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TITOLO/TITLE: Overcoming the European Monopoly on Knowledge: Greek Classics and Myths in Arabic Literature (1800-1950)

PROPONENTI – PROPONENTS: MARIANGELA MASULLO, ARTURO MONACO

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

The reception of Greek classics and myths in 19th-20th-century Arab culture is historically marked by some contributions considered fundamental by critics. In 1867, Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī published his translation of Fénelon's *Télémaque*, which is considered the first modern text containing clear references to Greek mythology (Tageldin 2017; Cormack 2019). In 1904, Sulaymān al-Bustānī's famous translation of the *Iliad* appeared and this work is often taken as a starting point for any analysis of the phenomenon (Avino 2002; Pormann 2006). In the 1920s, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn started his long-lasting contribution to the knowledge of the Classical world by founding the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Cairo and translating some texts of classical Greek literature, such as Aeschylus' and Sophocles' plays. A few years later, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm composed his celebrated plays inspired by Greek myth, which include *Biḡmāliyyūn* (1942) and *al-Malik Ūdīb* (1949), and paved the way for the many plays based on Greek mythology written and staged after the 1950s (Cormack 2017). Meanwhile, in the first three decades of the 20th century, poets from the Egypt-based *Dīwān* and *Abūllū* groups introduced and elaborated myths and characters from Greek literature, mainly through the lens of English Romanticism (Abdul-Hai 1982). From the 1950s onwards, references to Greek myths proliferated in poetry, primarily through the *Tammūz* experience which spread in the Arab world, as part of a broader trend interested in the myth, and which has been analysed in several studies (Razzūq 1959; Moreh 1976; Jayyusi 1977; Jabra 1979; Khairallah 1997; Deyoung 1998; Jawad 2014; Al Rayes 2020).

Despite the assessed documentary and literary value of these experiences, the reception of Greek classics and myths in Arabic literature has not been fully explored, especially in the formative period preceding the 1950s. For instance, the forty years between al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's (1867) and al-Bustānī's (1904) translations hide several documents attesting to a constant and growing interest in the Greek classical world and its mythology: the many translations, the essays in the periodical press, the encyclopaedic entries, the staged or manuscript plays, the curricula of the so-called "modern" schools founded in the Arab world since the 19th century are relevant sources that still need an in-depth analysis to reveal how the Greek heritage was perceived in the Arab literature of those days.

The reception of Greek classics and myths during the first half of the 20th century has received greater attention in literary studies ('Abd al-Ḥayy 1977). However, they do not cover the unexplored wealth of materials produced during that period of significant experimentation. Alongside the literary and non-literary forms suggested above, these materials include fiction and poetry, which in the first decades of the century were going through relevant transformations and gradually began to make use of figures and images from Greek myth. Moreover, most studies related to this period focus on the literary production in Egypt and Lebanon, neglecting the Arabic production from other regions, as well as the literature in languages that have interacted with Arabic for a very long time, foremost among them being Turkish.

In addition to the need to fill the numerous gaps in mapping the literary texts that incorporated Greek classics and myths, there is also the urge to start a reflection on how this reception has been studied so far. It has generally been viewed as part of the broader movement of translation and assimilation of the European cultural heritage (Avino 2002) that was deemed by many a fundamental step for the development of Arabic literary writing and its admission into World literature (Noorani 2019). This is certainly true, in the sense that the European channel proved essential for receiving Greek classics and myths. Throughout the considered period, there were very few cases of scholars proficient in ancient Greek (e.g. Sulaymān al-Bustānī), which would have allowed them direct access to the classical sources. Instead, these sources were consulted mainly

through European translations or European works that mentioned them. As a consequence, Greek myths were learned through this European mediation.

However, delving deeper into how these texts were translated and assimilated, it is possible to realise that from the beginning another approach was at work, which calls into question the idea that the reception of Greek classics and myths was a pure assimilation of their European representation. Looking closer at their writings, it emerges that Arab authors often used this classical and mythical material from a position of equality with their European counterparts. In other words, the classical Greek heritage is not always - or necessarily - seen as part of the European tradition, but rather as a universal heritage, to which all intellectuals are allowed to have free access. On the one hand, this positioning is sustained by the memory of the direct connection with the classical Greek world established by the Graeco-Arabic translation movement during the Abbasid era (Gutas 1998). On the other hand, Arab authors seem to have been conscious of what Bernal (1987) labels as the “ancient model” of Greek history, which emphasises the connection and debt of Greek civilization to earlier great civilizations, among them being the Phoenician and Egyptian civilizations (Etman 2008). By adopting this stance towards the classical Greek heritage, Arab intellectuals, consciously or unconsciously, thus questioned the European monopoly both on this heritage and its interpretation. At the same time, it can be hypothesised that this positioning facilitated the process of building what Yaseen Noorani calls the “shared framework that [...] allowed Greek poetic works to have prestige and meaning for Arabic readers” (Noorani 2019, 252), ultimately legitimising this heritage, and Greek myth in particular, as a source of inspiration for literary and artistic production. In the attempt to emancipate from European literary representations, Greek myth thus re-emerges in its archetypal essence, providing Arab poets, playwrights, and writers with a primordial material for their works.

Given the knowledge and methodological limits highlighted above, this panel aims to explore the Arab cultural and literary production concerning Greek classics and myths in the period 1800-1950, which is still little or not known, and to investigate new approaches to analyse their reception, highlighting the problems of interpreting classical reception as the mere assimilation of “European” heritage. Contributions covering the following fields, but not limited to them, are welcome:

- The use of Greek myth in Arab literary production: theatre, poetry, fiction
- Archetypes, Greek myths, and Arab literature
- Translation of Greek classics and myths into Arabic
- The European mediation in the reception of Greek classics and myths
- Channels of reception of Greek classics and myths: institutions, journeys, encounters
- Circulation and readership of texts on Greek classics and myths
- The role of the periodical press and other non-canonical or non-literary forms (e.g., encyclopaedias, travel literature, historiography) in disseminating Greek classics and myths
- Greek classics and myths in school curricula
- Archaeological discoveries related to the Greek classical world and Arab literature
- Reception of Greek classics and myths in cultural contexts close to the Arab one from a comparative perspective (e.g., Turkish literature)

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEI/DELLE PROPONENTI – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

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