

The Afterlife of the Villain: Rewriting Moral Ambiguity and Sympathy in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract—Contemporary literature frequently revisits canonical narratives to question the fixed moral categories through which characters have traditionally been understood. Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and *Hag-Seed* (2016) are significant examples of such revisionary writing. *The Penelopiad* reimagines Homer’s *Odyssey* from Penelope’s perspective and gives a collective voice to the twelve maids whose execution remains largely unexplored in the classical narrative. *Hag-Seed*, meanwhile, relocates Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* into a contemporary prison and transforms Prospero into Felix Phillips, a theatre director consumed by grief and revenge. In both novels, Atwood destabilizes the conventional opposition between hero and villain by exposing the silenced perspectives, psychological contradictions, and social structures underlying apparently simple moral judgments. The novels demonstrate that villainy is not always an inherent quality but can be produced through narrative authority, social power, gender hierarchy, and historical memory. Atwood’s revisionary technique also transforms the reader’s sympathy by encouraging an understanding of morally compromised characters without necessarily excusing their actions. Through Penelope, Odysseus, Felix, Tony, and the marginalized figures surrounding them, Atwood presents morality as unstable, contextual, and deeply connected to who possesses the authority to tell a story. The “afterlife” of the villain consequently becomes a space in which inherited judgments are reconsidered and forgotten voices acquire narrative power.

Index Terms—Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, *Hag-Seed*, Moral Ambiguity, Villainy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literary characters rarely remain confined to the texts in which they first appear. Characters from classical mythology, canonical drama, and earlier literary traditions continue to acquire new meanings when they are retold by later writers. Contemporary

literature has increasingly used rewriting as a means of challenging established narratives and questioning the moral judgments attached to familiar characters. Instead of accepting the distinction between hero and villain as permanent, revisionary fiction asks who created these categories, whose perspective established them, and whose voice was excluded from the original narrative. Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and *Hag-Seed* provide compelling examples of this process. Both novels return to influential canonical works and reconstruct their characters within new narrative frameworks. *The Penelopiad* revisits Homer’s *Odyssey*, particularly the story of Penelope and the twelve maids executed at the end of the epic, while *Hag-Seed* reworks Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* through Felix Phillips, a theatre director who experiences betrayal, exile, grief, and revenge.

Atwood’s revisionary practice is significant because she does not merely modernize the plots of the earlier works. She interrogates the moral assumptions embedded in them. In *The Penelopiad*, the supposedly faithful Penelope becomes a self-conscious narrator who recognizes the limitations of the idealized image constructed around her. At the same time, the twelve maids emerge from the margins and challenge the authority of both Penelope and Odysseus. In *Hag-Seed*, Felix initially appears as a sympathetic victim whose betrayal justifies his desire for revenge. Yet his obsessive pursuit of revenge gradually makes him morally ambiguous. His transformation demonstrates that suffering does not automatically make an individual morally innocent. Through these characters, Atwood demonstrates that the moral identity of literary figures is dependent upon narrative perspective.

The concept of the “afterlife of the villain” is therefore central to understanding Atwood’s fiction. A villain

does not disappear when the original narrative ends. Instead, the character survives in cultural memory, adaptations, interpretations, and subsequent retellings. Each new narrative can either reinforce or challenge the original judgment. Atwood uses this literary afterlife to complicate established moral categories. Her characters occupy spaces between innocence and guilt, victimhood and responsibility, sympathy and condemnation. The present article argues that *The Penelopiad* and *Hag-Seed* transform conventional villains and morally questionable figures into complex subjects whose actions must be interpreted within particular social, psychological, and narrative contexts. Through this process, Atwood demonstrates that sympathy does not require moral absolution and that understanding a character's motivations can coexist with recognition of the consequences of their actions.

II. REWRITING THE VILLAIN AND QUESTIONING NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

One of the most important features of Atwood's revisionary fiction is her challenge to narrative authority. Canonical texts frequently establish a dominant perspective that determines how readers understand characters. When a later writer changes the narrative perspective, the moral structure of the earlier text can also change. Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation involves "repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 7). This formulation is particularly relevant to Atwood because her novels repeat recognizable narratives while refusing to reproduce their ideological structures. The plots remain identifiable, but the perspectives, contexts, and ethical implications are transformed.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood immediately destabilizes the authority of the traditional *Odyssey* by allowing Penelope to narrate her own story. Her opening declaration, "Now that I'm dead I know everything" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 1), establishes an ironic relationship between death and knowledge. Although Penelope is dead, she possesses a narrative authority that she did not possess within the traditional heroic structure. Her position outside the world of the living allows her to reconsider the reputation that has been constructed around her.

Penelope recognizes that her cultural image as the ideal faithful wife has become a restrictive stereotype.

She states, "I became—what? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 2). This statement is crucial to Atwood's feminist revision of the *Odyssey*. Penelope's celebrated virtue is not simply a personal quality; it becomes a social instrument through which women are judged. By presenting herself as an "edifying legend," Penelope exposes the ideological function of her reputation. The supposedly virtuous woman becomes a standard used to discipline other women.

Atwood consequently refuses to present Penelope as a completely innocent alternative to Odysseus. Penelope acknowledges her awareness of her husband's deceptive nature. Her recognition that Odysseus was "slippery" and capable of manipulating others complicates her position as the faithful wife (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 3). She is neither completely deceived nor completely complicit. Her survival depends partly upon her ability to negotiate patriarchal structures. This ambiguity makes her more psychologically convincing because her moral decisions are shaped by circumstances rather than by absolute virtue.

III. THE TWELVE MAIDS AND THE RECOVERY OF THE SILENCED VOICE

The most significant revision in *The Penelopiad* is Atwood's treatment of the twelve maids. In the traditional narrative, they occupy a subordinate position within Odysseus's household and are ultimately executed. Atwood, however, gives them a collective voice through songs, poems, ballads, and dramatic performances. Their chorus creates an alternative narrative that contests Penelope's version of events.

The maids are particularly important because their marginal status makes them victims of the same patriarchal structure that produces Penelope's idealized identity. While Penelope is remembered as the faithful wife, the maids are remembered primarily through the punishment imposed upon them. Atwood asks the reader to reconsider whether their deaths can be understood simply as legitimate punishment. By allowing them to speak, she transforms them from objects of judgment into subjects capable of judging others.

The maids repeatedly challenge Penelope's narrative authority. Their presence prevents the novel from becoming a simple feminist retelling in which

Penelope becomes the new heroine and Odysseus becomes the villain. Instead, the novel contains multiple voices that contradict each other. Penelope seeks to control her reputation, while the maids challenge her version of events. The result is an unstable narrative in which no single character can completely possess the truth.

This narrative strategy transforms the reader's understanding of villainy. The twelve maids were not simply "bad" characters who deserved punishment; they were individuals situated within a hierarchical social structure. Their actions may remain ethically debatable, but Atwood encourages readers to examine the conditions under which those actions occurred. Moral judgment therefore becomes inseparable from questions of gender, class, power, and narrative representation.

IV. ODYSSEUS: FROM HERO TO MORALLY AMBIGUOUS FIGURE

Atwood's treatment of Odysseus further demonstrates how rewriting can transform a hero into a morally ambiguous figure. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is celebrated for his intelligence, courage, endurance, and ability to overcome obstacles. Atwood retains these qualities but changes their moral significance. Intelligence can become manipulation, courage can become aggression, and strategic thinking can become deception.

Penelope's narration repeatedly reveals the gap between Odysseus's public reputation and private behavior. She understands that he is capable of constructing persuasive stories about himself. His heroic identity therefore becomes a form of narrative performance. Atwood suggests that Odysseus succeeds not only because of his actions but because he controls how those actions are remembered.

This reinterpretation demonstrates that the distinction between hero and villain is often dependent on narrative perspective. A character can be heroic in one narrative and morally troubling in another. The same action may appear courageous when described by the victor but violent when described by the victim. Atwood's rewriting therefore challenges the assumption that literary morality is fixed. Instead, moral identity is shown to be constructed through storytelling.

V. FELIX PHILLIPS AND THE AFTERLIFE OF PROSPERO IN *HAG-SEED*

Atwood employs a comparable strategy in *Hag-Seed*. The novel reimagines Shakespeare's *The Tempest* through Felix Phillips, a theatre director who loses his position after being betrayed by Tony, his trusted colleague. Like Shakespeare's Prospero, Felix experiences exile and eventually plans a carefully organized return. However, Atwood transforms the supernatural and colonial dimensions of Shakespeare's play into psychological and institutional conflicts in contemporary Canada.

Felix initially attracts the reader's sympathy because he is clearly a victim of betrayal. His removal from his position and the death of his daughter Miranda create a profound sense of loss. His grief isolates him from ordinary life, and theatre becomes a means through which he preserves his connection with his dead daughter. His suffering makes his desire for revenge understandable. However, Atwood does not allow sympathy for Felix to become complete moral approval.

Felix's revenge gradually becomes an obsession. The narrator observes, "Suddenly revenge is so close he can actually taste it. It tastes like steak, rare" (Atwood, *Hag-Seed* 23). The image of revenge as something physically consumable reveals the intensity of Felix's desire. Revenge is no longer simply a response to injustice; it becomes an appetite. This transformation complicates Felix's identity because the victim begins to resemble the avenger who is willing to manipulate others in order to satisfy his own emotional needs.

The parallel with Prospero becomes increasingly important. Shakespeare's Prospero is both victim and controller. He has suffered exile, but he also exercises extraordinary power over the people around him. Atwood preserves this duality in Felix. Felix has genuinely suffered, but he also constructs elaborate situations in which other people become instruments of his revenge. His theatrical intelligence enables him to manipulate his enemies just as Prospero uses magic and knowledge to control the island.

VI. REVENGE, SYMPATHY, AND MORAL AMBIGUITY

The relationship between revenge and sympathy is central to *Hag-Seed*. Atwood does not ask readers

simply to decide whether Felix is right or wrong. Instead, she encourages them to understand how grief and betrayal have transformed his personality. His actions are ethically problematic, but the emotional history behind them remains understandable.

This distinction between understanding and approving is important in contemporary representations of morally ambiguous characters. A sympathetic villain or antihero does not necessarily become morally good. Instead, readers are invited to understand the psychological and social conditions that produce harmful behavior. Felix's suffering does not excuse his manipulation, but it explains why revenge becomes attractive to him.

The prison setting intensifies this issue. Felix works with incarcerated men who participate in his production of *The Tempest*. These prisoners have themselves been labeled criminals and social outsiders. Through theatre, they are given an opportunity to reinterpret the roles imposed upon them. Atwood therefore creates a parallel between the prisoners and the supposedly villainous characters of Shakespeare's play. Both groups have been defined by external labels, yet neither can be reduced to those labels.

The theatrical project consequently becomes a form of moral re-education. The prisoners learn to understand themselves through Shakespeare, while Felix is gradually forced to confront his own identification with Prospero. Theatre initially functions as a weapon of revenge, but it eventually becomes a means of release. The play that Felix uses to control others ultimately helps him recognize the destructive consequences of his obsession.

VII. THE VILLAIN AS VICTIM AND THE VICTIM AS VILLAIN

Both *The Penelopiad* and *Hag-Seed* complicate the relationship between victimhood and villainy. Atwood demonstrates that a character can occupy both positions simultaneously. Penelope is constrained by patriarchy, yet she also benefits from the social structures that marginalize the maids. Felix is betrayed and emotionally devastated, yet he uses his intelligence and institutional power to manipulate others.

This double positioning is one of the most significant features of Atwood's moral imagination. Traditional

narratives often divide characters into clear categories: heroes suffer and overcome; villains cause suffering and are punished. Atwood disrupts this structure by asking readers to consider what happens when a victim becomes capable of causing harm.

The moral ambiguity of Atwood's characters also reflects the complexity of contemporary ethical thinking. Modern readers are often less willing to accept simple categories of good and evil because human behavior is understood as being influenced by psychology, social structures, historical circumstances, and power relationships. Atwood's novels participate in this shift by refusing to provide completely innocent heroes or completely monstrous villains.

VIII. ADAPTATION AS ETHICAL REVISION

Adaptation in Atwood's fiction is therefore not merely a formal exercise. It becomes an ethical practice. By returning to canonical texts, Atwood examines what earlier narratives have excluded. In *The Penelopiad*, the silenced women of the *Odyssey* become narrators and commentators. In *Hag-Seed*, the prisoners who are socially marginalized become performers and interpreters of Shakespeare. Both novels therefore use storytelling to challenge established systems of cultural authority.

Julie Sanders argues that adaptation and appropriation can function as forms of "creative and critical" engagement with earlier works (Sanders 4). Atwood's novels exemplify this relationship. She respects the recognizable structures of Homer and Shakespeare while simultaneously challenging the ideological assumptions within them. Her adaptations are therefore acts of literary dialogue rather than simple reproductions.

The "afterlife" of the villain becomes particularly important in this context. Once a character enters literary history, later writers can reopen the case against or in favor of that character. Villainy can be questioned, sympathy can be redistributed, and forgotten perspectives can become central. Atwood's work demonstrates that literature possesses the power to revise not only stories but also the ethical judgments attached to them.

IX. SYMPATHY WITHOUT ABSOLVING GUILT

One of Atwood's most significant achievements in both novels is her ability to generate sympathy without demanding moral absolution. Penelope can be understood without being idealized. Felix can be sympathized with without being considered morally innocent. Odysseus can be admired for his intelligence while simultaneously being criticized for his manipulation. The maids can be recognized as victims without requiring readers to accept every action attributed to them.

This distinction is essential to the representation of morally ambiguous characters. Sympathy does not mean agreement. Instead, sympathy creates an imaginative space in which readers can recognize the humanity of characters whose actions may be disturbing or ethically questionable. By creating this space, Atwood prevents moral judgment from becoming simplistic.

Her characters therefore possess what can be described as ethical afterlives. Their stories continue beyond the original narratives, but their identities also continue to evolve. The reader encounters not fixed heroes and villains but characters whose moral meanings change according to narrative perspective. The afterlife of a character becomes an opportunity for literary justice: not necessarily justice in the sense of declaring someone innocent, but justice in the sense of allowing previously ignored experiences to be heard.

X. CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and *Hag-Seed* demonstrate the transformative potential of contemporary literary rewriting. By revisiting Homer's *Odyssey* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Atwood challenges the stability of conventional moral categories and exposes the complex relationship between narrative authority and ethical judgment. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's supposedly perfect virtue is complicated by her self-awareness, while the twelve maids challenge the silence imposed upon marginalized women. Odysseus, traditionally celebrated as an epic hero, is reconsidered through the perspectives of those affected by his actions. In *Hag-Seed*, Felix Phillips begins as a sympathetic victim but gradually reveals the destructive potential of his obsession with revenge. His transformation from

victim to manipulator demonstrates that suffering does not guarantee moral innocence.

Both novels ultimately suggest that villainy is not a permanent identity but a category shaped by storytelling, power, social position, and historical memory. Atwood's revisionary narratives create space for characters to exist between heroism and villainy, innocence and guilt, victimhood and responsibility. The reader is therefore encouraged to replace immediate judgment with critical understanding. The "afterlife of the villain" becomes an ethical and literary space in which forgotten voices can speak, celebrated heroes can be questioned, and morally compromised characters can receive a more complex form of sympathy. Through her rewriting of classical and Shakespearean narratives, Atwood demonstrates that the stories inherited from the past are never truly finished. Every retelling has the potential to expose what was hidden, question what was accepted, and transform the moral imagination of the reader.

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