

From metaphor to metamorphosis

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Résumé: *L'auteur examine de quelle manière Monica Hughes, dans sa trilogie romanesque Isis, s'approprie et réinvente l'ancienne religion égyptienne: le recours aux images et aux métaphores inspirées de cette mythologie peut se comprendre, sur le plan esthétique, comme une tentative de transformer en oeuvre d'art une étape fondamentale de la vie, la crise d'identité de l'adolescence.*

Themes of change and crisis have preoccupied people interested in adolescent development since ancient times. On the one hand, adolescent enthusiasm and idealism encourage young adults to exercise their independence; at the same time, they can lead to fears of being different and create pressures to conform. Consequently, adolescence is often considered synonymous with searching for a new sense of self, which would encompass all that one has been as well as what one might yet become.

In her Isis trilogy of novels, Monica Hughes presents adolescence as a time of personal crisis, artfully veiled in layers of imagery and symbolism. In so doing, she casts her literary nets into the deeper waters of one of the world's oldest organized religions, drawing metaphors and motifs from ancient Egyptian mythology. Chief among these is the concept of metamorphosis.

Metamorphosis may be understood on an aesthetic plane as the transformation of life into art. It may also refer to the dialectic of change and identity within a single text or succession of works. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to consider how Hughes explores the relationship between change and changelessness in terms of the physical manifestation of the Egyptian pantheon and the psychological development of her characters.

On the nature of metamorphic change

Weideman (qtd. in Budge 1899) recognizes three main elements in the Egyptian religion: (a) a solar monotheism, (b) a cult of the regenerating power of nature, and (c) a perception of an anthropomorphic divinity whose life in this world and beyond is typical of the ideal life of man (14-15). The first element honours the sun as the creator of the universe; its importance will be discussed in the next section. The second is expressed in the worship of deities intimately tied to animals and vegetation. The third encompasses the cult of Osiris. Together, they

serve to acknowledge the power of metamorphic change.

As did many ancient people, the Egyptians worshipped animals in their own form. They had no more trouble believing that individual animals could serve as abodes of the gods than they had believing a god was always incarnate in Pharaoh. For example, both the Apis Bull and the Goat of Mendes were venerated as living symbols of continual succession; when the currently reigning sacred animal died, another was routinely installed in its place. Similarly, kingship was passed from one pharaoh to another through sexual union of the god with the sister-goddess Isis, such that each new pharaoh was both father (Osiris, the slain god whom Isis temporarily raises from the dead) and son (Horus, the child of their union).

On a more imaginative scale, the Egyptians also accepted the probable existence of composite animals, that is, creatures which displayed the characteristics of several beasts. Many of their gods in fact sported animals' heads, or else adopted animal forms at will. Though no one knows for sure why they were portrayed thus, it does seem to suggest a curious interest in what might be called "otherness." If human beings were truly to co-exist with nature and be a part of its never-changing cycle of renewal, then divinity would most properly be represented as a point part way in-between.

Renewal in its turn implies death. The ancients thought of death as the essential prelude to life, and of life as preparation for death; the one was meaningless without the other. Death, then, was nothing more than a passing from one kind of time to another—a becoming, for lack of a better word, from life yesterday to life tomorrow. The difference, and hence the mystery, is that while life itself can be seen, becoming is hidden.

It would seem safe to assume, then, that Egyptian mythology does not seek to represent what is but, as Malraux (1960) puts it, "to transmute appearance into Truth" (9). In other words, regardless of whether change occurs in appearance or in circumstance, something always remains profoundly the same. Consequently, acceptance of metamorphic change allows the mind to transform an object into a less predictable, more variously faceted image. On an intellectual plane, it encourages its adherents to focus on what Frankfort (1961) calls "the life rhythm of a universe" rather than the exceptional circumstances which may disturb it.

If Malraux is correct, metamorphosis in its highest manifestation implies mastery over death. Consequently, any supreme value, by the very nature of its supremacy, possesses the power to metamorphose itself, to be reincarnated in variable, multiple and successive forms and in so doing defy annihilation. In Egyptian mythology, metamorphosis does not result from an external force, but from an inner power (equal to freedom, or the ability to actualize power) that each of us possesses. And it is the strength of that power which sculpts the landscapes of the mind.

The gods of Heliopolis and the cosmology of Hughes' Isis

The ancient Egyptians lived in a river valley. Theirs was an agricultural society, isolated against outside influences, but also highly dependent on the cyclical rise and fall of the Nile. Within its boundaries, Pharaoh ruled with absolute power. Even in spiritual matters, theological order was imposed by the priests of the great religious centres; for instance, Heliopolis, the most conservative of these centres, proclaimed the absolute sovereignty of Ra among the gods.

The Great Ennead (meaning "nine") of Heliopolis contained five gods and four goddesses: in addition to Ra (sun) the sole creator were his offspring Shu (air) and Tefnut (water), their children Geb (earth) and Nut (sky), and their children's children Isis, Osiris, Set and Nephthys. From this cosmology, the divine order of the pharaohs was established.

In contrast, the society of local gods usually took the form of a triad, consisting of two gods, one old and one young, and a goddess, the wise or female counterpart of the old god. The younger god was the son of the older god and goddess, and supposedly possessed all the attributes which had belonged to their father. The members of these triads varied at different times and in different places, but they served to honour the eternal triangle of continuous succession.

Hughes' cosmology is derived from the Great Ennead of Heliopolis. While she does not attempt to incorporate the entire godhead, she does select a representative from each generation. Ra retains his supreme role as the sun god, with Shu (the life spirit) and Nut (the spirit of order) characterized as two orbiting moons. Isis, on the other hand, is increased in size if not importance, as her original association with the Nile valley is broadened to encompass an entire planet.

Of the major players about to be introduced, only Osiris defies easy recognition in Hughes' cast of characters. Mark London is well equipped to play the part of Set. The three N'Kumos function as Horus figures. Guardian is clearly Ra, the Shining One. And their fates are irrevocably tied to Olwen's own who, as Isis, is the life-force which holds the narrative together.

The myths of Isis

Isis most often appears as the consort of Osiris, where in some versions they are connubially joined from the womb as were their siblings Set and Nephthys. Though of divine parentage, Isis and Osiris are also part human and reigned as the first king and queen of Egypt. Osiris is credited with bringing civilization to the Egyptian people. He gave them laws and taught them to worship the gods; and when Isis discovered grain growing wild, it was Osiris who introduced their cultivation. Eager to communicate these beneficent discoveries, he committed the government of Egypt to Isis and travelled throughout the rest of the world. Everywhere he went, people worshipped him; and both he and Isis were much beloved. However, Set, jealous of his brother's popularity and desirous of Isis,

murdered Osiris and hid his body. Consumed with grief, Isis set forth to wander the banks of the Nile in search of her husband whom, after suffering many sorrows, she eventually found and hid with Wadjet the snake goddess in the swamps of Buto. When Set discovered what she had done, he stole Osiris' body yet again, this time tearing it into many pieces and scattering it abroad. Again, Isis set forth in search of the fragments. When at last she had collected them all, she appealed to Ra, who charged Anubis (the son of Osiris and Nephthys) with the task of piecing the body together. Through the use of magic, taught to her by Thoth the moon god, Isis raised his manhood and was impregnated with their son Horus. She then buried her husband, whereupon Osiris came back to life and assumed a new identity as king of the dead.

Isis, however, remained among the living and devoted herself to the rearing of her son. Although Set sought to confine her following the death of Osiris, she was freed by Thoth, and returned to the swamps of Buto. Soon after, she bore her child. Knowing that Set would surely murder him were he to be found, Isis hid the infant Horus and watched over him. But one day, while she was away in search of food, Set sent a scorpion to sting him. In despair, Isis called upon Thoth, who taught her a spell that would restore her son to life. Thus, Horus lived to avenge his father, and met Set in a battle which lasted for three days and three nights. When it was clear that Horus would emerge the winner, Isis took pity on Set and interfered so that his life might be spared, then fled for her own. A furious Horus took off in pursuit and, upon catching up with her, cut off her head. This might have been the end of Isis, had not Thoth intervened yet again, transforming her head into that of a cow and reattaching it to her body. Horus was then placed on the throne of his father Osiris, and Set became Ra's adopted son.

A third myth links Isis with Ra the sun god. In his latter years, Ra's great age began to show; his mouth would tremble and his spittle fall upon the ground. When Isis discovered this, she mixed the spittle with a bit of earth, shaped it into a snake, and placed it on the path where Ra walked. Naturally, when Ra approached, the snake bit him. He cried out in pain, but (because the snake was formed from his own body) could not know what caused his illness. Isis pitied him and offered to cure him, but only on the condition that he reveal to her his real name. Knowing that the knowledge of his real name would give Isis power over him, Ra tried to sidetrack her by listing a series of impressive names, but she was not deceived and insisted on hearing the truth. Finally, Ra could stand the pain no longer and whispered it in her ear. As she had promised, Isis healed Ra and kept the name a secret. Sometime thereafter, Ra decided to withdraw from the world and return to the heavens, and reality as we know it was born.

The metamorphosis of Olwen

Olwen's life (and her afterlife) follow the same mythic pattern as Isis' own. She is the sole government on her planet until Pegasus II arrives. She is desired by

someone who eventually seeks to destroy her. She suffers long and intensely on behalf of those she loves. She ultimately achieves much wisdom and knowledge. She is, in every sense, the personification of a wise and beneficent goddess.

At the same time, the Olwen=Isis identification is far from a perfect fit. Olwen has no husband. She has no son. There is no great battle in which she intervenes, nor is she beheaded. Above all else, there is no trickery in her relationship with Guardian. How then, as Malraux put it, does Hughes transmute appearance into Truth?

On a physical level, Olwen's metamorphosis begins at the hand of Guardian:

I thickened your skin so that it would be opaque to the ultra-violet. I gave you an extra eye-lid to protect your eyes ... I deepened your rib cage and extended your vascular system, much in the way that deep-sea mammals adapted them, so that you could store much more oxygen at each breath. I strengthened your ankles and thickened your fingernails to help you climb. And I changed your metabolism slightly ... that shows in your altered [green] colour. (*The keeper of the Isis light* 81)

In order to keep her safe and happy on a potentially hostile planet, Guardian changes her physical appearance, adding a decidedly reptilian cast to her features. At first consideration, her animalian aspect is reminiscent of the Egyptian godhead; her divinity in particular is proclaimed through her resemblance to the uraeus (or sacred asp, worn by Egyptian royalty as part of their headdress) and Wadjet the snake goddess with whom Isis was closely associated. Even Jonas Tryon, the captain of Pegasus II, recognizes this innate quality: "She could not know that her sudden appearance from among the shadows reminded him of some exotic goddess" (*The keeper of the Isis light* 128). However, upon closer scrutiny, her altered appearance is also very cocoon-like; as Olwen herself notes, "She had the feeling that she was growing inside so fast that she was going to split and shed her skin the way a snake does" (84). Thus, the painful birth of her self-awareness (*The keeper of the Isis light*), her transmutation into That Old Woman (*The guardian of Isis*), and her eventual rebirth as Moira Flynn who too is "like a queen" (*The Isis pedlar* 110) are all part of a grand design, leading to the moment when love finally does go right.

At the beginning of their relationship, when outward appearances are well matched, Olwen's and Mark's shared tastes completely overshadow their wildly incompatible life experiences. However, when Olwen's mask is removed, and Mark sees her true self, it is he, not she, who suffers from the contradiction; the near death he meets during his fall is nothing compared to the psychological suicide he commits when he distorts her memory. Like Set, Mark is a symbol of the desert, except that here the desert in question is an emotional wasteland. As for Olwen, her misguided love is transformed into a mask she refuses to wear (*The guardian of Isis* 113) and after one final encounter with Mark, she removes herself from the settlement.

If Mark is Set and Olwen Isis, who then is Osiris? One possible explanation

is that he too is part of Olwen, such that the pain she feels when Mark rejects her actually results from a separation of self, which begins the day of Mark's fall. To her surprise, she finds that her love for Guardian is no longer enough, as she is biologically drawn to Mark. In a sense, her inner self is emotionally engulfed in a flood of new feelings; Mark nourishes her soul as the Nile nourished Egypt. When she is rebuffed, that idealistic wellspring is destroyed and she must depart in search of it. Mark, however, retains what she has lost; except that in his hands, her missing self becomes That Old Woman—not, as Osiris was, the benevolent ruler of souls but “she [who] brings death to the people” (*The guardian of Isis* 91). The Olwen=Osiris illusion holds physically as well, since in some parts of Egypt Osiris was identified with Sobek, a crocodile-headed god. While death-dealing crocodiles were greatly feared by the ancient Egyptians, and for good reason, Sobek was believed to be a god who was kind to the dead; in several versions of the myth, it was he who brought Horus back to life.

But Osiris is also incarnate in Mark. The compatibility the lovers experience from the moment they meet represents a true marriage of spirits. But Set enters paradise the day Mark looks upon Olwen without her mask. He kills Osiris the day Guardian visits Mark in the hospital and brings proof in the form of a photograph. He nearly rises from the dead when Olwen enters the ship during the sandstorm; he is hacked to pieces as Mark struggles to rationalize his feelings. Then finally, miraculously, Osiris stands whole and alive one last time, when Olwen meets with Mark to say goodbye. When they part, he has no choice but to retire to the Otherworld forever.

Olwen dies between the second and third books, at which point the metamorphic process takes an unexpected turn. Now instead of a ship of would-be settlers disturbing the equilibrium of two indigenous inhabitants, two outsiders come to disturb the equilibrium of the settlement. Though Moira Flynn does not resemble Olwen in any obvious way, she is enough like her to strike a mnemonic chord; as Guardian observes:

[Your voice] is like hers, with a lilt to it. You do not look like her, and her hair was red, not black. But you have some of the same grace. (*The Isis pedlar* 45)

Their relationship never evolves beyond a series of planning sessions; and our attention is drawn instead to her growing attraction to David N'Kumo. Still, when she kisses Guardian as he is about to accompany her father to parts unknown, we are reminded of how often Olwen would make that same gesture; and in the space of a moment, the Keeper lives again.

Unlike Olwen, who spent most of her life alone with Guardian, Moira has been all over the galaxy. She is quick and capable and prepared to match wits with anyone, even her own father. She is not Olwen of Isis, resplendent in her quiet dignity, but a fighter. David too is a fighter; and consequently, his Horus aspect is considerably stronger than those of his uncle and great grandfather. He ultimately defeats Michael Flynn—an interstellar Set, if ever there was one—

in a battle of wits and stamina, after which the eternal triad falls into place. In the end, his uncle Jody (the older god) prepares to ascend the throne, but in a curious twist of the original, it is David the younger who becomes the consort of the goddess figure.

This leaves only Guardian unaccounted for. Being a robot, he is perhaps the most obvious symbol of changelessness, yet he too undergoes a subtle metamorphosis of sorts, displaying at odd times throughout the trilogy a range of human responses. The reason for this may be attributed to Olwen's knowledge of his "secret name." While he is publicly known to some as DaCoP forty-three and to others as The Shining One, only Olwen knows him as Guardian and can see him for what he has become. By means of that name, she became what he calls his "reason," the purpose of his existence. And his final departure with Michael Flynn signals, as no other single action could have done, the passing of the gods from the realm of mankind.

In conclusion

Death is a door through which we all must pass, to be sure. But it is not an end, any more than the chrysalis that you see, torn and empty, hanging from a cactus spine, is the end. True, there is no more caterpillar. But see what there is instead. (*The guardian of Isis* 114)

Egyptian thought, says Frankfort, is paradoxical at best: the very people who conceived the world as static conceived their future condition as perennial movement. Recurrence then is the essence of changelessness. It is not something that resides in the individual, but is external to him/her. It is responsible for, among other things, the notion that the more things change, the more they stay the same. And it has a patron goddess: Maat.

Maat is the feminine counterpart of Thoth; where he represents a powerful internal motivating force, she is the personification of physical and moral law. Her name can be translated as "order," "justice" or "truth," but she is all three at once and more. She is greater than all the characters in the trilogy and the goddesses of Egypt. She is not to be found anywhere on Isis; and yet, by the end of the third book, her presence is both unmistakable and unavoidable.

If we take the silent presence of Maat into consideration, Olwen's metamorphosis long outlasts her lifespan; it is not complete until Moira and David are pledged to one another, and maybe not even then. The painful separation of who she really was (*The keeper of the Isis light*) from what others said she was (*The guardian of Isis*), and the social disorder which followed, is not resolved during her lifetime. At the same time, what appeared to be a stagnant and unnatural existence for the settlers (*The guardian of Isis*) becomes in time a way of life worth preserving (*The Isis pedlar*).

Olwen is a typical adolescent, struggling with the cruel fact that "a mirror can only show you what you see as yourself; it cannot tell you what another person sees" (*The keeper of the Isis light* 39). Her love affair with Mark leaves neither

unscathed, and even turns an entire world upside down. For both of them, it is the most significant event in their lives. Yet when Guardian flies off with Michael Flynn, they leave behind a world which has somehow survived it all and found its natural rhythm. Even as she chronicles the great emotional highs and lows of adolescence, Hughes (and hence her reader) never loses sight of the big picture. In the end, Maat prevails.

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