

*Between myth and literature.
The symbolism of the pomegranate in ancient mythology*

*Między mitem a literaturą.
O symbolice granatu w mitologii antycznej*

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Słowa kluczowe

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to show several planes of the relationship between myth and literature on the example of pomegranate symbolism in ancient mythology. The text takes into account the broad literary and mythological perspective inscribed in cultural studies.

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie kilku płaszczyzn relacji między mitem a literaturą na przykładzie symboliki granatu w mitologii antycznej. Tekst uwzględnia szeroką perspektywę literaturoznawczą i mitoznawczą wpisaną w zagadnienia kulturoznawcze.

Between myth and literature. The symbolism of the pomegranate in ancient mythology

Scientific considerations regarding the relationship between myth and literature have been present almost from the beginning of myth studies. They are preceded by the works of Romantics (Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich W. Schelling and others) through the greatest myth theories, i.e. comparative and folkloric studies, functionalism, structuralism and others¹. The subject literature situates these considerations on several levels. Among Polish researchers, Henryk Markiewicz points out three types of convergence between myth and 1) a particular literary work (genetic issues), 2) a literary genre (genealogical issues) and 3) literature as a whole². In the article *Mit a powieść. Prezentacja stanowisk teoretycznych* Cezary Zalewski refers to the classification proposed by John Vickery. He distinguishes four strategies of the relationship between myth and literature developed by mythographic criticism: genetic (questions about the beginning of myth and literature), material (questions about the method and purpose of using mythical material), formal (question about extremely broad analogies to myth or so-called mythical thinking), psychological (questions about the anthropological basics of myth and literature)³. Erazm Kuźma approaches the discussed issues in a slightly different way. He creates a typology of the uses of the name “myth”, distinguishing the following categories: myth as repetition; myth as a genesis; myth as a prefiguration; myth as a structure; myth as communication; myth as meaning; myth as value⁴. These barely indicated positions are worth supplementing with Robert A. Segal’s brief reflections from the book *Myth. A very short introduction*, focusing on the mythic origin of literature, myth understood as a story and mythic patterns⁵. The chapter *Myth and literature* concludes with an example of analyzing Lord Reglan’s concept from his book *The Hero. A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (1936)⁶.

¹ E. Mielecinski, *Poetyka mitu*, trans. by J. Dancygier, Warszawa 1981, p. 13-197.

² H. Markiewicz, *Literatura a mity*, [in:] idem, *Literaturoznawstwo i jego sąsiedztwa*, Warszawa 1989, p. 70.

³ C. Zalewski, *Mit a powieść. Prezentacja stanowisk teoretycznych*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” XCVII, vol. 3, p. 55-57.

⁴ E. Kuźma, *Kategoria mitu w badaniach literackich*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1986, no 77, vol. 4, p. 66-73.

⁵ A. Segal, *Myth. A very short introduction*, New York 2004, p. 79-87.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 87-90.

The examples of the title relations cited above fit into an extremely complex subject increasingly addressed by the interdisciplinary environments consisting of scholars in literary, cultural and religious studies, etc. In a certain sense, reflections on the connections and solutions of myth and literature are an attempt to combine various myth theories in the perspective of theoretical and literary studies. It should be noted that each method of myth analysis determines the methodology adopted by a researcher. For example, Joseph Campbell's monomyth concept reduces all issues to capture myth in psychological terms, for which the story is just an invitation to a broader analysis⁷. A similar research problem arises when defining the myth. Perhaps Erazm Kuźma is right, writing that "the question (...) about the meaning of the word is futile, but you have to ask how it is used"⁸. Therefore, it becomes extremely useful to replace individual definitions with methods of understanding this phenomenon. R. Tomicki proposes three approaches to myth: as a story, narrative; stressing the imaginary aspect of myth; as a universal phenomenon characteristic of all communities and any type of culture⁹. Meanwhile, a kind of universalism dominates in the literature on the subject. For example, it is difficult to figure out what Zalewski means writing about the standard definition of myth in the introduction to the already cited article¹⁰. There is no standard definition of myth, just as there is no single theory of myth. On the other hand, Zalewski's proposal is methodologically safe, because it captures almost all perspectives of myth studies. It is worth quoting here: „A myth is an expression of the sacred in words: it reports realities and events from the origin of the world that remain valid as the basis and purpose of all there is. Consequently a myth functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom, and knowledge”¹¹.

The considerations presented so far on the relationship between myth and literature fit into three main areas. The first area is a kind of dispute about priority, which can be described by asking whether literature is secondary to myth. These considerations, among others, were undertaken by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Another area concerns the relationship between myth and individual literary genres. In this case, literary scholars reach, among others, for theories Eleazar Mielecinsky, Max Müller, Gilbert Murray and many others. The third area, most often undertaken by literary

⁷ See: J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York 1949.

⁸ E. Kuźma, *Kategoria mitu...*, op. cit., p. 55.

⁹ R. Tomicki, *Mit*, [in:] *Słownik etnologiczny, terminy ogólne*, ed. Z. Staszczak, Warszawa-Poznań 1987, p. 244-247.

¹⁰ C. Zalewski, *Mit a powieść...*, op. cit., p. 56.

¹¹ K.W. Bolle, *Myth*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of religion*, ed. L. Jones (red.), vol. 9, Detroit: Thomson Gale, p. 6359.

scholars, could be called a reception. In this approach, myth is usually understood as a story, less often as an archaic ideological model. For this reason, various motifs, threads, mythical characters are first distinguished, and then the degree of their transformation is examined, from simple repetitions to transferring entire myths or their components to another cultural and social space. A separate issue is the function that these elements perform in a literary work. Therefore, reception is the way that myth overcomes from primary forms (ritual, mytheme, archemyth, etc.) to various transformations in a literary work. At the same time, it should be emphasized that it is extremely important to include indirect sources, e.g. in the form of intertextuality, and increasingly to take into account the specificity of contemporary culture, including popular culture. It is therefore a processual position, which very often takes on a comparative dimension. Both Erazm Kuźma and Tomasz Mizerkiewicz drew attention to this in their works. The latter proposed two types of relationship between mythical material and literature: mythologizations – revealed or hidden imitation and introduction of specific plots, characters, mythological motifs; mythical stylizations – imitating the features of an authentic mythical story.¹² In the first case, according to Mizerkiewicz, we deal with intertextual and hypertextual relationships, in the second – with genealogical relationships (architextuality according to Gérard Genette concept)¹³. The methodology introduced by John White in his work *Mythology in the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques*, referring to mythological novels, is still very popular. White distinguished four processing models: the complete renarration of a classical myth; a juxtaposition of sections narrating a myth and others concerned with the contemporary world; a novel, set in the modern world, which contains a pattern of references to mythology running through the work; a novel in which a mythological motif prefigures a part of the narrative¹⁴. An interesting proposal was introduced by Włodzimierz Szturc and Marek Dybizbański. In the book *Comparative Mythology*, based, among others, on ritualism and structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, they showed a peculiar evolution of the myth: rudimentariness (revival of the myth fragments in a new form), mythematic redundancy (stretching, expanding and disappearing elements of a living myth due to the excess of knowledge), repartiveness of mythemes (a new division, a new distribution of accents in the mythemes making up the myth)¹⁵. In turn,

¹² T. Mizerkiewicz, *Stylizacje mityczne w prozie polskiej po 1968 roku*, Poznań 2001, p. 11.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ J.J. White, *Mythology in the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques*, Princeton, New Jersey 1971, p. 52-54.

¹⁵ M. Dybizbański, W. Szturc, *Mitoznawstwo porównawcze*, Kraków 2006, p. 14; 22; 29.

Bogdan Trocha, writes about the degradation of myth in fantasy literature (he borrows the concept of degradation from *Patterns in Comparative Religion* by Mircea Eliade, 1958), that is, a specific binding of myths or their elements with the characteristic literary environment, which leads to endowment with specific features associated with the content of the literary presentation¹⁶.

Ancient literature occupies a special place in the above considerations. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine today's mythologies without Ovidius' *Metamorphoses* or Hesiod's *Theogony*, on the other, many mythologists point out that the works of Greek-Roman antiquity are just (or even) endless examples of the reception of the myth, and an attempt to separate the religious layer from the literary one is a real challenge. This is also due to the fact that a mythical story does not coincide chronologically with a history of ancient literature, which is also fragmentary in many places. That is why the versions given by Christian or Byzantine authors are just as important as the stories from the fifth or fourth century BC. What we call mythology is actually a set of different versions of the myth that have been given a coherent story, e.g. about Heracles, the golden fleece, Calydonian boar hunt. Today, few readers are aware of the fact that the eagerly quoted tale of the punishment that Sisyphus suffered in the afterlife, comes from Eustathius' *Commentary on Homer's Iliad* which very particularly recounts Homer's verses devoted to Sisyphus (VI, 153-154). As Claude Lévi-Strauss states, "[...] there is no single «true» version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth"¹⁷.

The multi-threaded relationship between myth and literature is well illustrated by the symbolism of pomegranate in ancient mythology. Source analysis, despite the availability of many mythological lexicons, such as Wilhelm Roscher's *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig 1884-1937), is not the simplest. The work of Idaliana Kaczor *Kult drzew w tradycji mitologicznej i religijnej starożytnych Greków i Rzymian* can be extremely helpful in this matter¹⁸. This book provides both important insights to the topic described in this article, and is a valuable example of the tradition of myth inscribed in the reception plane, mentioned by me. Ancient literature has become a reference point for the author (similarly to Lord Reglan) – comparative study of myth (see earlier concepts of Szturc and Dybizbański) inscribed in the religion and culture of ancient Greeks and Romans. However, the basis for Kaczor is a linguistic analysis, from which we

¹⁶ B. Trocha, *Degradacja mitu w literaturze fantasy*, Zielona Góra 2009, p. 73.

¹⁷ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, New York 1963, p. 216-217.

¹⁸ I. Kaczor, *Kult drzew w tradycji mitologicznej i religijnej starożytnych Greków i Rzymian*, Łódź 2001.

learn that the word “pomegranate” (in Greek ρόα, ροιή, ροιά; in Latin *punica granata*) does not have an established etymology and if it is not borrowed from some Asian language, it should be associated with greek ῥέω “to flow”, ροῦς “stream”¹⁹.

One of the most important features of pomegranate symbolism is its liminality. On the one hand, this symbolism refers us to the meanings related to fertility, fullness of life, resurrection and reviving nature, on the other hand – to death and stories taking place in mythic underworld²⁰. It is worth emphasizing at this point that the liminality of a given character or a symbol is not uncommon in Greek mythology. One of the best examples is the trickster category – Hermes, Prometheus, Odysseus, Sisyphus, Autolycus.

Tricksters – writes Harold Scheub – are the timeless energy, the eternally liminal, the ordering and the chaotic. They are the alpha and omega, the yin and the yang, the contradictory, the ambiguous, the unending. They are primordial, now sublime and now debased, neither the one nor the other, but a combination that emerges in strange, quirky, and unpredictable ways²¹.

Pomegranate as a symbol of life and love appears in Greece and Rome in the rites associated with a wedding. In Greece they were given to bridegrooms to eat, the Roman women getting married used to put garland wreaths on their heads. Numerous pomegranate seeds symbolized abundance, a large number of offspring. Its red pulp was a symbol of love. From the analysis of available literary texts we learn that pomegranate was one of the attributes of the goddess Hera, who was depicted with the pomegranate in her hand. Pausanias writes about this in *Description of Greece* (2.17.4)²²:

The statue of Hera is seated on a throne; it is huge, made of gold and ivory, and is a work of Polycleitus. She is wearing a crown with Graces and Seasons worked upon it, and in one hand she carries a pomegranate and in the other a scepter. About the pomegranate I must say nothing, for its story is somewhat of a holy mystery.

The subject matter connected with Hera and pomegranate leads us towards the given liminality of this symbol. So Hera was also worshipped as the goddess of the calendar year, as Robert Graves writes in *The Greek Myths*²³.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 40.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 114–115.

²¹ H. Scheub, *Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*, Madison, Wis. 2012, p. 12.

²² Pausanias, *Description of Greece with an English Translation* by W.H.S. Jones, Litt.D., and H.A. Ormerod, M.A., in 4 Volumes, Cambridge, MA; London 1918.

²³ R. Graves, *Mity greckie*, trans. by H. Krzeczowski, Kraków 2011, p. 40.

According to the *Hymn to Hera*, closer to the unknown poet Olen, cited by Pausanias (II.13.3), Seasons were Hera's nurses: „Olen in his hymn to Hera, says that Hera was reared by the Seasons, and that her children were Ares and Hebe”²⁴. From the fragment of the *Description of Greece* quoted above describing the statue of Hera, we also learn that Polycleitus carved a cuckoo on the scepter of the goddess. This is due to the myth (see Pausanias 2.36.2) in which Zeus turned into a cuckoo after unsuccessful courtship to Hera to deceive her first and then seduce and rape her. Therefore, this bird, as interpreted by Graves, becomes a symbol of spring, pomegranate, especially ripe, – the coming autumn, and consequently death (winter)²⁵. We are talking here about cyclicity related to both nature (seasons, pomegranate, cuckoo) and human life. Elsewhere in his work, Pausanias testifies (II.38.2) that Hera regularly bathed in the Canathus stream near Argos, thus renewing her heritage. Let's recall, that the word pomegranate should be associated with gr. ῥέω “to flow”, ῥοῦς “stream”. Hera is also associated with the myth about the kidnapping and tearing of tiny Dionysus by the Titans. This was referred to, among others, by Onomacritus cited by Pausanias (VIII.37.5) and Diodorus Siculus in *The Library of History* (III.62). However, the most interesting is the fragment transmitted in this context by Clement of Alexandria in *Exhortation to the Greeks* (II 16). We learn from it that pomegranate was to grow out of the blood of torn Dionysus. Perhaps these stories, as well as the myth about the death of Adonis, prompted Graves to propose the thesis that pomegranate fruit held by Hera or Persephone in the hand symbolizes death and the announcement of the resurrection²⁶.

Pomegranate also appears in stories related to mythic underworld. The most famous is the story of Demeter and Persephone (Kora). Hermes informed Demeter that her daughter, kidnapped by Hades, would return to earth, provided that she did not taste the food of the dead. However, Zeus's brother prepared a trick. His gardener Ascalaphus testified in front of all concerned that Persephone tasted seven pomegranate seeds in the Underground, thus breaking the oath (see Apollodoros, I.5.1-3 and 12). Pomegranate also appears in the myth of Tantalum, specifically in the passage about the punishment that Pelops' father suffered in Tartarus. Odysseus talks about it in XI book of *Odyssey* (582-592): “And trees, high and leafy, let stream their fruits above his head, pears, and pomegranates, and apple trees with their bright fruit, and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives. But as often as that old man would reach out toward these, to clutch them with his hands, the wind would toss them to

²⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece...*, op. cit.

²⁵ R. Graves, *Mity greckie*, op. cit., p. 40.

²⁶ Ibidem.

the shadowy clouds”²⁷. The above fragments can be interpreted after Graves as follows. Food in red color was treated as taboo and it was associated with the worship of the dead²⁸. Maybe that is why this fruit appears in the underworld. Also, do not forget about the seeds that die in the ground so that a new tree can grow. It is worth mentioning the story of a young girl named Side, who, trying to escape from her father’s urgency, committed suicide on her mother’s grave. A pomegranate tree grew out of her blood²⁹.

The analysis of the Greek-Roman texts presented above refers us to the aforementioned planes of relationship between myth and literature. We can therefore ask about the archaic foundations of pomegranate symbolism, the sources of which may arise both from a religious ritual (ritualistic school, Graves’s concepts presented) and from the universal structures of the human mind (concepts of Jung, Kerenyi, Campbell). Note that the ancient literature on these considerations may serve as an example for both above concepts, as well as prove a particular theory. Already cited Lord Reglan used countless literary texts to develop the category of traditional hero. However, a classical philologist may ask why he chose these texts and not the others. In other words, how can one build the concept of a traditional hero based on what, according to many, is secondary to the myth, or ancient literature?

Therefore, working with ancient literature consists in collecting as many texts related to a given issue as possible, and then comparing and putting them in a broader context: genealogical (the role of the genre in the transformation of the mythical story), historical, political, cultural. At this level of analysis, the reception plane is of secondary importance, and the interpretation of the research material resembles myth diachronic according to Lévi-Strauss’ theory³⁰:

Relations pertaining to the same bundle may appear diachronically at remote intervals, but when we have succeeded in grouping them together, we have reorganized our myth according to a time referent of a new nature corresponding to the prerequisite of the initial hypothesis [...].

Reception plane can be only the next step. In this particular case, it is the tale of Side, which was probably influenced by the story of the death of Dionysus and Adonis. This story, reminiscent of countless metamorphoses from

²⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey* with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, PH.D. in two volumes. Cambridge, MA.; London 1919.

²⁸ R. Graves, *Mity greckie*, op. cit., p. 79.

²⁹ W.H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, vol. IV (Quadriformis–Syzygia), Hildesheim 1965, p. 815.

³⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth*, “The Journal of American Folklore” 1955, vol. 68, no. 270, *Myth: A symposium* (Oct. – Dec.), p. 431–432.

Ovid's work, was somewhat deprived of its religious (ritual) character, thus becoming closer to purely human problems and passions.

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