

Bombshells and The Penelopiad

1. Introductions

Bombshells is a collection of six monologues written by Joanna Murray-Smith, each featuring one female character who is symbolic of a specific stage in life and role. Together, they are a telling account of the struggles of being a woman in a modern world, and the monologue format allows the author to emphasise how they are simultaneously unique and universally relatable.

The Penelopiad is Margaret Atwood's retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* from Odysseus' wife Penelope's point of view. The story is narrated first-person by Penelope who resides in the underworld, but is also peppered with spoken, sung or chanted testimonies from the twelve dead maids of the story who act as a Chorus, a traditional part of ancient Greek theatre. Although the story is old and much-retold, the voice is modern and the author's messages concerning women and their position in the world and their relationship with men are universal, regardless of the historical period.

2. Themes

Bombshells	The Penelopiad	Bombshells	The Penelopiad
The difficulties of motherhood		Motherhood in a time when a mother has to 'have it all'	Motherhood when a mother's greatest duty is to produce male heirs
Aligning oneself with a patriarchal social structure		A wholly human universe	Mythological and divine intervention in human lives
Women viewing one another as competitors		No portrayal of rape	Rape of women as a widespread, well-known issue
'Accepted' forms of women's power; sexuality, influence, attraction, diplomacy			
The need to conform to outsiders' expectations			

3. Character analysis

Bombshells

Character	Description	Comparisons
Meryl Louise Davenport	A high-strung, anxious mother whose daily life is filled with self-recrimination and who feels the outside world judging her for everything she does	*Penelope's approach to motherhood *Eurycleia's fussiness and delight in her power in this domain *All mothers
Tiggy Entwistle	Recently abandoned by her longstanding partner Harry, Tiggy is a shy, timid and yet deeply emotional woman who feels cheated out of the time and commitments she made to him.	*Penelope's continued attachment to Odysseus *Helen's flippancy towards male devotion

Mary O'Donnel	Mary is ferociously competitive and cannot abide the thought that her rival Angela McTerry might surpass her theatrical talents	*Helen's need to be admired *Odysseus' willingness to do whatever needs to be done in order to achieve his goals *Telemachus' youthful belief and confidence in his own superiority
Theresa McTerry	Taking the expression 'cold feet' to new heights, Theresa is a symbol of the pressures on women to become settled and have children before the biological clock runs out, and is very clearly marrying someone she cannot imagine having good future with	*Penelope's initial infatuation with Odysseus *Helen's utter certainty in every move she makes
Winsome Webster	A woman who defines her life by her widowhood and is pleasantly surprised when a younger blind man she is reading to takes a greater interest in her.	*Penelope's life as a mother compared to Winsome's *Eurycleia's dominance as an older woman
Zoe Struthers	An 'ageing American diva' who has experienced many shocks and setbacks, including the death of her mother, her husband's abandonment, and the realisation that her father was not her real father. While she has many regrets, she is continuing to perform.	*Penelope's regrets concerning her marriage to Odysseus *Penelope's relationship with her son Telemachus

The Penelopiad – Major Characters

Character	Description	Comparisons
Penelope (Princess of Sparta, then Queen of Ithaca)	The clever, reserved protagonist of <u>The Penelopiad</u> who becomes Odysseus' wife. She frequently feels powerless and by her own admission cries a lot, but is extremely aware of others' machinations.	*Any of the women in <u>Bombshells</u>
Helen of Troy	Penelope's vain, beautiful and uncaring cousin who feeds off men's adoration and whose actions drive much of the novel's narrative	*Theresa McTerry's need to be admired
Odysseus (of Ithaca)	Penelope's crafty and elusive husband, whose cleverness and willingness to engage in	*Mirrors Mary O'Donnel's determination *Completely lacks Winsome Webster's gentleness

	deceitful practices are his weapons in all areas of his life	*Somewhat frightened of his past like Zoe Struthers
The Maids	The twelve young, beautiful maids who help Penelope in her failed quest to rid the Ithacan palace of the Suitors, form the Chorus in <u>The Penelopiad</u> and are hanged near its conclusion	*Share Tiggy Entwhistle's anger over the unfairness visited upon them *Also share Winsome Webster's delight in reciprocated desire and love
Eurycleia	Odysseus' former nurse who is widely respected and enjoys 'interfering' and exercising her power, particularly over Penelope	*Similar to Zoe Struthers in seizing power of any kind with both hands *Unlike Theresa, Meryl Louise or Tiggy, she is definitely not down-trodden
Telemachus, Prince of Ithaca	Penelope and Odysseus' son who grows up 'quite spoiled' and begins to conspire against his mother when he begins to come of age	*Like his father, shares Mary O'Donnel's zeal for getting what he wants
The Suitors	A group of men who descend upon Penelope's household in Odysseus' absence and seek to force her to marry one of them	*No real likeness in their behaviour in any of the women of <u>Bombshells</u>

The Penelopiad – Minor Characters

Character	Description
Icarius, King of Sparta	Penelope's father, a suspicious, fearful man who orders his infant daughter to be drowned
Penelope's mother	A Naiad with little interest in mothering
Iphthime	Penelope's older sister who appears to her in a dream
Clytemnestra	Penelope's cousin known for her horrible acts of adultery and murder
Menelaus	Helen's husband who is rich and cuckolded by her
Agamemnon	Menelaus' brother
Palamedes	Menelaus' and Agamemnon's friend
Laertes, King of Ithaca	Odysseus' father
Anticleia, Queen of Ithaca	Odysseus' mother who is constantly disapproving and dislikes Penelope
Autolycus	Odysseus' grandfather
Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks	One of the Maids, could be called their ringleader
Actoris	Penelope's maid who died not long after arriving in Ithaca
Tyndareus, King of Sparta	Helen's father and Penelope's uncle who likely helped Odysseus cheat in the contest to win Penelope's hand

Piraeus	Friend of Telemachus
Theoclymenus	Friend of Telemachus
Paris, Prince of Troy	A younger son of King Priam with whom Helen has her disastrous affair
Antinous	The first of the Suitors
Amphinomus	Another of the Suitors, said to be the most polite
Melanthius	A goatherd who helps the suitors and is viciously maimed by Odysseus for this

4. Sample paragraphs

Prompt: How do Bombshells and The Penelopiad emphasise the subtleties of the male-female relationship dynamic?

Introduction

While the narratives of both Bombshells and The Penelopiad are firmly focused on the female perspective of issues relevant to them, the texts also address the male perspective and role in such issues. Like the women, the men created by the authors have instrumental roles in the way the stories play out, which interestingly are sometimes disproportionate to their actual involvement in the plot.

Body paragraph

One of the main differences between the texts, other than the literary format is the level of dialogue and active participation afforded to the male characters. In The Penelopiad, the male characters arguably largely direct Penelope's life, from her father essentially selling her into marriage to Odysseus' life-disrupting departure, return and 'lies...tricks and... thieving', not to mention her 'quite spoiled' son Telemachus' will to usurp and disobey his mother. Penelope's narration gives them large amounts of dialogue and paints them as three-dimensional people in her life, whereas the male characters in Bombshells have barely any dialogue – most of them have none – and yet manage to cause a similar level of turmoil in the female characters. The marriage of Theresa McTerry to her fiancé Ted, for example, sends her into long, capitalised rants heavily punctuated with exclamation marks and profanities yet Murray-Smith does not even give Ted a full description. Even without forming the male characters into rich, detailed personas, she still manages to fully showcase the chaos visited upon Theresa by her ill-considered marriage. She draws greater attention to her inner panic and desperation than we see in Penelope, whose voice retains a sense of shocked detachment even when crying or suffering. As such, the differing approaches of the authors both showcase the fact that men can wreak significant havoc with women's lives, and that we do not actually need to know much about the particulars of the men or their acts to comprehend the women's suffering.

Conclusion

The approaches of Atwood and Murray-Smith towards the level of engagement of their male characters differ significantly, yet both show the full impact of their actions on the lives of their female counterparts. Even when the men are given only cursory mentions, their presence as an agent of change within the story is sufficient for them to dramatically alter the courses of the characters they consort with.

5. Tips

It's very hard to look past the overt feminist overtones of both texts, but *try* – even though these are some of the most interesting parts of the texts and you definitely should discuss them (some research on the key figureheads and movements of feminism wouldn't go astray), there is more to them than messages about women. Maybe expand your view to more general ideas about human beings, how we live our lives and the ways we react to situations of duress.

Also consider that these texts are in two different formats; how does the live performance of Bombshells change the way it is perceived? How do the different media of these texts support or emphasise the authors' messages? What can a monologue do better than a book in terms of transmitting an idea and vice versa?

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