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Women, Bodies, and Voices: Rewriting Myth and History in *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between corporeality and textuality through a comparative analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Selby Wynn Schwartz's *After Sappho*. Drawing on body studies and feminist literary theory, it explores the concept of the body-

text and how the representation and inscription of the female body challenges conventional notions of textuality, narrative authority, and voice.

Both authors employ mythological and literary rewriting to foreground women's bodies and voices and to question the structures through which female experience is represented. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood revisits the myth of Penelope and the twelve maids from Homer's *The Odyssey*, contrasting Penelope's individual first-person narrative with the collective voice of the maids.

In *After Sappho*, Schwartz reimagines Sappho through a constellation of women whose lives and experiences transcend temporal and geographical boundaries.

The comparative analysis shows that both texts destabilize the possibility of a singular and authoritative representation of female experience, while adopting distinct narrative strategies. In both works, the body functions not merely as an object of representation but as a site of inscription through which identity, agency, gender, and power are negotiated. Ultimately, the dissertation argues that conceiving the body as text allows textuality to be reconsidered as embodied, relational, and shaped by gendered systems of representation.

Keywords: body-text, corporeality, female body, mythological rewriting, feminist literary theory

Introduction: Theoretical Framework

on Body Studies

The body is not merely represented *within* texts; it also participates in the production, transmission, and reception of meaning. In this regard, DeMello questions whether there is such a thing as a universal, decontextualized body, a *tabula rasa* simply awaiting inscription by culture. Her answer is negative. Rather, she argues that bodies are constructed in myriad ways through experiences shared within particular social and cultural contexts. Bodies are also shaped by history and are therefore constantly changing, as are the meanings attributed to them.

As DeMello observes, “bodies are contingent: molded by factors outside of the body” (5). If the body is not a fixed or universal category but is instead shaped by culture, history, and social experience, its relationship with language and textuality must also be reconsidered.

This relationship becomes particularly significant when considering that the historical association between women and the body is not politically or culturally neutral. As DeMello observes, women have historically been associated with the body, while men have been aligned with rationality and the mind (9). Such a distinction is not politically or culturally neutral, since it has contributed to the construction of women as bodily objects rather than speaking subjects. The question of embodiment is therefore inseparable from questions of representation and voice: if the female body has historically been represented by others, what happens when it participates in its own representation? What changes when the body is understood not simply as something represented by a text, but as something that participates in the production of meaning?

These questions lead to a reconsideration not only of the body but also of the concept of text itself. If embodiment can influence who speaks, how identity is constructed, and whose voice is recognized, textuality can no longer be understood exclusively as a linguistic or abstract process detached from the body. This dissertation approaches this problem through the concept of body-text. Body-text does not simply refer to a text *about* bodies. Rather, it is understood here as a mode of textuality in which embodiment affects who speaks, how identity is constructed, whose voice is recognized, and how inherited representations can be rewritten.

The concept therefore allows the relationship between body and text to be considered as reciprocal: the body can be represented through textuality, but it can also intervene in and transform the processes through which meaning is produced.

The theoretical framework developed in this dissertation draws primarily on the work of Hélène Cixous, Chantal Kwast-Greff, Melanie Ann Hanson and Toril Moi.

While Cixous, Kwast-Greff and Hanson offer different approaches to the relationship between embodiment and textuality, Moi provides an important critical perspective through which the risk of essentialism can be addressed.

More specifically, Cixous considers the body as a site of writing; Kwast-Greff explores how the body can become manifested through the text; and Hanson foregrounds the readerly and experiential dimensions of embodiment and textuality. Moi, meanwhile, questions essentialist conceptions of the body and of a supposedly stable or universal "female voice". Taken together, these perspectives provide a theoretical framework through which body-text can be conceptualized without reducing the body to a fixed category or assuming the existence of a single, unified female experience.

This last point is particularly important to the argument of this dissertation. If patriarchal representations of women are simply replaced by the idea of a supposedly authentic or "true" female voice, another fixed category may be created in their place. The concept of body-text developed here therefore does not seek to identify a single female voice or a universal meaning of the female body. Instead, it attends to the ways in which bodies, voices, and identities are continuously constructed, contested, and rewritten. DeMello emphasizes this instability when she argues that "the way in which bodies are used, contested, and their meanings disputed, points to the ways in which bodily meanings forever continue to shift, often in interesting and uncomfortable ways" (19).

The body is consequently approached in this dissertation as a site of negotiation rather than as a stable source of meaning.

This understanding of the body-text provides the basis for the analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Selby Wynn Schwartz's *After Sappho*. The choice of these two texts is not incidental. Both works engage with inherited representations of women, while questioning the authority to narrate, represent, and give meaning to female experience.

Atwood's *The Penelopiad* provides a particularly productive context for examining the rewriting of myth, the collective voice of the maids, the relationship between the body and violence, and the connection between voice and recognition. It also raises the question of who has the right to narrate a story and whose perspective remains excluded from established versions of the past.

Schwartz's *After Sappho*, by contrast, offers a different but complementary approach to the relationship between body and textuality. The novel explores female bodies and transformation, identity and naming, collective voices, historically silenced women, and the relationship between corporeal experience and writing.

Its engagement with the possibility of "living more lives" further complicates conventional understandings of identity as singular, stable, and fixed. While the two texts approach these questions differently, both demonstrate how textuality can become a space in which inherited representations are challenged and reconfigured.

The comparison between the two works therefore does not assume that they offer the same representation of the body. Rather, it considers the different ways in which body-text can operate across distinct literary contexts. In *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*, the body becomes connected to questions of voice, identity, memory, myth, and agency, allowing textuality itself to be reconsidered as something shaped by embodied experience.

This dissertation is guided by three main research questions:

- What do we mean when we talk about the concept of body-text?
- How does the body modify the notion of text?
- How do Atwood's and Schwartz's works contribute to the debate surrounding the relationship between body and textuality?

The aim of this dissertation is therefore to examine the relationship between body and text, with particular attention to the concept of body-text. The term refers not only to the body as the physical entity in which human experience is situated, but also to how embodiment can be constitutive of textual meaning. The dissertation consequently examines body-text not as a text that merely represents the body, but as a form of textuality in which embodiment can affect voice, identity, recognition, and representation.

To address these questions, the dissertation combines theoretical discussion with textual and comparative analysis. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework and develops a definition of body-text by drawing primarily on the work of Chantal Kwast-Greff, Hélène Cixous, and Melanie Ann Hanson, while also incorporating Toril Moi's critique of essentialist conceptions of female identity and voice.

The second chapter turns to the broader literary contexts of Atwood and Schwartz and examines existing critical discussions of *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*. These studies provide a basis for the subsequent analysis by addressing themes that are central to this dissertation, including voice, gender, myth, embodiment, and the rewriting of female experience.

The third chapter focuses on a comparative analysis of Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Schwartz's *After Sappho.* It examines how the authors engage with myth and reinterpret female figures, particularly Sappho and Penelope, while also considering the relationship between individual and collective bodies, individual and collective voices, and women's agency.

Particular attention is given to the ways in which textual form itself can become implicated in the representation of the body and in the production of alternative voices.

Finally, the conclusion brings together the dissertation's central lines of inquiry by reconsidering how the concept of the body as text can reshape our understanding of textuality. It synthesizes the insights developed across the theoretical, comparative, and analytical chapters and considers how embodiment, mythological reinterpretation, and gendered voice intersect in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Schwartz's *After Sappho*.

Ultimately, this dissertation does not seek merely to identify "female representations" in literary texts. Instead, it examines how the body intervenes in the production of voice, the construction of identity, and the rewriting of inherited representations. By approaching the body as an active component of textuality rather than as a passive object of representation, the dissertation proposes body-text as a way of reconsidering how bodies and texts produce meaning in relation to one another.

Chapter One:

Definition of body-text

This chapter develops the theoretical framework for the concept of the body-text through the work of Hélène Cixous, Chantal Kwast-Greff and Melanie Ann Hanson. Rather than treating the body as an object represented within a text, these scholars allow it to be understood as participating in the production, structure, and reception of textual meaning. Their approaches provide three complementary dimensions of the body-text: Cixous establishes the body as a site of inscription, Kwast-Greff examines how corporeality becomes materially and formally inscribed within textual structures; and Hanson situates bodily textuality within historical relations of interpretation, power, and agency. Taken together, these perspectives provide the basis for understanding the body-text as a reciprocal relationship between embodiment and textuality.

Hélène Cixous provides the theoretical starting point for this discussion in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). Her formulation of the relationship between body and writing opens the question that guides this chapter: how does embodiment alter the ways in which writing, reading, and meaning are understood?

Regarding the construction of the human body, feminist scholar Margo DeMello observes that “[…] human bodies are never ‘blank’ or unmarked, even when not explicitly marked through adornment or modification” (7). While DeMello emphasizes the cultural inscription of the body, Cixous extends this relationship between embodiment and inscription to writing itself, making the body central to the production of textual meaning. This relation is encapsulated in her formulation: “Text: my body-” (Cixous 882).

For Cixous, the body is not simply represented by language; it participates in the production of language. She argues that the body “[…] urges you to inscribe in language your woman’s style” (882), calling on women to write themselves into discourse and to transform the structures that have historically excluded them. Writing the body therefore means bringing embodied experience into language rather than treating the body as an object external to textual production. In this sense,

Cixous establishes a form of writing *from* the body: bodily experience, desire, and sensation become sources of textual expression.

This argument is inseparable from Cixous’s critique of the historical exclusion of women from discourse. Writing, for her, is not merely the communication of an already existing experience; it is a means through which women can reclaim their bodies and their capacity for self-expression. Her exhortation, “Write! Writing is for you [...] your body is yours” (876), links authorship to bodily reclamation.

The separation of women from discourse is therefore also a separation from their own bodies: when women's speech is censored, breath and speech are censored as well (880). Writing can challenge this alienation by allowing embodied experience to become a source of expression and agency.

Cixous consequently presents writing as more than a representation of women's experiences. She describes it as a transformative process through which subjectivity itself can emerge in language. When she writes, "I, too, overflow: my desires have invented new desires" (876), writing appears not simply to communicate desire but to generate new forms of desire and expression. Similarly, her reference to "unacknowledged sovereigns" whose bodies can enter language suggests that writing can create the conditions for previously marginalized subjects to emerge within discourse (876). Writing thus becomes an intervention in history: it allows women to participate in the production of meaning rather than remaining objects of meanings produced by others.

This conception of writing is central to Cixous's formulation of *écriture feminine*. Although she uses the term "feminine", she does not define it as a biological category or restrict it to women writers. Rather, feminine writing describes a mode of textuality that resists fixed structures, hierarchical oppositions, and forms of language that claim to establish a single or stable meaning. Cixous therefore distinguishes between biological identity and a mode of writing capable of disrupting dominant structures. Her formulation "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man" (877) emphasizes the relationship between the writer's position and language, while her broader concept of *écriture feminine* prevents that relationship from becoming a fixed opposition between male and female writers.

James Joyce provides an important example of this distinction. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), Cixous refers to Joyce’s treatment of Molly in *Ulysses* as “carrying [it] off beyond any book and toward the new writing” (884). Her inclusion of a male writer demonstrates that “feminine” does not designate the biological sex of the author. Instead, it refers to a form of writing that destabilizes established structures and permits forms of expression that exceed conventional linguistic and rhetorical boundaries. Cixous’s conception of *écriture feminine* is therefore dynamic and decentered rather than essentialist.

This decentered quality also challenges the assumption that writing is a neutral medium. If language is shaped by the position, experience, and embodiment of the subject who uses it, textual meaning cannot be entirely separated from the body from which writing emerges. Cixous consequently imagines writing as an embodied intervention in language rather than as the transparent transmission of a pre-existing meaning.

Women “must write through their bodies” to move beyond established rhetorical and social structures (Cixous 886), and she describes this writing as “volcanic”, capable of disintegrating institutional forms and destabilizing the structures that have excluded them (887–88).

Cixous’s understanding of the body is therefore also a challenge to the distinction between bodily experience and textual production. She describes speech itself in corporeal terms: woman “throws her trembling body forward […] her flesh speaks true” (881). Language here becomes a material performance rather than an abstract system detached from embodiment. The text can consequently be understood as a bodily space in which drives, desires, sensations, and experiences are translated into language. The body is not simply an object represented within the text; it participates in the process through which the text acquires meaning.

The political implications of this conception become particularly visible in Cixous's reconfiguration of the figure of Medusa. Against the patriarchal tradition that represents Medusa as monstrous and deadly, Cixous insists that "she's not deadly […] she's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). Her rewriting of the myth demonstrates how dominant representations can be disrupted through a different relation between the female body, desire, and language. The monstrous feminine is revealed as a product of patriarchal discourse, while laughter becomes a means of destabilizing the symbolic structures through which women have been represented. Feminine writing therefore does not simply introduce female bodies into an existing system of representation; it challenges the terms through which those bodies have been made meaningful.

This challenge also has an epistemic dimension. Cixous argues that women are "more body, hence writing" (886–87), suggesting that embodiment can constitute a mode of knowledge rather than merely an object of knowledge.

Embodied experience does not provide access to an unmediated or universally valid truth. Rather, it constitutes a situated position from which experience can be perceived, articulated, and interpreted differently. Writing through the body means that corporeal experience becomes a means of producing knowledge and meaning. The body therefore functions not only as the origin of writing but also as a site from which new forms of understanding can emerge. In this sense, Cixous moves from the body as something represented to the body as an active participant in textual production.

Cixous's model consequently establishes the first dimension of the body-text developed in this thesis. The body is not external to writing but participates in the production of textual meaning: embodied experience can shape what is written, how it is written, and whose voice enters discourse.

At the same time, Cixous's discussion remains primarily theoretical and programmatic. She establishes the possibility of writing through and from the body, but a further question emerges: how does corporeality become materially and formally visible within a text itself?

This question provides the transition to Chantal Kwast-Greff. If Cixous establishes that the textual form is shaped by the conditions of embodied experience, Kwast-Greff examines the traces through which corporeality enters textual form. Her analysis therefore allows the theoretical proposition that the body can participate in writing to be considered at the level of narrative structure, language, fragmentation, and textual inscription.

Chantal Kwast-Greff examines the material traces through which embodiment affects textual production; in fact, in her essay "The Body and the Text: Extra- and Infra-Textual Scars" (2002), she analyzes the body-text as a site where physical experience is registered within textual form. Kwast-Greff develops the implications of embodied writing by examining how corporeality becomes legible within narrative form. She describes the female body as a palimpsest, a "landscape of scars and writings", or rather as both "body" *and* "text" (Kwast-Greff 15). Kwast-Greff shifts the body from being something merely biological, a cultural "*tabula rasa*", to being an interpretive surface: it is constructed, on a biological and cultural level, as feminine or masculine, healthy or demented, scarred or not. Thus, we can say the body is multi-layered (15). Kwast-Greff maintains, for example, that "Contemporary Australian fiction written by women often depicts them as suffering in their bodies" (15). The body does not merely appear in the narrative; it structures how meaning is produced, since experience is recorded through marks that demand reading rather than description.

Thus, readers should not simply read what is being described, but also grasp the meaning of the experience the writer is conveying. Contemporary Australian narratives portray bodies whose pain functions not simply as subject matter but as an explicative mechanism, compelling the reader to encounter an embodied experience rather than a detached story.

Kwast-Greff further links this corporeal inscription to figures of madness. The disturbance affecting the character's body reappears in discourse, since "the form of the language echoes the fundamental madness of the woman character" (Kwast-Greff 15).

Madness, therefore, ceases to designate psychology and becomes textual truth – the "madwoman" writes her "dis-ease" on the body while writing reverses that instability into language (Kwast-Greff 15).

The body-text emerges here as transmission, reproducing disorder rather than representing it. As Kwast-Greff writes, "when bodies bleed, they tell a story it is hard to ignore" (16). Bodies suffering narrate stories; the female character "lacerates her body" in order not to be silenced (16). "The writer – who needs words – creates a character who speaks her body and loses hold of verbal language" (16). This implies that the character knows how to use her body to express text, but she cannot use verbal language; thus, her body (and text) emanates disorder and chaos.

Consequently, textual form changes as well. In fact, Kwast-Greff states that bodily disturbance generates linguistic disturbance, visible in hesitation, stuttering, and verbal fragmentation (17). Kwast-Greff thus argues that body and language are intrinsically linked, representing linguistic fragmentation not merely as a form of stylistic experimentation but as the textual manifestation of corporeal instability.

This distinction between language as a formal textual element and linguistic disturbance is crucial: whereas language may traditionally be treated as an autonomous feature of the text, Kwast-Greff shows how it is shaped by the body.

When the body is disturbed, language – and consequently the text – is disturbed as well. Thus, body and text become interconnected, producing what can be understood as body-text. Because the body participates in the production of meaning through disruption, interpretation also changes. The text produces a plurality of voices and demands a "collage-montage" reading that reconstructs meaning from fragments (Kwast-Greff 21). Kwast-Greff is arguing that the text is composed of different fragments that readers must bring together and read as a whole, actively assigning meaning to them. In this sense, readers are asked to decrypt the body-text rather than interpret it in the traditional hermeneutic sense.

The distinction between hermeneutic interpretation and decryption lies in the reader's role: while hermeneutic interpretation primarily involves understanding and interpreting a given text, decryption requires readers to reconstruct the connections between its fragmented elements and thereby produce a more coherent whole.

The body-text, therefore, is not simply a collection of words whose meaning readers have to interpret; its meaning emerges through the process of assembling and deciphering its fragments. Decryption thus involves transforming textual fragmentation into a comprehensible whole, allowing readers to access meanings that are not immediately apparent at the level of the individual fragments.

Before Kwast- Greff wrote about it, this contrast is something that Cixous studied as well. According to her, there is a distinction to be made between decrypting the body-text – what she calls *Écriture Féminine* – and traditional hermeneutics.

Smith explains that Hélène Cixous conceptualizes decryption as “writing the body”, a nonlinear and fluid expression that flows from bodily experience, sometimes referred to as “white ink”.

For Cixous, decryption does not seek a single or closed meaning; rather, it attempts to liberate the repressed feminine and recover the Other within the text (Smith).

Covic similarly argues that Cixous’s feminist politics require a reorientation of both subjectivity and reading practices, since the aim of “*The Laugh of the Medusa*” is to “break up the [supposed] ‘truth’ with laughter” (Covic).

Furthermore, Cixous critiques traditional hermeneutics because she associates it with what she terms a “phallogocentric” system – what Hoctor defines as a patriarchal mode of […] rational control, and fixed meaning (2).

According to this reading, traditional interpretation attempts to dominate the text by establishing a “hierarchy of sexual difference” in which masculine rationality is privileged over feminine embodiment (McKenna 70).

As Smith notes, Cixous argues that patriarchal forms of interpretation suppress women’s voices precisely because they exclude the body and the Other from discourse.

Unlike such exclusionary forms of interpretation, Cixous’s approach accommodates multiple and unstable meanings, valuing textual openness and “active ambiguity”.

Covic illustrates this through Cixous’s reconfiguration of the figure of Medusa. Rather than presenting Medusa as a monstrous feminine presence, Cixous transforms her into a laughing figure whose disruptive laughter opens new possibilities for feminist writing. In this way, women’s writing becomes both liberating and interventionist.

The traces inscribed upon bodies and narratives acquire political significance. Scars function as signifiers of oppression, resistance, and the re-creation of the self (Kwast-Greff 21).

The body-text, thus, records history materially: social violence appears not as background context but as textual structure. Kwast-Greff consequently relocates meaning from representation to inscription – the text does not describe experience but carries its physical trace.

Cixous establishes the body as a site of inscription, showing how embodied experience enters language through writing. Kwast-Greff develops this relationship further by showing that inscription also works in the opposite direction: language does not merely describe the body, but participates in constructing the meanings attached to it. Her analysis therefore shifts the focus from the body entering textuality to the ways in which textual and linguistic choices shape how the body is perceived, classified, and made meaningful within a narrative.

Kwast-Greff illustrates this process through Kate Grenville's *Dark Places* (Picador, London, 1944), where the language used to describe the female body does not simply reflect an already existing understanding of femininity but actively contributes to its construction. Albion's question to his wife, "Tell me, Norah, how is a woman to be made happy? How is she to be made whole, or rather how is she to be made no longer hole?'' (Kwast-Greff 19), turn the female body into an object defined through sexual difference.

The pun on "whole" and "hole" reduces the woman's body to a sexualized absence that must be completed, revealing how a linguistic choice can impose a particular meaning on the body. As Kwast-Greff notes, this is especially significant because the male perspective is produced by the female author "impersonating a male first-person narrator" (19).

A similar process occurs when Albion hears that his daughter "became a woman" and interprets this phrase as meaning that she is "biologically able to mate now, like any dog or monkey on heat" (*Dark Places*, 42 qtd. in Kwast-Greff 19).

Here the expression “became a woman” is not a neutral description of physical development. Albion’s interpretation transforms the girl’s body into a sexual and reproductive category: her body becomes meaningful primarily in relation to its presumed capacity to mate, marry, become pregnant, and reproduce.

The language surrounding her body therefore does more than describe it; it determines how that body is made legible within the narrative. Corporeality is consequently inscribed through language itself, as the words used to name and describe the female participate in constructing its social and textual meaning.

Taken together, Cixous and Kwast-Greff articulate two complementary dimensions of the body-text. Cixous establishes the body as a condition of writing, showing how embodied subjects enter language and inscribe themselves within discourse. Kwast-Greff develops this insight by demonstrating how corporeality can become visible in the formal and linguistic structures of a text: the body is not simply represented but leaves traces that affect textual form and interpretation. Her examples therefore shift the discussion from the possibility of bodily inscription to its textual operation. If the body can be inscribed within textual structures, however, a further question emerges: how is this inscription experienced by the reader?

Melanie Ann Hanson addresses reception by shifting attention from textual structure to how the female body becomes a site of meaning, inscription, and expression. In *Decapitation and Disgorgement, The Female Body’s Text in Early Modern English Drama and Poetry* (2007), Hanson examines how women’s bodies have historically been subjected to systems of interpretation that deny them the authority to produce meaning about themselves.

Her approach therefore adds a third dimension to the framework developed in this chapter: Cixous foregrounds the body as a condition and source of writing; Kwast-Greff examines how corporeality becomes materially and formally inscribed within textual structures; Hanson considers how bodily inscription is historically produced, interpreted, and contested.

A distinction between Hanson's concept of the *female body's text* and Cixous's *feminine writing* is therefore necessary. Cixous is primarily concerned with a mode of writing that disrupts established linguistic and rhetorical structures. Her broader question is how writing can emerge differently when informed by embodied experience. Hanson, by contrast, begins with the body as a material and historical site upon which meaning is produced and imposed. Her concern is not simply how the body enters writing, but how the female body itself becomes readable within systems of cultural representation and how it can communicate beyond those systems.

For Hanson, this process is inseparable from the historical restriction of women's subjectivity. Women could be socially defined as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, while being denied the position of subjects who could speak and produce authoritative meanings about themselves. As Hanson observes, women "should not be subjects" (7). The female body could consequently become the object of interpretation without possessing equal authority over that interpretation. Hanson describes this condition through the metaphor of "decapitation": the separation of the body from the head represents the separation of corporeal existence from intellectual and interpretive authority. The body remains visible, but the voice that might explain or define it is removed.

This separation also clarifies Hanson's understanding of the body's text. When women are denied direct access to discourse, meaning does not disappear; instead, it may be displaced onto the body itself. The body becomes a surface upon which social, cultural, and patriarchal meanings are inscribed. In this sense, the body-text is not simply a metaphor for bodily expression. It describes a process through which the body becomes readable within a particular historical and cultural system. The female body is therefore "overwritten" not because it lacks meaning, but because the meanings attached to it are produced within structures that determine how it can be seen, interpreted, and socially understood.

Hanson's second key concept, "disgorgement", complicates this process by emphasizing that the body is not merely a passive recipient of inscription. It can also become a means of producing and communicating meaning. If "decapitation" represents the removal of interpretive authority, "disgorgement" represents the body's capacity to respond to that restriction through forms of expression that exceed conventional discourse. The body therefore functions simultaneously as a site upon which meanings are imposed and as a site from which meanings can emerge.

This distinction is particularly important for the concept of body-text developed in this thesis. The body is neither simply an object to be read nor an autonomous source of meaning. Its meanings emerge through an interaction between material embodiment and the cultural and textual systems that interpret it.

Hanson's emphasis on "disgorgement" therefore does not suggest that the body possesses a single, authentic message waiting to be decoded. Rather, it demonstrates that bodily expression can disrupt the meanings imposed upon the body and create alternative forms of communication.

The body can consequently be understood as a site of knowledge, but not because it contains an essential or universally valid truth. Embodied experience constitutes a situated position from which social structures can be perceived, experienced, and articulated.

The body can register the effects of the historical and cultural systems in which it is situated, and bodily expression can make those conditions available for interpretation. In this sense, embodied experience produces forms of knowledge that are inseparable from the material and discursive conditions in which they emerge. The body does not simply provide content for representation; it can affect what becomes perceptible, articulable, and knowable within a text.

Hanson's discussion of fragmentation further develops this idea. She argues that apparent textual "chaos" does not necessarily indicate an absence of meaning; rather, "the fragmentation […] indicates that there is much beneath the surface to investigate" (154). Fragmentation can therefore become a trace of the conditions under which expression has been produced. A fragmented or difficult-to-be-read body-text is not necessarily a failed text; its formal difficulty may itself register the historical conditions that have shaped the possibilities of embodied expression. This connects Hanson with Kwast-Greff, whose analysis similarly demonstrates how disturbances in the body can be reflected in disturbances in textual form.

The two scholars, however, approach the relationship from different directions: Kwast-Greff emphasizes how corporeal disturbance can shape language and narrative form, whereas Hanson emphasizes how the body carries and communicates meanings produced within historical structures of silencing.

Hanson consequently situates the body-text within material history. Women's bodies, she argues, were "defined as male property," while their sexuality was placed "under the jurisdiction of men" (143).

Under such conditions, bodily inscription cannot be separated from relations of power. When speech is restricted, women may be forced to find "desperate means to communicate the female body's text" (144).

The body thus becomes a record of the structures that attempt to regulate it, while bodily expression can simultaneously expose and resist those structures.

This historical dimension is crucial because the body-text does not exist independently of culture. As Hanson observes, "the body's text says something about the culture a person lives in" (149-150). The marks, gestures, silences, and forms of bodily expression through which a body becomes legible therefore reveal the social structures in which that body is situated. The body-text can consequently be understood as both a product of historical inscription and a potential means of contesting that inscription.

Hanson's argument also prevents the concept of the body-text from being reduced to a search for a single, stable bodily meaning. She states that "there is no essential way to silence women or for women to express discourse" (154), emphasizing the plurality of forms through which embodied expression can occur. The fragmented or difficult-to-read body-text is therefore not necessarily a failed text. Its difficulty may itself register the conditions under which embodied experience is made legible and communicated.

Hanson thus extends the framework established by Cixous and Kwast-Greff in a significant way. Cixous establishes the body as a source and condition of writing; Kwast-Greff demonstrates how corporeality can become materially and formally visible within textual structures; Hanson situates bodily textuality within historical relations of power and emphasizes how embodied subjects are both interpreted by and can respond to those structures. The three approaches consequently move the concept of body-text from inscription to textual form, to cultural and interpretive context.

This historical dimension is particularly relevant to the texts examined in this thesis. In both *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*, women's voices emerge from bodies and identities that have already been shaped by inherited cultural narratives. Atwood and Schwartz do not simply introduce female characters into pre-existing stories; they reconsider who has the authority to narrate, whose bodies can signify, and whose voices can become part of the textual record. Their works therefore allow the body-text to be understood not simply as a form of narrative agency, but as a mode of textuality in which embodied experience can alter the conditions under which meaning, knowledge and narrative authority are produced.

Taken together, these approaches demonstrate that the body cannot be separated from the textual and cultural structures through which identity and meaning are produced. Cixous establishes embodiment as a condition of writing; Kwast-Greff shows how corporeality can be materially and formally inscribed within the text; and Hanson situates bodily textuality within historical relations of power and interpretation. Building on these perspectives, this thesis understands the body-text as a reciprocal relationship between embodied subjects and the textual and discursive systems through which bodies acquire meaning, authority, social recognition, and knowledge.

Embodiment is not treated as a fixed essence or as the stable foundation of a predetermined identity. Rather, bodies are materially present while their meanings are shaped by the cultural, social, and textual structures through which they are represented and interpreted. At the same time, embodied subjects can negotiate, question, and contest these structures, creating the possibility of revising inherited representations and narratives.

The body-text, therefore, does not designate simply a text *about* bodies, nor does it suggest that the body literally becomes text. Rather, it refers to a mode of textuality in which embodiment affects who speaks, how identities are constructed, whose experiences become legible, what forms of knowledge can emerge, and how inherited representations can be negotiated and rewritten.

This definition provides the theoretical basis for the following chapters, which examine how Margaret Atwood and Selby Wynn Schwartz employ different narrative strategies to give form to these processes in *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho.*

Chapter Two:

The Body as Text: Corporeality and Textuality in Atwood and Schwartz in Light of Toril Moi

This chapter addresses one of the central research questions of this dissertation: how does the body modify the notion of text? The concept of the body-text has so far been defined as a mode of narration in which meaning emerges through embodiment. This definition, however, raises a further question: who speaks when embodiment affects textual production? More specifically, in what sense can the body write?

According to the theoretical perspectives examined in Chapter One, including Hélène Cixous and the other scholars discussed there, the body can write, but this should not be understood simply as the physical act of a hand holding a pen. Rather, bodily writing refers to the ways in which lived, material, and libidinal experience enters textual production and affects the forms through which subjects can be represented.

In Cixous's formulation, for instance, writing is connected to unconscious drives, desires, bodily rhythms, and forms of expression that resist conventions of predominantly masculine discourse. Bodily writing therefore concerns the relationship between material experience and textual form: embodiment does not merely provide the content of writing but can also affect how meaning is produced and how subjects become legible within the text.

The present chapter develops this conception of the body-text through the theoretical framework of Toril Moi and through critical approaches to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Selby Wynn Schwartz's *After Sappho* (2022). If the body-text is a form of narration in which meaning is produced through bodily inscription rather than through purely verbal representation alone, the body cannot be considered independently of the discursive structures through which it is perceived and represented. The body-text therefore emerges from the interaction between corporeality and textuality: the material body is shaped by social and cultural meanings, while textual practices can reproduce, contest, redistribute or transform those meanings.

Toril Moi's work is particularly useful here because it facilitates the transition from the body as a material entity to the body as a narratological and discursive position. Several narrative phenomena are relevant to this transition, including embodiment, voice, plurality, fragmentation, and distributed subjectivity. These should not, however, be treated as interchangeable terms or as separate definitions of the body-text. Rather, they constitute different formal and conceptual mechanisms through which the body- text can emerge.

Embodiment is central because the body is not merely a physical object but a site in which experiences are inscribed and through which meaning is produced.

Individual experiences and identities are shaped by how bodies are perceived, regulated, and treated by society, particularly within patriarchal structures. Voice is consequently relevant not simply as the presence of previously marginalized speakers, but because changes in narrative perspective alter the conditions under which embodied subjects can become narratively and socially legible.

Similarly, plurality is not valuable merely because it produces “more voices”: it can unsettle the assumption that one subject can speak for an entire category of women. Fragmentation is therefore closely connected to plurality. The body-text can emerge through the coexistence of different bodies, experiences, and perspectives, rather than through the construction of a unified feminine subject.

II.I Toril Moi: Corporeality, Subjectivity, and the Rejection of Essentialism

The first issue this chapter develops is the distinction between corporeality and biological identity presented in Moi’s work. One of the most important consequences of this distinction is that there can be no necessary correspondence between female bodies and female voices.

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, Moi understands the body not simply as anatomy but as a “situation”. The body is therefore inseparable from the material and social circumstances in which it exists: the ways in which it is treated, regulated, exposed to violence, subjected to labour, or granted or denied forms of authority. To say that embodied experience enters textual production is consequently not to claim that biology directly determines literary expression. Rather, the material conditions in which an embodied subject exists shape the perspective from which that subject can speak and write.

For Moi, the body can write when the separation between intellectual production and material existence is refused. The body becomes relevant to writing because the subject’s physical and social reality participates in the society of meaning. Bodily writing is therefore not a biological expression but a situated form of subjectivity.

This distinction is essential to the conception of the body-text developed in this dissertation. The body-text cannot be approached as the expression of an essential female experience, because the body does not possess a single predetermined meaning.

Instead, the body-text changes according to the embodied subject who produces it, the historical and social context in which that subject exists, and the discourses through which the body has already been interpreted.

This is particularly important when considering the relationship between women and authorship.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Moi, discussing Gilbert and Gubar, observes that patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as fundamentally masculine: the male writer "fathers" his text and becomes its authoritative origin (56). If authorship is coded as masculine in this way, female authorship becomes a problem not simply of gaining permission to speak but of negotiating a literary system in which authority has already been associated with the male subject.

The question of authorship is therefore inseparable from representation. This dissertation therefore shifts attention from the representation of women to the conditions under which embodied subjects can occupy, negotiate, and contest narrative positions. In Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Schwartz's *After Sappho*, women's bodies do not simply become objects of representation; they become sites through which speaking positions are distributed, fragmented, and reconfigured.

The different women represented in these texts are shaped by different material conditions, and these conditions affect the perspectives from which they narrate and the meanings attached to their bodies.

Penelope provides a particularly clear example. The Penelope represented in Homer's *The Odyssey* does not possess the same narrative position as the Penelope constructed in Atwood. The difference is not simply that Atwood gives her a voice that Homer denied her. Rather, Atwood places Penelope within a new discursive structure in which her account becomes one narrative among others, and in which her embodied experience is inseparable from the contradictions and limitations of her position.

A similar process occurs in Schwartz's *After Sappho*. The women whose stories participate in the novel's collective narration inhabit different historical and material circumstances. Some experience sexual violence, forced marriage, social exclusion, or forms of labour imposed upon them. These experiences do not produce one unified female consciousness. Instead, they contribute to the differentiated perspectives through which the collective narrative is constructed.

The body-text must therefore be distinguished from the more general notion of "the body *as* text". Although the two concepts are related, the latter can describe the metaphorical process through which social meanings are inscribed onto bodies, whereas the body-text, as used in this dissertation, refers specifically to the interaction between embodied subjectivity and textual production. The body is not merely something that is read; it participates in determining how narrative perspective, authority, identity, and meaning are constructed. Voice concerns the capacity to speak; polyphony describes the coexistence of multiple voices; and counter-narrative identifies forms of resistance to dominant accounts.

Body-text focuses more specifically on the relationship between these narrative practices and the bodies whose social meaning and authority they construct or contest. In Atwood, this relationship emerges through the struggle between Penelope's account and the maids' counter-account, while in Schwartz it emerges through the circulation of women's experiences, names, and textual legacies across bodies and generations.

This distinction also clarifies why Moi's rejection of essentialism is central to this dissertation. Moi argues that the notion of a "true female authorial voice" risks replacing one fixed category with another.

As she writes, Gilbert and Gubar's belief in the "true female authorial voice as the essence of all texts written by women" obscures the problems raised by their account of patriarchal ideology (63-64). If patriarchal representation were simply replaced by an authentic and unified female voice, the category of "woman" would remain fixed. This is crucial because it allows this dissertation to begin moving toward Moi's own theoretical position.

The body-text developed here avoids this assumption. It does not seek to identify an authentic female voice hidden beneath patriarchal representation. Instead, it examines how different embodied subjects acquire, negotiate, resist, or destabilize narrative positions within particular historical and discursive structures.

Moi's discussion of nineteenth-century women is particularly relevant because she observes that it is difficult to imagine women developing a feminist consciousness entirely untouched by dominant patriarchal structures (63). Subjectivity is therefore never produced outside discourse. The body-text is similarly within the structures it may contest. It does not represent an escape from discourse but a process of negotiating and potentially transforming the meanings that discourse has attached to embodied subjects.

In this sense, both Atwood and Schwartz can be read through a post-essentialist understanding of subjectivity. Their texts do not present women, bodies, or voices as possessing a fixed nature. Rather, the body-text is differently constituted according to the subject, historical context, material experience, and discursive conditions involved.

The body-text can consequently be understood as an "I" in progress. This does not mean that the physical body itself is constantly changing, but that the subject's relation to that body is continually reconstructed through experience, memory, discourse, and narration.

The body-text is therefore neither a stable body nor a stable voice: it is a process through which embodied subjectivity is repeatedly made and remade.

II.II Gender, Femininity, and Discursive Construction

Kristeva's critique of the masculine/feminine binary further complicates this conception. As Moi reports, Kristeva argues that women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical categories (12-13). This is relevant because the body-text cannot depend upon the assumption that "female" and "feminine" designate stable or equivalent categories.

Moi similarly draws on De Beauvoir's understanding of femininity as culturally produced. De Beauvoir's well-known formulation that "one isn't born a woman, one becomes one" (Moi 65) distinguishes biological sex from the social production of femininity. As Moi further notes, although women are undoubtedly female, this does not guarantee that they will be feminine (65).

The implication for the body-text is significant. The presence of a female body in a text does not determine either a feminine identity or a particular mode of discourse. The material body remains present, but the meanings attached to it and the subject positions constructed around it are mediated by social and cultural structures. Consequently, the biological body does not determine a fixed identity or predetermined way of speaking.

Gilbert and Gubar's observation that "the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too" (qtd. in Moi 56-57) further demonstrates that patriarchy operates not only by controlling who can write but also by shaping the available representations of femininity. Women's bodies therefore enter literature already marked by previous representations.

Moi's framework reconceptualizes the body not merely as a biological entity but as a discursive and situated site of meaning. Her rejection of essentialism, together with De Beauvoir's account of femininity as culturally produced, challenges the idea of a stable female identity. Voice and subjectivity consequently emerge as narrative constructions rather than natural properties of the female body.

This also means that literary representations of women's bodies are never entirely neutral or pre-existing. They carry previous textual meanings that can be repeated, contested, altered, or transformed. The body-text, thus, operates within a history of representation rather than outside it.

DeMello's distinction between inscription and counter-inscription is particularly useful at this point. If inscription refers to how social discourse marks and defines the body, counter-inscription describes the possibility that the body can also become a site of resistance (18). The body-text can therefore be understood as a process in which embodied subjects negotiate existing inscriptions rather than simply replacing them with an allegedly authentic alternative.

II.III Margaret Atwood and Her Contribution to the Notion of the Body-Text

These theoretical concepts acquire literary form in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), her rewriting of Homer's *The Odyssey*. The analysis focuses particularly on the fragmentation of voice, the relationship between embodiment and narrative authority, and the rewriting of myth through the perspectives of Penelope and the maids.

Critical discussions of *The Penelopiad* help clarify how Atwood constructs a body-text that is fundamentally fragmented and contested. Rather than presenting one unified female subject who replaces the male authority of the epic, Atwood distributes narrative perspective between Penelope and the chorus of maids.

Begüm Tuğlu's analysis of fragmentation and collectivity in her essay "From Culturazing Nature to Naturalizing Culture: The Differing Function of Animal Imagery in Defining Bodies from Homer's Odysseus to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*" (2016) is particularly relevant. As Tuğlu observes, Atwood shifts the narrative away from the predominantly male perspective associated with Odysseus and introduces the perspectives of Penelope and the maids (25). This is more than a simple substitution of one narrator for another. Atwood transforms the structure of narrative authority by making the maids, as a collective, part of the storytelling process.

The maids function as "plural narrators": their collective voice is distinct from Penelope's individual "I". This distinction is crucial to the body-text because it prevents the redistribution of narrative authority from becoming a simple transfer of authority from Odysseus to Penelope.

Penelope does acquire a narrative position from which she can recount her experience, but her account is continually interrupted and challenged by the maids. The chorus constitutes a second narrative body, speaking as "we" and repeatedly questioning Penelope's interpretation of events. Their presence destabilizes her attempt to establish a coherent and authoritative version of the past. The result is therefore not the recovery of a single suppressed female voice but the coexistence of competing embodied perspectives. Penelope remains a marginalized figure in relation to the patriarchal structures represented by the epic, but she is also placed in a position of relative authority over the maids.

Atwood consequently reproduces neither the Homeric hierarchy nor a simple reversal of it. Instead, she exposes the internal divisions and inequalities among women themselves.

This is particularly visible in Atwood's representation of the female body as fragmented. The body is not presented as a unified whole but through different parts, experiences, perspectives, and forms of representation. The same principle operates structurally in the text: narrative meaning emerges from the combination and conflict of different voices and textual fragments.

Tuğlu's description of *The Penelopiad* as a "patchwork" (31) is therefore particularly productive. The patchwork does not simply bring separate women together to create a homogeneous female identity. Rather, it creates a composite structure in which difference remains visible. Penelope and the maids participate in the same narrative while retaining distinct positions within it.

This distinction is essential to the conception of the body-text. The body is not transformed into a unified symbol of "woman"; instead, embodied difference becomes part of the textual structure itself. The body-text is therefore constructed through the coexistence of bodies that do not have equal access to authority.

The critical analysis of *The Penelopiad* consequently suggests that articulation does not automatically produce equality. The maids' collective voice challenges Penelope's narrative and makes experiences absent from the dominant account visible, but their position remains distinct from hers. The redistribution of narrative space therefore exposes rather than erases the divisions and hierarchies shaping women's experiences.

Ioana-Gianina Haneş's discussion of *The Penelopiad* develops this relationship between embodiment and voice. Drawing on Howells, Haneş describes the female bodies represented in Homer as "mute bodies to be gazed at" by men (qtd. in Haneş 16).

Atwood's intervention is consequently not simply to add women as speaking subjects, but to alter the conditions under which embodied subjects can narrate and acquire authority.

This is visible in the novel's fragmented narrative structure, in which narrative perspective is distributed between Penelope and the chorus of maids. Even Penelope's interpretation of her own past cannot become definitive. The interpretation of the geese, for example, is questioned by Penelope herself and subsequently complicated by the maids' accusations concerning her involvement in their deaths. The narrative, therefore, refuses to allow one speaker to establish an uncontested meaning for the events represented. The maids are thus not merely additional speakers. Their presence changes the conditions under which Penelope's account can acquire authority. They constitute a counter-narrative that makes the body-text inherently relational and contested.

Haneş further emphasizes Atwood's use of rewriting as renarration. Drawing on Morau, she describes critical rewriting as a process of "asserting, changing, and reasserting – renarration – identity" (Morau 173, qtd. in Haneş 10). In *The Penelopiad*, rewriting therefore modifies not only the story being told but also the narrative position from which embodied subjects can be understood. Atwood's rewriting of *The Odyssey* consequently redistributes perspectives between Penelope and the maids. Both narrate retrospectively from Hades, recounting events that have already been incorporated into the dominant myth. Their narratives do not simply add female voices to an existing story; they alter the structure through which the story can be interpreted.

The body-text in Atwood is therefore characterized by the tension between **embodiment, fragmentation**, and **contested authority.** Penelope's embodied experience becomes narratable within a textual structure that simultaneously limits its claim to authority.

The maids' bodies and experiences enter the text collectively, but their collective voice does not merge with Penelope's.

Instead, the coexistence of these voices produces a fragmented narrative field in which authority is continually negotiated.

This is why the body-text in *The Penelopiad* should not be reduced to the claim that women finally "find their voices." What changes is more specifically the relationship between embodied subjects and narrative authority. Atwood brings previously marginalized bodies into a textual structure in which they can produce, contest, and complicate meaning. The body becomes a site through which narrative authority is redistributed, but that redistribution remains incomplete and unstable.

DeMello's description of the body as "a continuous and important site of struggle" through which women can resist gender domination (16-17) is therefore particularly relevant. In Atwood, the body is not simply recovered from silence; it remains a site of conflict over representation, responsibility, memory, and authority.

Atwood simultaneously exposes the historical silencing of female bodies and prevents the alternative narrative from becoming singular. The redistribution of voice between Penelope and the maids therefore challenges the singular authority of the Homeric epic while also demonstrating that there is no single, unified female perspective capable of replacing it.

II.IV Selby Wynn Schwartz's Contribution to the Body as Text

Schwartz's *After Sappho* constructs a different form of body-text. Whereas Atwood's narrative is particularly concerned with the fragmentation and contestation of narrative authority between Penelope and the maids, Schwartz emphasizes distributed subjectivity, naming, and the construction of a collective "we" across different women and historical periods.

The discussion draws on Houston Smith and Lara Feigel, whose analyses converge around three particularly relevant themes: naming, distributed subjectivity, and the first-person plural.

These concepts illuminate a body-text in which subjectivity does not remain attached to one stable body or one individual voice.

Distributed subjectivity is particularly significant because Schwartz deliberately replaces the singular, authoritative narrative subject with a plurality of voices. Like a Greek chorus, these voices converge and disperse throughout the narrative, producing a collective subject without eliminating the differences among the women who constitute it.

Feigel's discussion of *After Sappho* emphasizes Schwartz's use of the first-person plural: the "we" encompasses women whose lives and experiences cross different historical and social contexts. The collective narrator therefore destabilizes the idea that an embodied subject must correspond to one individual body.

This is an important distinction from the body-text constructed by Atwood. In *The Penelopiad*, plurality emerges through the juxtaposition of Penelope's individual "I" and the maids' collective "we". In *After Sappho*, by contrast, the collective "we" is itself the principal narrating subject. Schwartz distributes subjectivity across bodies rather than simply placing different narrative voices alongside one another. The body-text consequently becomes a form of collective embodiment. The bodies represented in the novel remain historically and materially different, but their experiences participate in a narrative structure that crosses those differences without reducing them to one fixed identity.

This is also why the motif of naming is central. Lily Houston Smith observes that Schwartz's novel begins with the declaration, "the first thing we did was change our names". The decision to change their names and to become Sappho can be interpreted as an act of self-redefinition, but its significance extends beyond the acquisition of a new identity. Naming becomes a textual mechanism through which the relationship between the body, identity, and social recognition is reorganized.

The women do not simply recover identities that already existed beneath patriarchal definitions. They actively construct alternative subject positions by taking on a name associated with another historical figure. Their bodies therefore become readable through a new symbolic framework.

Sappho's significance is precisely connected to this process. Her association with female independence and transgression provides women with a figure through which existing identities can be contested. The transformation is consequently not a return to an authentic feminine self but a rewriting of the terms through which the self can be named and recognized.

By choosing to become Sappho, a figure represented as devious and dangerous by men, these women reject the identities imposed upon them and assume an identity that patriarchal discourse seeks to contain precisely because it embodies female agency and resistance.

The relationship between naming and the body-text therefore differs from a simple claim that women "reclaim their identities". The crucial point is that identity itself becomes shown to be narratively and socially produced. By changing their names, the women alter the discursive categories through which their bodies and subjectivities can be understood.

Feigel's and Smith's analyses consequently converge around collectivity, distributed subjectivity, and renaming. The first-person plural produces a subject whose boundaries are not fixed, while naming demonstrates that those boundaries can be narratively reconfigured.

The body-text in Schwartz can therefore be understood as a **distributed and continually reconfigured subjectivity.** Different women contribute different experiences and historical positions to the collective narrative, but the "we" does not become a stable essence shared by women. Its composition remains open and relational.

This distinction is crucial in relation to Moi's critique of essentialism. A collective female narrator could potentially appear to reproduce essentialism by grouping heterogeneous women under a single "we". Schwartz's narrative, however, complicates this possibility because the collective subject is continuously constituted by different bodies, voices, and experiences. The "we" is therefore not a fixed feminine essence but a changing narrative configuration. Its meaning depends on the women who constitute it, the historical contexts in which they lived, and the relations established among their experiences.

For this reason, the first-person plural is central to Schwartz's construction of the body-text. Subjectivity is not located in one stable body but distributed across multiple bodies and voices. The collective subject remains in a process of continual transformation.

II.V Atwood and Schwartz: Two Forms of Collective Embodiment

The comparison between Atwood and Schwartz can now be formulated more precisely. Both writers connect embodiment with collectivity and use forms of collective narration, but they do not construct the same body-text.

In *The Penelopiad,* Atwood's collective embodiment is produced through the juxtaposition of Penelope's individual narrative and the maids' collective voice. The resulting body-text is **fragmented and contested:** different embodied subjects occupy different positions within the narrative, and their accounts remain in tension. The central problem is therefore the instability of narrative authority.

In *After Sappho,* Schwartz's collective embodiment is produced through a first-person plural narrator whose subjectivity is distributed across different women, bodies, and historical periods. The resulting body-text is **distributed and continually reconfigured:** the "we" is not a single embodied subject but a collective narrative formation whose composition changes across the text.

The central problem is therefore how plurality can produce collectivity without becoming a new fixed identity.

The difference is consequently not merely formal. Atwood asks what happens when multiple embodied subjects enter a narrative but do not agree with one another. Schwartz asks what happens when multiple embodied subjects are deliberately brought into a collective grammatical and narrative position. Both strategies challenge the assumption that the body-text must correspond to a single, unified subject. Yet they do so differently. Atwood foregrounds **competition and contradiction between embodied voices,** whereas Schwartz foregrounds **distribution and relationality across embodied voices.**

Their use of collectivity should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that all women share one experience. On the contrary, both texts demonstrate that embodiment is differentiated. The collective voice does not erase differentiation; it makes the relationship between individual experience and collective subjectivity a central problem of narration.

The comparison also clarifies the distinction between the body-text and related categories. Embodiment describes the involvement of material experience in subjectivity and representation; voice concerns the narrative position from which a subject speaks; plurality describes the coexistence of multiple voices; fragmentation concerns the breaking apart of a unified body, identity, or narrative structure; and distributed subjectivity describes the dispersal of the narrative subject across multiple bodies and perspectives.

The body-text encompasses these processes but cannot be reduced to any one of them. It describes the broader relationship through which embodied existence and textual/discursive structures mutually shape one another.

In Atwood, this relationship becomes visible through the fragmentation and contestation of narrative authority. In Schwartz, it becomes visible through distributed subjectivity, renaming, and the continual reconfiguration of a collective "we".

II.VI From Voice to Narrative Agency: Question Raised by Moi

Moi's theoretical framework also allows the dissertation to reconsider what it means for a marginalized subject to acquire a narrative position.

In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope is allowed to narrate her own story, but this does not mean that she achieves unrestricted narrative authority. The chorus of maids repeatedly challenges and contradicts her account, preventing her from becoming the sole authoritative source of meaning.

This is crucial because Atwood does not equate speaking with liberation. Penelope can narrate from her own perspective, but she cannot establish her version as the definitive account of her own experience. The acquisition of narrative agency therefore remains partial and contested.

The maids further complicate this process because they are themselves marginalized figures who nonetheless challenge Penelope. Atwood thus creates a structure in which marginalization does not disappear once a woman becomes a narrator. Instead, different positions of marginality and authority coexist within the same text.

The body-text consequently emerges through the tension between **speaking and being authorized to speak**. Narrative agency is not simply the presence of a voice; it concerns the conditions under which that voice can produce meaning and acquire authority.

Schwartz raises a different question through the collective "we." If the individual female voice is replaced by a collective narrator, does plurality escape the essentialism criticized by Moi, or does it risk producing a new category of "woman"?

The novel's narrative structure suggests that the "we" remains open rather than fixed. Its composition changes according to the women, historical periods, and experiences incorporated into it. The collective subject therefore does not depend upon a common essence. Instead, it is produced through relations among heterogeneous embodied subjects.

This makes distributed subjectivity central to Schwartz's body-text. Identity is not located in a single, stable body or voice; it is produced through the relationships among multiple bodies and voices. The "we" can therefore remain collective without becoming homogeneous, provided that its composition remains open to difference and transformation.

Both Atwood and Schwartz thus reject the idea that women, their bodies, or their voices possess a fixed and stable nature. Yet their approaches to this problem differ. Atwood emphasizes the instability of authority produced by competing voices, while Schwartz emphasizes the instability of subjectivity produced by its distribution across multiple bodies.

The body-text therefore cannot be reduced to a narrative in which women move from silence to speech. Such a formulation would overlook the central problems demonstrated by both novels: **who is authorized to speak, from what embodied position, under what discursive conditions, and with what consequences for the subject being represented**.

In Atwood, the body-text emerges through the contest between Penelope's "I" and the maids' "we"; in Schwartz, it emerges through the collective "we" that distributes subjectivity across different bodies and historical positions. In both cases, embodiment changes the structure of textual authority rather than merely supplying a new theme or a new group of speakers.

II.VII Conclusion

The theoretical framework developed in this chapter makes it possible to understand the body-text as more than a metaphor for the representation of women's bodies. Drawing on Moi, the body-text is grounded in the relationship between material existence, social discourse, subjectivity, and textual production. The body is neither a purely biological entity nor a transparent source of authentic meaning. It is a situated and discursively mediated site through which subjects acquire meaning and narrative positions.

This perspective also clarifies the importance of rejecting essentialism. There is no single female body that produces a single female voice. Embodied subjects are shaped by different historical, social, and material conditions, and the textual forms through which they speak reflect these differences.

Atwood and Schwartz develop this principle through distinct narrative strategies. In *The Penelopiad*, the body-text is constructed through fragmentation, competing voices, and contested narrative authority. Penelope and the maids enter the narrative as embodied subjects, but their perspectives do not merge into one unified female voice.

Instead, their disagreement demonstrates that the redistribution of narrative space does not automatically resolve the hierarchies that structure women's experiences.

In *After Sappho*, the body-text is constructed through distributed subjectivity, renaming, and the first-person plural. Schwartz disperses the narrative subject across different women, bodies, and historical periods, creating a collective "we" whose identity remains open and continually reconfigured. The collective voice therefore does not necessarily constitute an essential feminine identity; rather, it makes the relationship between individual embodiment and collective subjectivity itself the object of narrative experimentation.

The comparison consequently reveals two distinct forms of collective embodiment. Atwood constructs a body-text through **fragmented and contested authority**, while Schwartz constructs one through **distributed and continually reconfigured subjectivity**. Both challenge the idea that textual authority must belong to one unified subject, but they do so through different relationships between body, voice, plurality, and identity.

The body-text should therefore be distinguished from related categories such as embodiment, corporeality, voice, feminist rewriting, or the body-as-text. These concepts illuminate particular aspects of the phenomenon, but the body-text describes their interaction: the ways in which embodied existence enters textual production and the ways in which textual and discursive structures, in turn, shape the legibility, identity, authority, and representation of embodied subjects.

For what concerns, instead, the concept of collective textual body, it is not a unified female body. It is a textual configuration in which multiple embodied subjects coexist without being reduced to a single identity or voice. In Atwood, this collectivity is produced through contestation; in Schwartz, instead, it is produced through circulation and transformation.

Building on this theoretical framework, the following chapter will move toward a closer comparative analysis of *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*. It will examine their respective narrative strategies and approaches to embodiment, focusing particularly on their use of myth and their reinterpretation of female mythological figures such as Penelope and Sappho. It will then consider how each text represents the female body and negotiates the relationship between individual and collective voice and corporeality.

Finally, the analysis will address the historical and legal contexts that shape Schwartz's novel and examine women's agency through an appropriate theoretical framework, identifying both the points of convergence and the significant differences between the two constructions of the body-text.

Chapter Three:

Analysis and comparison of Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Schwartz's *After Sappho*

Building on the critical framework outlined in the previous chapter, this chapter turns to a comparative close analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Selby Wynn Schwartz's *After Sappho*, shifting from the theoretical debate to how the two texts construct and reconfigure the body-text.

In Chapter One, the thesis demonstrated how the body-text is understood as a mode of textuality in which the body functions not as an object of representation but as a site of inscription, meaning production, and narrative structure. In Chapter Two, instead, one of the main research questions was addressed: how does the body modify the notion of text? Further related questions were addressed as well: can the body write? And who speaks when embodiment affects textual production?

In Chapter Three, instead, the dissertation focuses on the analysis of the two books, discussing topics like the narrative voice, the representation of the female body, the reinterpretation of mythological figures, and the relation between individual and collective forms of expression.

The analysis of the two texts is therefore crucial not only for establishing the body-text as a site of textual agency, but also for examining the different forms that this agency can take; for example, both authors in their books used the practice of rewriting and reinterpreting mythological (and historical) figures, like Penelope and Sappho.

Furthermore, this chapter develops topics already introduced in the previous chapters, particularly the relationship between the female body, narrative voice, and textuality.

Both authors represent the female body through individual and collective forms of voice and corporeality.

Atwood, for example, alternates between Penelope's individual narration and the collective voice of the chorus of maids, emphasizing the tension between individuality and collectivity while also returning to the question of who has the authority to narrate. Schwartz similarly moves between individual women and collective forms of female experiences, allowing voices, identities, and memories to circulate across different bodies and historical moments.

The comparison between the two texts therefore reveals two distinct configurations of the body-text. Atwood and Schwartz both expose the relationship between embodied subjects and the discourses through which their bodies become legible, but they configure this relationship differently: Atwood presents the body as a site of competing narratives and contested authority, whereas Schwartz presents it as a site of circulation, accumulation, and transhistorical transmission. The analysis that follows examines how these two models emerge through the authors' different uses of narrative voice, corporeality, rewriting, and collective expression, and considers what each reveals about the body-text as a form of textual and embodied agency.

III.I Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

The Atwood section points toward a central feature of the body-text: bodies do not simply exist before narration as stable objects waiting to be described. They are produced, classified, exchanged, silenced, and contested through language.

To delve more into this idea, this section focuses on Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, her rewriting of the myth of Penelope. In it, Atwood rewrites the events narrated in Homer's *The Odyssey*; the story is narrated by Penelope from the underworld, after her death, and by the chorus of hanged maids.

Instead of describing herself as the faithful and patient wife of the traditional myth, Penelope completely changes the idea of her that the readers of *The Odyssey* had.

The maids constitute the other narrator of the story, and they speak as a chorus; they tell their readers how they died, hanged by Odysseus for being unfaithful to him (their master), while he was away. Indeed, several of the girls were raped by the twelve Suitors, who were trying to make Penelope theirs while Odysseus was away. However, for Odysseus, the maids going to bed with the Suitors without asking for his permission was something worth punishing, and he hanged them.

Their death matters because what the maids did was for Penelope; indeed, she states, "they were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace" (Atwood 114).

However, Penelope could not tell Odysseus it was her who sent the maids to the Suitors and they are (unjustly) hanged and killed. The maids still blame Penelope for their death and, in the underworld, they won't let her get near them (Atwood 190); that is where Penelope's narrative and the maids' meet. In fact, Atwood gives Penelope a first-person voice and places it alongside the collective voice of the twelve maids.

Moreover, since the maids still view Penelope as the reason why they were killed, they often doubt her reliability even as a narrator, intervening to contradict her.

This is important for what concerns the issue of who can narrate; in this case, it is not clear whether the readers should trust either the maids or Penelope as (reliable) narrators.

From the opening of the novel, Penelope claims the right to tell her own story: “Now that all others have run out of air, it’s my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself” (Atwood 3). The statement immediately establishes a contrast with Homer’s narrative. In *The Odyssey,* Penelope is not the narrator of her own story; Atwood instead allows her to reinterpret the image of the faithful, diligent, and patient wife.

Her boredom during Odysseus’s absence – “When would he come back and relieve my boredom?” (Atwood 81) – already complicates that conventional image.

Her later insistence that the “slanderous” stories about her are “completely untrue” and “groundless rumors” (143) further draws attention to the instability of the story she is attempting to control.

However, this is important because it is not merely about the rewriting of a classic; it connects with the body-text.

In fact, it is not only Penelope’s voice that writes; by allowing her to narrate, Atwood is allowing Penelope’s body to write as well. And the result is crucial for the idea of women and their bodies: Atwood’s Penelope rewrites the image of the ideal woman and wife (i.e., faithful, patient, diligent) that dominated the patriarchal society.

Yet Penelope’s authority is immediately challenged by the maids. When they first appear, they speak collectively:

> We are the maids
>
> the ones you killed
>
> the ones you failed (Atwood 5).

The chorus does not merely provide a second perspective; it directly contests Penelope’s account. The maids repeatedly accuse her of contributing to their deaths, while Penelope’s own narrative leaves their fate unresolved: “so I’ll never know” (Atwood 161). Their competing accounts therefore make narration itself a site of narration.

The disagreement between Penelope's individual narration and the maids' collective voice is important for what concerns who tells the story and, thus, whose body speaks; this can be related to the concept of body-text. In other words, the body-text is a mode of textuality in which the body can be (and is) inscribed; in Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, it is Penelope's and the maids' bodies that write the body into the text.

Atwood reinforces this tension by contrasting the way Penelope represents herself with the way the maids represent her. They describe her as "happy, clean and free" (Atwood 125), while referring to themselves as "naughty little jades" (Atwood 151) and sarcastically declaring, "Blame it on the slaves! Blame it on the sluts! […]" (Atwood 152). Their language exposes the gendered and social hierarchy underlying Penelope's self-fashioning.

Atwood herself explains in the introduction that she has given the story to "Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids", whose chanting and singing Chorus [...]" (XV) remains connected to the haunting memory of their execution.

Thus, the chorus of maids does more than add multiple voices: it keeps the bodies that have been silenced materially present within the text. In fact, even if their bodies have been hanged, their voices nevertheless persist; this is precisely where body and text enter into a distinctive relationship. Although their bodies no longer exist, the maids continue to speak from the underworld. Their voices, surviving beyond their physical deaths, come together in a single collective voice that forms a chorus and narrates their story.

In order to describe the maids and their bodies, Atwood employs animal imagery. This is crucial to the relationship between bodily and textual representation because the maids are initially made readable as bodies through a language that dehumanizes them, reducing them to animal-like figures. Yet, the novel does not leave them confined to this objectifying representation.

Through their collective speech, the maids appropriate the very textual space in which their bodies have been represented and reclaim their status as speaking subjects.

Thus, while their physical bodies are subjected to violence and erased, their textual bodies persist through language: the same figures who are initially represented as objects become the narrating subjects of their own story.

The maids are described as “animals young, to be disposed of at will, sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, discarded when bloomless” (Atwood 67), while the Suitors treat them as they would “the sheep and pigs and goats and cows” (116).

Their bodies are consequently reduced to animal bodies; animality becomes the condition through which the maids’ bodies are made readable and materially present in the text, even after their deaths.

However, this animalization does not simply bring the maids’ bodies into relief; rather, it renders them visible through dehumanizing and objectifying language.

The Suitors treat the maids as animals, taking advantage of their bodies and subjecting them to sexual violence. Thus, animal imagery simultaneously makes the maids’ bodies visible and denies their humanity, reducing them to bodies that can be used, exchanged, and discarded.

Yet, as the maids acquire a collective voice, they are no longer merely the objects of such representations; through their narration, they reclaim the textual space in which their bodies have been dehumanized and transform their representation into an act of self-expression.

The association between animality and the female body extends beyond the maids. Indeed, Penelope and Odysseus are also associated with animals: Odysseus becomes “the eagle” (139), while Penelope says, “I sound like an owl” (2) and recalls feeling “like a prize horse on parade” (72).

These images, however, do not operate in the same way. While Odysseus is associated with the eagle, a figure traditionally linked to strength, power, and authority, Penelope compares herself to an owl and, more significantly, to a prize horse on display for others to gaze at.

The contrast between these images highlights the different ways in which male and female body are positioned within a patriarchal society: while the male body is associated with power and agency, the female body is seen more as an object of observation and possession. The female body, in particular, is presented as something that can be watched, exchanged, possessed, or discarded.

This idea becomes explicit when the maids state, "[…] our bodies had little value" (Atwood 14). The language of value turns the body into an object that can be assessed within a patriarchal economy.

Marriage provides another example. Penelope explains that her marriage was arranged because "that's the way things were done then" and that "marriages were for having children" (23-24). At her father's court, women could even be the object of contests in which men competed to marry a "nobly born woman who was – so to speak – on the block" (26).

Penelope consequently describes herself as having been "handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat" (39).

This thesis focuses on the notion of body-text; on this ground, Atwood's rewriting is crucial because it allows the female body to become a site of narrative intervention. Even if, in this passage, Atwood describes the practice of marriage through animal imagery and depicts the female body as a (dead) animal, by allowing Penelope and the maids to narrate their own stories, she shifts them from objects of representation to subjects who can participate in, question, and contest the narratives through which their bodies have been represented.

Penelope, in particular, becomes capable of exposing and intervening in the discourse through which her body has been made legible as an object.

In fact, she describes herself through an image that exposes the process by which her body has been made into one. Her statement therefore draws attention not only to the representation of the female body, but also to the discourse through which that body becomes legible as an object to be transferred, possessed, and used. At the same time, by articulating this representation itself, Penelope is able to expose and question the discourse that has objectified her. The body-text thus becomes a space in which the subject can intervene in the representations imposed upon the body, rather than remaining simply their passive object.

The maids occupy an even more vulnerable position within the economy of the body.

Penelope admits that “several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist” (115).

Their bodies are simultaneously sexualized and denied agency, and the consequences are fatal.

Yet the maids later speak back to the narrative that has reduced them to objects.

Their collective voice turns the same bodies that were controlled and punished into a source of testimony.

This is why Atwood’s treatment of the female body can be read not merely as a representation of oppression, but as a textual space in which competing narratives of the body contend for authority.

More specifically, the female body becomes a site of dispute between the narratives imposed upon it and those articulated by Penelope and the maids.

Another important topic treated in the book is that of deception. Odysseus is repeatedly associated with “lies” and “tricks” (Atwood 93), while Penelope admits that even “an obvious fabrication” about her absent husband could comfort her (85).

Telemachus also lies to her, and when Penelope and Odysseus finally meet again, she describes them as “proficient and shameless liars of long standing” (173).

Most importantly, she concludes that “it’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other” (173).

The final uncertainty is therefore not simply whether Penelope and Odysseus were faithful, but whether their relationship can be understood through any stable account at all.

Atwood makes narrative itself unstable: the characters depend on stories even while acknowledging that those stories may be false.

The Atwood section therefore points toward a central feature of the body-text: Penelope’s body, the maids’ bodies, and the bodies of the characters associated with them become sites where different accounts struggle for legitimacy.

Atwood’s revision of Homer consequently turns the female body into a problem of textual authority as much as a problem of representation, as the characters themselves gain the capacity to expose, negotiate, and argue the narratives through which their bodies have been made legible.

III.II Selby Wynn Schwartz’s *After Sappho*

After Sappho approaches the relationship between body and text through a different structure. Rather than centering on one protagonist, Schwartz constructs a collage of women characters whose lives intersect across different periods.

In doing so, Schwartz explores a series of interconnected phenomena through which the text moves from the instability of individual identity towards the construction of a collective female voice. Naming and renaming first destabilize individual identity, opening the possibility of “becoming Sappho” and thus of moving beyond a singular, fixed self toward a plural and transhistorical female embodiment.

This transformation ultimately contributes to the emergence of a collective female voice, in which individual experiences of sexual violence, the regulation and representation of women's bodies, marginalization, and female rage are incorporated into a shared history. Through the figures of Sappho and Cassandra, this process culminates in the collective "we", transforming individual experiences of silencing and oppression into a broader, transhistorical female voice.

Naming is one of the first ways in which Schwartz represents identity as something that can be changed. The novel begins: "The first thing we did was change our names" (Schwartz 9).
Lina Poletti, Sibilla Aleramo, Renée Vivien, Jessie Gavin, Berthe, and other women abandon inherited names or adopt new ones, turning renaming into a practice of self-fashioning.
Schwartz also emphasizes the weight carried by an inherited name: "Her old names would drag after her like chains" (28). The metaphor suggests that names can impose identities as restrictive as physical restraints, giving an otherwise abstract process a material dimension.
Naming therefore operates as both a social and textual act: the women alter the names through which they are socially recognized and, in doing so, transform the identities and narratives attached to them.

Renaming, instead, leads directly to the idea of "becoming Sappho." The women announce, "we were going to be Sappho" (Schwartz 9), but the process is not immediate: "we needed a great deal of practice before we could become Sappho" (33).
Later, Schwartz insists that "becoming Sappho was not to play-acting in a garden! It was living the rites among the people who had tended the ancient shrines" (112).
Sappho therefore functions less as a fixed historical identity than as a possibility that can be inhabited and transformed.

Virginia Woolf is described as “the first to write Sappho into becoming us” (194), and Schwartz later imagines that “there would be more than one life unfurling in every life” (235), with Sappho becoming “a different one of us” in each chapter (235).

The movement is consequently reciprocal: the women become Sappho, but Sappho also becomes them. This reciprocity is crucial because Schwartz is not simply presenting a multiplicity of female voices; she imagines a form of subjectivity that circulates across historically distinct women. The boundaries separating one female subject from another, thus, become permeable: Sappho can be reconstructed through the experiences, voices, and identities of women who come after her, while these women can, in turn, inhabit and transform her identity. What emerges is neither a single, unified subject nor a collection of autonomous individuals, but a plural and relational subject whose identity is produced through its connection with other women across time.

In this sense, “becoming Sappho” does not imply the disappearance of individual identities; rather, it creates a space in which individual identities can coexist, overlap, and continually reshape one another.

The female subject consequently becomes transhistorical: it is not confined to one body, one voice, or one historical moment, but is repeatedly reconstructed through the women who take part in it.

This dynamic can be understood as Schwartz’s distinctive configuration of the relationship between body, identity, and text.

The body remains historically and individually situated, since each woman experiences oppression within her own specific circumstances; yet, through naming, identification, and literary transformation, these separate bodies become connected within a shared textual and symbolic space.

The text thus becomes the mode through which identities can move between bodies without erasing their differences. Rather than representing women as isolated subjects whose voices have merely been recovered, Schwartz constructs a form of female subjectivity in which one woman's experience can become part of another's. The result is a collective identity that is not based on similarity, but on the possibility of inhabiting, transforming, and carrying forward the experiences of other women.

This distinguishes Schwartz's approach from Atwood's. Atwood applies collective female voices to challenge the silencing produced by patriarchal narratives; her *Penelopiad* largely brings together distinct voices that remain recognizably separate: Penelope speaks as Penelope, while the maids develop a collective voice of their own.

Schwartz, instead, pushes the relationship between female voices further by destabilizing the boundaries between the subjects who produce them. Her women do not simply speak alongside or on behalf of one another; they participate in the ongoing construction of one another's identities. Consequently, whereas Atwood foregrounds the recovery and confrontation of marginalized voices, Schwartz emphasizes the circulation and transformation of female subjectivity across bodies, identities, and historical periods.

Schwartz's plural and relational understanding of female subjectivity is also reflected in her treatment of the female body, which emerges not as an isolated site of individual experience but as a body shaped by shared structures of patriarchal power.

Schwartz describes "the casual breaking of bodies in the back rooms of a household, nearly always the bodies of women" under the authority of the *patria potestas* (25).

The law "authorized the husband to treat his wife as a child forever" (25), denying her full personhood.

The same logic appears when Sibilla's manuscript is rejected because "it was only the story of a woman" (29). The word "only" does more than diminish her writing: it exposes the connection between the devaluation of women's experiences and the devaluation of the bodies through which those experiences are lived.

Schwartz repeatedly shows how women's bodies were treated as property. The Pisanelli Code is described as turning women into "the small gift, pawned for the future of the fatherland" (23), while Anna Kuliscioff rejects the idea that women should be "held as property" (24).

Romaine Brooks's self-portrait provides a contrasting form of bodily agency: Schwartz writes that "at last she had taken the risk of her own body" (182).

The sentence is significant because representing one's own body becomes an act of risk, precisely within a culture in which men have claimed authority over how women are seen.

The body-text thus involves not only the oppression of the female body but also the struggle to make that body speak on its own terms.

Sexual violence makes this struggle particularly explicit. Schwartz describes Rina Faccio's rape in physical terms: "her dress was shoved up. She cried out, but only the brute palm of his hand could hear her" (Schwartz 20).

Her inability to make herself heard is both literal and symbolic. Schwartz describes how "while he was thanking her for having been raped by him, he tried to rape her again," before Sibilla was given to him in marriage under the law (45).

The violence is therefore sustained by a legal structure that transforms the abused woman's body into the property of the men involved.

Schwartz's historical perspective makes visible the relationship between bodily violence and institutional authority. However, the silencing of women extends beyond marriage and sexual violence.

Schwartz asks, “and will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?” (55), drawing attention to the male authority that has historically shaped literary judgment.

Political institutions reproduce the same exclusion: in 1912, Italian politicians “had limited suffrage to men alone,” leaving “every woman in Italy” disenfranchised (138).

Even the temporary inclusion of women during the war is described in terms that reveal the underlying exclusion: perhaps women would become “Englishmen” (177).

The formulation suggests that recognition was conditional upon entering a male-defined category rather than being granted based on women’s own identities.

Schwartz connects this history of silencing to female rage: Rina Faccio experiences “a tumultuous hatred of life, this life, her life” (20), while Eleonora Duse describes women as “burning and burning with a dry rage against the long tyranny of men” (86).

These moments do not simply present anger as a psychological reaction. Rage becomes a response to the repeated denial of agency over the body, marriage, work, and voice.

The emotion therefore has a collective dimension: individual experiences of control accumulate into a shared awareness of the structures producing them.

Finally, the figures of Sappho and Cassandra provide Schwartz with two complementary models for this relationship between women, voice, and textual survival.

Sappho is associated with artistic creation and the possibility of inhabiting multiple lives.

Cassandra, by contrast, is associated with seeing and speaking what others refuse to hear.

Schwartz describes her as a prophetess who “did not hold her nightmares on her tongue” (49), and later recalls that she “could not hide her tongue from what she had to say” (136). Cassandra therefore becomes a figure for the voice that refuses silence.

The distinction between the two figures becomes clearer when Schwartz considers their place in literary history.

Cassandra is one of the women who were “dragged across the seas as slaves and then murdered on the threshold” (143), whereas the women initially prefer Sappho because “nothing happened to Sappho except her own life” (143).

Cassandra later challenged this distinction: “it is not true that nothing happened to Sappho except her own life” (168).

She explains that Sappho’s fragments contain the missing lines of women’s lives: “our lives are the lines missing from the fragments […] the future of Sappho shall be us” (168).

Sappho and Cassandra thus become connected. One represents the text that survives in fragments; the other insists that women must become the voices that complete those fragments.

This connection is central to Schwartz’s collective female voice. The women are described as “grasping each other by the wrists in a circle” (61), forming “a chorus of voices” (62).

Sibilla allows other women’s voices to “wing their way through hers, intertwine with hers, rise up on her tongue” (62).

The image of voices moving through the body is particularly relevant to the body-text: the individual woman does not disappear into a collective, but becomes a medium through which other women can speak. Her body becomes the point of contact between separate lives and narratives.

The collective does not require agreement. At a bar near Gare du Nord, different groups of women propose different futures: some imagine a separate island, others want to enter government, and others want to “seed Sappho everywhere we could” (159). Their positions differ, yet their voices rise together.

Lina later promises that their chorus “would never be silenced” (187), and in the afterwords Schwartz returns to the formulation “we are the chorus, […] taking different aspects of the character in different Centuries” (255).

Collectivity therefore does not erase difference; instead, it provides a structure in which difference can remain audible.

The same structure appears in the idea of living multiple lives. Schwartz writes that Sibilla heard stories of all the women Eleonora Duse had been (145), while Duse herself had "already been too many women in her life" (85). Sarah Bernhardt similarly insists, "I have many lives" (197), and awakens with "many more lives" (245).

These examples extend the idea of collective voice beyond speaking for others. The body becomes capable of carrying several identities and experiences without reducing them to a single, stable self. In this sense, multiplicity is not a departure from the body-text but one of its defining conditions.

Another very crucial topic Schwartz touches upon concerns historical and legal references; they are not merely background information. They show how the law has materially shaped women's bodies, determined who possesses them, whether their testimony counts, whose name they bear, and whose experiences could acquire legal or social authority.

The different laws discussed by Schwartz also help the argument about the body-text: more specifically, the fact that legal texts define the body's status, ownership, and testimony renders the body as something textual in a particularly literal sense.

The clearest example is Article 544, which allowed a father to give a daughter who had been raped in marriage to the rapist. Schwartz describes the law as "manoeuvring girls of sixteen as brides to the very men who had trampled them down" (20) and later connects it to the verb *impadronirsi*, "to become the patron and possessor, the proprietor and the patriarch" (44). The language of possession makes explicit the relationship between legal authority and bodily ownership.

Other laws demonstrate the gradual and uneven transformation of women's legal status. The Pisanelli Code of 1865 gave Italian women the right to make wills and allowed daughters to inherit property (Schwartz 21).

Its 1877 amendment further allowed women to “act as witnesses” and to “sign our names to what we knew to be true” (23). Schwartz emphasizes the textual dimension of this change: women’s words, previously considered “gauzy and frivolous,” acquired “a new weight as they settled on the page” (23). Here, the relationship between body and text becomes particularly clear. The legal recognition of a woman’s signature demonstrates that textuality is not merely representational: the physical act of inscription produces a material and social effect, altering what a woman can legally do and how her testimony is recognized.

Body-text therefore describes the relationship between the material body and the textual and discursive systems through which that body acquires social meaning, legal recognition, and narrative authority; it also names the subject’s capacity to enter, reproduce, negotiate, or contest these systems through acts of narration, inscription, and representation.

In this sense, the 1877 amendment does not simply give women a voice; it changes the conditions under which their words can acquire authority.

Legal recognition does not simply change women’s social position; it changes the status of their signatures, testimonies, and words.

At the same time, other legislation continued to govern women through their bodies. Schwartz describes the *patria potestas* as “the thick knot of their power to dispose magisterially of women” (25), while Italian and French laws placed responsibility for illegitimate children disproportionately on women.

The *jus sanguinis* similarly connected citizenship to familial and paternal blood, while the 1927 Royal Decree rewarded women who bore children and taxed those who remained unmarried (241). These examples reveal a recurring pattern: women’s bodies are treated as instruments through which families, nations, and social structures reproduce themselves.

Schwartz also records historical spaces in which women collectively claimed forms of agency. At the 1908 National Congress of Women in Italy, women articulated different demands, from suffrage and literacy to support for unmarried mothers, while nevertheless agreeing on the need to end the *autorizzazione maritale* (30).

The 1914 inauguration of the Library for Actresses created a space where women could "learn to think for themselves" (149).

During the war, women were also called upon to perform work that had previously been associated with men, while the International Congress of Women brought women together around questions including emancipation, pacifism, workers' rights, and juridical equality (150).

These episodes matter because they show women moving from bodies regulated by institutions to bodies that occupy, create, and transform public spaces.

The historical narrative nevertheless remains marked by attempts to regulate women's identities and voices. *The Black Book,* supposedly containing the name of every lesbian in Britain, and the proposed criminalization of female homosexuality demonstrate how naming itself could become a means of surveillance (Schwartz 184-188).

Later, under fascism, the confinement of homosexuals and the continued subordination of women reveal the persistence of institutional control (226-227). In 1927, the women in the novel return to Lina's earlier manifesto because they are awaiting a voice capable of articulating resistance (241-242).

The repeated return to women's names, writings, laws, and manifestos suggests that historical memory is itself part of the struggle over who can speak.

The historical and legal material therefore strengthens rather than interrupts Schwartz's treatment of the body-text. Laws determine what women may do with their bodies; institutions determine whether their testimony is recognized; and literary and political texts preserve or suppress their voices.

Schwartz brings these dimensions together by turning historical women into interconnected figures within a collective narrative. The body becomes an archive, while the text becomes a space in which that archive can be recovered and reorganized.

III.III Two Models of Body-Text

The analysis of Atwood and Schwartz reveals two models of the body-text: while Atwood constructs the body-text primarily through competing narratives and contested authority, Schwartz constructs it through circulation, accumulation, and transhistorical transmission. In other words, Penelope's individual narration is repeatedly challenged by the collective voice of the maids, preventing any single account of the past from becoming definitive. In Schwartz, instead, women's names, experiences, and voices pass between individual lives and across historical periods.

In both texts, however, the body is inseparable from the discourses through which it becomes socially and narratively legible. The formal difference is important: Atwood emphasizes contradiction between voices, whereas Schwartz emphasizes their circulation and accumulation.

This distinction is central to the concept of the body-text developed in this thesis. Body-text does not simply refer to the representation of the body in language, nor does it suggest that the body *literally* becomes a text. Rather, it describes the reciprocal relationship between embodied subjects and the textual and discursive systems through which their bodies acquire meaning, authority, and social recognition.

These systems may regulate, objectify, silence, or define the body, but subjects can also reproduce, negotiate, or contest them through acts of narration, inscription, and representation. Body-text, thus, concerns not only the stories imposed upon bodies, but also the capability of embodied subjects to intervene in the narratives through which they are understood.

This distinction becomes particularly visible in the two works examined here. While Atwood constructs the body-text through competing narratives and contested authority, Schwartz constructs it through the circulation and transformation of experiences, identities, and memories. Their difference is therefore not merely formal. It reveals two ways in which body-text can operate: as a site where narrative authority is contested and as a space where experiences, identities, and memories are transmitted and transformed. Neither text presents "woman" as a stable category with one voice.

Instead, the body-text is fragmented and plural: different embodied experiences are articulated through competing narratives, while those narratives can intersect, contradict, or inhabit one another.

This comparison demonstrates how the concept of body-text operates differently across the two works. If Schwartz foregrounds the material and institutional effects of textual inscription, showing how women's bodies acquire legal and social agency through their participation in authoritative narrative systems, Atwood emphasizes the contest over who has the authority to inscribe and narrate the body. Rather, both authors show that the bodies and texts are mutually involved in the production of meaning. In *The Penelopiad,* Penelope's account is repeatedly challenged by the maids' collective voice, preventing her version of the past from becoming definitive. The body-text thus emerges in both as a site where the meanings and authority attached to embodied subjects can be negotiated and contested.

The chapter has consequently identified several points of convergence between *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*: the tension between individual and collective voice, the representation and objectification of women's bodies, the unequal distribution of narrative authority and the instability of identity.

Atwood develops these concerns through Penelope, the maids, fidelity, deception, and animal imagery, while Schwartz approaches them through naming and renaming, historical and legal structures, Sappho and Cassandra, sexual violence, female rage, and collective memory.

Their different strategies lead to a similar challenge to patriarchal forms of representation: neither author allows the meanings attached to women's bodies to remain determined by a single authoritative narrative.

The following chapter – the conclusion – returns to the initial research question: how does the body modify the notion of text? In doing so, the conclusion tries to state what the analysis presented in this dissertation enables to answer.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the concept of the body-text, focusing more specifically on how the body modifies the notion of text in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Selby Wynn Schwartz's *After Sappho*. Drawing on the work of feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Toril Moi, the analysis explores the relationship between embodiment, identity, voice, and textuality, arguing that the body cannot be understood merely as an object represented within a text. Rather, embodiment participates in the production, transmission, and interpretation of meaning, affecting both the forms through which bodies become legible and the positions from which they speak.

To answer the main research question – how does the body modify the notion of text? – this dissertation has argued that the body makes textuality inseparable from the embodied subjects who inhabit, negotiate, and contest the discursive systems through which bodies acquire meaning, authority, and social recognition.

The body therefore does not simply enter the text as an object of representation; it also affects the conditions under which representation becomes possible. This includes questions of who can speak, how identities are constructed, whose accounts are recognized as authoritative, and how inherited representations can be challenged or revised. At the same time, the comparative analysis demonstrates that contesting dominant narratives does not necessarily dissolve existing hierarchies. The emergence of previously marginalized voices can instead reveal differences and tensions among embodied subjects themselves, making visible the uneven distribution of authority even within acts of narrative revision.

This understanding of the body-text is grounded in the theoretical framework developed in Chapter One. Moi's rejection of fixed femininity makes it possible to understand the body not as the expression of an essential female identity, but as a site whose meanings are produced through cultural, social, and ideological structures. Cixous's account of writing through the body, together with feminist critiques of inherited representations, further demonstrates that textual practices can intervene in the systems through which bodies have been defined and interpreted. The body-text therefore emerges not from a simple opposition between bodily experience and textual representation, but from their continuous interaction: bodies are shaped, interpreted, regulated, and remembered through language, while textual practices can rearticulate the meanings attached to embodied experience.

The concept of the body-text should consequently not be understood as a metaphor in which the body simply "becomes" a text. It describes instead a reciprocal relationship in which body and text continually shape one another.

Bodies are named, represented, regulated, objectified, silenced, remembered, and rewritten through language; at the same time, texts can expose, negotiate, and contest the discursive processes through which such meanings are produced. Textuality is therefore inseparable from embodiment: the question of who speaks cannot be separated from the question of whose body is represented. From this position, it is represented, and authority to interpret or narrate it is granted.

This reciprocal process takes different forms in *The Penelopiad* and *After Sappho*. Atwood's rewriting of *The Odyssey* redistributes narrative authority among Penelope, the maids, and other figures, and the contrast among their accounts shows that the multiplication of voices does not produce a unified alternative perspective. The collective voice of the maids, in particular, complicates the relationship between individual and collective embodiment and exposes tensions that remain unresolved by Penelope's narration.

Schwartz similarly constructs a plural textual space in which Sappho, Cassandra, and the numerous other women enter into relationships of identification, transformation, and divergence. The coexistence of these voices does not establish a single account of female experience; rather, it makes visible the differences between bodies, histories, identities, and positions from which experience is narrated. In both texts, therefore, narrative plurality is significant not simply because previously excluded women speak, but because the interaction among voices reveals the contested conditions under which embodied subjects become narratable and authoritative.

The comparative analysis also shows that rewriting is not merely an aesthetic practice but a negotiation of textual and bodily authority. By revisiting inherited myths, historical figures, and patriarchal representations, Atwood and Schwartz intervene in narratives that have already assigned meanings and positions to female bodies.

Their texts do not simply replace these representations with definitive alternatives. Instead, they reopen them to contestation, exposing the instability of identities and the unequal relations of authority through which they have been constructed.

Penelope, the maids, Sappho, Cassandra, and the other women who populate Schwartz's narrative occupy textual spaces in which identity remains relational and revisable, and in which no single voice can fully determine the meaning of the body.

The body therefore modifies the notion of text precisely because embodiment affects the conditions through which bodies become legible within textual and discursive systems. These conditions shape not only how bodies are represented, but also who can narrate them, whose narrative is granted authority, and how that authority may be negotiated or contested.

The body-text can thus be understood as a space of negotiation between body and language, individual and collective voice, embodied experience and its representation, and inherited narratives and their revision. Rather than proposing a single definition of female experience, Atwood and Schwartz demonstrate how multiple embodied positions can enter into dialogue, conflict, and relation with one another.

Ultimately, to rewrite the body is also to intervene in the text through which that body has been made legible. Such intervention does not necessarily resolve the inequalities between voices or establish a final form of recognition. Instead, it makes visible the contested and uneven processes through which speaking, being heard, being represented, and constructing identity become possible. In this sense, the body-text names not the recovery of an authentic voice or body outside discourse, but an ongoing process through which embodied subjects negotiate the meanings that textual and cultural systems attach to them.

The body modifies the notion of text because it is both shaped by these systems and involved in their transformation: embodiment becomes part of the very conditions under which texts acquire meaning and can be revised.

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