



## Rewriting Classical Myths: Women's Voices in "Los motivos de Circe" and "Penélope" by Lourdes Ortiz

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to explore the mythical representations in two of the six short stories that make up Lourdes Ortiz's *Voces de mujer* (2007), previously published under the title *Los motivos de Circe*. It is well known that most rewritings of the classical myths have been faithful to the "official truth" of the original versions. But recent works in search of other meanings, have explored dimensions often hidden or blurred by the "official" version. This is the case of the short stories in this collection whose protagonists are six archetypal or mythical women and their respectful references to the biblical, Homeric and pictorial world: Eve, Circe, Penelope, Betsabé, Salomé and Gioconda. The perspective offered by Lourdes Ortiz about the history of these myths allows us to read the story from the point of view of her female heroines. As such, then, in this article I will focus on two female characters from the Homeric epic: Circe and Penelope.

**KEYWORDS:** Mythological representations; Feminism; Feminist Narrative; Subversion; Parody; Postmodernism; Gender

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**RESUMEN:** *Reescribiendo mitos clásicos: Voces de mujer en "Los motivos de Circe" y "Penélope" de Lourdes Ortiz.*- El propósito de este artículo es explorar las representaciones míticas en dos de los seis cuentos que componen *Voces de mujer* (2007), de Lourdes Ortiz, publicado anteriormente bajo el título *Los Motivos de Circe*. Es bien sabido que la mayoría de las reescrituras de los mitos clásicos han sido fieles a la "verdad oficial" de las versiones originales. Sin embargo, trabajos recientes han explorado las dimensiones a menudo silenciadas por la versión "oficial". Este es el caso de los cuentos de esta colección cuyas protagonistas son seis mujeres arquetípicas o míticas, y sus referencias con el mundo bíblico, homérico y pictórico: Eva, Circe, Penélope, Betsabé, Salomé y Gioconda. La perspectiva ofrecida por Lourdes Ortiz sobre estos mitos nos permite leer la historia desde el punto de vista de sus heroínas femeninas. Este artículo se centra en dos personajes femeninos de la épica de Homero: Circe y Penélope.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Representaciones mitológicas; Feminismo; Narrativa feminista; Subversión; Parodia; Postmodernismo; Género

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As one of the most prolific and outstanding contemporary Spanish writers, Lourdes Ortiz can very well be representative of twenty first century

literature, given the great variety of content and experiment with form shown in her work. Her literary work, which includes historical novels, short

stories, plays, and numerous newspaper articles, manifest her interest in human affairs, with special attention given to issues concerning to the world of women in particular. Her cultural references range from classical antiquity to the present, highlighting the broad cultural background of this author. Her proficiency and knowledge of history, culture and myths of antiquity is complemented by her knowledge of the latest myths of contemporary cultural society, highlighting the key role played by the current images of the media in shaping our world.

The purpose of this article is to explore the mythical representations in two of the six short stories that make up Lourdes Ortiz's *Voces de mujer* (Ortiz, 2007), previously published under the title *Los motivos de Circe*.<sup>1</sup> It is well known that most rewritings of the classical myths have been faithful to the "official truth" of the original versions, and absolutely respectful of their canonical meanings and cultural significance. But recent works in search of other meanings, have explored dimensions often hidden or blurred by the "official" version. This is the case of the short stories in this collection whose protagonists are six archetypal or mythical women and their respectful references to the biblical, Homeric and pictorial world: Eve, Circe, Penelope, Betsabé, Salomé and Gioconda. The perspective offered by Lourdes Ortiz about the history of these myths allows us to read the story from the point of view of her female heroines. As such, then, in this article I will focus on two female characters from the Homeric epic: Circe and Penelope. We will begin with a brief overview of the characteristics that reflect the nature of her works, in light of her feminist views.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE NARRATIVE OF LOURDES ORTIZ

Much of the criticism on the narrative of Lourdes Ortiz has focused on the feminist aspects of her work. Alicia Giralt, in her study *Innovaciones y tradiciones en la novelística de Lourdes Ortiz* (Giralt, 2001), analyzes the work of the author in the context of feminism and feminist literary theory, paying special attention to the representation of the genres in the texts, distinguishing the feminine and feminists characteristics in her work. Thus, the collection of stories in *Voces de mujer* (Ortiz, 2007) and the novel *Urraca* (Ortiz, 1982, 1991), are the texts that would fall within the feminist stage. Moreover, Biruté Cipliauskaitė (1988) also explores Ortiz's works in an attempt to find out if there is a feminine narrative; in other words, a narrative written by a woman who writes consciously as a woman, but not necessarily as a feminist.

In her chapter on the psychoanalytic novel, Cipliauskaitė focuses primarily on *Luz de la memoria* (Ortiz, 1976) and in her chapter on the historical novel she turns her attention to *Urraca* (Ortiz, 1982, 1991), where the most important

factor is the manifestation of the almost timeless essence of women. *Urraca* provides an overview of the story, as it presents a female narrator whose multiple voices and perspective allows us to discover a historical reality previously seen through primarily masculine eyes.<sup>2</sup> As Biruté Cipliauskaitė argues, the interest in historical fiction is attributed to the need to explore the reasons for the previous silences and to show that women also had their place in society (Cipliauskaitė, 1988: 123). It also states that it is in this novel where Ortiz fully develops an autobiographical feminine style (Cipliauskaitė, 1988: 148). Especially admirable about her historical novels, is Ortiz's knowledge of the social and daily life of the characters, especially when we take into account that is only recently that historians have taken to analyze the quotidian histories of peoples, and even more specifically the quotidian historical contributions or "intrahistoria" of women. Throughout history, women's lives have often been falsely interpreted, and distorted views of their world have been presented as truths.<sup>3</sup> And this is precisely what Lourdes Ortiz challenges in her historical novels and other works with feminists characteristics: the traditional and patriarchal point of view, giving her female characters solid and strong voices with their own version of history. Her works demonstrate the desire of women to control their own lives and to represent themselves more realistically in society and in the narratives told about them. Lourdes Ortiz penetrates into the inner world of women throughout history by showing a series of common characteristics over time, or to put another way: universal features of an inner world that has always existed.

In her study entitled *Contando historias. Las primeras novelas de Lourdes Ortiz*, Lynn Ann McGovern also points out the feminists characteristics of Ortiz's work, while at the same time reflecting on power systems, and the uncertainty faced by women and other cultural minorities as marginalized members of the dominant ideology. According to McGovern, the writer reflects these concerns revealing how the prevailing culture encodes and imposes its own system of inscription and representation in all aspects of society (McGovern, 2004: 20). The postmodern sensibility reflected in her work offers an alternative perspective that reveals the absence of objective knowledge to the multiple points of view under which we can observe reality. This de-centered vision expands the field of the reader to include existing voices that have been neglected or lost long ago (McGovern, 2004: 146). It is important to mention that the works of Lourdes Ortiz continually manifests the relativity of truth. The impossibility of objective truth is shown in texts where fact and fiction come together, suggesting that human life is influenced by fictional characters who live among

us and dictate prescribed roles or create new possibilities (McGovern, 2004: 152).

Her work as a writer concerned with female-themed works and feminist views is complemented by other works of broader issues concerning the existentialist characteristics of the current Spanish novel, reflecting on a postmodern era that does not believe in absolute truths.<sup>4</sup> The works of Lourdes Ortiz should be placed within the framework of postmodernism—a product of this time of intersecting cultures, values and worlds. Ortiz's characters do not believe in transcendental Truth, but what prevails for them is the existential anguish of the inner world they inhabit. However, her works continue to challenge the supposed end of patriarchy and the rules imposed by a phallogocentric society (Giralt, 2001: 221).<sup>5</sup> About this type of society, Rolando Pérez writes in *On An(archy) and Schizoanalysis*:

In brief, Man is what Woman is not. The Father is Capital. The Father is Money, the Father is the System, the Father is the Word, the Father is God, the Father is the Creator, the Father is the Author of Woman, and last but not least, the Father is the World [...] Man declares: there exists only One Subject, and only One Self; woman is object, and woman is Other; moreover there exists only One flow of desire (or libido), and it, of course is masculine. The fascism of phallogocentrism demands that there only be One source of libidinal energies (Pérez, 1990: 107–108).

That source, he says, has often been represented by Oedipus, the Freudian Oedipus of psychoanalysis:

Oedipus is everywhere: Oedipus is the company Boss who harasses women on the job ... Oedipus is the political despot ... Oedipus is the oppressive priest ... Oedipus is ... any figure of authority ... Oedipus [of representation] telling us how to live—who will believe this a hundred years from now: that there was a time when human beings were structuralized according to a nice little play [Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex*] (Pérez, 1990: 108, 110).

In Lourdes Ortiz's writings, especially in those who explore the world of women, the problems encountered and the solutions offered, can provide guidance and support to deal with the same or similar situations in the present world. Ortiz presents the world of women, their infighting and their situation *qua* women prior to the establishment of the patriarchal system of socialization we have today, and delves into the nature of their anxieties, their tensions and their suffering, only to show that the inner world of women has not undergone considerable change since the portrayal of women in *Genesis*.

The principal theme of her work is complemented by narrative techniques that make up her innovative universe. She experiments with new forms and genres,

and her stories and novels do not conform to the traditional third-person voice; instead, in the pages of her writing we encounter multiple narrators who play with first, second and third person narratives, as well as with experiments that employ flashbacks or *analepsis*, free association of ideas, and the exploration of the inner and outer worlds, all of which give her texts a certain appearance of chaos—an appearance of impression of which are quickly disabused when we consider the solid structure and composition of her writing. It is important to note the role that the reader has to assume if she or he wants to be a participant in the creation of meaning in Ortiz's stories. The use of irony is of paramount importance. Lourdes Ortiz is considered one of the most intrepid *post-franquistas* writers because through the use of irony and satire, she achieves her goal of self-determination, illustrative of the major change in world view that occurred during Spain's transition to democracy. Language is learned, precise and clear, often with a lilting rhythm and poetic lyricism that appeals to the emotions through the use of specific sensory images. Ortiz is undoubtedly one of the writers in the Spanish language that better uses the musicality of words.

Ortiz's novels function as a life mirror, a reflection on the diversity and multiplicity of realities, phenomena and views that make up the human and the world as we know it, a postmodern world, unstable, unbalanced fragmented and confusing, where there are no absolute truths, revealing the lack of objectivity in the face of a world fraught with multiple subjective truths. Along with the imbalance of the world it manifests the existential angst of the individual, and the protagonists of her literary works strive to know themselves in a world where truth seems to be arbitrary, full of contradictions and sometimes unknowable. But the existential angst is not restricted to a particular time, not even to our present situation. Ortiz compares and contrasts human and historical periods; portrays reality as a tapestry in construction, and draws attention to the historical truths or conventions to be challenged in the present in order to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

## “VOCES DE MUJER”

In her short story collection, *Voces de mujer*, Lourdes Ortiz subverts normative masculine representations of women, and gives women their own voice. Six women who could be described as Western myths, Eve, Circe, Penelope, Betsabé, Salome and Gioconda, express their inner feelings through a voice hitherto unknown, revealing character from the female point of view, showing an unknown side of these myths—an inner world whose knowledge is necessary in order to have a more complete view of history, in order to change the preconceptions of current society, and finally in order to give expression to a female universe whose

evident essence across time and space has been ignored.

These texts are subversive of a cultural, stereotyped model, and of the traditional literary canon that supports it. As Hélène Cixous argues in “The Laugh of the Medusa”, a feminine text has to be subversive; and it is important that a woman be the subject of her own inscription:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement [...] She must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history (Cixous, 1986: 309–11).

And even though she notes that it is not altogether possible “to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded”, it doesn’t mean, she says, that “it doesn’t exist”. In fact, as she points out, it does, “[b]ut it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (Cixous, 1986: 313). Furthermore, we can see clearly what Cixous means by this. Women are born in a society dominated by men, and inscribed by logocentric discourses of power that perpetuate systems of oppressive hierarchical binary oppositions, or what Celia Amorós has called “dicotomías categoriales” (Amorós, 1985). Logocentrism relates to ideas connected with the male order, as is with the power and rationality that are expressed in gendered speech. In this system, the woman is understood through its relationship-opposition to the masculine, and feminine traits are perceived as negative. As Cixous says, in traditional Western culture some of these male / female oppositions are: Activity / Passivity; Culture / Nature; Day / Night; Father / Mother; Head / Heart; Intelligible / Sensitive; Logos / Pathos.<sup>6</sup> Thus, women must fight against these systems and against the men and women who support them. In order to transform them, a reading aimed at deconstructing the canon and a writing opposed to the patriarchal discourse is necessary.

Subversion, says Cipliauskaitė, is often carried out through the employment of certain narrative procedures that emphasize gendered speech differences, as well as alternative linguistic and stylistic models of writing. By undertaking a project of demystification and re-vision, Lourdes Ortiz is breaking with the literary tradition that has falsely represented so many female figures. As Alicia Ostriker notes, the use of myth is always revisionist, and specifically in the case of women’s writing; it means a self-examination

in which the stories are modified “so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy” (Ostriker, 1985: 318). As she states in her definition of “revisionist mythmaking”:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends ... initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible (Ostriker, 1985: 317)

Ortiz subverts the canonical text by replacing the male observer-narrator (Homer) for a third-person omniscient voice that demonstrates the aspirations and anxieties of her heroines, unknown or ignored by their original creator; Ortiz rescues fragments of the original text de-contextualizing them in order to alter their meaning and to manipulate the plot and the outcome.

The subversion that takes place in Lourdes Ortiz’s short stories falls into what Linda Hutcheon defines as postmodern parody. She declares that “Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders” (Hutcheon, 1989: 93). The parodic reprise of the past, says Hutcheon, is not nostalgic, ahistorical or de-historicizing, but it’s always critical. She argues that,

... through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference [...] Postmodern parody is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history. This paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called the “allegorical impulse” of postmodernism [...] I would simply call it parody. (Hutcheon, 1989: 93–95)

Lourdes Ortiz adopts a vision of intertextual integration that deconstructs world myths and surpasses the preceding models *vis-à-vis* a reevaluation and parody of characters and mythical elements.

## “LOS MOTIVOS DE CIRCE”

Circe is the sorceress of *The Odyssey*, daughter of Helios, and the nymph Perseis, who turned every man who walked on her island into beasts.<sup>7</sup> With potions she turned the treacherous or haughty and bold sailors that dared land in her island into the pigs, wolves or lions (they already were in spirit). According to the account of Homer, Odysseus, legendary King of Ithaca, sent to the island of Circe a crew of twenty



sailors desperate for food and water. All, with the exception of Eurylochos, were seduced by Circe's feast and turned into pigs, leaving Eurylochos to escape and inform Odysseus of what had happened. Odysseus, then, went in search of his men in order to free them, and on his way he came across Hermes, messenger of the gods, who gave him an herb that would protect him from Circe's magical powers. Once on the island, Circe tried to bring Odysseus under her magical powers but, failing to do so and recognizing that he was not like the others, Circe fell in love with Odysseus and agreed to his request to have his crew turned back into men. Ortiz's Circe is a woman in love, but whose love and not her magical potions is what tames the Homeric hero, with whom she spends an entire year, during which Odysseus becomes a story teller, a man of letter and not of arms who narrates his adventures to Circe's delight. But a year later, Odysseus asks Circe to let him go, to which she agree, leaving her, says the story, alone with her memories, nostalgia, melancholy and sadness.

In this account, Lourdes Ortiz narrates the feelings and thoughts of the sorceress from her loneliness and gives her a voice through a narrator located in her memory, who speaks of her feelings for the hero and other men. "Como credos", are the initial words of this story, which circularly ends where it began, in the flashback of a third-person omniscient voice located in Circe's memory. "Como cerdos ... Esa mirada torcida, agria, los ojillos turbios por una lujuria siempre insatisfecha" (Ortiz, 2007: 101), of men who, after many months at sea and full of desire, land in Circe's island, an island full of life, food and women, "un humo hogareño que aturde a los marineros y les habla de mujeres junto a la rueca" (Ortiz, 2007: 103).

Ortiz's Circe see men as hairy, dirty and toothless, moving towards her palace with the sole idea of possessing and conquering the body of the women by force, as if the mere act of possessing were the only thing that gave value to their lives. Circe remembers them as the beasts which they later became under her spell. And at the sight of men turned into beasts, Circe remembers Odysseus being different from others, having a noble spirit and being skillful word play. Circe, described as "la dotada de voz" (Ortiz, 2007: 108), was captivated by Odysseus, the hero who built worlds with words: Odysseus who had the gift of speech. Odysseus is generally characterized as one of the most cunning, intelligent and resourceful heroes of Greek mythology. In this story, the author highlights his great power to build worlds with words, his use of language and his great story telling abilities:

Ya no navegante, ya no viajero infatigable, sino poeta y narrador que se conmovía ante el giro inesperado de la frase, ante una anécdota trivial, que al ser contada y recontada una y otra vez, se iba adornando con pequeños matices, con una gracia inesperada,

como si sus sentidos fueran despertando al placer del cuento inacabado, del relato imperecedero. (Ortiz, 2007: 110)

The power of the word, the power of the narrator, is a constant in the work of Lourdes Ortiz. It is noteworthy that Ortiz's dialogue between the two lovers comes from textual quotes from *The Odyssey*. Odysseus becomes a poet, a troubadour, and a storyteller excited at the pleasure of the story that is slowly replacing the action, amazed at the power of words to construct realities. This love story, however, comes to an end after a year, as Odysseus begins to miss having his strength tested and begins to think of the worlds he would have to resign if he stayed at Circe's side: namely, his homeland, his father Laertes, his wife, Penelope. And so Circe lets him go. She agrees to his wish, advises him on the road to take, and warns him of the obstacles he will encounter on his return. Odysseus, we are told, had to leave, because he preferred to be "Nadie junto a una esposa complaciente" (Ortiz, 2007: 117). The narrative voice in third-person recalls Circe's memories and feelings of her loneliness and melancholy, and her longings for a hero who conquered her forever. In the distance she hears the sounds of men turned into beasts under her spell, as she will continue to attract sailors who out of their animal desire for power and possession will inevitably gravitate towards her island, "como cerdos".

The mythological figure of Circe is portrayed in this short story with human feelings and emotions, far from the witch portrayed in *The Odyssey* and other subsequent literary versions. Traditionally, Circe has been described as lewd, misleading, cruel, and greedy, who feels mocked, by an inferior being –a man– a negative image always accompanied by the highlights of her perfect beauty. This portray of Circe, as other similar literary versions, is far from the Circe portrayed by Lourdes Ortiz in this short story. The writer establishes a distance from the first version of the myth through her own interpretation of it. She is transformed from being the capricious, jealous, bitter and cruel goddess of the Homeric epic, into a painful and lonely woman, who let the man she loved go as her final act of love, as if in the act of letting him go she was also dismissing all the negative personality qualities traditionally attributed to her; the very qualities, in other words, that have traditionally prevented her from being considered a rational woman, consciously undermining the system of binary oppositions that puts women on underside of history. In this story Circe has the gift of reason -traditionally the exclusive purview of men- as opposed to the irrational sentiment traditionally imputed to women. Lourdes Ortiz also imbues her Circe with the intellectual capacity not only to perform magic, but to reflect into her inner world, and communicate to us her own judgment and point of

view. The words and wisdom associated with Ortiz's Circe serve to highlight a positive aspect of women, totally dismissed in most of the ancient stories, for here Circe's intellect is put to the service of reason in opposition to men's animalistic desires and their irrational need for conquest and war. Thus, through revised the myth of Circe, Ortiz gives voice to the silenced side of women's universe, subverting and surpassing the stereotyped models, conquering the field of reason and spirituality, only available to the evolved mortals that can get, like Circe, a little bit closer to the reign of gods.

### “PENÉLOPE”

The protagonist of this story is Penelope, also a character in Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus' wife, the legendary king of Ithaca, daughter of Icarus and Periboea. According to Homer, Penelope's son, Telemachus, was born just before his father, Odysseus departed for the Trojan War. Twenty years passed before he finally returned, and Penelope, for four years after the fall of Troy, rejected countless marriage proposals of princes who longed to marry her. This mythical character is considered the prototype of fidelity. Always hoping for the return of her husband, she said she would choose a suitor as soon as she had just finished weaving a shroud for Laertes, Odysseus's father. The faithful Penelope, for three years, was undoing at night what she wove during the day, in an attempt to “buy” time for her husband to return home, until one of her servants discovered the ruse. And when Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, tired and old, disguised of a beggar, the first thing he does is to kill his wife's suitor. Finally, after the Penelope's initial difficulty in recognizing her husband in disguise, the two are once again reunited.

The narrator is an omniscient voice in the third person, and, as in the previous text, “Los motivos de Circe”, the dialogue is taken verbatim from Homer's poem. The omniscient narrator gives way to the first-person voice of the main characters giving transparency to their nature and human condition. In this tale, Penelope is portrayed in the light of different perspectives, not only as the faithful and resigned wife, held in esteem in *The Odyssey* for her discretion, inaction and flawless fidelity to Ulysses, but also with a voice that has not been previously heard. If the role of Penelope in *The Odyssey* was relegated to being the background of the glorious adventure of Ulysses, if therein she accepted her fate as a passive complement of her heroic husband's fame, Lourdes Ortiz reveals Penelope's deepest sorrows that are inhibited in the Homeric text: her painful silence, her frustrated hopes, her discouraged sexuality, her old age mismanaged by the nostalgia of a lost youth.

This story begins with the binding mandates of her son Telemachus, who orders his mother to go

to her designated space to work, as we read in *The Odyssey*: “Vuélvete a tu habitación. Ocupate de las labores que te son propias, el telar y la rueca, ... y del arco nos ocuparemos los hombres y principalmente yo, cuyo es el mando de esta casa” (Ortiz, 2007: 121). Thus, establishing the submissive status of the protagonist, imprisoned in her chores. Those types of commands are repeated two more times in Ortiz's text, to remind us, as in the Homeric text, that the young son as the reflecting image of his father's power is the master, and to establish the rigorous discrimination that regulate the socially prescribed gender roles. As noted by Soriano (1993: 189), in mythology, in Greek philosophy and science women were always in the minority: supervised by a male figure, and their activities confined to the world of home and, among others, to the craft of weaving.

Faithful wife, she awaits her husband, while her suitors “llenar la casa con sus gritos, sus borracheras y sus modos de hombre” (Ortiz, 2007: 123), hoping to be one of the elected as her husband, while enjoying the sensual pleasures of Epicurean delicacies, drinks and young slaves available. Penelope feels admired and observed by them, but when she hears the story of the battles of Odysseus, grief and anguish seize her, and she experiences an infinite solitude, that makes her take refuge in her bedroom as she continues to work, as her youth fades away in hopes of seeing her husband again, “y siente unos celos que muerden sus entrañas desgarrándola y la hace presentir a todas las Circes, las Calipsos, las posibles mujeres de rasgos exóticos y técnicas maduras, infinitamente sabias en el arte del amor” (Ortiz, 2007: 128). Meanwhile, Telemachus, watching her movements, tirelessly reminds her of her position in life: “Vuelve a tu habitación ... ocúpate de las labores que te son propias” (Ortiz, 2007: 130). The contrast between the traditional models of woman as angel (Mary) and woman as monster (Medusa) becomes the virgin/whore binary of the rapist, and the family romance of the faithful/unfaithful wife: the former represented by the passive care taker, and the latter by the active sexual threat to masculinity. Ostriker declares that this angel-monster dichotomy that divides female identity is derived from mythological representations of gender (Ostriker, 1985: 316). Lourdes Ortiz treats these stereotyped myths as a palimpsest by writing over them with new and different voices. The women with whom Ulysses is unfaithful (Circe, Nausica and Calipso) are viewed by Penelope as threats to masculinity. But of all the “sinful” women, it is Helen -“¡Esa puerca de Helena ...!” (Ortiz, 2007: 130)<sup>8</sup>- who best represents the direct antagonist of Penelope who, submissive in her bitter nostalgia, remembers her with contempt as the cause of her husband's misfortune; for it was Helena who caused the Trojan War that left her suffering the

consequences of her fidelity, and resisting the siege of her suitors. Helena, we are told, did not resist and got carried away “por el primero que alabó sus rubios cabellos y puso calambres en sus dedos”, and she, Penelope, feels with conviction and fervor that the unfaithful Helen who left her husband for Paris must “lavar la mancha que sobre su pueblo y sobre los suyos cayó desde que el adulterio trajera la desdicha a las tierras de Itaca” (Ortiz, 2007: 131). Penelope’s indignation and suffering gives us a new vision of the myth, as it provides us with a reason for her loyalty that goes beyond her love for her husband, and locates it in her desire to restore the honor of her people with the power of her strength, while leaving the undignified behavior of the adulterous Helena for everyone to see.

When Odysseus returns, Penelope is faced with a reality that does not correspond with the desire and longing felt during those twenty years of his absence. Odysseus has inevitably aged, and dressed as a beggar, almost a stranger, he is an old man who reminds her of the passage of time in her own woman’s body. But Telemachus, always lurking, reminds her of her role in society: “Madre mía ... descastada madre, ya que tienes ánimo cruel, ¿por qué te pones tan lejos de mi padre, en vez de sentarte a su lado ... Ninguna mujer se quedaría así ... Pero tu corazón ha sido siempre más duro que una piedra” (Ortiz, 2007: 132). And Penelope returns to Ulysses, knowing full well that there will be no more suitors: all killed by the hero upon his return from the war, she will never be admired and desired again, but remain only a servant of her son and husband. Full of memories and nostalgia, husband and wife, long for what they lost. The sexually frustrated Penelope, regretful of her useless faithful waiting, is left with mere memories of her suitors, “el murmullo de las voces, los encuentros furtivos en las esquinas del patio” (Ortiz, 2007: 134), and images “cada músculo de sus cuerpos”. Ulysses is left with the memories of his adventures, and “sueña con los brazos siempre frescos de Circe, con la juventud de Nausica o el encanto hechicero de Calipso” (Ortiz, 2007: 134).

Certainly, Lourdes Ortiz’s narrative uses *The Odyssey* as an intertext, establishing a dialogue between the speeches of some of her characters and the point of view of the female author’s voice. But if the classic epic highlights the loyalty and dedication of Penelope portraying her as a model of female fidelity, Ortiz’s story highlights her boredom and frustration, surrounded by Telemachus’ comments, and her own recognition of desolation and loneliness, while noting that her loyalty was not so much driven by her unconditional love for her husband, but more importantly by her determination to restore honor to her people, and erase the stain left behind by the that adulteress Helena. Ortiz’s faithful wife is also a rebel, almost seductive, frustrated and distressed by

a waiting that was not worth it, for personal reasons alone. Penelope is no longer the conjugal fidelity prototype, and the character is demythologized. The denial of a happy ending in the story confirms the abandonment of a certain nostalgia with respect to the consecrated female figures of art and literature (Ostriker, 1985: 330), confirming Linda Hutcheon’s point that the parodic reprise of the past is not nostalgic, ahistorical or de-historicizing, but always critical.

The mythical representations in *Voces de mujer* give expression to the historically imposed silenced of women, made possible by all kinds of phallogocentric institutional discourses of power. Her stories allow for the indispensable ruptures and transformations in history. The two short stories explored in this paper, both focused on the Homeric epic, “Los motivos de Circe” and “Penélope”, and they serve as an affirmative answer to the question Cixous, poses about men:

Wouldn’t the worst be [for them] ... that they [women] have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing. (Cixous, 1986: 315)

What Cixous is here describing –in just a few words– is obviously a subversion of normative, phallogocentric categories of beauty, of gender roles, history, and myth, a writing over (palimpsest), and a self-writing of woman. An apt description of Lourdes Ortiz’s writing project.

## NOTES

1. The book, with the first six stories and a parábola in two acts, *Cenicienta*, was first published in 1988 in Ediciones del Dragón. In 1991, the Editorial Castalia, in the collection Biblioteca de Escritoras, published them again in an edition by Felicidad González Santamera. *Cenicienta* was replaced by a monologue, *Yudita* that premiered at the Teatro de Bellas Artes in Madrid in 1988. In 2007, the Miguel Delibes Chair published the six stories under the new title, *Voces de mujer*. The quotations in this essay are taken from this last edition.
2. See also Juliá (2006).
3. For more on the false interpretations of women’s lives in history see Giralt (2001: 23) and Da Silva (1982: 16).
4. For more information see Vallbona (1992).
5. As Giralt argues, the phallogocentric worldview is intrinsic to the institutional discourses that have had the greatest influence on the lives of women: the church, the legal, the medical or scientific and the philosophical discourses. In the short story “Eva”, for example, one can see traces of these discourses, specifically the ecclesiastical and the philosophical. In the first, based on the story of Genesis and the teachings of St. Paul, the supremacy of men over women is presented as ontologically normative: women were created to serve men. In philosophy, from Aristotle on, the emphasis has been on the opposition between woman *qua* nature (or sensibility) and man *qua* reason (Giralt, 2001: 18).
6. For more information, see Jenson (1990).
7. For an analysis of “Los motivos de Circe”, see Marco (2001).
8. It is interesting to note that Penelope calls Helen a “puerca”, for the association between the unfaithful wife or the

“immoral whore” and being a pig goes back at least to the middle ages. In the middle ages (as in a book like *El libro de buen amor*) the word for whore is “troia” or “troya” in reference to Helen of Troy who left her husband Menelaus for Paris. In fact, “troia” is still used in Italy today as word of insult to refer to an unfaithful woman or wife.

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