

**Vox Feminae: Telling Women's Stories in Ursula LeGuin's *Lavinia* and  
Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad***

**Shalini Teresa Fernandez**

**Abstract**

From the mid-twentieth century there has been an unprecedented rise in the publications of rewritings of myth, many of which have been written by women especially in the arena of popular fiction.

One of the functions of myth is as a means of collective socialization that situates the individual within a larger cultural experience, then myth can be said to provide beliefs, roles and models of behaviour that can be and are emulated or drawn upon within the community or society and which are socially and culturally naturalized. This naturalization then serves to hide the dynamics of power and inequalities (gender, race, class) inherent within the social system. Feminist engagement with these myths can then be seen as a way of contesting hegemonic social controls and constructions, and feminist rewritings of these genres an attempt to reshape social grammars.

Homer and Virgil's iconic epic tales, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, feature the adventures of Odysseus and Aeneas whose stories are told largely from the perspectives of the male protagonists whose narrative focus is on their actions and homosocial relationships. LeGuin's *Lavinia* and Atwood's *The Penelopiad* re-tell these heroic stories from a more liminal perspective – from the margins to which Lavinia and Penelope, the two wives, have been relegated – thus drawing attention to and focusing on the often unspoken social realities and power structures within their marriages and communities that circumscribe and dictate the lives of women. Both LeGuin and Atwood's rewritings of these influential epics serve both to reaffirm the importance of these mythic narratives within the cultural imaginary and to palimpsestically facilitate a “re-visioning” of these myths for a contemporary audience.

Myth, as Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests, is not static but rather dynamic—it is both constant and yet mutable, both subject to change just as much as it is resistant to change. It is in this tension between these two positions that LeGuin and Atwood's rewritings of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* can function within the system both as a means of revising as well as within that revision, perpetuating the myths.

Keywords: feminist rewriting, myth, Le Guin, Atwood, *Lavinia*, Penelope, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*