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

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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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Abstracts and Speakers

Imagining an Arab antiquity through Greek mythology: translation, appropriation, and recreation

Elisabetta Benigni, University of Turin

During the 19th century, several Arab intellectuals developed a strong interest in the historiography and mythology of the ancient Mediterranean. This fascination is particularly evident in the translations produced by Rifā'ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's school in Egypt, as well as in the articles published in the journal "al-Ġinān" and, a few decades later, in the historical works of Ilyās Maṭar or Ğūrġi Yannī in Greater Syria. Within this frame, the ancient Greeks and their mythology were a primary focus, as exemplified by Sulaymān al-Bustānī's translation of the *Iliad* published in 1904. While the Arab texts from the 19th century reflect a stereotypical European (specifically French) perspective of classical Greece, they also merge with the emergence of an Arab romantic notion of antiquity that corresponds to the Arab *ġāhiliyyah*.

My objective is to delve into how the ancient mythology of the Mediterranean influenced the concept of an Arab antiquity. To accomplish this, I will focus on analyzing three key sources: Rifā'ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's translation of Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, which was published in Beirut in 1867; a history of Alexander the Great published Beirut in 1868; and Sulaymān al-Bustānī's translation of the *Iliad*, which was published in Cairo in 1904.

The new Eurydice in the rewriting of Ḥalīl al-Hindāwī, *Ramād al-muḥtariq*

Andréa Forget, Université de Lorraine

In his play *Ramād al-muḥtariq* written in the early 1940's, the Syrian-Lebanese author Ḥalīl al-Hindāwī (1906-1976) proceed to a rewriting of the Greek myth of Orpheus, especially the ancient legend of Orpheus and Eurydice: the death of Eurydice that lead to Orpheus's katabasis. In the aim of spreading his political and social message in the context of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, the playwright use the female figure of Eurydice as a symbol of the nation, wavering between a traditional life and the modernity that the French presence allows.

In his work, al-Hindāwī nourish himself with the Greek literature, and gives a new life to the Greek heroin: through her Lebanese version she acquires a real identity, a real existence, a real voice, like did the Syrian and Lebanese nations at the time of their independences and their constructions as nation-states. By using the deep symbols conveyed by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the author assimilate the Greek classic legend and adapt it to express his vision of the Levantine society in the middle of the twentieth century.

"Black" Cleopatras, "White" Athenas: mirages of Hellenistic Egypt

Marco Lauri, Università eCampus

Modern Egypt's identity discourses often emphasise the heritage of the country's storied antiquity. Different identity projects, that perceive Egypt's past, future, and place in the world in different terms (Reid

2002, 2015, Colla 2007), have interpreted and appropriated parts of this stratified past. Linguistic and 'racial' genealogies were, and are, invoked to frame these discourses. Racial perceptions are, as Sara Ahmed (2015) aptly put it, "sedimented history". This precipitates in contemporary debates about Egypt's, specifically Ancient Egypt's, "whiteness" or "Africanness", and, for example, a notable disconnect in scholarship and public perception between Ancient Egyptian and Nubian heritage. The legacy of Hellenistic Egypt, and its connection with neighbouring spaces or times, is then an intersection point for conflicting notions and projects about Egypt.

How would Egypt's "Greek" history relate to the earlier "Native" one, and to later "Arab" version of it? Greekness was, and is, usually portrayed as "whiter" than Ancient, or Arab, Egypt, which, in turn, is represented as "whiter" than the rest of Africa. Despite this, Cleopatra VII, the last queen of the Macedonian, Greek-speaking, "white" and "Western", Ptolemaic dynasty, has been widely recognised as a symbol of Egyptian national identity, and even of anti-colonial resistance, at least since Šawqī's play *Mašra' Kilyūpātrā* in 1927.

My contribution will trace these symbolic entanglements as sedimented history of competing projects of Egyptian cultural identity.

Greek Myths in Nazik al-Malā'ika's Poetry as Structural and Aesthetic Unifying Instruments

Mariangela Masullo, Università di Macerata

The appearance of Greek mythic motifs in contemporary Arabic poetry can be tracked back to the beginning of the XX century, when exponents from innovative movements such as the so-called *Dīwān* school (1921) and, to a greater extent, the *Abūllū* circle (1930 ca) began incorporating mythological scenes and references in their verses (Jayyusi 1977, Moreh 1976). Often seen as an echo of Western poetry, this tendency cannot indeed be easily reduced to sheer influence. Arab poets were undoubtedly acquainted with Western models, mainly drawn from English Romanticism (Abdul-Hai 1982), but their resorting to Greek mythology had deep roots in the politics of renovation pursued by the new generation of poets, one of its most important figures being the Iraqi poet Nāzik al-Malā'ika (1922-2007). This paper aims at tracing the presence of selected Greek mythological occurrences in al-Malā'ika early production (1940s-50s), not only for their meaning to the readers and their emotional charge, but also for their function as poetical infrastructures (Ghazoul 2002). The study will show how mythic references, scenes and allusions were functional to convey a suitable framework for the new aesthetics and poetics of the prosodic experiments carried by al-Malā'ika, which ultimately led to her theorization of the *shī' r ḥurr*, on the one side, and to the following retrieval of ancient mythology performed by Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabra (1919 – 1994) in the 60s, on the other side.

The (Arabic) Dissemination of Greek Myths through al-Bustānīs' Dā'irat al-Madāris

Arturo Monaco, Sapienza University of Rome

"The *Dā'irat al-Madāris* contains first the theological and philosophical sciences [...]. Secondly, the civil and political sciences [...]. Thirdly, the historical sciences such as [...] Greek mythology and other ancient superstitions" (al-Bustānī 1876: 5). These words by Buṭrus al-Bustānī describe the main contents of his encyclopaedic project and surprisingly they mention explicitly Greek mythology among the topics. The eleven volumes published by al-Bustānī and his family members between 1876 and 1900 feature several entries about Greek myths, deities, and heroes. This contribution aims to analyse how these contents are presented to Arab readers in a period when Greek mythology was still a very new subject in Arabic literary and cultural production. Keeping an eye on the context of the Arabic reception of Greek classics and myths during the 19th century, this contribution will address the following questions: which myths are presented in the *Dā'irah*, and why? How are they described? Which are the main sources used to write these entries? What was the significance of these entries in terms of circulation and reception?

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEI/DELLE PROPONENTI – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Mariangela Masullo is Associate Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Macerata, and a member of the Teaching & Learning Sciences: Inclusion, Technologies, Educational Research and Evaluation doctoral board. She earned her PhD in Arabic Poetry at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. Her research interests cover Arabic contemporary poetry, Iraqi poetry from al-*shi’r al-ḥurr* movement to today, women’s writing during the *Nahḍa*, and the transition from classical to modern in Arabic poetry. She participated in the TEM project in 2010 with a research on translations of Arabic Literature into Italian in the previous 50 years. She wrote a monographic essay on Nāzik al-Malā’ika (2015) and translated and commented Amal al-Joubouri’s *Agar before the Occupation/Agar after the Occupation* into Italian (2019). She is also the author of several essays and reviews published in academic journals devoted to Arabic poetry and Arab women’s writing.

Arturo Monaco is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow (2022-2025) at Sapienza University of Rome – American University of Beirut, with the project *Digital Mythology and Arabic Literature: A Digital Archive to Study the Dynamics of the Reception of Greek Myths in Modern Arabic Literature*. He holds a PhD in Civilizations, Cultures and Societies of Asia and Africa, Sapienza University of Rome. His PhD dissertation resulted in the book *Surrealismi arabi 1938-1970. Il Surrealismo e la letteratura araba in Egitto, Siria e Libano* (Istituto per l’Oriente “C.A. Nallino”, Rome 2020), which explores the surrealist trend in modern Arabic literature, with a special focus on the surrealist production in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon between the 1930s and the 1960s. His research interests include modern Arabic poetry, Arab literary press, and intercultural exchanges between Arabic and foreign literatures. In the latter field, he translated Sulaymān al-Bustānī’s Introduction to his own translation of Homer’s *Iliad* (Istituto per l’Oriente “C. A. Nallino”, Rome 2022).

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