

Rewriting Classical Myths: the Case of Penelope

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The *Odyssey* is the classic par excellence of Western literature. Every epoch that needs to validate its roots comes back to Ulysses, whose story has been rewritten endless times and brought back to life by as many authors. James Joyce, Constantine Cavafy and Derek Walcott are just some of the best-known re-tellers of the Homeric poem. The *Odyssey's* plot is particularly well suited to reproduction and retelling in different times and different cultural contexts. To its linear story – a man wandering over land and sea for many years and his fight to re-conquer his kingdom and his wife – a variety of subplots can be added, for example digressions on the characters encountered by Ulysses in his adventures, or parentheses on life in Ithaca in the absence of the King.

The twentieth century is perhaps the time during which the most interesting developments involving the *Odyssey*, its plot and its symbols, take place. Authors of rewrites are attracted by non-dominant characters, by what has not been said by the canon, by marginal stories and consequences taken for granted; sometimes the new versions they produce even enter the canon and become 'modern classics', as is the case with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Among all the characters of the *Odyssey* who undergo such rewriting, one in particular stands out in modern times for her strong contrast with the image assigned to her by tradition, and as a particularly fruitful example of the metamorphosis of Homeric character: Penelope.

The figure of Penelope traditionally remained in the wings of what have generally been considered the much more important adventures of Ulysses, but over the past fifty years, this female figure has gradually become the protagonist of novels, short stories and poems within Western literature.¹ After introducing the core problematics which arise in relation to the character of Penelope, over the course of this article I will show how this character is transformed from the Homeric text to modern rewrites, restricting the cases

¹ Among many rewrites, and excluding those I will investigate in the course of this paper, some of the best-known in terms of diffusion and critical reception are: Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005); Silvana La Spina, *Penelope* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1998); Annie Leclerc, *Toi Pénélope* (Arles: Ed. Actes Sud, 2001); Giorgio Manganelli, 'Di Circe e di Penelope', in *Ti ucciderò mia capitale* (Milan: Adelphi, 2011) and Augusto Monterroso, 'La tela de Penelope, o quién engaña a quién', in *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* (Mexico City: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1971). Other works not entirely dedicated to Penelope nevertheless give an important role to her figure in their plots, for example Antonio Spinosa, *Ulisse* (Milan, Piemme 1997) or Stefano Benni, *Achille piè veloce* (Milan: Feltrinelli 2003).

investigated to two Italian examples that strongly underline the divergence from the classical version and that are here brought together for the first time: Bianca Tarozzi's *Variazioni sul tema di Penelope* (1989) and Luigi Malerba's *Itaca per sempre* (1997).² There are at least three reasons for choosing an Italian corpus. First of all, Italy and Italian literature both have a very close relationship with the myth of Ulysses: among the different routes posited for Ulysses' navigation, one long-standing hypothesis is that the stages of his journey are recognizable in Italian territories (and indeed, many Italian landscapes still appear to be under the influence of the legend of Ulysses: promontories, stretches of coasts and beaches are named after characters in the *Odyssey*). The multiform aspects of the figure of Ulysses, especially his thirst for 'canoscenza', have never ceased to attract Italian writers, poets and philosophers. Dante's presentation of the adventurer in the *Divina Commedia*³ begins an Italian tradition that sees Ulysses as a predecessor of Christopher Columbus and will culminate in the Romantic vision of Ulysses as a tragic hero, in which Foscolo mirrors himself.⁴ Secondly, Italian literary scholarship still needs to give full recognition to literary works on Penelope: though scholars like Pietro Boitani and Maurizio Bettini have provided valuable works on Ulysses, and even on the Sirens and Circe,⁵ there has been no comprehensive study of the figure of Penelope. Since Penelope emerges so clearly in Italian literature across the centuries,⁶ a study of Italian 'Penelope' texts alone is necessary and worthwhile, especially if it aims not just at filling bibliographical gaps, but at creating new meanings that – from and through literary texts – question the wider horizons of philosophy and anthropology. Finally, two major methodological contributions to the study of the myth of Penelope come from Italian scholars: Adriana Cavarero's *In spite of Plato* (1990) and Monica Farnetti's *Non così per Penelope* (2007).⁷

² *Variation on the theme of Penelope* and *Itaca forever* have never been translated into English; all translations from these texts are therefore my own.

³ See Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia. Vol. 1 Inferno*, ed. by Natalino Sapegno (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1955), XXVI (pp. 290-302).

⁴ Ugo Foscolo, 'A Zacinto', in *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Ugo Foscolo. Vol I, Poesie e Carmi*, ed. by Francesco Pagliani, Gianfranco Folena, Mario Scotti, 2nd edn (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1985), p. 95.

⁵ Pietro Boitani, *Sulle orme di Ulisse*, 2nd edn (Bologna: Il mulino, 2007); Pietro Boitani, *L'ombra di Ulisse: figure di un mito*, 2nd edn (Bologna: Il mulino, 2012); Maurizio Bettini and Carlo Brillante, *Il mito di Elena* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002); Maurizio Bettini and Luigi Spina, *Il mito delle sirene* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007); Maurizio Bettini and Cristiana Franco, *Il mito di Circe* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010).

⁶ Even before the twentieth century it is possible to trace some Italian examples of literary works with Penelope as their protagonist, for example: Gianbattista Della Porta, 'La Penelope, tragicomedia', in *Teatro. Vol. 1. Le tragedie*, ed. by Raffaele Sirri (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1978), pp. 31-176 and Giuseppe Salio Padovano, *La Penelope, tragedia* (Padova: stampata presso Giuseppe Comino, 1724).

⁷ An English edition of Cavarero's work is available. See Adriana Cavarero *In spite of Plato: a feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy*, trans. by Serena Anderlini (Cambridge: Polity, 1995). Farnetti's contribution (*Not so for Penelope*) has never been translated into English.

In the light of their theories, the aim of this study is to focus solely on the character of Penelope and to show how this figure is re-interpreted in modern times, where she moves from the straightforward example of faithfulness and chastity assigned by the canon to a more complex representation of feminine wisdom. Through the use of the en-gendered symbol Penelope, the classic is thus permeated with a new meaning and moves towards a productive representation of feminine diversity.

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In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is the wife of Ulysses, king of Ithaca, who is away from home for twenty years: for ten years he is involved in the Trojan war, and for the rest he is forced to wander across the sea, because the god Poseidon impedes his homecoming. During this long absence, the palace of Ithaca is occupied by the Suitors, young local aristocrats who try to conquer Penelope and take possession of Ulysses' holdings. Penelope – unaware of her husband's destiny – invents a trick to delay giving a response to the Suitors' requests: she says that she will marry one of them as soon as she finishes weaving a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. But she unravels each night what she has woven during the day, thus postponing the completion of her task. After four years the Suitors discover the trickery, but luckily Ulysses comes back home in time to defeat them all and to reconquer his kingdom and his wife.

This short summary makes clear how easily Penelope might be considered a symbol of faithfulness, chastity and patience. To this end the scholar Woodhouse wrote in 1930:

Certainly Penelopeia does not in the world's imagination stand on a level with either Kirke or Kalyпсо, much less does she vie with 'Fayre Helen, floure of beauty excellent'. [...] For in truth nothing much could be made of the figure of Penelopeia in the Romance of the *Odyssey*, without disturbing the centre of gravity of the poem. The subject of the poem is the Man.⁸

Woodhouse can be taken as the last champion of a stereotyped view of Penelope that lasted at least until the 1950s. Recent critics and contemporary rewrites have strongly criticized and undermined his interpretation;⁹ nevertheless, Penelope might be considered the

⁸ William John Woodhouse, *The composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), pp. 201-03.

⁹ A complete survey of all the contributions showing the centrality of Penelope in the *Odyssey* would exceed the specific aim of this paper, but the most important monographs of the last twenty years are: Marilyn A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown. Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991); Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994); Ioanna Papadopoulou-Belmehdi, *Le chant de Pénélope* (Paris: Belin,

worst-treated woman in mythology, not only because of her fame as a ‘boring housewife’, but also because many characters in the *Odyssey* – Telemachus, Agamemnon, Athena, and the Ithacans, to name but a few – address her at times with unfounded reproaches and cruel words. Telemachus banishes her from the place where men reason and talk, he commands her to leave the hall and to weave her web:

So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own task,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for giving orders,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house.¹⁰

Moreover, the Ithacans themselves do not acknowledge her as a heroic character: hearing music coming from the palace, and unaware of the rejoicing for Ulysses’s return, they think that she has eventually married a suitor, and proclaim, disparagingly: ‘That callous woman, too faithless to keep her lord and master’s house to the bitter end’.¹¹ Penelope has in fact done the exact opposite, but neither the Ithacans nor the myth itself do her justice: her figure continues to be linked to a concept of fidelity, despite a lack of references to this effect within the text. Indeed, in the Homeric text, Penelope is never mentioned as faithful (the attribute never appears in connection with her name), but as ‘wise’ (*periphron* and *echephron* are her usual epithets). Undeniably, the concept of wisdom for a woman of the Homeric period includes the attribute of fidelity. However, whether or not Penelope was faithful, I prefer to focus on other intriguing features of her wisdom and, regarding her fidelity, I will simply mention here that not all the variants of the myth agree on this point: for example there is one version – mainly reported by Servius – which says that Penelope lay with all the Suitors and from that orgy the god Pan (that in ancient Greek means ‘all’) was generated.¹²

1994) and Richard Heitman, *Taking her seriously. Penelope and the plot of Homer’s Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). In these works Woodhouse’s words are refuted once and for all, based on the role assigned to Penelope as a modifying agent of the plot (Katz and Felson-Rubin), her feminine deceptions considered as narrative strategies (Papadopoulou-Belmehdi) and the specific focus on the tragic aspect of her character (Heitman).

¹⁰ Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles, (London: Penguin, 2006), I, 356-59 (p. 89).

¹¹ *Odyssey*, XXIII. 149-51.

¹² See Servius, *Servianorum in Vergilii Carmina Commentariorum*, ed. by Edward Kennard Rand et al., (Lancaster: American Philological Association, 1946), II, 44 (p.329). ‘Cum Ithacam post errores fuisset reversus, invenisse Pana fertur in penetibus suis, qui dicitur ex Penelope et procis omnibus natus, sicut ipsum nomen Pan videtur declarare’. ‘It is narrated that when Ulysses went back to Ithaca after his wonderings, he found among his household deities Pan, who is said to be born from Penelope and all the Suitors, as Pan’s name itself declares’. My translation.

Moreover, Penelope has some qualities traditionally considered masculine, such as cunning, an uncommon virtue for women of ancient literature, who were expected to be beautiful, fertile and often naïve. Among all the mythological women ‘beautiful as goddesses’, she is wise, and she singlehandedly runs a microcosm made up of men. She is queen of the palace, she cleverly rejects the Suitors, she prays to the gods; yet in spite of all these qualities and strengths, she is predominantly remembered only as Ulysses’ wife. Acceding to this narrow interpretation is another great sacrifice required of the character; a sacrifice that would go on for centuries: ‘I amount to [...] an edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with’, says the Penelope created by Margaret Atwood.¹³

It is evident through all this that for a modern and productive reading of Penelope, a feminist perspective is inevitable and desired. Penelope is the first wise woman in Western literature, and once her wisdom and cunning are acknowledged, Penelope becomes a symbol filled with gendered meaning that can no longer be overlooked, either by those dealing with literature or indeed those working with anthropology and women’s rights. In the last decades of the twentieth century, writers and scholars began to consider Penelope in a different light from that assigned to her by the patriarchal tradition and, more or less consciously, created feminine figures with a new perception of their wishes and their pains. Rewrites and feminist theories do not move at the same pace; nevertheless, it is possible to trace a tendency that leads writers to create Penelopes who are increasingly independent and wise, along with the spread of new feminist theories.

An important contribution to the rehabilitation of Penelope in a new feminist guise is provided by the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero. She was part of the feminist group ‘Diotima’, a philosophical community for women formed in Verona in 1983, whose aims were to further develop the reflection on sexual difference raised in the works of Luce Irigaray.¹⁴ Cavarero wrote a sort of manifesto for the group, in which she expanded on Irigaray’s discussion on language, in particular asking how it is possible for women to define themselves if the language in which they are supposed to do so is masculine-connoted.¹⁵ In 1990, in her book *In spite of Plato. A feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy*, Cavarero integrated her reflections on sexual difference with questions

¹³ Atwood, p. 2.

¹⁴ For an introduction to the theory of sexual difference, see Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1984); Luce Irigaray, *Je, tous, nous: pour une culture de la différence* (Paris: Grasset, 1990).

¹⁵ The article was published in 1987 as the second essay of the book *Diotima: il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. See Adriana Cavarero and others, *Diotima: il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, 3rd edn (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2003).

relating to the symbolic representation of the individual in the society. Borrowing figures from Plato and from Western tradition, she demonstrated that they could be reshaped as new feminine figures in order to properly represent sexual diversity. Penelope is presented as the first figure to undergo this process of 'restoration'. Cavarero analyses Penelope's actions: by weaving and unraveling, Penelope creates her very own temporality, which is untouchable by events. While Ulysses lives out his many adventures on the sea, and while her Suitors are guzzling in the hall, Penelope stays away from History. She lives her own story made up of small, private and familiar events, represented by her weaving in the company of other women.

At the same time, Penelope is also a figure who negates her own actions. If she only wove, she would be seen to accept the specific job assigned to women by men; but Penelope unravels during the night what she weaves during the day, in this way rebelling against the symbolic order imposed on all women by patriarchal traditions:

Penelope's time cannot be touched by events, precisely because it cannot be reduced to either one of the two tempos that are alien to it: the tempo of men's actions and the tempo of wifely domestic production. [...] Penelope seeks refuge neither in lack of action nor in the self-denial that comes from prolonged waiting. She weaves and unweaves and in so doing she delineates an impenetrable space where she belongs to herself, while she prolongs the frustration of the disappointed usurpers.¹⁶

The loom is therefore much more than a feminine domestic tool: it is an opportunity for Penelope to take the floor, it is her voice when she is forbidden to speak, as when Telemachus banishes her from the hall. At the end of her chapter on Penelope, Cavarero imagines what may have happened to the character, after Ulysses' last departure, poetically suggesting that she continues to weave with the other women, talking and thinking about a reality made up of thoughts and bodies, leaving the sea and death outside her room.

The idea of feminine wisdom expressed by a defined space (Penelope's room) and time (the gap between weaving and unweaving) matches not only Irigaray's thought, but also other Italian discourses on Penelope. The 'impenetrable space where she belongs to herself' described by Cavarero is in fact the same one that is presented by Bianca Tarozzi, poet and academic, in her poem *Variazioni sul tema di Penelope* (1989).¹⁷ Tarozzi underlines the distances that separate the woman from the open sea, imagining her abandoned once more by her husband, who has left for another 'last journey'.

¹⁶ Adriana Cavarero *In spite of Plato: a feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁷ Bianca Tarozzi, *Nessuno vince il leone: variazioni e racconti in versi* (Venice: Arsenale, 1989), p. 21.

Ora discesa
sulla riva, dal mare risuonante
sente voci lontane, antichi
naufraghi,
fantasmi che la vogliono afferrare:
tutte le guerre che non ha perduto
né vinto,
tutti gli amori che non ha vissuto
il dolore e il furore degli eroi,
che non le spetta:
scempio,
dolce urlare del vento
dentro l'anima.

Ritorna sui suoi passi.
L'esperienza
del limite per lei
è l'acqua incollerita della riva –
per Ulisse lo schianto
e la fine tremenda
contro gli scogli, verso la leggenda.

Now, down
on the seashore, in the echoing sea
she hears distant voices, ancient
castaways,
ghosts who strive to grasp her:
all the wars that she has neither lost
nor won,
all the loves that she has not lived
the grief and the fury of the heroes,
to which she has no claim:
destruction,
sweet howling of the wind
within her soul.

She retraces her steps.
The experience
of the limit is for her
the angry water on the seashore –
for Ulysses is the crash
and the terrific end
against the cliff, toward the legend.¹⁸

The different attitudes of the two characters toward life are illustrated through their respective relationships with the sea. It is congenial to Ulysses, and the hero wants to compete with this limit to become a legend. For Penelope, on the other hand, the seashore as a limit is the frontier of a world that does not belong to her, the world of men's heroic deeds. Penelope's space is her palace and her room, where she belongs to herself. Moreover, Penelope's abstention from travelling is explicable because she embodies the house itself. According to the feminist writer Monica Farnetti, Penelope (like many other women settled in their homes, a common occurrence in Western literature) guards the essence of the house, the sense of belonging to a place that travellers are continuously searching for around the world. In this way, female non-travelling assumes a new significance. Women are seen as the guardians of identity, they doubt neither themselves nor their origins. They do not need to travel around because they have never lost their identities:

Se si viaggia per cercare se stessi e la propria origine, città, patria o madreterra, e se Penelope e le sue simili invece non viaggiano, non sarà perché niente offusca per loro il rapporto con l'origine, la matrice, la dimora? Perché il fatto di essere nate dello stesso sesso della madre almeno in questo le garantisce? Perché sono già là, alla famosa "meta che

¹⁸ Tarozzi, p.21. My translation.

viaggia accanto al viaggiatore”, e possono così risparmiarsi il mito e la fatica, la gloria e l’epopea, la dannazione e l’avventura?¹⁹

Cavarero’s and Farnetti’s works provide the theoretical background needed to perform a modern analysis of the ‘wise’ Penelope, whose non-travelling – as in Tarozzi’s poem – can now no longer be seen merely as a mundane counterpart to the much more fascinating and dangerous adventures of Ulysses. Moreover, Tarozzi’s poem perfectly exemplifies the need for modern, and in this case feminine, rewrites of past texts. As Adrienne Rich notes in her article ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’, ‘we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us’.²⁰ The source text – the *Odyssey* – already carries *in nuce* the elements that make Penelope a symbol of gender diversity. But tradition following the Homeric text has been too concerned with glorifying Ulysses’ trickeries to pay enough attention to the character of Penelope and, consequently, confines the woman to the limited description of a faithful wife. Tarozzi breaks the hold of tradition by giving an alternative reading of Penelope’s features – like her staying at home – and in doing so she achieves the sense of writing as re-vision: ‘the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival’.²¹

Another Penelope that agrees with the *Odyssey* in its representation of her as a wise woman plays the central role in Luigi Malerba’s 1997 *Itaca per sempre*. The novel tells the fortunes of Ulysses after his stay in the Phaeacian’s kingdom, once he lands on the island of Ithaca and disguises himself as a beggar. In contrast to Homer’s version, in which Penelope only recognizes Ulysses after he has recounted to her the secret in the making of their bed – a secret shared only by themselves – Malerba’s Penelope recognizes him as soon as he enters the palace. In Malerba’s new treatment of the classical myth, although Penelope immediately recognizes the beggar as her husband, she wants to punish him for taking so long to return and in particular for not having trusted her enough to reveal his identity to her immediately on his arrival. Penelope is the only one who can really

¹⁹ ‘If travelling is a way to find oneself and one’s origins, city, country or motherland, and if Penelope and those like her do not travel, might this not be because nothing interferes with their relationship with their origins, their matrix, their homeland? Because the fact that they are born of the same sex as their mothers affords them at least this protection? Because they are already there, at the famous “destination which travels alongside the traveler” and they can thus save themselves the myth and the effort, the glory and the eternal fame, the damnation and the adventure?’ Monica Farnetti, ‘Non così per Penelope’, in *Il globale e l’intimo: luoghi del non ritorno*, ed. by Liana Borghi and Uta Treder (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2007), pp. 47-58 (p. 51). My translation.

²⁰ Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, *Collegiate English*, 34 (1972), 18-30 (p. 15).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

recognize Ulysses, but she decides to play along with Ulysses' game of hiding his identity from her, and turns it into a competition. Throughout the text the protagonist is a very vindictive Penelope: 'Ho imparato a destreggiarmi anch'io alla maniera di Ulisse e aspetto con lo sguardo fisso all'orizzonte l'ora della vendetta come premio per la mia pazienza'.²²

The writer creates a dual narration in which the voices of Ulysses and Penelope are interwoven and narrate the same events from two different perspectives. Finally, after centuries of silence, Penelope speaks and her voice is not timorous at all. Malerba's Penelope is stronger than Ulysses: her perspective queries the myth and she calls into question even the well-established epithets associated with Ulysses' name: 'Ma quanto è ingenuo l'astutissimo Ulisse', she remarks in reference to his vain attempts at disguise.²³ Penelope is presented as a heterogeneous and modern woman who, rather than embodying a single characteristic, like the Homeric warriors, is a multifaceted character: she is thoughtful, vengeful, competitive, astute and psychologically strong – a female version of the original Ulysses. Malerba gives voice to this strong character who, aware of her suffering, even puts forward the idea that women might have the right to commit adultery and travel exactly like men:

Non capisco con quanta presunzione Ulisse abbia sospettato della mia fedeltà. Non mi ha forse ripetutamente tradito durante i suoi viaggi? È forse meno doloroso per una donna il tradimento del suo uomo di quanto non sia doloroso per un uomo il tradimento della sua donna? Chi ha stabilito che una donna debba soffrire e perdonare? [...] E perché mai, ho pensato, non dovrei fare anch'io qualche bel viaggio? Quando avranno finito il primo poema chiederò a Ulisse di portarmi in Egitto. Mi dicono meraviglie di questo paese e io da quando mi sono sposata non sono mai uscita da Itaca, come da una prigionia. Per caso solo gli uomini hanno diritto a viaggiare?²⁴

Unlike Tarozzi's Penelope, who stays on the seashore, Malerba's Penelope wishes to travel. Nevertheless, this does not make her doubt herself. The topical binarism 'travelling versus staying at home' assumes here a new meaning after the discourse of Tarozzi and Farnetti: once home and roots are correctly acknowledged as the anchor of our identity, travelling can produce something positive. This is why it is only when Penelope's story reaches the

²² 'I have learnt to get by on my own like Ulysses, and with my eyes fixed on the horizon I wait for the hour of my revenge as a reward for my patience'. Luigi Malerba, *Itaca per sempre* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), p. 29. My translation.

²³ 'How naive the very cunning Ulysses is'. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁴ 'I can't understand how presumptuously Ulysses suspected me of disloyalty. Didn't he cheat on me during his voyages? Is her husband's infidelity perhaps less painful for a woman than his wife's for a man? Who says that a woman has to forbear and to forgive? [...] And whyever, I thought, should I not go on a nice trip too? When they have finished the first poem I will ask Ulysses to take me to Egypt. They say it's a wonderful country and since my wedding I have never left Ithaca, it has become my prison. Who has decreed that only men have the right to travel?' *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 175.

‘traditional’ ending – that is after Ulysses’ expected homecoming - that Malerba’s Penelope decides to travel.

Malerba plays with the myth and it is fair to wonder if *Itaca per sempre* is merely a *divertissement littéraire*. The desire to amuse is definitely present, but there is something that goes beyond this in his presentation of Penelope as a key character. By overturning the epithets and making Ulysses a weak man and Penelope a strong woman, Malerba shows his desire to subvert the roles attested by the canon. Malerba himself writes in the post scriptum of his novel that Penelope is ‘un carattere sicuramente meno passivo di quanto la lettura superficiale dell’Odissea ci possa indurre a credere e che ha accreditato una idea errata e un po’ noiosa di questo sublime personaggio’.²⁵

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There are many variations of the myth of Penelope, and several Italian authors have played with this myth to create modern and deviant Penelopes who do not conform to the chaste woman in the canon.²⁶ Tarozzi’s Penelope on the edge of the seashore is the guardian of the feminine essence, Malerba’s Penelope punishes her husband’s misbehavior with cunning. Such modern rewrites of myth vindicate women who in past texts have suffered from male usurpation. At the same time they show us why classics endure: because of their potential to be universal, modernity can reappropriate them for its own ends, in the process ensuring that their fame continues.

In modern times, Ulysses is often seen as a man in the grips of an identity crisis, an anti-hero who can no longer endure glory and endless success (as in *Capitano Ulisse* by Alberto Savinio, published in 1934). He is de-heroicised, deprived of his glory and fame, a man who makes mistakes, who has doubts and who weeps. In *Itaca per sempre*, even the language of the hero is affected by his perplexities and anxieties: from the first pages of the novel his sentences are characterized by negations (‘non ho mai trovato... non riconosco... non riconosco... non mi sono mai fidato... non so... non so’) and question marks (thirteen

²⁵ ‘Definitely not such a passive character as a superficial reading of the Odyssey might lead us to believe, inducing us to see this sublime protagonist in an erroneous and even boring light’. Ibid., pp. 184-85. It would be instructive to investigate how conscious Malerba was of creating a Penelope that fits in with other feminist writers. While I am convinced that Bianca Tarozzi read the philosophers of sexual difference, for Malerba this issue deserves further investigation. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to see how two different authors, one male and one female, with two different contexts, represent a wise, independent and strong Penelope within a ten year gap.

²⁶ For example, among many others, in 2003 Stefano Benni invented a South American dancer, Penelope-Pilar, in his *Achille piè veloce* (Milan: Feltrinelli 2003). Clearly not only contemporary Italian literature produces Penelopes who distance themselves from the canonical one. Among non-Italian rewrites, maybe the most resolute Penelope of the last decades is the protagonist of the above-mentioned Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005).

in his first speech alone), indirect questions ('mi sono domandato... e mi domando... chissà se qualcuno raccoglierà... chissà se potrò contare...') and self-directed ones ('da dove viene? da dove vengono? dove mi trovo?').²⁷ Ulysses even doubts his past glories under the Trojan walls:

La chiamo vittoria ma chissà se si può chiamare con questa parola la distruzione di una città e i fatti atroci che sono avvenuti sotto le sue mura e che io stesso ho raccontato cento volte come eventi gloriosi durante le soste lungo il mio ritorno.²⁸

Therefore, Penelope's metamorphosis within Italian rewrites of the *Odyssey* is part of a broader process of transforming mythological characters: they take on twentieth-century tragedies and problems, they doubt their identities, or create new ones that reflect modern – in this case, feminist – thought.

As the rewrites analysed here have shown, to study the figure of Penelope today means to take into consideration the gender implications inherent in her myth. In contemporary rewrites it is very unusual to find a silent Penelope: little by little, she is released from the need to objectify her words and conceits into symbols, as in the *Odyssey* where she has to stay at her loom and is forbidden to speak. The many Penelopes of modernity express themselves freely. She speaks, she writes (as had already happened in the first century B.C., when Ovid's Penelope wrote a letter to Ulysses)²⁹ and she even sings, with Molly Bloom's soprano voice. Penelope's word becomes a song, and once more the source of this song is in the *Odyssey* itself, for 'Penelope's song' is already described in book XXIV, when Agamemnon launches the tradition of rewrites on Penelope, saying from the underworld:

The fame of her great virtue will never die.
The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind,
a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope.³⁰

It will be a sexed voice, achieved with a struggle through the centuries and only recently imbued with meaning. A feminine song, which benefits from an autonomous subjectivity,

²⁷ 'I have never found...I do not recognize...I have never trusted...I don't know.... [...] I was wondering...and I wonder...who knows if someone collects....who knows if I can count on.... [...] Where is he from? Where are they from? Where am I?' Malerba, pp. 7-10.

²⁸ 'I call it victory but who knows if it is possible to give this name to the destruction of a city and to the atrocities which took place outside its walls, atrocities which I myself have recounted as glorious events a hundred times, during the pauses in my journey homeward'. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁹ Ovid, *Heroides*, trans. by Harold Isbell, (London: Penguin, 1990), I (pp. 1-9).

³⁰ *Odyssey*, XXIV. 192-98.

orchestrated by many authors who – more or less consciously – finally give voice to Penelope and her fame.