wanting them to find pleasure in everything they were performing. The transition from the retelling to the underworld, in which they got up one by one, took off their nooses, and exited was completely unscripted. I told them what I wanted, and how they should be feeling, and gave them free rein. This silence, in a show with a lot of dialogue, was more impressive than I expected it to be. It also mentally prepared the actors for the next scene.

The final scene was the most important, and the most difficult to figure out. It got rewritten the most. The ending changed several times. I had no idea how to stage it. In fact, I can’t believe that I haven’t yet mentioned how hard it was to block scenes involving twelve or thirteen people. It was SO hard. For this scene, just the staging was a challenge, and I still don’t like how some of that part turned out. To have a group of twelve people confronting a single person is very weird looking. You expect a group like that to act like a mob, to be physical and angry, but that just didn’t work for this scene, as much fun as it would have been to stage that way. I spent a great deal of time working with the actors on what exactly was being performed emotionally, because their blocking was so little. There was one rehearsal where we kept running the scene over and over, and it wasn’t even approaching what I wanted. I finally got up and gave
a speech about how this was about betrayal and justice and heartache and all these other things that had built up over centuries and centuries of existing but not existing. It was more a rant than a speech, and I managed to get myself sort of worked up while doing it. I ended it with something like, “Do you see how I’m getting emotional just talking about this? If you guys put this behind your lines, and imagine that you’re confronting someone you trusted, like your friend or your mom, but then they let you down in a huge way, you’ll be able to do this too. I swear it’s easy.” The scene was a confrontation, one that had been building up for eons, and one that the maids deserved to get something out of. They got up to try the scene again, and by the end of it, half of them were teary-eyed.

I stressed over and over again the importance of this last scene, not only for the characters, but for the play’s meaning. It says something off the bat that we started with a book entitled *The Penelopiad*, and ended with a play called *MAIDS*. This was about them struggling to find meaning in what happened to them, and why they were so misused. It was also an attempt to tell the story of what happened, and outline those who misused them. Yes, Odysseus is the obvious villain in this story, he is the one who tied the ropes around their necks, but somehow Penelope gets off free. She was the one that asked them to spy on the suitors for her, to distract them, to be raped by them. She put her maids in place, albeit unknowingly, for Odysseus to punish them. And that’s just the thing: she doesn’t know. She may not have been the one to string them up, but she may just as well have been. Women unknowingly and unthinkingly being the oppressors or aids to oppressors of other women is nothing new, it is nothing old, it has been happening forever. Our most recent presidential election made that very clear. And it is always women of privilege who do it: rich women, white women, cis women, straight women.
Penelope is exactly this. She aligns herself with her own oppressor, and the worst part is that it’s done obliviously. In their reenactment, the maids are really just trying to get her to understand that she blindly abused them. They just want to know why. Of course, the maids never got any kind of resolution from Penelope. That’s the problem with this kind of story. There’s not often a good answer. It’s a many headed monster: once you answer one question, another pops up in its place. This is why we ended on an unsatisfying note for both the audience and the maids, and even Penelope. There’s no end. I would love for this project to become obsolete. I want there to be a time when it isn’t needed or even understood, when every question has its answer. I have no lofty perceptions that this project would do anything to change that in the larger world. If a day like that ever comes, it will not be because of this piece of theatre. But it may be because of women like the ones onstage, both character and actor. The twelve maids will never be forgotten. They continue to ask why. They continue to push. And so do we.
Works Cited


Acknowledgements

(In which I attempt to be genuine. It’s hard.)

Thank you first and foremost to my partners in all that is SPROJ, Isabel Bennett and Annie Garrett-Larsen. Obviously, without the two of you this wouldn’t even exist. But more than that - it would be without beauty and without depth. We made a good thing.

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Jorge - you’re the best. You win all the prizes. Is it okay if I call you occasionally just to ask your advice about life? Truly, I am beyond glad that you were the advisor to this, mostly so that we could spend more time laughing at each other.

A humongous thank you to Hellena Schiavo and the team at the Fisher Center. Thank you all for your work that went into this brand of student theatre, and thank you especially to Hellena for your never ending patience with my insanity.

Any Kopischke is my favorite ghost woman and you came to a rehearsal once and gave me notes. That was good.

Every professor I have worked with in the theatre department taught me something that went into this project, and will help me in my career past college, and I am so grateful for that. It was a privilege to be taught by all of you.

My presence at this college, and the opportunities I have been given here would not have happened in the slightest without Bill McLean. I wish he could have seen this, although I’m not sure if he would have been able to hear all of it.

Last but not least, hi Mom. Thank you. You are why I’m still doing theatre. Why was it a bad idea for me to major in EUS, again?