

What can we say about masculinity in ancient Egypt? How do different sectors of society promote certain ideas of "what it is to be a man?" Do men always conform with these ideals or are there ways to resist them, adapt them?

Masculinity in ancient Egypt was not necessarily a solid concept. Just because somebody was not assigned with the male sex at birth it did not mean that they could not present as masculine in the way that they dressed or behaved within the social climate. Whilst those who were biologically female could present as masculine, there was no harsh boundary set for those who were biologically male - men were often depicted with what would be attributes of modern femininity such as elaborate jewellery and long hair.

For example, we can look at the illustrations within Theban tomb TT96, the burial chamber of Sennefer and see that Sennefer himself is depicted with long hair that goes beyond his shoulders as well as a broad and complex necklace around his neck. This necklace is accompanied by large gold hoop earrings and thick gold bracelets. Whilst these qualities would be associated with femininity in today's society, it would have shown Sennefer's power and importance in the ancient Egyptian time period. Decorating oneself as a male was not something that was deemed as inappropriate or odd but rather a good thing, it showed that the individual was successful and had some sort of significance in the social hierarchy. This differs from modern society where the decoration of somebody who is biologically male or identifies as a male is often seen as being flamboyant or drawing attention to oneself that is not always welcomed due to stereotyped connotations of homosexuality.

Another common perception is that those who present as masculine are more powerful or more important than those who present as feminine. This is supported by the fact that men, or those who wish to be seen as a masculine icon are depicted in front of or ahead of those who are assumed to be more feminine in ancient Egyptian art. The burial chamber of Sennefer can once again be used as an example, as both Sennefer and his wife are shown to be seated together on one panel. Sennefer's wife, Meryt, is seated next to Sennefer but we can also see that she is positioned behind him. Her arm is seen to extend behind the torso of Sennefer with her hand reappearing on his shoulder, appearing to hold or embrace her husband whilst still being shown as the submissive within the relationship.

On the opposite end of this spectrum, we could look at Akhenaten's chief wife, Nefertiti. Nefertiti was generally seen as equal to her husband and was even at times depicted alone. There is one depiction of Nefertiti that sticks out as being particularly unusual, when we look at the sarcophagus of Akhenaten we can see depictions of a woman upon each corner, this woman being Nefertiti. This depiction stands out as the corners of a sarcophagus were generally guarded by portrayals of protective goddesses such as Isis, Hathor or Neith to name a few. Instead of these protective goddesses, Nefertiti stands tall on all four corners, answering the spiritual needs of her husband and protecting him throughout the afterlife. This is significant because it shows the sheer amount of power that was held by Nefertiti, with power being

something that is typically associated with masculinity in both the modern social climate and the climate within ancient Egypt.

Masculinity in Egypt was not limited to the way that individuals were presented within society, when classifiers in texts are considered, female divine names were rarely classified. However,

on the occasion that they were classified the falcon on the standard  is used. This is the same classifier used for male deities and the hieroglyph itself signifies the king as god, it was used as a royal symbol as well as a divine classifier. This shows that masculinity was dominant because masculine or male signifiers were also used for females rather than separate feminine classifiers. Although the falcon on the standard was used, there were a small number of occasions where separate divine classifiers were used for female deities, for example in Unas' pyramid texts we can see that goddesses are classified with three cobras rather than the falcon on the standard. Although this was a different classifier used for the goddesses it can still be linked to the concept of masculinity as the cobra appeared on the king's crown and was known to be the king's female companion from the first dynasty onwards, suggesting that although the cobra was a feminine symbol it had very close ties with masculinity and the support of a man as a dominant figure¹.

You did not have to be a man to be powerful in ancient Egypt, but you did have to have masculine traits to some degree. Traits of masculinity such as strength, both in the physical and emotional manner, equated to power. If an individual had shown themselves to be emotionally weak then that would in turn effect how others viewed them as a social leader.

¹ "(PDF) THE BEARDED WOMAN AND THE QUEEN: THE"

https://www.academia.edu/2128553/THE_BEARDED_WOMAN_AND_THE_QUEEN_THE_FORMATION_AND_TRANSFORMATION_OF_FEMALE_DIVINE_CLASSIFIERS. Accessed 4 Jan. 2021.