

## **‘Cutting the Threads with Words’: the Figure of Penelope in the Poetry of Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke<sup>1</sup>**

Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke (1939–2020) is one of Greece’s leading female poetic voices with a work that spans over thirty years. She was also a linguist and an acclaimed translator. Her work is widely read in Greece and it has also received official recognition: it has been awarded the Greek National Poetry Prize in 1985 and the Greek Academy’s Poetry Prize in 2000. The body, myth and nature but above all language and its ability to convey emotions and experiences are central features of her poetry. This essay discusses Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke’s poetics with reference to her revision of the character of Penelope in three seminal poems. Her original reworking of the myth shows her knowledge of feminist discourse such as the writing of Adrienne Rich and Hélène Cixous. Above all, it reveals that she was a careful poet-reader. I discuss her affinities with Elisaveta Bagryana’s ‘Penelope of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’ (1934) and, perhaps surprisingly, her dialogue with Wallace Stevens’ brilliant poem ‘The World as Meditation’ (1952). The essay also addresses the wider question of the use of ancient Greek myth in feminist writing and by women poets in Greece.

**Keywords:** Penelope, myth, poetry, women’s writing, feminism, modern Greek literature

Oh, these invisible and terrifying threads,  
which you snag then slacken yet never snap,  
which manipulate our fates, and permanently bind us  
to unborn offspring and dead progenitors!

With one leap into infinity I’d like  
to snap off each knot – so as to glimpse,  
free, separate – myself – my image,  
with no past, no rank, no age, no name!

(Bagryana 1993: 57–63)

In this poem of 1934, the Bulgarian poet Elisaveta Bagryana bemoaned the way in which people, and women especially, are tied in a tight net of relationships and expectations which restrict freedom and obscure self-knowledge. In the lines quoted above as an epigraph to this essay, the poetic persona wishes to disentangle herself from these binding threads, to “snap off each knot,” in order to allow her unmediated self to emerge free of any constraints.

In the following sections of this poem, these constraints are addressed in greater detail: inherited mentalities (“It [the past] lends the violet or scarlet colour to our blood,” 1.3) and culture (“It gives the lighter or darker shading to our soul,” 1.4) shape personal identities, and both are very powerful and difficult ties to break. She also bemoans the mixed blessing that is the past (“Oh, the past! You – inevitable evil or good;/you – bright gift or burdening blackness,” 1.9–10). Bagryana wants modern women to be different from Penelope, not (as she sees her) passive and restricted but active and engaging in the thrill that is life. Her Penelope is very Odyssean: she has the same thirst for life, for adventure and for new experiences as her famous husband. She embraces travel; *she* will be the one to return to the family hearth after many adventures to become the “devoted wife” but also “an immortal woman”.

We find in this poem one of the earliest engagements with the figure of Penelope by a woman poet.<sup>2</sup> Bagryana challenges the traditional popularised story of the *Odyssey* with its stereotypically perceived gender roles;<sup>3</sup> for it is true that Penelope is one of the mythical figures who lent themselves to what we now call revisionist mythmaking as women poets attempted to challenge traditional gender roles and especially the role of women in the arts and society. Revisionist examples accumulate, unsurprisingly so, from the 1970s onwards as the feminist movement gains momentum and becomes theorized in well-known writings such as those of Adrienne Rich, who, in her seminal essay “When We Dead Awaken” (1971) focuses on the importance of re-vision in the process of awakening of the female consciousness; (Rich 1972: 18–30) or Cixous who spoke of *écriture féminine* and the need to create a new language to express the female experience (Cixous 1976: 875–893). But in 1934 this momentum had not gathered yet. Bagryana’s poem was, in this sense, ahead of its time and prophetic of the way that feminist writers would seek to explore a feminine identity through myth by questioning traditional representations of women and putting forward a new narrative, a re-telling of the old story.

This is the aim too of the poems by Anghelaki-Rooke (1939–2020) that I will discuss in this essay and which are appended at the end for the reader’s convenience. Two of those poems were published in 1977 in a collection entitled *The Scattered Papers of Penelope*.<sup>4</sup> The title itself, which was adopted by Anghelaki-Rooke’s translator, Karen Van Dyck, in her translations of selected poems, clearly shows that Penelope’s figure was instrumental in the fashioning of Anghelaki-Rooke’s poetic persona. The picture is completed in 1996 with ‘The Other Penelope’ in the collection *Flesh Is a Beautiful Desert* (1996) which, as I will claim, closes Anghelaki-Rooke’s engagement with classical myth. What is it, however, that begins this engagement? There is no doubt that Anghelaki-Rooke is determined to offer a new female

and feminist voice in the context of the male-dominated world of modern Greek poetry.<sup>5</sup> Outside her poetic work, this becomes clear in essays that she has written, and especially so in “Sex Roles in Modern Greek Poetry”, written during her phase of greatest attention to myth. It highlights the tradition of women’s poetry in Greece and reveals Anghelaki-Rooke’s concern with this tradition’s characteristics and goals. It is clear that she was aiming at creating a genealogy of women poets, looking back at the work of those who came before her. At the same time, the intertextual web of her poetry places the Greek poet at an international crossroads of influential voices which help her shape her vision. Her knowledge of many languages including Russian<sup>6</sup> acts as a liberating force in this endeavour, allowing her to draw from outside the modern Greek canon.

That she should choose a mythical figure to do so is not without significance:<sup>7</sup> it underlines Anghelaki-Rooke’s determination to challenge the tradition from within and in its own terms. Indeed, Greek women poets face a double challenge when it comes to using classical allusions and myth in their poetry. The awareness of an illustrious tradition set aside, they are faced with the additional dimension of gender roles, as Christopher Robinson succinctly puts it: with the unflattering depiction of women in classical literature, and, on the other hand, with the patriarchal values that this tradition has helped sustain and the literary tradition that it has supported (Robinson 1996: 109–120). That Anghelaki-Rooke makes these choices, therefore, reflects the ambition of a young female writer to enter the Greek literary stage dynamically and on her own terms.

Before Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke it was mainly male poets (or minor women poets who embraced traditional perceptions of women) who have used the figure of Penelope to either assert traditional gender roles (as in the case of Kostis Palamas or Nikos Kazantzakis) or to offer, in the case of Kostas Varnalis, writing from the perspective of the Left, a highly subversive, sexually predatory, version of this character.<sup>8</sup> Kazantzakis’ case may be relevant for Anghelaki-Rooke’s Penelope poems, because he was Anghelaki-Rooke’s godfather and an early admirer of her poetic output that began when she was only 17 years old (1956). As I will discuss, her reworking of Penelope is very much in the spirit of second-wave feminism, and the image of Penelope emerging from these earlier poets could not have satisfied an ambitious woman poet: both Varnalis and Kazantzakis express extremes that emerged from a male imagination according to which a woman may be either submissive and compliant or aggressive and violent and they missed all the nuance and subtlety of female consciousness and experience.

If the work of male poets and traditional female voices form the establishment against which Anghelaki-Rooke reacts, looking outside Greece provides important precedents that may have offered her more positive examples. Bagryana may be a case in point and one Anghelaki-Rooke could well be familiar with.<sup>9</sup> The idea of the binding threads in relation to feminine identity is an intriguing parallel, important for both these women poets. In Bagryana's poem, however, Penelope becomes a female Odysseus and her choices copy his own actions. This modern Penelope of the twentieth century rejects Penelope's patient waiting and weaving; she also rejects her perceived restriction in space and is eager to 'drink life to the lees', as Tennyson wrote of his own 'Ulysses':

Oh, take me, you, countless roads,  
winding serpents hissing in the sky,  
and on earth, and at sea.

Take my uncalm and bright thirst  
and from one end of the world to the other, take  
them and shake up the oceans,

so that an ocean of human masses  
could overflow its shores  
and clean up the hearth of this earth,

to shake up the fortified,  
ossified soullessness  
of this century submerged in dark greed! (3.1–12)<sup>10</sup>

Bagryana's character aims at reforming the world. Following in Odysseus' footsteps, the modern Penelope is putting her thirst for life in the service of social change but with an agenda informed by the kind of political affiliation that Anghelaki-Rooke did not have: restless, ambitious, with fiery determination, she represents women's passion and the hope that it will fuel radical change in a world that has lost its moral compass.

Although Anghelaki-Rooke's Penelope is no less passionate, she is on the path of another tradition in which female identity develops in the space left by Odysseus' absence. This becomes clear in all three poems devoted to the retelling of the myth. In 'Penelope Says'

the poetic persona states that ‘absence is the theme of my life’ (7). In ‘The Other Penelope,’ Odysseus remains an idea on the margins of Penelope’s world. In ‘The Suitors’ this idea is developed in greater length. The poem begins with a set of recognisable *topoi* of women’s writing (see Appendix, 1–19), the motifs of the closed space, of passivity and of silence. Penelope is “upstairs” and looks at the world from the window, besieged by the suitors who are presented as having control over her life whereas the grille of the window suggests entrapment.

What begins, however, as an enclosure in which the female subject is objectified under the male gaze and control,<sup>11</sup> develops into something quite different. The closed room turns into “a room of one’s own”, as described by Virginia Woolf; a space of self-discovery and self-knowledge. The references to “a change” (24), to “a shining thread” (25) or again to “the essence of myself” (27) frame the emergence of a “kernel” (29) devoid, just as in the lines from Bagryana’s poem in the epigraph, of all the layers of externally imposed conventions (29–34). The thread that usually marks Penelope’s weaving, becomes a sort of Ariadne’s thread, leading her towards the depths of her own consciousness.<sup>12</sup> She is gradually becoming an independent individual that promises to be so powerful that “even death will have value” (38). This is an important statement, because it underlines the increasing control that she foresees having over her own life.

The suitors here represent external constraints and others’ expectations and perceptions of the female subject imposed on her by a traditional, patriarchal society. But the subtle Homeric references in the poem already announce their demise: they are “cut into slices” (8) just like so many formulaic references to food in the *Odyssey*, an image that alludes to their slaughter;<sup>13</sup> they are “dazzled by the light” (15) just as their dead souls are spellbound by Hermes’ golden wand at the beginning of book XXIV.<sup>14</sup> The hardest bonds to break, however, are those of internalized behaviours and expectations considered to be one’s own free choice. It is clear from the following lines that feminist theory and activism on their own cannot secure the formation of a complete female consciousness:

I too once had  
mud in my hair  
lemon blossoms behind my ears  
and would cry passionately  
‘Free yourself of your bonds!’  
but the bonds go deep:

a way of being  
where the self plays itself. (40–47)

What is required is a self-awareness that consciously keeps Odysseus at bay despite the passions of the flesh. This dimension of the “poetics of absence” gives Penelope agency and choice which emerge at the end of the poem, where Anghelaki-Rooke toys with the question of whether Penelope had recognized her husband or not (“my flesh waits for you/but my mind saw you coming/long ago/and has accompanied you to the door.” 61–63). These ideas are more comprehensively developed in Anghelaki-Rooke’s best-known poem, ‘Penelope Says’. And it is not solely the feminist tradition that defines its meaning but also the subtle exploration of the image of the artist from the perspective of Penelope in Wallace Stevens’ seminal poem ‘The World as Meditation’ (1952). Stevens’ poem engages with key features of the *Odyssey* that made it into modern poems: absence, waiting, weaving, love and creation, and the constant postponement of Odysseus’ return. Only here, however and in Anghelaki-Rooke’s ‘Penelope Says’ do we find them all woven together to create a comprehensive poetic stance.

‘The World as Meditation’<sup>15</sup> begins with an epigraph, a quote from the Romanian-French composer Georges Enesco. This already introduces to the reader the different values on which the poem develops: travelling (as did Odysseus) and performance are secondary to the essential process of meditation, the workings of the mind. The “dream,” that is, creative imagination, is what lies at the foundation of every creative process, and it is not linear, like the journey, but circular, an exercise that follows the cycle of day and night. A contrast emerges here between two different kinds of travelling (physical and of the mind) which, in the main body of the poem, correspond to Odysseus and Penelope.

Stevens’ reworking of the myth leaves Odysseus at the periphery of the poem and focuses on Penelope. His identity is questioned right from the beginning as he changes from “Ulysses” (1) to “someone” (3) and then becomes “a form of fire” (5) and a “savage presence” (6). Later he is identified with “the warmth of the sun” (16) and “a barbarous strength” (21). In other words, Odysseus merges with the natural world. Penelope, on the other hand stands out as the receding of her husband opens up the space for her to compose her own self. The choice of words is not random: it harks back at the epigraph and implies that the process of the composition of a subjectivity may be compared to that of a musical piece – it comprises many movements and moods, it is dynamic and changes with each performance. It is also internalised, the work of the mind.

Stevens is closer to Homer when he refuses to restrict Penelope to a room or to one activity, weaving. There is a “deep-founded sheltering” (9) that she has imagined but she is not trapped in it. Her weaving is mentioned in the second stanza, but the poem also suggests that she was managing the estate and looking after her trees.<sup>16</sup> Penelope is not objectified either. Characteristically, she is not combing her hair in front of a mirror but remains inward-looking, opening up the space of the mind as a space of artistic creation. It is indeed in the mind that “thoughts beat in her like her heart” (17), a metaphorical image of pregnancy that gives birth later to the word, the syllables that she pronounces. She creates her world, creates *the* world and through it, her own self. She becomes the archetypal artist. The internalized physical desire is sublimated into art.

The poem challenges the duality of active male vs passive female, a typical one in feminist criticism of traditional attitudes, because it stages the level of activity that develops in a condition of apparent stillness and passivity, replacing the physical *déplacement* with a mental one. Stillness is the suspension of physical movement, a vortex that maximises the potential of the mind. In the final stanza the product of creation is uttered syllable after syllable, the logos of a woman who is creating her man, her story.<sup>17</sup> It also puts emphasis on the process rather than the final product (“kept coming constantly so near”, 24), another important concept of feminist criticism. With Odysseus’ absence Stevens underlines the importance of deprivation in fuelling creativity. It is the hero who becomes a Muse, in a rearrangement of the traditional roles.

Penelope does not break the bonds of her marriage, however, and therefore her stance is not radical enough. The perception of the self remains dependent on that excellent virtue of the ideal couple, *homophrosyne* (like-mindedness): οὐ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ γε κρεῖσσον καὶ ἄρειον, ἢ ὄθ’ ὁμοφρονέοντε νοήμασιν οἶκον ἔχητον/ἀνὴρ ἠδὲ γυνή.<sup>18</sup> Many images in the poem reflect the love of the famous couple (see Appendix stanza 3 and 5). Unlike Anghelaki-Rooke in ‘The Suitors’ discussed above, she does not close the door to him, quite the opposite: “His arms would be her necklace/And her belt, the final fortune of their desire” (14–15). More importantly, she never forgets him (24) and in doing so, guarantees Odysseus’ *kleos*, his royal power and his successful *nostos*.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly Stevens’ Penelope does not wish to emancipate herself altogether despite her exercise in autonomy. What is more, her production remains in the sphere of the mind leaving out the female body which, as we shall see, is crucial to the image of the female artist as Anghelaki-Rooke wanted it. And she has no voice – the *sotto voce* and Penelope’s compliance in Stevens’ poem are points that Anghelaki-Rooke addresses using the form of the dramatic

monologue in her signature poem, 'Penelope Says'. The voice, however, has none of the anger, frustration, or irony that we find in other reworkings of the myth by women.<sup>20</sup>

We can identify the usual motifs here: Penelope's weaving, and the absence of Odysseus. It is clear however that in the hands of Anghelaki-Rooke they become means of exploring female creative and artistic consciousness.<sup>21</sup> For example, the poem rejects traditionally accepted activities of women from the outset (needlework, etc.); the double negation with which the poem begins leaves no doubt that it is *writing* that this specific Penelope is engaged with. What is more, the weaving and un-weaving, typical again of Penelope's trickery, has now become the artist's struggle with words, the writing, erasing, and rewriting at the heart of literature. In the same vein, Odysseus' absence which caused the complications that led to Penelope's weaving in the epic, is given a radical treatment: it allows the foregrounding of the female body suffering from the deprivation of a beloved presence, which in turn makes the speaker aware of the complementarity of the physical and the intellectual in the process of artistic creation:

tears and the natural suffering  
of the deprived body  
appear on the page (8–10)

This absence, however, just as in the case of Stevens, is what opens up the very space in which the female speaker is able to reflect and develop as an artist. The epigraph Anghelaki-Rooke chooses to forward her poem with, the last two lines from Daniel Weissbort's poem 'Have Faith,' underline the instrumental role of absence, reminding us of a similar treatment of deprivation in the poem by Stevens:

Have faith. There have been signs enough.  
But faith is an alien thing to me.  
Remember, though, that love was too.  
I have begun to read the signs  
and your absence teaches me  
what art could not.<sup>22</sup>

One learns to have faith just as one learns to love, and absence, according to Weissbort's poem, triggers a process of learning how to have faith. In the context of Anghelaki-Rooke's



poem, I claim that absence teaches the female voice in the poem how to get to know and have faith in herself. “She has composed so long a self,” wrote Stevens. This process of self-discovery is as painful as it is rewarding and fulfilling:

It is a hard and thankless job.  
My only reward is that I understand  
in the end what human presence is  
what absence is  
or how the self functions  
in such desolation, in so much time (41–46)

But how is this process of self-discovery staged and explored in the poem?

It is clear from the outset that the speaker sets herself apart and against the old *status quo* that wants women to be silent and passive observers of life. The character of Penelope that Anghelaki-Rooke develops is outspoken, active, and unambiguous in her wishes and actions:

and I will cut  
with words  
the threads that bind me (29–31)

This is a masterly metaphorical use of the weaving imagery, which recalls again Bagryana’s poem. Bagryana’s powerful lines explore, as I wrote at the beginning, the complex tangle of threads that bind the female subject restricting freedom but also rendering it a puppet in the power relations that define patriarchy. Cutting the threads is therefore an act of freedom, of emancipation, but it also turns this modern Penelope into a different mythical figure altogether, giving her the features of an Atropos. Atropos was one of the three Fates, and it was she who ended life by cutting the threads that bound people to it. Cutting the threads of tradition, therefore, could be a fateful act because it puts the very survival of the modern woman artist in danger, as she can no longer draw from the rich (but patriarchal) well of tradition. An alternative tradition of women’s writing, on the other hand, has not taken shape yet.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see with ‘The Other Penelope’, the violence and risks such a decision entails do not go unacknowledged.

The poet is using words to cut herself off the ties that bind her to her husband but also the tradition that binds women within a male worldview. Words are a powerful tool for freedom

but one that is not earned easily. Indeed, as we read in the first section of the poem, their weight is a struggle to manage. This is not a simple reassertion of the traditional idea of expressive difficulty and the challenges of mastering language. For a female author, we should add an additional dimension explored at length in feminist criticism: that words have already been used so extensively in male-dominated discourse that they have become heavy with acquired meanings of a patriarchally defined tradition (Ostriker 1982: 68–90). A woman artist has to go back to the original word, purified of all the cultural admixtures it has acquired in its successive appropriations and uses – a wish that has been dynamically expressed by Bagryana when she speaks of “the most primitive discoveries” (2.25).

‘Penelope Says’ engages indeed with such a process of purification by foregrounding female initiative and action in denying two things which have traditionally framed women’s lives: domesticity and attachment to a husband. Indeed, words and phrases such as “I stifle/the living cries” (12–13) “I will cut” (29) and, above all, “I passionately forget you” (37) emphasize the conscious choice of this course of action:

Each day  
I passionately forget you  
that you may be washed of the sins  
of fragrance and sweetness  
and finally all clean  
enter immortality. (36–41)

Unlike Stevens’ Penelope who never forgets Odysseus, or Bagryana’s, who returns to the family hearth, Anghelaki-Rooke’s heroine refuses to play the traditional role that secures the fame of her husband.<sup>24</sup> She also turns her back to the memory of the sensuality of her husband’s presence symbolically captured in the imagery of lines such as these: “with new birds and white sheets,” “the old ceiling dripping/under the weight of the rain.” She appears determined to live without one of the most typical characteristics of Penelope’s relationship to Odysseus, *homophrosyne*. The merging of personalities must be abandoned if the woman artist is to discover her own individuality and voice. This ‘conscious uncoupling’ changes radically the image of Odysseus in the poem. He is gradually divested of his physical substance and the sensuality attached to it (“that you may be washed of the sins/of fragrance and sweetness”) and becomes a symbol, comparable to the idea of him in the poem by Stevens.

Anghelaki-Rooke's subversion of Odysseus is all the more admirable for imposing on him what the hero himself rejected in the Homeric epic, immortality (40–41). His surprising choice is discussed by Wilson in the introduction of her translation. She explains that “the hero wants to maintain his dominant position in his household” and that “Odysseus’ choice to be with Penelope is associated [...] with [...] an insistence that a man (it has to be a man) might be able to claim or reclaim a permanent position at the head of his social ladder” (Wilson 2018: 60). It is about the preservation of patriarchy again and Anghelaki-Rooke creates a heroine who refuses to bow to this tradition. Penelope stays with her writing and keeps Odysseus at bay in the divine sphere. This is a masterstroke in the inversion of traditional motifs, because instead of the female figure as a Muse and inspiration, Anghelaki-Rooke turns Odysseus into such a symbol in the female journey of self-discovery.<sup>25</sup> As the poem clearly states, Odysseus is no longer a particular man but becomes a symbol of nostalgia in everyone’s mind – a symbol that sets off a creative journey, a spiritual adventure for the discovery of the self.

It would be misleading, however, to claim that this voyage of self-knowledge remains in the sphere of the mind (another feature distinguishing this poem from Stevens). As mentioned above, it is the inclusion of the physical aspect that makes this poetic exploration a distinctively female one – after all, “writing the body” was a key aspect of *écriture féminine*.<sup>26</sup> The physical and the intellectual are bound together from the very beginning of the poem: just as physical pain affects poetic expression, it is also defined and shaped by it as life and art permeate each other. The female body, however, offers a lot more than a powerful source of or direct contact with emotion and feelings. The ability to give birth (“the body keeps remaking itself,” 49) and the cyclicity which is, by definition, a female physical experience sets the body against the inexorable passing of time and death. The body regenerates itself through pain, illness and love, and is shaped by life and experience just as it becomes the means through which this life and experience are transformed into art: “hoping that what it loses in touch/it gains in essence.” (53-4).<sup>27</sup> In the case of Anghelaki-Rooke this is more than a mere literary device since she spoke openly of the health problems that marked her from birth and which have accompanied her throughout her life causing increasing disability. What is more, cyclicity is associated with the open-endedness of writing, of a desire, in the case of female writers, to resist closed meanings, the linear authority of patriarchal discourse.

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The last poem Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke wrote using the figure of Penelope comes twenty years later (1996) and bears the title 'The Other Penelope'. What could have triggered the return to the myth after all this time? Is it a kind of 'Rereading the *Odyssey* in Middle Age', reassessing the symbolic weight of the myth in the light of new life experiences?<sup>28</sup> Does it mark the completion of a poetic journey in relation to myth? Does the poet's attitude towards myth change? What is certainly the case is that 'The Other Penelope' is the last poem in which Anghelaki-Rooke makes explicit use of ancient Greek myth in her poetry, using it to explore poetic creation and female identity in relation to it.<sup>29</sup>

'The Other Penelope' is a complex poem because of its dense expression and original imagery, but its abrupt ending, the slamming of the door, suggests that the moment has come for closure. The fact that the poem belongs in a group entitled 'Personifications of an Ending' encourages this reading. But what kind of ending could this be? I believe that the poem stages the end of myth as a space and as a tool of self-discovery; it dramatizes the limitations of the language<sup>30</sup> of myth and the tradition that it embodies in the articulation of a new female identity as well as revealing the lure of this tradition and how deeply ingrained it is in the woman poet's consciousness. Through its imagery (the painting on the wall, 15–20), the poem also presents both the difficulty of ridding oneself from the old order which is deeply ingrained in the definition of the self and the realisation of the challenges and restrictions of representation precisely when one wishes to leave the traditional route. And I think that the music imagery in the second part of the poem (33–40) implies just that, how vulnerable one is to the music of convention.

Penelope is no longer restricted in the closed space of a room, as was the case with 'The Suitors,' although her roaming among the olive trees with dishevelled hair (no doubt an image that has its roots in actual experiences on the island of Aegina where Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke spent her summers in the family home) is comparable to the activist that appears in that poem. Does her freedom from the enclosure of her room reflect her liberation as a woman and an artist? What could the "other" in the title possibly mean?

Freedom from the old patriarchal order requires a process of 'othering' of the self through new associations. But how does one become 'other' if the traditional referents are no longer there? Knowing oneself, as Plato vividly explained in *Alcibiades*, can only happen in a community and in communion with friends – we look at the friend's eyes and we see our soul (the love and like-mindedness that we saw in Stevens poem).<sup>31</sup> We are constantly in a web of relationships, and 'weaving' who we are cannot take place in a vacuum. The power of such bonds is at its strongest in love. What is left of the self, then, when these bonds are severed?

Whereas in 'Penelope Says' emphasis is put on the body's uplifting power, 'The Other Penelope' turns to the effects of this violent separation. It explores, therefore, the consequences of the previous poem's determination to cut the threads and forget Odysseus with passion.

The poem shows this through references to visual representation and, in turn, music. Although Odysseus is no longer there, he has become an idea, relegated as in the case of Stevens in the periphery of the poem. His image, painted by herself, reminds Penelope of the powerful bonds (love, domesticity) that she strives to cut.

There in the island's palace –  
with the fake horizons  
of a saccharine love  
and only the bird in the window  
comprehending the infinite –  
she had painted with nature's colours  
the portrait of love.  
Seated, one leg crossed over the other,  
holding a cup of coffee  
up early, a little grumpy, smiling a little  
he emerges warm from the down of sleep.  
His shadow on the wall:  
trace of a piece of furniture just taken away  
blood of an ancient murder  
a lone performance of Karaghiozi  
on the screen, pain always behind him.  
Love and pain indivisible [...] (10–26)

Love's ekphrasis recalls portraits of winged males by the well-known painter Yannis Tsarouchis [see plate] and it is so ingrained in her identity that removing it is an act of violence that cannot leave the self unscathed. The reference to the ancient murder – perhaps that of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra; or of the suitors by Odysseus – reminds the reader that radical acts are never without consequences, and even when they aim at liberating the subject, they always leave a mark (a shadow on the wall, a stain). The choice of Karaghiozi, the indomitable trickster-hero, underlines Anghelaki-Rooke's determination and the subversiveness of her

stance but also reminds us that the performance of the self requires an audience to become effective.



Yannis Tsarouchis, *To Teleion* (1967), available via

<https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/67498/Yannis-Tsarouchis-To-Teleion> (accessed 30 September 2021)

Then in a typographically separated new section, we have a reference to music whose sounds seem to lure this Penelope back to the comforts and conventions she struggles to distance herself from (see Appendix, 33–47). Phrases such as “saccharine love” or “fake horizons” in the extract above, and here words such as “resignation”, “fear”, “evocative” underline the critical awareness of the dangers of a tradition which still holds a strong emotional appeal on the female subject for the supposed security and quietude it offers. And both with the ecphrasis and with the successive negations of the end of the poem quoted above, the powerful hold of what must be rejected is explored as in a paradox. The image of Eros is

removed but its description ironically represents again what is no longer there; the music is rejected but the successive negations only imprint on the page what is supposed to be left out. In 'The Other Penelope' these lines also describe what must be left behind if the poetic consciousness is to develop independently and the wound that this process causes. The language of love becomes traumatising in its effort to exist without its referent. The decisive action to slam the door is as much a sign of determination as it is of fear that one may not be able to resist. But it is a necessary step that must be taken if the self is to become independent and self-sufficient. Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke gives a nod here to Emily Dickinson and her poem 'The Soul Selects Her Own Society' (1890)<sup>32</sup> where the shutting of the door marks the female subject's resolve to become free of convention and to favour introspection:

The Soul selects her own Society –  
Then – shuts the Door –  
To her divine Majority –  
Present no more – (Dickinson 1970: 143)

Cutting the threads, therefore, implies cutting the ties with the mythical representation of love relationships and engaging with a language that, through new referents, will create new myths, and will give a new agency to women. Penelope has developed quite differently from her epic counterpart: she is more dynamic, her body and her sexuality are no longer indeterminate or ambiguous – above all, this Penelope breaks *homophrosyne* and forgets Odysseus, challenging in this way the cornerstones of the 'oikos' that hold up the traditional patriarchal values. This creates a wound that is emphasized in Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry hereafter because in subsequent poems she often returns to the theme of violence in the severing of the bonds of love, the wounds and pain that this entails. Unlike the poem of Stevens, Anghelaki-Rooke's feminist poetics is radical as becomes clear also in a later essay, where she clearly speaks of the need of "the 'enemy,' the 'opposition,' even the wound, i.e. something that gives birth to vision. Indeed, there must be an adversary element in the life of a poet [...] a punch in the stomach, something more or less violent [...]" (Anghelaki-Rooke 2000: 29–30). But the vision that will come out of this is certainly worthwhile according to Anghelaki-Rooke's own admission in "Sex Roles in Modern Greek Poetry:"

Female poets have learned poetry from men and not from women; it is only the younger generation which tries to shake off the burden of the role that they have always been

playing for men. It is a long and difficult process which will be greatly aided by the exploration of a feminine poetic language. Considerable different experiences will then be expressed and new ones concerning matters as basic as life, death, and time. And it is through this language again that a new woman will emerge, a complete being, containing and contained, acting and acted upon and a not a half entity where one half is desperately looking for its other half which is always situated somewhere outside herself (Anghelaki-Rooke 1983: 146).

To conclude: the use of the figure of Penelope helps Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke explore female artistic consciousness and put forward a female-centred poetic that distinguishes itself from traditional perceptions of women. Her stance is indebted to Bagryana's dynamic assertiveness and to the poetics of absence as explored in Wallace Stevens' seminal poem but becomes fully developed thanks to the principles of feminism and her careful reading and ingenious subversion of the Homeric text. Using myth, however, also helps her realize the limitations of Ancient Greek myth in the development of a female consciousness. Writing within the mythical tradition preserves the shadow of this very tradition despite the author's ambition to challenge it from within. In 'The Other Penelope,' this limitation is expressed through references to painting and music, but the poem also acknowledges how traumatic and violent the experience of severing oneself from this tradition can be. The violent imagery that dominates the poem underlines the strength of this bond but also the poet's determination to "slam" the door and explore alternative referents in the fashioning of a new female self, a new language and a new mythology.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the lecture series "Women in Balkan Literature and Culture: Subversive Readings and Identity Challenges" organized by the universities of Ghent and Manchester. I would like to thank the organisers Dr Miglena Dikova-Milanova and Dr Adelina Angusheva-Tihanov for their invitation. I would like to thank the reviewers and David Ricks for their constructive observations.

<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Clayton. *A Penelopean Poetics. Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford: Lexington, 2004). Clayton's overview in chapter 4 discusses some early cases such as Stephen Phillips' 'Penelope to Ulysses' (1915) and Roselle Montgomery's 'Ulysses Returns' where one can see an emerging female consciousness in Penelope's character and the promotion of her creative imagination. Better known examples before Bagryana are: H. D.'s 'At Ithaca' (1924) and Dorothy Parker's 'Penelope' (1928). Bagryana's stance is much stronger and clearer and anticipates later developments of the theme in the seventies and eighties.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike what is widely claimed, for example, Penelope was not weaving in isolation. Her loom was set in the halls of the palace. See, for example, Homer, *Od.* II.94: *στησάμενη μέγαν ἴσθον ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὕφαινε* ('She fixed a mighty loom inside the palace hall', trans. Emily Wilson). Indeed, Seth L. Schein alerts us against confusing the image of Penelope as appropriated by later authors and thinkers and her image in Homer: "it would be simplistic to adopt the standard, patriarchal reading of Penelope and of the roles of women and other females in the *Odyssey* generally without recognizing how the poem



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partly undoes this reading.” See “Female Representation and Interpreting the *Odyssey*,” in *The Distaff Side. Representing the Female in Homer’s Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 17–27.

<sup>4</sup> See Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope*, trans. Karen Van Dyck (London: Anvil, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> She speaks of “the male totalitarianism of Greek society” reflected in the poetry of the women she reviews and anthologises. See “Sex Roles in Modern Greek Poetry,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 1, no. 1 (May 1983): 141–155 (146).

<sup>6</sup> Anghelaki-Rooke was an acclaimed translator of Pushkin and Akhmatova.

<sup>7</sup> Not using myth or other allusions to the classical past was, according to Karen Van Dyck, a form of resistance in the seventies, not only to the traditional trends and themes of the male-dominated modern Greek canon but also, especially so from 1967 onwards, a resistance to the abuse of the classical tradition by the regime of the Colonels. This, however, is only partially true, because many women poets do actually make extremely creative use of myth for the same purpose. For Van Dyck’s argument see “Bruised Necks and Crumpled Petticoats: What’s Left of Myth in Contemporary Greek Women’s Poetry,” in *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry*, ed. Peter Mackridge, 121–130 (London: Frank Cass, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview see Angela Kastrinaki, “Η Πηνελόπη στον 20<sup>ο</sup> αιώνα,” in *Η Λογοτεχνία, μια σκανταλιά, μια διαφωγή ελευθερίας* (Athens: Polis, 2003), 191–215. This is a brief overview of modern Greek poems focusing on the figure of Penelope.

<sup>9</sup> Anghelaki-Rooke knew Russian very well and this may have given her access to Bulgarian poetry. What is more, Aris Diktaios had published an anthology of Bulgarian poetry in translation including Bagryana: *Ανθολογία Βουλγαρικής Ποίησης* (Αθήνα: Δωδώνη, 1971). Finally, Rita Boumi-Papa (1906–1984) published a selection of Bagryana’s poetry in translation: *Ελισαβέτα Μπαγκριάνα, Ποιήματα* (Αθήνα: Γρηγόρης, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> See Bagryana 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Anghelaki-Rooke discusses John Berger’s book *Ways of Seeing* (London: Harmondsworth, 1977) at the beginning of “Sex Roles in Modern Greek Poetry” with regards to the objectification of women in the visual arts.

<sup>12</sup> Anghelaki-Rooke herself comments on this idea in relation to another Greek poet, Maria Kyrtzaki and the use of Ariadne’s thread as a tool to explore female consciousness. See “Notes on Modern Greek poetry,” *Gramma* 8, (2000): 29. <https://doi.org/10.26262/gramma.v8i0.7295> (retrieved 23. 9. 2021)

<sup>13</sup> *Od.* XII.359–60: *αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ ῥ’ εὖξαντο καὶ ἔσφαζαν καὶ ἔδειραν, μῆρούς τ’ ἐξέταμον* (‘They prayed, then killed them, skinned them, and cut off /the thighs,’ tr. Wilson)

<sup>14</sup> *Od.* XXIV.3: *τῆ τ’ ἀνδρῶν ὄμματα θέλγει* (‘with which he casts a spell to close men’s eyes,’ tr. Wilson).

<sup>15</sup> My reading is informed by Lauren Rusk’s insightful analysis in her paper “Penelope’s Creative Desiring: ‘The World as Meditation’,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 9, no 1 (Spring 1985): 15–25.

<sup>16</sup> See *Od.* IV.735–37: *ἀλλὰ τις ὀτρηνῶς Δολίον καλέσειε γέροντα, [...]/καὶ μοι κῆπον ἔχει πολυδένδρεον* (‘Now call old Dolius, my gardener,/the slave who cares for all my trees.’ tr. Wilson).

<sup>17</sup> This is a motif that will dominate again later feminist revisions of the myth, not least Carol Ann Duffy’s version of Penelope in *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 1999): 70–71.

<sup>18</sup> Homer *Od.* VI.180–4: ‘for nothing could be better than when two/live in one house, their minds in harmony’ (trans. Wilson).

<sup>19</sup> This is extensively discussed in all modern scholarship on the figure of Penelope. See indicatively Barbara Dell’Abate-Çelebi, *Penelope’s Daughters* (Nebraska: Zea Books, 2016): 84–94.

<sup>20</sup> Penelope poems by Hilda Doolittle, Bagryana or Dorothy Parker have such tones.

<sup>21</sup> Victoria Reuter offers a detailed reading of this poem in the light of gender theory and especially Butler’s theory of the subject. See her unpublished thesis “Penelope Differently. Feminist Re-visions of Myth” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2014): 185–193.

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordc942.html?id=2340> (Accessed 30 September 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Feminists regret this lack of alternative sources that keep them trapped to the language of patriarchy.

<sup>24</sup> Reuter is right in emphasizing this in her discussion. See “Penelope Differently,” 191.

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<sup>25</sup> Anghelaki-Rooke discusses this passive role of women in the work of male artists in “Sex Roles”. See p. 141 for example.

<sup>26</sup> See indicatively Ann Rosalind Jones, “Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of L’ Écriture Féminine,” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (1981).

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed discussion of the centrality of the body in Anghelaki-Rooke’s poetry see Reuter, “Penelope Differently,” 165-180 and S. Bohandy, “Defining the Self through the Body in Four Poems by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke and Sylvia Plath,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 12, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>28</sup> The title is of a poem by Linda Pastan in *Carnival Evening. New and Selected Poems 1968–1998*, (New York: Norton, 1998), 202.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, after ‘The Other Penelope’ Anghelaki-Rooke will not return to ancient Greek mythology again, preferring to focus on her own ‘mythology’ of female figures: Lypiu, Magdalen etc.

<sup>30</sup> Although her interpretation of the poem differs from the one proposed here, Reuter reaches a similar conclusion regarding the centrality of the language of poetry in Anghelaki-Rooke’s feminist poetics.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades*, 133b.

<sup>32</sup> I would like to thank here David Ricks for bringing this poem to my attention.

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## APPENDIX OF POEMS DISCUSSED

### Wallace Stevens, 'The World as Meditation' (1952)

In *The Collected Poems Of Wallace Stevens*, 520–521. New York: 1954.

<https://ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/world-as-meditation/docview/2141229921/se-2?accountid=9851>

*J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à voyager. Mais l'exercice essentiel du compositeur – la méditation – rien ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi... Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour.* – Georges Enesco

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,  
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.  
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.  
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,       5  
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells.

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,  
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,  
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise       10  
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.  
No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.  
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace  
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.       15

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun  
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.  
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,  
Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement. 20  
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,  
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,  
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.

**Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke**

In *The Scattered Papers of Penelope*, ed. Karen Van Dyck. London: Anvil, 2008.

<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8K936RW>

**'Penelope Says' (1977)**

*And your absence teaches me*

*What art could not*

Daniel Weissbort

I wasn't weaving, I wasn't knitting  
I was writing something  
erasing and being erased  
under the weight of the word  
because perfect expression is blocked 5  
when the inside is pressured by pain.  
And while absence is the theme of my life  
– absence from life –  
tears and the natural suffering  
of the deprived body 10  
appear on the page.

I erase, I tear up, I stifle  
the living cries  
'Where are you, come, I'm waiting for you

this spring is not like other springs' 15  
 and I begin again in the morning  
 with new birds and white sheets  
 drying in the sun.  
 You will never be here  
 to water the flowers 20  
 the old ceiling dripping  
 under the weight of the rain  
 with my personality  
 dissolving into yours  
 quietly, autumn-like... 25  
 Your choice heart  
 – choice because I have chosen it –  
 will always be elsewhere  
 and I will cut  
 with words 30  
 the threads that bind me  
 to the particular man  
 I long for  
 until Odysseus becomes the symbol of Nostalgia  
 sailing the seas of every mind. 35  
 Each day  
 I passionately forget you  
 that you may be washed of the sins  
 of fragrance and sweetness  
 and finally all clean 40  
 enter immortality.  
 It is a hard and thankless job.  
 My only reward is that I understand  
 in the end what human presence is  
 what absence is 45  
 or how the self functions  
 in such desolation, in so much time  
 how nothing can stop tomorrow

the body keeps remaking itself  
rising and falling on the bed 50  
as if axed down  
sometimes sick, sometimes in love  
hoping that what it loses in touch  
it gains in essence.

*Translated by Karen Van Dyck*

**‘The Suitors’ (1977)**

From the window  
the garden seems to belong  
elsewhere  
and the house to travel  
on a leaf. 5

Through the window grille  
the suitors of my silence  
are cut into slices;  
they meet and organize my life  
as if it were a party 10  
and the smell of cooking  
from all those years of waiting  
reaches me upstairs.

The suitors fly around me  
dazzled by the light 15  
of my blinging loneliness;  
when I look at them from above  
it is because I am in a room  
filled with Odysseus.

I won’t talk again 20  
about his sublime voice  
his slight originality  
that from the beginning made him eternal



but about a change  
 a shining thread 25  
 inside me.  
 I reach the essence of myself  
 by waiting.  
 How can I describe the kernel  
 when it is no longer surrounded by anything 30  
 when it is naked, but not scared  
 when it shakes, but doesn't flail  
 when it imposes on me the steadfastness  
 of time?  
 A seriousness begins with me 35  
 and takes over all of nature.  
 If this continues  
 even death will have value.  
 .....  
 I hear the shouting downstairs,  
 I too once had 40  
 mud in my hair  
 lemon blossoms behind my ears  
 and would cry passionately  
 'Free yourself of your bonds!'  
 but the bonds go deep: 45  
 a way of being  
 where the self plays itself.  
 Now there's only one window;  
 behind it my little private shadow  
 my natural world. 50  
 Shut up in the house  
 as if in time  
 I look at the tree  
 as if it were God:  
 outside of time. 55  
 I understand something

about my presence  
here  
with you and separate from you;  
my flesh waits for you 60  
but my mind saw you coming  
long ago  
and has already accompanied you to the door.  
Faces only exist  
inside us 65  
their eyes rowing  
in our body fluids.

*Translated by Karen Van Dyck*

**‘The Other Penelope’ (1996)**

Penelope emerges from the olive trees  
her hair more or less tidy  
her dress from the neighbourhood market  
navy blue with white flowers.  
She tells us it wasn’t obsession 5  
with the idea of ‘Odysseus’  
that pressed her to let the suitors  
wait for years in the forecourts  
of her body’s secret habits.  
There in the island’s palace – 10  
with the fake horizons  
of a saccharine love  
and only the bird in the window  
comprehending the infinite –  
she had painted with nature’s colours 15  
the portrait of love.  
Seated, one leg crossed over the other,  
holding up a cup of coffee

up early, a little grumpy, smiling a little  
 he emerges warm from the down of sleep. 20  
 His shadow on the wall:  
 trace of a piece of furniture just taken away  
 blood of an ancient murder  
 a lone performance of Karaghiozi  
 on the screen, pain always behind him. 25  
 Love and pain indivisible  
 like the pail and the child  
 on the sandy beach  
 the ah! and a crystal glass that slipped from one's hand  
 the green fly and the slaughtered animal 30  
 the soil and the shovel  
 the naked body and the single sheet in July.  
 And Penelope who now hears  
 the evocative music of fear  
 the cymbals of resignation 35  
 the sweet song of a quiet day  
 without sudden changes of weather and tone  
 the complex chords  
 of an infinite gratitude  
 for what did not happen, was not said, cannot be uttered 40  
 now signals no, no, no more loving  
 no more words and whispers  
 caresses and bites  
 small cries in the darkness  
 scent of flesh that burns in the light. 45  
 Pain was the most exquisite suitor  
 and she slammed the door on him.

*Translated by Edmund and Mary Keeley*

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Оригинални научни чланак

## „Пресећи нити речима“: Пенелопа у поезији Катерине Ангелаки-Рук

Катерина Ангелаки-Рук (1939–2020) припада најважнијим поетским гласовима Грчке. Она је била и цењена лингвисткиња и преводитељка. Стварала је преко три деценије и њена дела се читају широм Грчке. Добила је многа званична признања, укључујући Грчку националну награду за поезију 1985. године и Награду за поезију коју додељује Грчка академија, 2000. године. У средишту њене поезије су тело, мит и природа, али надасве језик и његова способност да пренесе осећања и искуства. Овај текст се бави поетиком Катерине Ангелаки Рук уз осврт на њену ревизију лика Пенелопе у три важне песме. Оригиналан начин на који је користила овај мит у својим делима показује њено познавање феминистичког дискурса, а нарочито дела Адријен Рич и Елен Сиксу. Поврх свега, открива нам да се она пажљиво посвећивала писању и читању. Разматраћемо сличности са „Пенелопом 20. века“ (1934) Јелисавете Багријане и ауторкин дијалог са генијалном песмом Воласа Стивенса, „Свет као медитација“ (1952). Текст се такође бави ширим питањем коришћења старогрчких митова у феминистичким делима песникиња у Грчкој.

**Кључне речи:** Пенелопа, мит, поезија, женска књижевност, феминизам, модерна грчка књижевност