Mythological Transformations: H. D.'s Reimagining of Classical Myths in her Novel

Hermione

التحولات الأسطورية: إعادة تصور الروائية هيلدا دوليتل للأساطير الكلاسيكية

في روايتها 'هيرميون'

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Abstract

Today and throughout history myths once born, grow and transform. Myths and their quality of growing and transforming are regarded as universal human commonality. Myths are also long-enduring as they usually portray—in addition to gods, spiritual and supernatural occurrences—the processes of human existence, reality, understanding, knowledge and so on. They offer clues and insights into the origin and beginnings of creation, man, the universe and the like. Hilda Doolittle's novel *Hermione* is a symbolic depiction of traditional myths and their growth and transformation. Therefore, the current research study aims to examine the process of reimagining classical myths and their mythological transformation in H. D.'s novel *Hermione*. It also intends to explore how the novel brings back to life the ancient Greek myths showing with a gentle touch the process of transformation such myths undergo.

Besides, the present study will show not only how myths can transform and be transformed, but also how they can creatively be given new sense. The novel distinctively delineates myths with exceptional finesse, novel scopes and remarkable processes of transformation. Hence, the study at hand will highlight the importance of reimagining classical myths with traditional and modern mythological transformations as well.

Keywords: Hilda Doolittle, *Hermione*, Myths, Reimagining Classical Myths, Mythological Transformations

اليوم وعبر التاريخ، تولد الأساطير وتنمو وتتحول. تعتبر الأساطير وقدرتها على النمو والتحول بمثابة قواسم مشتركة إنسانية عالمية. كما أن الأساطير طويلة الأمد أيضًا لأنها تصور عادةً - بالإضافة إلى الآلهة والأحداث الروحية والخارقة للطبيعة - عمليات الوجود الإنساني والواقع والفهم والمعرفة وما إلى ذلك. أنها توفر أدلة ورؤى حول أصل وبدايات الخلق والإنسان والكون وما شابه. رواية هيلدا دوليتل هيرميون هي تصوير رمزي للأساطير التقليدية ونموها وتحولها. ولذلك تهدف الدراسة البحثية الحالية إلى دراسة عملية إعادة تصور الأساطير الكلاسيكية وتحولها الأسطوري في رواية هيرميون للكاتبة هيلدا دوليتل . كما تهدف أيضًا إلى استكشاف كيف تعيد الرواية الحياة إلى الأساطير اليونانية القديمة، وتظهر بلمسة لطيفة عملية التحول التي تمر بها هذه الأساطير. علاوة على ذلك، فإن الدراسة الحالية لن تظهر فقط كيف يمكن للأساطير أن تتحول وتتحول، ولكن أيضًا كيف يمكن إعطاؤها معنى جديدًا بشكل إبداعي. ترسم الرواية الأساطير بشكل مميز ببراعة استثنائية ونطاقات جديدة وعمليات تحول ملحوظة. ومن هنا فإن الدراسة المطروحة ستسلط الضوء على أهمية إعادة تصور الأساطير الكلاسيكية مع التحولات الأسطورية التقليدية والحديثة أيضا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هيلدا دوليتل، هيرميون، الأساطير، إعادة تصور الأساطير الكلاسيكية، التحولات الأسطورية

Introduction

Myths have long existed and persisted ever since; they are as old and ancient as the history of man and of creation itself. Besides, myths are undoubtedly a universal human quality; they transcend time, space, race, language and the like. Myths could be perceived as the universal human language and memory of the human race, so to speak. They usually portray and present natural events, rationalize spiritual theories, social beliefs and customs.

The word myth means a story; it goes back in origins to the Greek word 'mythoi'. The word myth can also be defined as a "symbolic tale of the primordial times that revolves around the creation of the universe, known as cosmology and cosmogony," (Bağırlar 26). Likewise, some have defined myths as "the tales that are believed to be true and sacred in the distant past," (*ibid*). As tales, myths could possibly indicate both human and superhuman worlds and supposed realities. Since myths are tales, they can also be "associated with the rituals and beliefs of the people in the past and considered as their social values and traditions," (Gikandi 13). A myth is therefore an indication, a reference or a projection of certain intense and brilliant stories that articulate the origins of man and the origins of the universe as well.

Hilda Doolittle like many other novelists and writers of all ages, seems to exhibit a deep interest in and realization of the importance of myths and their association not only with literature but also with the very existence of human individuals. She also recognizes the supreme prominence of myths as literarily and otherwise indispensable means of expression:

> For H.D., classical mythology was an essential means of expression, first acquired in childhood and repossessed throughout her life. H.D.'s extensive output of poems, memoirs, and novels is marked by a pervasive Hellenism which evolved in response to the changing conditions of her life and art, but remained her constant idiom. She saw herself as reliving myth, and she used myth as a medium through which to order her own experience and to rethink inherited ideas. If myth served H.D. as a resource for self-understanding and artistic expression, H.D. herself has served subsequent poets, critics, and scholars as a model for the writer's ability to reclaim myth, to create something new and personal out of ancient shared traditions. (Murnaghan 63)

For such writers, myths are an important vehicle of expressing oneself and one's experiences. For them, myths are also assumed to denote and construct the prevailing fragments of existence, life, reality and the world as a whole. *Hermione* by H. D. is a vivid illustration of the significance of myths in people's lives and in their literature.

Mythological Transformations and the Reimagining of Classical Myths in H. D.'s
Hermione

Approximately one year after her mother had died, Hilda Doolittle wrote her autobiographical narrative *Hermione*. Hence, the novel is widely assumed to be an account of a mother-daughter relationship and an expression of loss in this respect. As such, the novel apparently presents an exploration of a daughter's sense of loss for her mother. It also seems to depict the daughter's struggle to establish herself, to individuate, without reference or attachment to her mother.

Yet, for H. D., it could seemingly be assumed that the employment of the mythological figure Hermione in her novel comes within the context of reimagining classical mythology and demonstrating mythological transformations of such mythological figures as an essential means of expression. The voluminous and grand oeuvre of poems, memoirs and novels written by Hilda Doolittle stands in testimony to the writer's sparking interest in mythology and classical myths. In almost all her works, there seems to be a persistent omnipresence of myths and mythological figures and references. It is even suggested that Hilda Doolittle has not just used myths as a necessary medium to express and enact her own experience and reimagine the inherited body of ideas, but has also conveyed an image of herself as a reliving myth besides being a prolific and gifted writer.

It is apparently true that myth and mythological figures as employed in H. D.'s works have greatly been her resource assisting her in creative writing and in understanding herself as well. Still, such self-understanding and creative expression have also provided an example and a lighting beacon for the coming generations of writers. Her employment and reimagining of myth has been an archetypal demonstration of the writer's potential and aptitude to retrieve and reimagine myth, to fashion something fresh, individual and different out of ancient mythologies as common human traditions and values.

In literary texts, writers usually employ mythological figures in the form of gods, goddesses, supernatural beings or non-human figures. Moreover, literary works that bring in mythological figures and/or references tend to present semi-real settings for the figures and events of such myths. In addition to their settings, the plot of myths has also to be different from other fictional plots:

> Myths may have the setting of the proto-world which is somewhat different from the real world. The plot of the myth might be based on the interplay between the real world and proto-world or the previous world. Myths are based on the mystery of the unknown happening in the world. (Johnson 27)

Historically speaking, a myth is set to figure out answers about ontological questions, and are supposed to reflect the "dualities of nature in the world such as light/dark and good/bad," (Groves 49). As such, myths have always been integrated in literature in the past, in the present, and across space and time. The purpose of integrating a myth in a literary text might possibly be to highlight such classic tale, its transformation or to reimagine it altogether as in the case of H. D.

In literature and in people's lives as a whole, myths have always been of paramount importance and frequently treated with respect and seriousness. This is so because a myth is regularly deemed a major symbol of highly significant human values. Myths are widely perceived as a reproduction and representation of the summarized and collective human experiences: "a reflection of summarized experiences and the emotions that are connected with these experiences," (Reeves 57).

In the modernist times, literature is teemed with examples and instances of mythological figures and events. T. S. Elliot is a prominent example of a modernist writer abundantly employing myths and mythological tales in their literary writing. The list of modernist literary writers employing mythological figures and events in their work could endlessly go on:

> The myth of Fischer King is influenced by The Golden Bough and from Ritual to Romance that was written by JG Frazer and Jessie Weston respectively. … . The creation of mythical Odysseus in Ulysses by James Joyce. … . Leopold Bloom which is considered as the modern literature of the age narrates the existence of Odysseus in a sardonic heroic manner. … . A well-known poet WB Yeats, had made astrology, occult, and historical mythology that include the Great Wheel and the Gyres, the Phases of the Moon. … . Also, well-known modern literature for children, Harry Potter, is filled with Greek and Latin culture and myths of the past age such as dragons, Padfoot, and the spells which are derived from Latin roots. (Bağırlar 27)

In her novel under discussion, H. D. employs and reimagines Hermione who is a classically mythological figure that goes back in history and origin to the Greek mythology. Hermione is a classically mythological figure, but one who in time has grown and transformed in form and content. In ancient Greek mythology, religion and literature alike, the mythological figure of Hermione has persisted in presence, growth and transformation.

In ancient Greek mythology, for example, Hermione is the female form of Hermese, messenger of the gods, and the daughter of Helen of troy. In Christianity, the Bible presents Hermione as a prophetess, whereas in English literature Hermione is introduced as an undesired and deserted female figure as in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* or as a motherly-attached and suffering girl as in H. D.'s *Hermione*:

> Hermione is the female form of Hermese, messenger of the gods, god of science, trade, and eloquence, is immortalized in Greek mythology as the daughter of Helen of troy and Menelaus, King of Sparta. … . The Bible introduces Hermione as a prophetess in the Acts of the Apostles. … . In *The Winter's Tale* by Shakespeare, as in the myth the choices made by males in this comedy circumscribe Hermione's actions. She is declared unfaithful by her husband, Leontes, King of Sicillia, and imprisoned, although she is pregnant with a daughter who is born while she is confined. (Dresang 213-14)

Hilda Doolittle wrote her autobiographical novel *Hermione* in 1927, but was published posthumously fifty four years later, in the year 1969, (Murnaghan 63). As such, the novel is assumed to have been written by H.D., to reflect her unrestrained connection with Pound:

> As a roman aʿ clef, Hermione chronicles her intense passion for Pound portrayed by the main characters Hermione Gart and George Lowdnes, who

endure a tempestuous romance and early engagement closely reminiscent to H.D.'s real life circumstances. H. D.'s painful ambivalence and escalating turmoil with her parents is fictionalized in the novel as eruptive scenes between Hermione and her mother Eugenia. (Rivers-Norton 29)

Hermione in H. D.'s novel is presented as an intelligent and witty teenage girl who is well-loved by her teen peers for that. The name Hermione is apparently derived from the name Hermese which originates in the Greek mythology. According to the Greek myth, Hermes was a female messenger of Greek gods who possessed "traits such as quick-thinking, wit, and was the god of eloquence," (Gikandi 95). In the novel under study, Hermione is also a female character who is presented with equal qualities of sharp thinking, wit and intelligence attributed to the Greek mythological figure Hermese.

As a girls' fiction, H. D.'s *Hermione* is also said to "focus on relationships", which is "a common theme in girls' fiction," (Riverlea 136). Yet, even as a girls' fiction, H. D.'s novel is closely related to mythology and mythological references; the novel reimagines and projects Hermione who is classically a mythological female figure named Hermese and presents her differently. Though Hermione in H. D.'s novel is still a teenage girl, the novel provides a touch of mythological transformation as demonstrated through Hermione herself who is the major character and heroine in the novel.

Hence, by merging a female teenage element along with projecting mythological references, H. D.'s novel seemingly "opens up a space for teenage girls to imagine how it might feel to be part of great mythical narratives. … , and explore[s] what it could be like to be growing up as a teenager in ancient culture," (*ibid*). What else could this be if not a demonstration of the writer's skill and artistic dexterity of reimagining classical myths with a delicate touch of change and evolution?

Further into H. D.'s delicate presentations of mythological transformation, her novel *Hermione* is abundant with instances and presentations of such mythological transformations. In addition to Hermione, the novel presents Arachne and Athena as vivid examples of

mythological evolution and change. These two mythological characters are transformed into spiders in the course of the novel's events:

> Another famous weaver is Arachne, famously transformed into a spider after challenging the goddess Athena to a weaving contest. When the judges find Arachne's work superior to that of the goddess, Athena turns her into a spider. There are differing versions of this etiological story, which explains the origin of spiders. In some versions, Arachne hangs herself out of shame; taking pity on her, the goddess transforms her into a spider. In others, the goddess takes vengeance on her competitor's hubris (perhaps further irritated by Arachne's weavings, which show the shortcomings of the gods). In some versions, turning her into a spider is a punishment – the spider a creature associated with fear and horror, with dust, and with weavings that nobody wants. In other versions, Arachne's transformation allows her to spin her creations into eternity. (Larson 89)

In view of that, for H. D., the reimagining of ancient myths and presenting their mythological transformations seems like a foundational technique that she consistently follows in her literary writings. In so doing, she seems to be vividly portraying how such antiquated themes and subjects could profile and make known a female writer's visions, integrity and reliability. The reason could assumingly be that such ancient and mythological subjects help her as a female writer to reimagine mythological figures, more particularly female heroines, in her writings to figure out meaning and recognize purpose as well:

> As an innovative author, H. D. tested the boundaries of human potential to expand the possibility of equality and emancipation of the human spirit. For H. D. remembering and integrating the value of female archetypal patterns had an enormous impact on her creativity as well as literary sensibilities to validate her own artistry as a maternal matrix of a woman's awareness of the self and its development from maidenhood into maturity. (Rivers-Norton 21)

For H. D. yet again, the reimagining of classical myths and literarily presenting their mythological transformations as in her mythological female heroine Hermione seems like thinking of and recognizing "the metaphoric salvation of the Holy children and their 'predecessors' Abraham and Isaac, or the mythological tale of the Golden Fleece," (*ibid* 25).

Hilda Doolittle apparently puts much emphasis on recognizing herself, locating meaning and finding her own way and purpose. She thus demonstrates a cognizance of

complication and a dexterous interest in foregrounding the challenging issues that pay attention to the experiences of individual characters and coming of age in her fiction. Therefore, mythological narratives in all her writings in general and in Hermione in particular seem like doing the job of establishing a line of communication between writers and fictional characters leading them to equally think of the troubles and challenges of life.

This could be so conceivably because mythological narratives usually produce, present and reflect universal and common human values and experiences. Additionally, mythological narratives regularly present and depict moving tales of troubles, hardships and challenges that a human individual of any age, race and language; and across space and time—teenagers particularly girls in H. D.'s *Hermione*—can identify with:

> This is partly because mythological narratives synthesize universal elements of the human experience (from the ancient world to the present day), allowing young readers a feeling of connection. It is also partly because they present powerful stories of hardship and difficulty, which resonate with the challenges that teenagers face. These challenges can broadly be identified as: growing up, finding a place in society, relating to family, developing sexuality, and coping with trauma (such as violence, war, abuse, suicide). (Riverlea 103-4)

Hermione by Hilda Doolittle seems very perceptively immersed in the reimagining of classical myths and figures. Besides, the novel presents such mythological figures and events with vivid details that seemingly abandon the conventional accounts reported in their classic origins. Unlike her classical namesake Hermese, Hermione is an ordinary teenage girl who is strongly attached to her mother. While the mythological Hermese is a goddess or quasi-goddess, Hermione is a regular teenage girl who loses her mother and is now deeply suffering from that loss.

In that order, the novel seems to be grounded on the proposition that since Hermese in classical myths was immortal just like Hermione in the novel, this mythological figure has endured through time into the modern age in the form of Hermione. The prospect of the ancient myths' potential of persistence, endurance and ever-lasting change and evolution

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could possibly be attributed to their intriguingly captivating nature and bizarre components and mechanism. Such mythological figures or creatures have a different nature, are different, behave and are made differently:

> The mythological beings of Ancient Greece are fascinating because of their strange components: their many legs and oddly placed eyes, their teeth, their heads, their roaring and devouring mouths, their eating habits, their extreme strangeness. These are not cute and cuddly monsters, but in the way that each is taken out of its story, and considered as part of a group, they are collectible and countable. (Riverlea 229)

Such uniquely fascinating nature and constituents of myths and mythological figures could probably be the inspiration behind the continuation of literarily and otherwise presenting, reimagining and transforming these classical myths of ancient Greece as well. The goddess girl as in H. D.'s Hermione with her modern transformation and reimagining could assumingly be said to denote the novel as well as this mythological figure's range and scope in inspiring the narrative. In addition, mythological figures enjoy the unique characteristic of being general and particular all at once: "being both specific and universal, myths connect with many kinds of stories, and their emphasis on transformation and overcoming of suffering relate strongly to trauma narratives," (*ibid* 107).

H. D. in her novel *Hermione* seems like evoking a kind of internal drama as well in which all elements have a mythological dimension. Hermione's mother seems to reject her child daughter while at the same time the child also seems to detach herself from her mother, or at least trying to. Besides, the family member who has given Hermione a shelter seems in enacting such an attitude to be relating to the Greek origin of the myth: "Both the mother who excludes the child and from whom the child distances herself, and the relative outsider who includes her and gives her a sense of control, are associated with Greece," (Murnaghan 66).

Moreover, it seems that reimagining mythological figures and literarily representing them indicates H. D.'s distinctive type of knowledge as it offers fresh understanding and superior control of things. A similar mother-child distancing and further indication of H. D.'s

particular knowledge is her another novel *The Hedgehog*. Through this narrative, H. D. seems to have addressed her daughter Perdita with relation to herself. The heroine of this story is a young girl named Madge who seems a lot like Perdita.

Both Madge and her mother in the story, and Perdita and her mother in reality seem to share a lot in common and to go through one too many similar experiences. Just like H. D. and her daughter Perdita, Madge and her mother live in the same place, and it happens that Madge—just like Perdita—decides to temporarily distance herself from her mother in the form of adventuring. While adventuring, Madge comes across some mythological figures such as an eagle related to Zeus and a boy linked to Pan.

Through such mother-daughter distancing and reunion, Madge comes out more knowledgeable and more experienced. She gains fresh visions and a better sense of independence and freedom:

> Here we can observe the fluid transfers between the real and the mythic characteristic of H.D.'s imagination: a mountain, associated through myth in H.D.'s childhood imagination with the encouraging family servant, reappears as the literal, modern-day setting of a similarly encouraging first encounter with quasi-mythical figures. (Murnaghan 66)

Whether in H. D.'s real life since childhood throughout old age or in many of her literary writings such as *The Hedgehog* and *Hermione*—to name only few—a close observer could conceivably trace plentiful memories, reminiscences and recollections of myths and mythological figures. Such observation and traces apparently express and outline the writer's correlation with and link to myths and mythological heritage, both as a human being and as a writer.

In that vein, it seems that the writer does not just demonstrate a great skill reimagining and presenting classic myths but also carries and communicates an idea of mythology as conforming to actuality or something typical. The way H. D. reimagines myths and depicts their evolution and change both as an ordinary individual and as a literary writer seems like

she breathes new life to such myths and mythological figures. For her, a myth is a bridge, a channel through which the personal and the universal merge and rise anew:

> myth as the hinge between personal experience and universal patterns; ancient Egypt as a site at which mythic patterns were realized with particular authority; the mutual implication of narrative and landscape; the presentation of oppositions within a mythological framework, and the importance of the mother. (Murnaghan 67)

In the course of her literary career, H.D. has established and introduced a form of continual and an unremitting mythology. Across her literary productions, H. D., seems like reimagining and innovating myths and mythological figures as if she is struggling to figure out the problems and questions that have long troubled her. Her long narrative poem "Hippolytus Temporizes", for instance, is a poem that reimagines and reproduces the classical myth of Euripides' Hippolytus:

> There (to pull out one strand from the poem's complex web) a haunting personal debate between passion and autonomy is articulated through the conflict between Artemis and Aphrodite. This is, then, an adult version of an opposition stated in classical terms reminiscent of the similar opposition in H.D.'s childhood reminiscence of Helen and Ida. (DuPlessis 13)

Additionally, in this narrative poem—just like in *Hermione*—it could assumingly be observed how the writer reimagines, reproduces and delineates a kind of peculiar fascination at and association with Euripides, the mythological figure. Unlike *Hermione*, however, H. D. in "Hippolytus Temporizes" reveals a kind of particular sympathy with classical male myths. The writer's empathy could seemingly be attributed to this male figure's "attunement to women and his untraditional versions of well-known myths," (Gregory 231). After all, Euripides was an historic and prominent writer whose works have "provided an ancient precedent for the mythological revision that remains one of H.D.'s main poetic legacies," (*ibid*).

Concluding Remarks

H.D. exhibits an unquenching thirst for and an inextinguishable interest in classical myths and mythological figures. Throughout her literary career as a whole and through her novel *Hermione* in particular, H. D. has demonstrated how she has as a writer made such classical myths and mythological figures her own. She has not only employed myths and mythological figures as means of expressing herself and communicating her own experience, but has also reimagined and reproduced them through her writings as if she has restored them back to life again.

As shown and discussed in *Hermione* and other works mentioned earlier, H. D. has incorporated classical myths and mythological figures for their association with her knowledge and experiences in real life. Yet, she has also reimagined and reproduced them in her literary writings to make them approachable and receptive to her and her readers' hardly acquired knowledge of diverse forms of concepts such as sexuality, of the discomfort and agony of desertion, and of the overwhelmingly demoralizing consequences of a male-controlled and aggressively militarist culture and background.

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