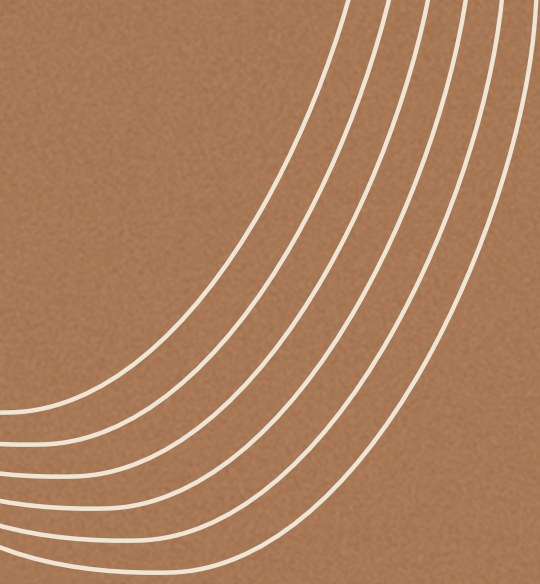
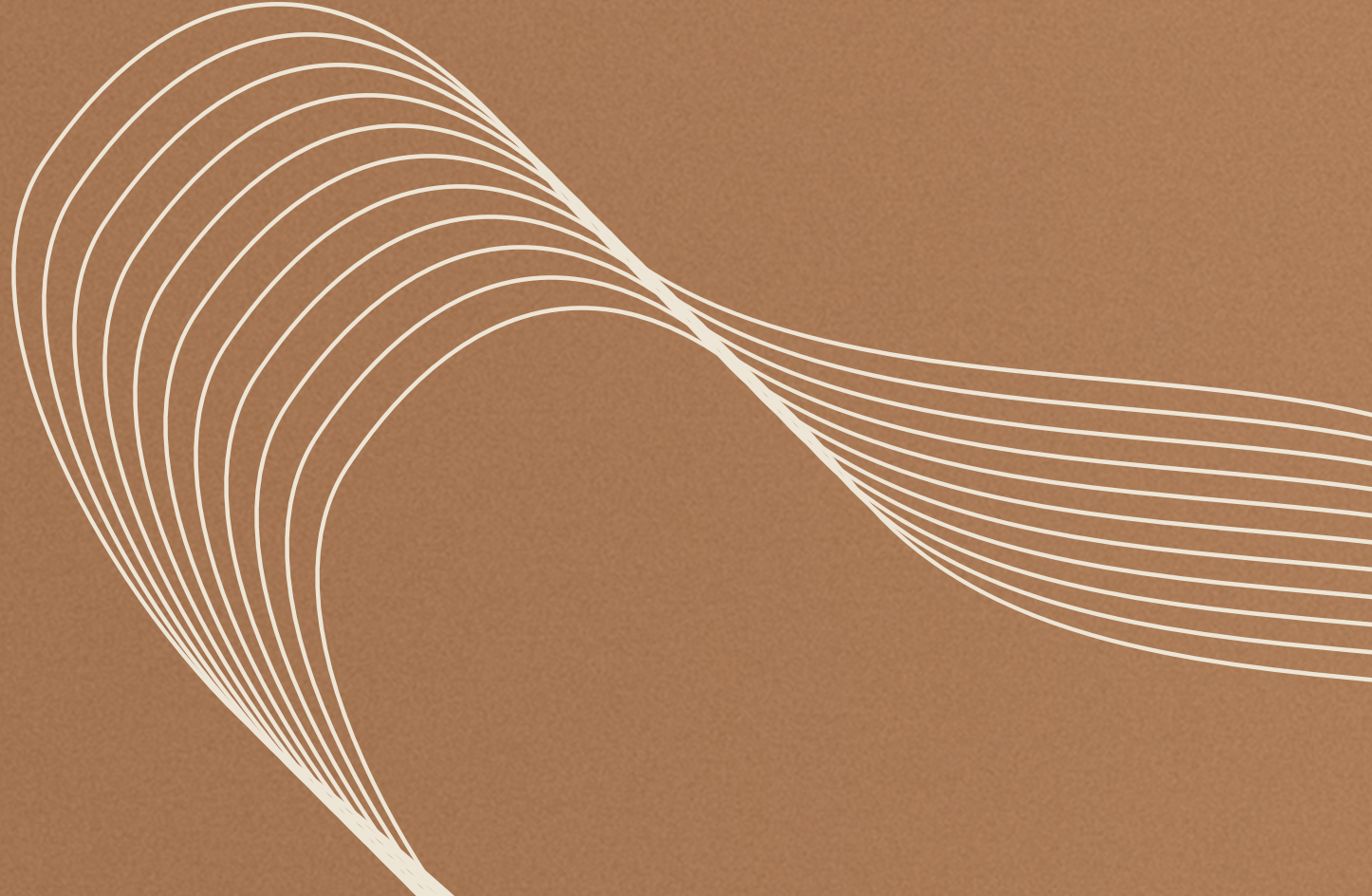


Abstract white line art in the top left corner, consisting of several concentric, curved lines that sweep upwards and to the left.

Margaret Atwood

THE PENELOPIAD

Education Packet

Abstract white line art in the bottom left corner, consisting of many thin, curved lines that sweep upwards and to the right, creating a sense of movement and depth.

ABOUT THE PLAY

PLAY SYNOPSIS

For twenty years, Penelope waits. While Odysseus becomes immortalized through tales of monsters, gods, and impossible journeys, she wages a quieter battle—against time, expectation, and the relentless suitors who threaten everything she has left. But when the hero returns, the true tragedy belongs not to kings, but to twelve forgotten maids whose voices history refused to hear. The Penelopiad is Margaret Atwood's haunting, witty, and fiercely contemporary retelling of The Odyssey—a spellbinding blend of myth, music, and memory that invites audiences to question every story they've ever been told.

MAJOR THEMES

- Storytelling & Truth
- Power & Class
- Gender
- Justice
- Loyalty & Betrayal
- Memory & Reputation

PRODUCTION TRANSPARENCY:

This production contains stylized sexual acts/intimacy, stylized violence/assault, allusions to sexual harassment, and topics of slavery, death, and grief.

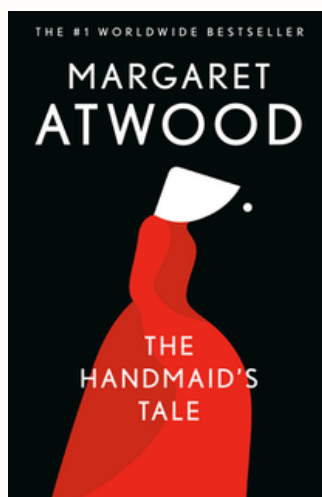
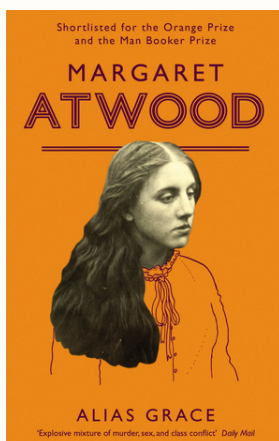
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian novelist, poet, essayist, and playwright born in Ottawa in 1939. Over her career, she has written more than fifty books and become one of Canada's most celebrated contemporary authors. Her best-known works include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Testaments*. Her writing frequently explores power, gender, identity, and whose voices are remembered or overlooked. Atwood has twice received the Booker Prize, for *The Blind Assassin* and, jointly, *The Testaments*.



She published *The Penelopiad* in 2005, retelling *The Odyssey* through the perspectives of Penelope and her twelve maids, and later adapted the novella for the stage. The theatrical version premiered in 2007.¹

Have you heard of her most popular books?



¹Margaret Atwood, "Biography," Margaret Atwood, 2026, margaretatwood.ca/biography.

AN ECHO OF AN ECHO...

The Penelopiad is a story that has been told, retold, changed, and reimagined for thousands of years.

In the Author's Introduction of the script, Margaret Atwood describes the play as an "echo of an echo of an echo." Long before *The Odyssey* was written down, stories about the Trojan War were passed from person to person through oral tradition. These myths were fluid: different storytellers told different versions, emphasizing some characters and leaving others out.¹

THE TROJAN WAR

Did it actually happen? We don't know. Troy was a real ancient city, but there is no conclusive evidence that the Trojan War described in Greek mythology actually occurred.² Atwood describes it only as "possibly an historical event."



ORAL TRADITION



The stories of Troy were passed down by word of mouth, not from a single written text. As stories passed from one storyteller to another, details could be added, removed, or changed.

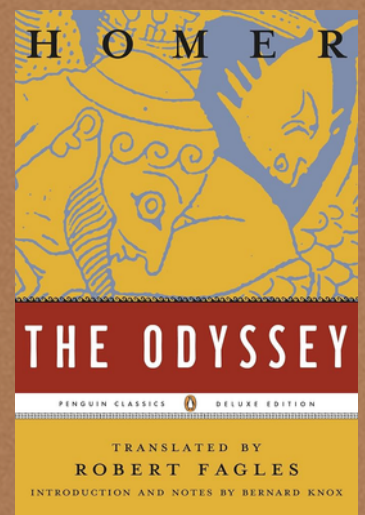
How can a story change as it gets passed from person to person?

What happens when someone who was actually there finally tells their version?

HOMER'S *THE ODYSSEY*

Around the 8th century BCE, the stories took shape as *The Odyssey*, traditionally attributed to Homer. The epic follows Odysseus's ten-year journey home after the Trojan War. Homer drew from existing oral traditions, choosing some versions of the myths while leaving others out.

Have you read *The Odyssey*?



²Alexandra Villing and Lesley Fitton, "The Search for the Lost City of Troy," British Museum, November 26, 2019. British Museum article

... OF AN ECHO

THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF RETELLINGS

The story did not stop with Homer. For centuries, writers have returned to these ancient myths, retelling and reshaping them for new audiences. Atwood points to writers ranging from Ovid and Dante to Shakespeare and James Joyce as part of this long tradition.



Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*



Virgil's *The Aeneid*



Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* (2026)

***THE PENELOPIAD* (Novel, 2005)**

Atwood joined that tradition with *The Penelopiad*, published in 2005 as part of the Canongate Myths series. Rather than simply retelling *The Odyssey*, Atwood drew from other versions of the mythology and placed Penelope and the twelve Maids at the center of the story.

THE PENELOPIAD ON STAGE (Premiered 2007)

Atwood adapted the story again, this time for the stage. Penelope tells her version of events while the Maids sing, perform, interrupt, and challenge the story being told. The stage adaptation was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in association with Canada's National Arts Centre in 2007.

The Penelopiad is rarely produced, and RLT received permission directly from Margaret Atwood and her representatives to bring this remarkable work to our stage.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

KEY CHARACTERS

PENELOPE:

Queen of Ithaca. The play's central storyteller. From the Underworld, Penelope looks back on her childhood, marriage, and the twenty years she spent waiting for Odysseus. She wants to tell her own version of the story.

THE TWELVE MAIDS:

Enslaved Servants / The Chorus.

The play's other voice. The Maids served Penelope and helped her deceive the Suitors, but were hanged after Odysseus returned. Now dead, they interrupt Penelope's story with songs, dances, jokes, and accusations—determined to tell their version of what happened. The Maids also play every other character in the play except Penelope.

ODYSSEUS:

King of Ithaca. The famous hero of The Odyssey. Clever, charming, and a master trickster, he spends twenty years away from Ithaca before finally returning home.

TELEMACHUS:

Son of Penelope and Odysseus. An infant when his father leaves for Troy, Telemachus grows up surrounded by the Suitors and longs for his father's return.

HELEN:

Penelope's Cousin / Helen of Troy.

The famously beautiful woman at the center of the Trojan War and a constant source of comparison and rivalry for Penelope.

KEY VOCABULARY

Epic

A long narrative about heroic deeds and adventures. The Odyssey is an ancient Greek epic.

Hades / Underworld

The realm of the dead in Greek mythology. Penelope and the Maids tell the play from there.

Naiad

A water nymph in Greek mythology. Penelope's mother is a Naiad.

Suitor

Someone seeking to marry another person. Penelope's Suitors occupy her home while Odysseus is missing.

Shroud

Cloth used to cover or wrap a body for burial.

Chorus

A group of performers who collectively comment upon the action of a play.

Oral Tradition

Stories passed from person to person through speech and performance rather than writing.

Retelling

A new version of an existing story, often changing its perspective, emphasis, or interpretation.

DURING THE SHOW

A few reminders as you join us in the world of the play:

1. **Arrive on time:** Timeliness is key. It is important to arrive at least ten minutes before the show's 7:30 p.m. start time for preview and evening shows, and 2:00 p.m. for Sunday matinees. Consider arriving early to beat the lines and find good parking.
2. **Silence electronic devices:** Turn off or silence all phones, watches, and other devices that may make noise.
3. **No talking during the performance:** Save conversations for intermission or after the show.
4. **No photography or recording:** Photography and recording are prohibited and can distract performers and other audience members.
5. **Stay seated:** Don't leave your seat during the performance unless it's an emergency. Take bathroom breaks during intermission.
6. **Use caution with food and drink:** No outside food is allowed in the theater, but the concession stand will be open before the show and during intermission. If you eat or drink, be discreet.
7. **React appropriately:** Actors love appropriate reactions. Audiences usually clap at the end of scenes or a performance. Audiences might laugh at funny lines, gasp at surprise events, and even weep during tragic scenes. If you are unsure of an appropriate reaction, use other audience members as your guide.
8. **Treat the staff with respect:** Sometimes staff members make mistakes - missing tickets, misunderstandings, and so on. Be calm when dealing with problems.
9. **Parking:** Please do not park in the space between our building and the red brick building located on the east side, or you will be towed. Street parking is available but limited.



ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Why *The Penelopiad*? A statement from Reno Little Theater's Artistic Leadership Committee:

The Reno Little Theater Artistic Leadership Committee chose to produce *The Penelopiad* because Margaret Atwood's bold reimagining of Penelope's story gives voice to women who have often been pushed to the margins of the stories we know. The play offers a compelling blend of humor, music, mythology, and contemporary perspective while inviting audiences to question whose stories are remembered, whose voices are heard, and who gets to shape the narrative. We believe *The Penelopiad* will challenge, entertain, and spark meaningful conversation while offering our audiences a fresh and provocative theatrical experience.

The Penelopiad is being produced by Reno Little Theater at 147 E. Pueblo St., Reno, NV. The show runs from September 25 to October 16, with a preview on Wednesday, September 23 and a post-show talkback with the audience on Sunday, October 4.

For questions or additional information about this packet, please contact luis@renolittletheater.org



Two stages, one company



PULLING AT THE THREAD

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BEFORE WATCHING

- Who usually gets to decide which version of a story becomes the “official” version?
- Can two people experience the same event and honestly remember it differently?
- What makes you trust (or distrust) a storyteller?

AT INTERMISSION

- So far, do you trust Penelope as a storyteller? Why or why not?
- How have the Maids challenged Penelope’s version of events?
- What differences have you noticed between Penelope’s life and the lives of the Maids?

AFTER WATCHING

- Did you trust Penelope more or less by the end of the play? What changed your mind?
- What do the Maids want us to understand that Penelope’s version leaves out?
- Who has power in this story? Who does not? How does that affect whose story gets heard?