

**RECEPTION OF THE READING OF THE MYTH OF PENELOPE'S WEB IN
THE POEM LAS NOCHES DE PENÉLOPE, BY LUZ MÉNDEZ DE LA VEJA**

***Receção de leitura do mito da Teia de Penélope no poema las Noches de Penélope, de
Luz Méndez de la Vega***

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Abstract

We propose to analyse the reception of the myth of Penelope's web – queen of Ithaca in the absence of her husband, Ulysses (Odysseus) – in the poem *Las Noches de Penélope*, by contemporary Guatemalan author Luz Méndez de la Vega. Known as a revolutionary feminist activist and champion of freedom, Méndez de la Vega found in art and culture effective means for her civic and political intervention through her poetry. She is also the author of essays, narratives, articles and plays for newspapers, while also founding theatre groups and pursuing music, teaching and, among other things, academic research.

Resumo

Propomo-nos a fazer uma análise da receção de leitura do mito da teia de Penélope – rainha de Ítaca na ausência do marido, Ulisses (*Odisseu*), de Homero (928 a.C.–898 a.C.) – no poema *Las Noches de Penélope*, da autora contemporânea guatemalteca Luz Méndez de la Vega (2019-2012). Conhecida como ativista revolucionária de cariz feminista, transmissora de liberdade, Méndez de la Vega encontrou na arte e na cultura os meios eficazes para a sua intervenção cívica e política, através da sua poesia, sendo também autora de ensaios, de narrativas, de artigos e de peças para os jornais, ao mesmo tempo, fundando grupos de teatro e enveredando pela música, ensino e entre outros meios, a investigação académica.

Key-words: *Penelope's web; The Nights of Penelope; Luz Méndez de la Vega; Ulysses; Homer.*

Palavras-chave: *Teia de Penélope; Las Noches de Penélope; Luz Méndez de la Vega; Ulisses; Homero.*

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INTRODUCTION

In Greek mythology, the Moirai – which Roman culture would later refer to as the Fates – are three weaving goddesses, sisters to each other and sisters of the Hours, daughters of Zeus and Themis. Their skill is expressed through the spindle and thread. They are: Clotho (Nona), Lachesis (Decima) and Atropos (Morta).

These deities control the destiny and life path of humans, whose decisions – for example, life and death – no other deity can interfere with, not even the powerful Zeus. Clotho spins the threads; Lachesis draws them out, extends them and directs them; and Atropos is the irreversible one – that is, the one who cuts the threads, ending the biological cycle. Thus, symbolically, "it is they who, before the wheel of fortune, weave and cut the thread of life at will" (Silva, 2018, p. 233).

Penelope was the most famous weaver of Antiquity. Helen of Troy, a celebrated female figure of Ancient Greece, was also recognised for her skill at the loom. However, both appear in opposite situations in relation to their suitors described in literature – mainly by Homer (928 BC–898 BC) – despite having in common the experience of isolation, insecurity, anguish, and nostalgia. While Helen – married to Menelaus – reciprocated the love of Paris, who took her with him and sheltered her in an unknown house, a situation against which her betrayed husband launched an armed expedition in the hope of rescuing her, Penelope experienced the opposite situation: her husband, whom she declares herself to be very fond of, is slow to return from the Trojan War and she lives surrounded by suitors who constantly harass her, but she resists and hopes for his return.

In fact, spinning and weaving were a hallmark of the female condition – one might say: exclusively female. Take Telemachus, son of the couple from Ithaca, who was only responsible for managing politics and weapons, the paradigm of male tasks. He says to his mother:

Now return to your chambers and pay attention
to your labours, to the loom and the spindle; and command your slaves
to do their work. For the bow belongs to men
everyone, especially me: for it is his power in the house
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 596 – c. 21, vv.350-353).

However, in the 21st century, this condition – that the loom and spinning wheel are exclusively female skills – may seem to us to be a sign of social discrimination against women, given the division of labour according to gender, but in the time of Homer's compositions, which highlight the figures of weavers, they were, in that context, a mark of status, distinction, elegance and intelligence. In the case of the Queen of Ithaca, it proved, in a way, to be a political instrument, since the suitors, in coveting her heart for a new marriage, also implicitly coveted the throne and the riches of the palace.

The myth of Penelope's web

The myth of Penelope's web is intrinsically linked to the marital fidelity of the Greek heroine, who married Ulysses. He was king of Ithaca, son of Laertes and Anticleia; she was daughter of Naiad Peribeia and Icarius. The latter was brother of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. Therefore, as he was the adoptive father of Helen of Troy, she is Penelope's cousin.

Ulysses is the hero of *the Odyssey*, an epic work by the Greek poet Homer. As can be seen, the title of the poetic composition derives linguistically from the word 'Ulysses'. In fact, Penelope became the greatest paradigm of fidelity to marriage vows, a universal legend in classical literature and compositions throughout the millennia. However, there are different versions of local and later traditions about the aforementioned legend. "The figure of Penelope, her role and performance in *the Odyssey*, has been a favourite subject of re-examination and discussion" (Pereira, 2003, p. 11). Be that as it may, the myth remains with appropriations and reinterpretations in works by classical authors such as Euripides, Seneca, Ovid, and Aristophanes, and contemporary authors such as Luz Méndez de la Vega, Nuno Júdice, and Sophia de Mello Breyner.

The version of the myth we explore here for our analysis is the most authoritative. The young woman was admirably beautiful – *a divine woman* (Lourenço, 2019, p. 53 – c. 1, v. 332). There are two main versions of her marriage. One points out that Icarius consented to the marriage through Tyndareus, who, having received good advice from Ulysses, wanted to repay him for the favour he had done him. The second version – the most plausible – states that Icarius, who was an accomplished athlete and championship winner, would not give his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone except those who could beat him in a race. Ulysses took up the challenge, accomplished the feat of defeating him,

and thus obtained consent to marry Penelope. After the wedding, Icarius tried to convince Ulysses that the couple should remain in Sparta. His son-in-law told him that Penelope should choose whether she wanted to stay with her father or her husband. She did not answer and, at that moment, covered her face with a veil. Icarius interpreted this act by his daughter as a symbolic expression of her desire to accompany her husband, and therefore let them leave for Ithaca.

The most widely accepted version of the myth states that Penelope and Ulysses had only one son, Telemachus, who was born a year before his father was called to fight in the Trojan War. Ulysses had children with other women, such as Telemachus, whose mother is believed to be Calypso, and Telegonus, probably the son of Circe – "according to another, less authoritative version, the son of Ulysses and Calypso" (Grimal, 1992, 2nd ed., p. 433).

Ulysses' absence, which lasted twenty years, proved painful for Penelope, marked by loneliness – the military conflict lasted a decade and the return home another decade. Penelope had no news of her husband, whether he was alive or dead. The queen of Ithaca asks the famous bard inspired by Calliope to cease singing about the ill-fated return of the Achaeans:

(...) But cease now this sad song,
Which always wears away my heart in my chest,
For an unforgettable pain has struck me deeply.
Such is the head I long for with nostalgia, always remembered,
Of the man whose fame is widespread in Hellas and in Argos
Lourenço (2019, p. 53-54 – c. 1, vv. 340-344).

However, due to the queen's imposing beauty, a large number of suitors gathered around her – "all desired to lie beside her in bed" Lourenço (2019, p. 54 – c. 1, v. 366). As such, her father advised her to remarry another man, but she, remaining faithful to her marital commitment, stated that she would wait for her husband for as long as necessary. She tries every argument and trick to avoid a new marriage. However, faced with such insistence and so as not to displease Icarius, Penelope decides to accept the courtesy of the suitors in the palace, but imposed one condition: the new marriage, with one of them, should only take place after she had finished weaving the shroud for Ulysses' father, Laertes – this was a ploy to maintain her desired distance from the constant harassment of the candidates for her heart.

Mythological tradition indicates that Penelope, despite her enormous loneliness caused by her husband's absence, was, in fact, among the wives of the heroes participating in the war, the only one who did not break her marital fidelity.

The deceit of the web and the return of the hero

As we said, Ulysses' journey back to Ithaca lasted as long as the war itself. It was a very difficult journey, in which the Greek hero had to face many challenges and dangers. The hero's return runs throughout Homer's composition. Penelope saw her son grow up without his father and found herself surrounded by suitors who persisted in their attempts. Ulysses returned to the palace as a beggar and found Penelope surrounded by suitors, who believed the hero to be dead. The main version of the myth states that the queen did not immediately recognise her husband, who only identified himself to Telemachus, their son, but mythologists have reflected and discussed among themselves whether this non-recognition was simulated or not. Legend has it that Penelope, who retains the epithet 'wise' throughout the epic – 'the daughter of Icarius, the wise Penelope (Lourenço, 2019, p. 54 – c.1, v. 329) – only allowed the unknown "beggar" into her house when she obtained irrefutable proof that he was indeed Ulysses.

Three years after making her promise to her suitors, Penelope had still not chosen a new husband nor finished the shroud. This part can be described as the 'web of deceit' (Pereira, 2009, p. 15), as the heroine unravelled every night the work she had done on the loom during the day in order to postpone the decision on her new engagement, according to the myth, in the hope of getting Odysseus back.

For we are now in the third year – soon the fourth will come –
in which she deceives the hearts of the Achaeans.
She gives hope to all and makes promises to every man,
Sending messages; but her mind wanders to other things.
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 86 – c. 2.vv. 89-92).

From then on, she also wove on the large loom during the day,
But at night she unravelled the weave, after putting out the torches
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 86 – c. 2.vv. 104-105).

However, the queen was denounced by one of her slaves. Faced with this surprise, Penelope proposed and organised a test for the suitors, which consisted of the following: she would marry the one who could string Apollo's bow and shoot an arrow from it. None of the suitors were able to do so; only Ulysses, disguised as a beggar and already inside

the palace, achieved the feat. Immediately afterwards, Ulysses, Telemachus and other members of the court – who had previously recognised the former – killed all the suitors. They had been living in the palace for years, spending its riches and seeking royal power, specifically that which would come with marrying the queen in her second marriage.

II – ANALYSIS OF THE POEM BY LUZ MÉNDEZ DE LA VEGA AND EXTENDED BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Next, before analysing the poem in light of the myth of Penelope's web, we will quote it in its entirety. After our study and reflection, and so as not to run the risk of being insufficiently effective in this analysis, we will also have to immerse ourselves exhaustively in the most striking biographical aspects of its author. She is a Latin American woman with a strong personality, imbued with a political imagination of revolutionary commitment to feminism and, on a philosophical level, existentialism. Only in this way can we better understand the writer's appropriation of the Greek myth, for although she is a recognised figure in her country and on her continent, she is still little known in the rest of the world.

Poem *Las Noches de Penélope*, by Luz Méndez de la Vega²

Tejí bajo el sol
y destejí
con las estrellas,
oyendo el rumor
5 del mar
por el que un día
Ulises
lleno de amor por mí
tuvo que alejarse.
10 Tejí y destejí
por las noches
sobre mi lecho
solitario
– ardiente amante –

² We took the liberty of placing verse numbers (in increments of five) on the left side of the poem for easy reference when analysing the composition, based on the original language (Spanish)

15 huérfana
del calor de su cuerpo,
en tanto Helena
locamente ardía
entre los brazos de Paris.

20 Tejí y destejí
– sin mirar el tiempo –
veinte años
de ausencia
crecidos sin su voz

25 sin la caricia de su piel
junto a la mía.
Veinte años
de oscuras noches
en que el deseo

30 se hacía ceniza
sobre mi ardiente
castidad de esposa.
Veinte años
de silencio suyo

35 y llenos de ecos
traídos por las olas:
Calíope,
Circe
y Nausicae,

40 nombres
que
me
clavaban
puñales en el vientre.

45 Tejí y destejí,
cicatrizando heridas,
sorda ante el acoso
a mi cuerpo y al trono.
¡Ulises insustituible!

50 mi corazón gritaba
a olas del mar
y entre su espuma
encontraba mensajes
de su regreso

55 porque ni Circe, Calíope
o Nausicae
podrían borrar mi sello
tatuado
en la carne y alma de Ulises.

(Vega, Luz Méndez de la, 1998, 35-37 pp.)

It is an entirely lyrical poem, in which the author gives voice to Penelope, highlighting the Greek heroine's speech in the first person ("I"), while in *the Odyssey* Homer uses narration, as is typical of epics. It is obvious that in certain passages of the epic text the characters sometimes speak in direct speech, but this is within the logical context of a narration.

Let us demonstrate the lyricism of the contemporary poem: Luz uses, throughout, the implied personal pronouns, possessive pronouns and personal pronouns common to both genders, marked in bold: "**I** wove under the sun / and unravelled" / with the stars"; "Ulysses / full of love for me"; "**Tejí y destejí**"; "**mi** lecho"; "junto a la mía"; "sobre **mi** ardiente"; "a **mi** cuerpo y al trono"; "**mi** corazón gritaba"; and "**mi** sello". However, let us give an example of the narrative voice of the Homeric composition, returning to one of the parts of the s already mentioned, with which we can verify the paraphrase in the first three verses of the contemporary poem and in which the tradition of the myth is respected. The allusion to the "sun" replaces that to the "day", while the allusion to the "stars" replaces that to the "night" (also marked in bold):

From then on, she also wove on the large loom during the **day**,
but at **night** she unraveled <the weave>, after lighting the torches
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 86 – c. 2, vv. 104-105).

Between verses 10 and 19 of Luz's poem, Penelope laments her suffering in love – "ardent lover" – due to the prolonged absence of her husband. She refers to "my lonely bed" and feels "orphaned / from the warmth of his body" (Ulysses). The same complaints are evident between verses 20 and 26: 'twenty years / of absence / grown up without his voice / without the caress of his skin / next to mine', as well as in other parts of the text.

We can see this lonely picture in several passages of the Greek epic – at least four summarised passages in which we encounter the anguish of the queen of Ithaca, who weeps and can only fall asleep with the help of the goddess Athena. Here is one of them:

After climbing up to his chambers with the slaves,
Odysseus, her beloved husband, wept until a gentle
sleep was cast over his eyelids by grey-eyed Athena
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 54 – c1, vv. 362-364).

However, going back a little, between verses 10 and 11, we read: "Tejy y desttejí /por las noches". This is an innovation to the myth, a reinterpretation that breaks with the idea that the heroine wove by day and unravelled by night – that is, it refers to both actions being performed at night. We will explore our interpretation of this passage further on.

In the Guatemalan author's poem, between verses 17 and 19, the queen of Ithaca, stating that she feels orphaned by the warmth of Ulysses' body, makes a different comparison to Helen of Troy: "while Helen/ 'burned madly/ in Paris' arms', wanting to show that she was happier. Penelope claims to have spent twenty years of "dark nights / in which desire / turned to ashes / on my burning / chastity as a wife" (between verses 28 and 32). Here, we may be faced with yet another innovation to the myth, where doubts and an agonising crisis regarding the desire to remain faithful to her marriage vows stand out. Furthermore, libidinous fantasies and dissatisfaction also stand out, as she feels like an ardent lover, speaking of desire and sensuality (for example, the warmth of the body and caresses on the skin), unlike the Penelope of Homer's. She appears to us to be psychologically more assertive, a model of determination in her vows, with an unyielding heart and no feelings of lust, to the point that Ulysses says to her:

An incomprehensible woman, more so than any other woman
It was you who were given an unyielding heart by those who dwell on
Olympus.
No other woman would remain so harshly distant
from her husband who, having suffered so much,
returns to his homeland in his twentieth year
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 634 – c.23, vv. 166-170).

In the contemporary composition, Penelope continues: "Twenty years / of silence from him / and filled with echoes / brought by the waves: Calliope / Circe / and Nausicaa" (verses 33 to 39), which stabbed her in the stomach. In our view, the current Penelope is trying to say that news reached her by sea – that is, through combatants returning to Ithaca – that her husband was distraught, enchanted and even romantically involved with the two goddesses and the princess, respectively.

Circe is a famous sorceress goddess, considered the queen of all sorceresses. Daughter of the Sun and Perse, she is also the goddess of night and physical love. She appears in *the Odyssey* and in the legends of the Argonauts. See Ulysses' relationship with Circe in the twelfth year of his absence from Ithaca:

And every day for a year we stayed there,
Eating meat in abundance and drinking smooth wine.
But when a year had passed and the seasons had completed
Their cycle, decreasing the months and increasing the days,
my faithful companions called me and said:

"You are confused! Remember now your homeland,
If it is destined that you should be saved and arrive
your high palace and your homeland!"
(Lourenço, 2019, p. 310 – 10.467-474).

Calliope is one of the oldest and wisest of the nine muses in Greek mythology. Daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory), she is the goddess who inspires epic poetry, eloquence and science in general, and possesses a beautiful voice. As mentioned above, Calliope inspired the bard to sing of the tragic end of the Trojan War and the ill-fated return of the combatants to Ithaca, a song that the queen ordered to be stopped. In mythology, the muses sometimes do not distinguish reality from fiction, leading mortals to deception.

Nausicaa, meanwhile, is a beautiful young woman, daughter of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians. Her encounter with Ulysses illustrates the concept of hospitality among the ancient Greeks. The young princess was on the beach, accompanying her maidservants who had gone to wash the royal family's clothes. While waiting for the clothes to dry in the sun, Nausicaa plays with a ball with other young women, her friends. Their laughter and effusive words end up waking a foreign man who, the night before, had thrown himself into the sea when the boat he was travelling on sank. The man immediately appears in front of the girls, but he is completely naked. He hides his nakedness with the bushes and calls out to the girls, but they all run away, except Nausicaa, who takes him to her father in the palace. Alcinous offers him clothes and food. This is Ulysses, who, after some time, is recognised at a banquet, at which point he is moved to tears when a bard sings of the Trojan War and the dramatic end of some of his comrades in arms.

The king of Ithaca was enchanted by the young woman's beauty, to the point of telling her that she resembled a muse, namely Artemis:

I kneel before you, O sovereign. Are you a goddess or a woman?
If you are one of the goddesses, of those whom the vast sky holds,
it is Artemis, daughter of the great Zeus, whom I most closely r
resemble you in beauty, proportions and height.
(Lourenço 2019: p. 203-204 – c. 6, vv.149-152).

The charm is reciprocated. Nausicaa shows romantic interest and confesses to a friend that she would like to have Ulysses as her husband. Alcinous told the king of Ithaca that he would consent to the marriage, but ended up sponsoring the hero's return to Ithaca, giving him a ship and various gifts.

Towards the end of Luz's poem, between verses 45 and 59, Penelope assures us that she wove and unravelled, healing wounds, deaf to the harassment of her body and her throne. She exclaims that Ulysses is irreplaceable, that her heart cried out and received messages of his return, and that the three figures mentioned above could not destroy her alliance, in flesh and soul, with her husband.

In our interpretation, Luz Méndez de la Vega brings the theme of the social and political role of women into our time, as well as questioning marriage as an institution, in which spouses often live unhappily and, in many cases, the bond only exists as a guarantee of wealth and social power. In the composition, she does not dissociate the body from the throne. The allusion to "¡Ulises insustituible!" (verse 49) may have more to do with the guarantee of the palace's wealth and power, due to the marital connection, and not so much with the purely conjugal relationship. All the more so because Penelope's marriage is the result of a bet between her father and Ulysses.

As we stated at the beginning, in Greek times the loom and the spinning wheel were symbols of female prestige, which elevated Penelope to a higher level among women. However, the verb 'to weave' has a 'metaphorical meaning' (Pereira, 2003, p. 14) in relation to the tasks of the Queen of Ithaca, which were different, for example, from those of her son, as we have seen. In Homer's composition, the queen confesses that, in relation to her suitors, "I weave a thread / of lies" (Lourenço, 2019, p. 539 – c. 1, vv.137-138). As for the making of her father-in-law's funeral shroud, she reveals that "a god put the idea / of the garment in my mind". (Lourenço, 2019, p. 539 – c. 19, vv. 138-139).

Weaving is divine, unweaving is human.

This dependence on the deity is a factor of a certain inferiority, as it is divine will and not exactly that of the queen, who is human. In fact, Penelope states: "so that no Achaean woman among the people may reproach me / that she who has gained so much wealth lies without clothing" (Lourenço, 2019, p. 540 – c. 19, vv. 146-147). We are not dealing with a queen regent like Atossa of Persia, who, in the absence of male royal

members (husband and son), had powers equal to those of the sovereign, particularly at the political and military levels. However, if weaving is an act of divine inspiration, unweaving is human inspiration – therefore, a personal act of transgression.

By bringing up the myth, Luz Méndez highlights Penelope's transgression as a political act and, given the circumstances, an anti-religious act of female liberation from patriarchal society, her own intimacy, her marital status and social status. The Guatemalan poet titles the poem *Las Nochas de Penélope (Penelope's Nights)*. Why only "nights" and not "days and nights"? And why not just "days"? In our view, Luz, existentialist as she is, is devaluing the actions of the deities, who labour in the light of day and whom humans obey. For Luz, human decisions based on religious factors, without the free will of societies, distort culture and the condition of women, as she stated. In short, marriage as an institution, sexual fulfilment (Penelope fantasised in her lust, while Ulysses had several women) and the social affirmation of women are, implicitly, called into question in the contemporary poem.

Author's biography – a contemporary voice from Latin America³

To avoid the risk of not being sufficiently effective in our analysis of this poem, we must also delve into some detail into the most striking biographical aspects of its author, a Latin American woman with a strong personality, imbued with a political imagination of revolutionary commitment to feminism and, on a philosophical level, existentialism. Only then will we better understand the writer's appropriation of Greek myth.

Luz was a prominent figure in contemporary Guatemalan literature. She was born in 1919 and died in 2012 – ironically, as a feminist, on Women's Day.

² Given that Luz Méndez de la Vega is a figure who is little known outside Latin America, the author of this work requested a biography of the writer from Sandra Santana, president of PEN International Puerto Rico, who forwarded the request to her counterpart in Guatemala, who responded very kindly. She fulfilled the request by sending a YouTube link to the documentary *Luz – Mujer, Desnudez y Palabras* (60 minutes long and without mention of the year), produced by the University of San Carlos of Guatemala (USAC), a work coordinated by researcher Gladys Tobar Aguilar and with the address mentioned below. Therefore, the author of this article based the biographical section on this film. The quotations (in quotation marks) in the aforementioned biography refer to this documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPrXPPvrz4I>

Due to the political activities of her father – who was a doctor and belonged to the strong opposition of the Unionist Party to the government – and the revolutionary upheavals caused by the fall of the dictator Estrada Cabrera – who would later be assassinated – as well as the return to dictatorship shortly thereafter, Luz, aged just two, had to accompany her family into exile in Mexico, where she began studying at the age of four at a secular school, at a time when the Mexican government did not allow religious schools to exist. This secularism was a determining factor in her later development as an independent and atheist intellectual. However, at the age of nine, her family transferred her to a boarding school run by nuns in El Salvador. It could be said that this was a very traumatic, harsh and cloistered experience, in which the idea of sin was obsessively instilled in her, punishments went so far as to place the girl in a cell with rats and spiders for days on end, and she was fed only bread and water. This bitter experience inspired her to write, much later, the essay *Aquel vestido de terciopelo y escaje* (*That Velvet and Lace Dress*), which is feminist in nature and against patriarchal society.

However, despite these harsh methods, it wasn't all bad: Luz befriended other students at the boarding school and their families, and soon became aware of the literature of the. The girl was fortunate enough to be chosen as the school's student representative to present a bouquet of roses to the Chilean poet and feminist Gabriela Mistral at an official event. Gabriela rewarded her with a kiss. This was the most important moment for Luz, because Gabriela became her great inspiration to take up literature and, later, feminist activism.

When the whole family returned to Guatemala, Luz attended the French Lycée and a teacher training college, where she completed her teaching course at the age of 17. However, she did not go on to higher education, choosing instead to marry and, at the age of 20, have the first of her three children. The marriage lasted 25 years, ending in divorce in 1965.

Later, she became generously involved in charitable work with her country's Social Welfare Auxiliary Service. Having been invited to write for a newspaper about these activities, this opportunity proved to be an open door to journalism. She began writing for various newspapers across the country, particularly for their cultural pages. She wrote countless articles until the end of her life, always with a feminist slant.

In 1944, at the age of 25, Luz decided to return to teaching. She enrolled and completed a bachelor's degree in Arts at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala

(USAC). She then completed a PhD in Literature at the Complutense University in Madrid, returning in 1954 to San Carlos, to the Department of Literature in the Faculty of Humanities, but this time as a lecturer and academic researcher. It is in this capacity that she focused her research on feminist themes and recovered texts by women writers who lived during the colonial period, as is well known, under the rule of the Spanish Crown (1523-1821) – Guatemala gained independence on 15 September 1821. She helped found several theatre groups, including Humanidades, which premiered Greek tragedies in that country – for example, *Antigone and Medea*. In addition, Luz edited essays that questioned certain religious aspects which, in her view, distorted the culture and dignity of women. She addressed sexuality, often resorting to classical myths. However, Luz faced serious adversity caused by yet another return to dictatorship, particularly from the 1970s onwards. The military government imposed censorship and even physical repression on cultural circles, uncomfortable with the intervention of intellectuals who, in their activities, called for openness to democracy and modern thinking. Luz, who witnessed and fled episodes of shootings with the police, actively stood out as a figure who promoted freedom and was always concerned with the problems of women. She did so through cultural action – in her poetry, essays, narrative, journalism, theatre, teaching and even music – but also as an activist. For example, she took a stand in favour of decriminalising women convicted of having abortions.

In 1979, the writer once again provoked the society of her time with her book of poems *Eva Sin Dios*. The philosopher Rigoberto Juárez Paz, her compatriot, notes that Luz's poetry "is immersed in so-called existentialism, which emerged in France after World War II. This philosophy, in Luz's case, consists of existential anguish, "the anguish of having lost God," which refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) proclamation of the death of the divine – *God is dead* (in German: *Gott ist tot*). In Rigoberto's opinion, this is not a simple denial of God's existence, but a cry for life.

Luz joined the faculty of Rafael Landívar University in Guatemala City. The author of a diverse literary oeuvre, which began to be published shortly before she turned 50, her writings and recreations reveal her influences from classical antiquity, especially with regard to women's issues. *Helénicas* (1998) is a book in which she appropriates, interprets, poeticises and recreates figures from Greek mythology, such as Penelope – more specifically, in the poem *Las Noches de Penélope* – and, in other examples, Oedipus, Iphigenia, Dido and Narcissus.

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