

SEX AND GENDER IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Don your wig for a joyful bower

Editor

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‘BOASTING ABOUT HARDNESS’:
CONSTRUCTIONS OF MIDDLE KINGDOM
MASCULINITY

R.B. Parkinson

Please do not make me use the word homosexual, which I think too dangerous (for it enhances prejudices) and absurd. Say ‘Gay’ if you like, but it would be too recent a word to be used in this passage.

Marguerite Yourcenar (Delcroix 2002, 381 n. 1)

Interpreting masculinity

In the past, scholarship often quietly denied that sexuality was an appropriate object of study. Within Egyptology, more recent studies have often concentrated, with good reason, on female sexuality and gender; this can sometimes unintentionally create a sense that masculinity is a monolithic given, as opposed to femininity’s constructed, contested – and therefore discussable – nature. Masculinity in other cultures has received inspiring studies, such as Bruce Smith’s treatments of the topic in Elizabethan literature (1994, 2000) or Michael Rocke’s analysis of male culture in Renaissance Florence (1996). Such studies mostly centre round questions of ‘homocriticism’ and ‘homosexuality’ and, as David Halperin has noted, the history of sexuality exemplifies fundamental questions of identity and difference in historiography (2002, 105–6; see also Voss and Schmidt 2000). Views of sexuality in the past have been, and still are, dynamic means of constructing modern identities, particularly in the case of classical Greece. Until comparatively recently, however, such views have rarely concerned ancient Egypt, despite the fact that perhaps the earliest recorded ‘chat up line’ in human history is one between two men which occurs in a Middle Kingdom narrative (‘How lovely your backside is!’, *The Tale of Horus and Seth*, 2.1). Similarly, European works of visual art with an Egyptian theme contain few homoerotic elements, despite the frequent orientalist treatment of Egyptian culture as exotic, erotic and effeminate, and despite a notable Roman precedent in the Egyptianizing representations of Hadrian’s Antinous.¹ The principal examples in modern visual and literary

art are minor and largely comprise occasional presentations of Akhenaten as in part 'homosexual' (see, e.g., Monserrat 2000, 33–4, 168–82).

Any views of past sexuality are 'neither historically inevitable nor politically innocent' (Bravmann 1997, 49, 47–67), and some positive assessments of ancient sexuality can occasionally risk underestimating the alterity of the past (Halperin 1990, 2002). As Michael Locke notes, 'simply to project current Western conceptions of homosexuality – which are dominated by the notion of a permanently deviant and distinct minority – onto same-sex relations in past or other societies inevitably tends to misrepresent their historical and cultural specificity' (1996, 87). I consider here some Middle Kingdom monumental representations of masculinity, and discuss the controversial interpretations of the Old Kingdom tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in order to explore the implications of such presentations. I also consider how far the way in which men were portrayed can be considered erotic, and the manner in which some Middle Kingdom poems suggest that representations of masculinity were cultural constructs that were probably seen by the ancient actors to be potentially fluid, unstable, and contingent. I suggest that these contingent constructs can offer the potential for a 'queer' gaze, taking 'queer' as 'whatever' is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin 1995, 62). 'Queer' can usefully designate readings that 'seek to examine the theoretical and critical forces... that privilege the normative over the disruptive' (Martin and Piggford 1997, 10) and even readings 'against the grain'. As Scott Bravmann comments:

As a heuristic device 'queer' has helped focus attention on how culturally sanctioned versions of the normal and the natural have been constructed and sustained, revealing them to be cultural fictions enabled only through their dependent relationship with the abnormal and the unnatural which those fictions themselves construct. (1997, 20)

Such readings can be part of a search for a subaltern history including 'histories of women, children, the poor, for example – histories whose very existence would contest the story the hegemonic state would tell of itself'.²

In early modern scholarship, the standard view of sexuality in ancient Egypt was constructed through a selective process of obscuring the evidence. For example, religious representations of the erections of ithyphallic deities had often been targeted in Christian mutilations of ancient monuments,³ and this process was re-enacted by modern scholars, as with the publication of a temple relief showing Senwosret I before the ithyphallic Min from Coptos where a label carefully covered the god's phallus (Fig. 1).⁴ In the publication of ancient elite texts, this tendency was particularly strong with instances of same-sex desire. References to male-male sexual activities were often omitted,

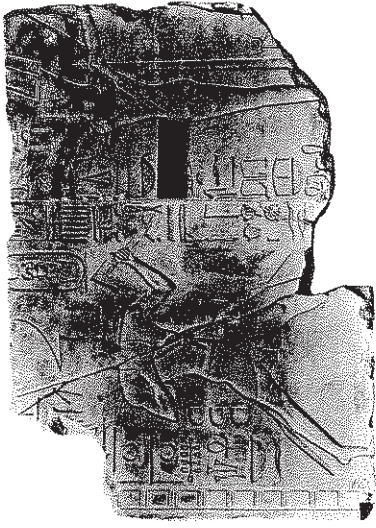


Fig. 1. An obscured erection: Petrie's publication of a relief from Coptos.

emended or reinterpreted, as in the early discussions of the 32nd maxim of *The Teaching of Ptahhotep* (listed in Kammerzell and Toro Rueda 2003, 64–9),⁵ or they were translated only into Latin, as with *The Tale of Horus and Seth* (P. UCL 32158 rto: Griffith 1898, 4); or they were published only in lavish editions that would 'appeal to the narrow band of scholars and would not be within reach of the ordinary man', as the publisher Emery Walker remarked about A.H. Gardiner's edition of the New Kingdom *Contentions of Horus and Seth* (Horton 2003, 35). In addition, potentially erotic aspects of Egyptian art and texts have perhaps often been underestimated. In the Middle Kingdom, same-sex desire between men was a comparatively prominent explicit theme in the fictional literary corpus (Parkinson 1995). Other textual evidence suggests that categorizations of people existed that were based on sexual activity, with terms attested such as *nkkw*, 'fucked man' or *hmjw* 'backturner', although these arguably do not equate to a sense of essential erotic orientation.⁶ The actual social attitudes of the period towards such individuals remain a matter for conjecture, but the literary treatments seem to have a somewhat negative tone and to imply that same-sex desire was considered on a par with adulterous desire.⁷

Monuments to masculinity

The modern reception of the 5th dynasty tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara exemplifies how interpretations of ancient sexuality are contingent and fashioned within specific modern contexts, and demonstrates the complexity of assessing ancient cultural constructions of masculinity and same-sex desire. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, the relationship between the two men replaces the usual iconographically central

relationship between the tomb-owner and his wife in this mastaba, and the two men are shown kissing, embracing and sitting together (e.g. Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, pl. 50, 68–9, 72–3, 90–1). They retain the normal distinct gender conventions in physique, costume, colour and posture, and are shown with wives and children (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, 25–44). When the tomb was discovered in 1964, however, scholars seem to have been made uneasy by these unusual depictions of what has been termed 'excessive affection' (Baines 1985, 480), but by the late 1970s the tomb featured in the standard Egyptological reference work as belonging to a same-sex couple (Westendorf 1976, 1273; Parkinson 1995, 62 n. 44).

The reading of this monument as commemorating a male couple is attractive to many modern enlightened sensibilities, and the tomb has been taken as a 'positive image' in many histories of sexuality, as on the cover of Rictor Norton's anti-constructionist *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer history and the search for cultural unity* (1997), where it features as evidence of the universal presence of same-sex couples. Such historical examples have an important role in creating modern sexual self-awareness and social identity, and in arguing that human rights should be extended to gay individuals in societies where 'homosexuality' is considered to be an American or European 'disease' (e.g. Whitaker 2006). Since data for a subaltern history can have political and social implications for the present, assessments of such evidence should be rigorously argued in order to prevent the academic community from dismissing any such analyses as merely 'special pleadings' or 'political correctness run riot' (Dowson 2006, 97) – otherwise analyses might unintentionally encourage the community to dismiss all evidence for a subaltern past as insubstantial and unproven. Due to the nature of the academic community, scholarship inevitably operates within established institutional frames that are often, by their nature, normative.

However, it seems certain that the expectations of Egyptian society were in general heteronormative, and that marriage was the officially sanctioned cultural norm. There is sparse evidence in (elite) sources of any unmarried individuals, and even the rare lack of a wife in tomb representations need not always indicate that a man was unmarried (Roth 1999, 37–45; Swinton 2003). There was apparently social and cultural pressure to marry and have children: in a much later Ptolemaic demotic text from Elephantine a man who is about to choose a wife complains 'I am told by every man who (is in) Elephantine (and) Syene that "There is no woman (in your) house!"' (P. Berlin 13538 l. 20–3; Porten 1996, 322). Marriage does not, of course, preclude same-sex sexual relationships either before or during marriage (e.g. Rocke 1996), but a closely similar phrasing significantly occurs in the opening verses of the late Middle Kingdom *Tale of Neferkare and Saset*,

where it forms an implicit explanation of – or at least an introduction to – the clandestine sexual relationship between the king and his unmarried general.⁸ Same-sex sexual relationships were clearly possible but were apparently regarded as social aberrations and potentially scandalous – as opposed to the norm of having 'a woman in one's house'. The Old Kingdom tomb's unusual iconography of male intimacy can be contextualized within these social norms by interpreting it as showing the two men as twins, an uncommon relationship (Baines 1985, esp. 463–70). This heteronormative reading gains plausibility from the existence of a similar symmetrical pairing on their funerary monuments of two late 18th dynasty men, Hor and Suty, who may also have been twins.⁹ Although the parentage of Niankhnum and Khnumhotep is not recorded, the similarity of their birth names might also suggest a close genetic relationship.

In academic Egyptology, the analyses of this mastaba as belonging to a male couple have sometimes been dismissed without full consideration and as if inherently misguided. As Thomas Dowson comments, this in part reflects the discipline's often limited view of social reality and its heterosexist bias (2000, 2006, 96–9, and this volume). This valid criticism, however, does not in itself resolve the question of interpretation or prove that a heteronormative reading is incorrect. The 'couple'-reading can also be considered to be a partial analysis, and I would add two brief comments to the ongoing debate. Firstly, some of the representations of Niankhnum and Khnumhotep that are most often used as 'positive images' happen to recall modern gay culture and stereotypes. The closely cropped hair of the two men and the apparent presence of moustaches on some photographs of the reliefs conform to the 1970s 'clone'/hyper-masculine style of some gay men (e.g. Levine 1998, 55–65). In addition, both men also have the title 'royal manicurist'. This embodies prestigious and ceremonial closeness to the person of the king and was very possibly a ceremonial sinecure (Baines 1996), but a superficial reading of this title conforms to a twentieth-century negative stereotype of the gay male as a campy hairdresser (e.g. Howles 1993, 330–1). Thus the 'positive image' readings of the tomb may embody modern attitudes just like the heteronormative readings. In addition, such readings can be viewed as self-stereotyping and therefore potentially self-repressive:¹⁰ inevitably, subaltern studies – like all academic study – can be an un-intentioned act of ventriloquizing.¹¹

Secondly, the 'couple'-reading is also potentially anachronistic and restrictive in its assumptions about social relationships. Niankhnum and Khnumhotep's iconographic vocabulary mirrors that used to portray conjugal relationships between a man and wife, and Greg Reeder has argued that it therefore shows the men to have been a conjugal couple (2000, 207, and

this volume). However, to argue that these gestures are exclusively conjugal applies a modern idea of the family as an essentially romantic/sexual attachment of two people, as opposed to a larger social group where other non-sexual relationships might take iconographic precedence. In particular, an intimate embrace is not exclusively a sign of specifically sexual desire, and even passionately expressed male intimacy need not be sexual (e.g. Halperin 2002, 117–21): two men embracing may appear a somewhat sexual gesture to an English or American academic in the streets of his/her home town, but this does not seem so, for example, in a Cairo street. The dividing line between 'homosocialism' – a useful term from Eve Sedgwick's work (e.g. 1985, esp. 1–5, 1990) – and 'homosexuality' in any culture is unstable and complex and can be hard to determine for both insiders and outsiders (Smith 1994; Orgel 1996, 31–52; Goldberg 2003, 222–8). The same ambiguity about how to interpret the sort of relationship that is shown in the mastaba's representation of male intimacy is found, for example, in nineteenth-century photographs showing men posing affectionately with a friend (Deitcher 2001). Such instances show how all readings of sources are ultimately contingent and are fashioned within our modern social and cultural frameworks, whether from a 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual' perspective. Homosexual identity – as opposed to same-sex desire – and the dichotomy between homo- and hetero-sexuality are 'relatively recent and culturally specific development(s)' (Halperin 2002, 3).¹² Despite the ideological formulations of gender, sexuality and relationships in any society, polymorphous human desire tends to ignore such boundaries, and friendship, affection, desire and love are often parts of a fluid continuum, which is constructed variously even within a single culture. Any analysis of how a representation of desire was understood – either at the period of its creation or in later periods – requires both an assessment of what was contextually probable and also an awareness that the meanings of such representations vary both within groups and across time.

In the Middle Kingdom, the motif of men embracing occurs in royal iconography where the king embraces a god as in the temple of Senwosret I at Karnak and in its 'White Chapel' (Lacau and Chevrier 1956; Gabolde 1998, 2000; Hirsch 2004, 42–9). In most scenes in this Chapel the god who is being approached or embraced by the king is ithyphallic (e.g. 1956, pl. 29, 39, Fig. 2). Such scenes are thus potentially 'homoeotic', especially since temples were places of restricted access where the intended viewer was implicitly primarily an elite male (e.g. Hare 1999, 137–48). As with the mastaba of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, these scenes raise the possibility that a sexually charged male intimacy is being displayed. However, while the White Chapel is 'an explicit celebration of the phallus among males' (Hare 1999, 148), the same temple-sphere also documents much later

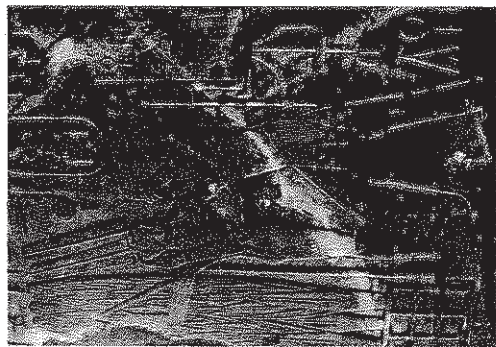


Fig. 2. King Senwosret I embracing an ithyphallic god on a pillar from the 'White Chapel' (photo: R.B. Parkinson).

explicit statements against same-sex sexual activity which occur in lists of local prohibitions (Parkinson 1995, 61–2; Depauw 2003, 54–5), suggesting that the iconography is unlikely to be highly sexualized. Even in interpreting something as apparently universally transparent as an erection, cultural context is everything, and in most Egyptian contexts an erect phallus is not only a manifestation of sexual arousal and desire but 'a nexus of associations exemplifying, supporting, and extending' male power in society (Hare 1999, 111). It is 'a multivalent signifier', with overtones of resurrection, creation, and fertility (e.g. Meskell and Joyce 2003, 103), and it usually just stands alone without any other genitals or interaction. In mythology, the sexual act that created the cosmos was that of a solitary male orgasm (e.g. Hare 1999, 111–24; Meskell and Joyce 2003, 103–5), as if male sexuality needed no object against which to define itself. Many scholars would argue that in many ancient cultures men were 'ambisexual' and did not present themselves as homo- or hetero-sexual, but just male and sexual (e.g. Polloni 1999).

Other visual and textual sources show a concern with masculinity. In early Middle Kingdom nomarch's tombs, such as at Beni Hassan and Qubbet el-Hawa, scenes of fighters and wrestlers present walls of near naked male flesh (e.g. Decker and Herb 1994, 535–6, 548–55, pls. 305–7). These combative images may embody the military ethos of a war-torn period but may also reflect a more general ethos of aggressive masculinity. Elsewhere this masculinity has a specifically sexual aspect. The First Intermediate Period nomarch Ankhthef proclaims in his tomb inscription that 'I am a male (*ḥ3j3j*)

without equal' in a militaristic context. The orthography of 'male' deploys a sign showing the phallus entering a vulva instead of the usual phallus determinative, highlighting the conceptual connections between masculine dominance and sexual activity (Morenz 2005, esp. 129–30, 132–4). 12th dynasty royal inscriptions also exalt such masculinity: the Senma stela of Senwosret III celebrates the fact that 'aggression is bravery' (l. 8; Sethe 1928, 84 ll. 3–4) and presents a world of begetting male heirs, bravado, and brawn, against which the enemy is considered to be a 'back-turner' (*ḥmꜣw*: l. 8), whose women are to be plundered.¹³ Here and elsewhere, the royal denigration of enemies can have overtones of male rape (O'Connor 2005, 450–52). In a much later literary work, the Late Egyptian *Tale of Horus and Seth*, penetration is described as 'the work of a man (*k3t-ḥ3wyt*)' (12.3); this sexual act is with another male rather than a woman, and this episode in the tale mobilizes ideas of dominant masculinity in opposition to youth, weakness, and passivity (Parkinson 1995, 65–6). Similar attitudes to sexual activity have also been documented in modern Egyptian village contexts by Richard Critchfield (1982, 17, 107), and are common in cultures where 'machismo' is valued. Although the frequent analysis of ancient Greek male sexual activity in terms of dominance/submission and active/passive roles – as opposed to gender-specific desire – has been increasingly criticized,¹⁴ male sexual activity throughout ancient Egyptian culture seems to have been conceived at least partly in terms of dominance, penetration, aggression, and of adopting roles appropriate to one's male gender, age, and status almost regardless of the object. This high valorization of masculinity is summarized in a Ptolemaic (temp. Ptolemy IV) nome-list in the temple at Edfu, where the ithyphallic god Min is described as 'boasting of his *nḥt*' i.e. his erection/hardness/victory (Nome 5, ll. 2–3; Cauville and Devauchelle 1987, 338). The same word-play occurs earlier in a Ramessid Dream Book, where a dream of an erection (*nḥt*) is an ominous portent of the 'victory' (*nḥt*) of the dreamer's enemy (P. Chester Beatty III rto 8.2; Szpakowska 2003, 102). Within the context of this ideal of dominant masculine behaviour, however, same-sex desire seems to have been considered more problematic (Parkinson 1995).

Within a culture that conspicuously celebrated masculinity in terms of male potency and dominance, the White Chapel's display of male sexuality was probably not intended to arouse sexual desire in the male viewers, or to have explicitly concerned same-sex desire. Such displays, however, may have retained some erotic potential. Although Lynn Meskell has argued that Egyptian phallicism was 'materialized in the everyday' (Meskell and Joyce 2003, 111), most phallic representations are from notably religious contexts: erections are found, for example, with certain gods in religious contexts and

not with kings or the non-royal elite in other contexts (e.g. Robins 2008). The only exceptions are depictions that are arguably satiric or humorous, such as the Ramessid 'Erotic Papyrus' or sketches on Ramessid ostraca which can be viewed as parodies of specifically religious conventions (e.g. Omlin 1971; Meskell and Joyce 2003, 113–15; O'Connor forthcoming). While there was a strong tradition of eroticism in the representation of naked women (such as 'fertility figurines': Pinch 1993, 198–236), representations of male elite mortals almost always show the genitals covered.¹⁵ As Jack Goody notes, in many cultures sex can be represented in religious contexts 'whereas the rest of society is prudish about the reality', and sex 'is largely absent from public representations for reasons having to do with privacy, intimacy and identity' (1997, 236). Thus, the relatively restricted decorum of the phallus in Egyptian representations might even suggest that the sexual potential of the depiction of an erection was not entirely neutralized by being iconographic or by being 'just a symbol' (Hare 1999, 148). While the scenes of the White Chapel were arguably not a homoerotic celebration of the phallus, since they were displayed within the decorum of temple iconography, they were not necessarily completely asexual in themselves.

A similar celebration of masculine values of hardness can be seen in the visual idealization of the male muscular body in representational art, which parallels the way in which kings and heroes are praised for their 'strong arm' or 'brawn' in official texts (*ḥp3*: e.g. Blumenthal 1970, 217–18 [F 2.10]). Modern scholarship can sometimes underestimate the role of desire in ancient representations. For example, in the tomb of the nomarch Sarenput I at Qubbet el-Hawa, which is contemporaneous with the White Chapel, the traditional representation of the seated tomb owner at the entrance displays a prominent amount of young, firm, well-muscled, naked flesh (e.g. Müller 1940, pl. 2; Fig. 3). Sarenput wears only a short kilt that is a sign of prestige, and his relative lack of clothing does not indicate weakness or poverty, as in one contemporaneous poem's description of near-naked labourers (*The Teaching of Khety*: Parkinson 1997, 274–81). The exposed shoulder, arm and leg muscles are very carefully detailed, and this muscular ideal has a potentially erotic aspect. As Meskell notes, Egyptian art offers an early canonical representation of the 'triangular physique' that is still highly valued in many cultures (Meskell and Joyce 2003, 114). Modern viewers tend to read these representations un-erotically, but if we were to translate this picture into our own culture's photographic representational conventions, the erotic potential of such a depicted physique would be more immediately obvious. The male body is very probably glamorized and eroticized in such representations, and such muscular strength is explicitly an inspiration to (a woman's) desire in the Late Egyptian *Tale of the Two Brothers* (3.4–6; see Parkinson 1995, 63).

displays of masculinity can be viewed in many different ways. An element of ambiguity remains inherently possible.

Masculine poetics in the late 12th dynasty

Middle Kingdom literature was arguably a field of cultural production which allowed a consideration of ideological faultlines (Parkinson 2002, 2006). Masculinity and sexual activity are among the topics that are subjected to a nuanced presentation in this type of discourse. There are a comparatively high number of cases of same-sex desire in Middle Kingdom literature, which suggests that male-male sex was a site of cultural interest and/or anxiety (Parkinson 1995). This interest might in turn suggest that the differences between being, for example, impressive to other men and being desirable to them were not entirely obvious and fixed to the original audiences. A particularly nuanced presentation of masculine values can be traced in the poems from a single late 12th dynasty Theban tomb-library, now in Berlin, that contains copies of *The Tale of Sinuhe*, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* and the *Dialogue of a Man and his Soul* (e.g. Parkinson 2004, 52–6; and in press).

The three poems in this ancient collection are all unambiguously male-centred. The significant relationships between the main characters in *Sinuhe* are relationships between men: between Sinuhe and Senwosret, and between Sinuhe and Amunenshi. The female characters comprise only the queen, her (implicitly female) children, and Amunenshi's daughter who provides heirs for Sinuhe. Sinuhe's wife is a matter of alliance in his new life (B 78–9), and the main role of the Queen in his life is to assure his symbolic rebirth into Egyptian society, by acting as his 'heaven who is in the palace' (B 185) and by representing his divine patroness Hathor, Lady of the Sycamore.¹⁷ Modern re-writings of the tale have interpreted the relationship between Sinuhe and the queen in romantic terms, as in Naguib Mahfouz's story of 1941 (2001, 47–56). In the original poem her role as the divine patroness of his rebirth has potentially erotic overtones, but in the lyric that the princesses sing in the recognition scene, any sexualized role that the queen might enact here as Hathor is present only in relation to the king, and the royal women act only as intermediaries in the relationship between the king and Sinuhe (B 263–79).¹⁸ This dependent role of women is reflected in the way in which the queen is introduced at the start of the poem in terms of her relationships with royal men:

the Partician Lady, the greatly praised,
the Queen of Senwosret in Khnemsut,
the Princess of Amenemhat in Qanefru,
Nefru, the blessed lady.

(R 3–5)

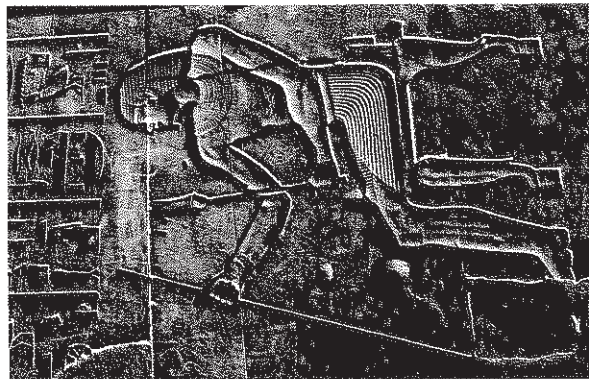


Fig. 3. The muscular nomarch Sarenput I from the entrance to his tomb-complex at Qubbet el-Hawa (photo: R.B. Parkinson).

Such funerary images comprise men's presentation of themselves and are often intended for a primarily male audience; like the White Chapel they can thus imply a degree of same-sex admiration. As with religious images of erections, the funerary context and the conventional nature of scenes of a near-naked male body may have served to neutralize its potential sexual aspects or to have rendered it displayable, but the general question remains: does the display of male beauty for a male audience involve homoeroticism and something sexual?¹⁶ Or is this representation a form of 'homosocialism', male narcissism or a display of machismo and masculine status – simply men 'boasting about hardness' to each other? In a hierarchical society, competition between individuals could have involved not only official status and closeness to the king, but also masculinity. Masculinity could well have been displayed to evoke admiration, just as official titles were, without intending a sexual response. Behavioural displays of manhood in some cultures have been interpreted as articulating wider social roles than simply gender: 'Mediterranean manhood is the reward given to the man who is an efficient protector of the web of primordial ties, the guardian of his society's moral and material integuments' (Gilmore 1990, 48). Nevertheless, in many cultures sexuality remains an important component and sign of this role (1990, 40–2), and

Neither the queen nor Sinuhe's wife has any recorded speech or any described physical involvement with him, and Sinuhe's career and experiences remain predominantly a male concern.

In a similar manner, the wife in *The Eloquent Peasant* apparently has a stereotypically wifely name (Meret, R 1.2), exists for narrative reasons, and is silently abandoned by the narrator after her momentary rationale has passed (B 78–9). The only significant feminine entity in the poem is the abstract concept Maat, and the main social relationship in the poem is between the peasant and the male High Steward. Likewise, *The Dialogue* is a conversation between a man and his male alter-ego who is his 'partner and brother' (148–9). In this poem, women feature only in the parables as irritating meal-providers (80–4) and as un-mourned-for child-bearers (76–8).¹⁹ and in the lyrics as images describing slander about adultery (98–9). The only text in this group of manuscripts in which there is significant mention of a possible relationship between a man and a female being is *The Herdsman's Tale* (Parkinson 2002, 300; Schneider 2008). This fragmentary tale survives on a partly erased portion of a roll that was apparently re-used to create a roll on which a scribe could make a copy of *The Dialogue*: thus this narrative of a sexual encounter with a female being was erased in order to make space for a male internal dialogue. And even in this narrative, the feminine is rejected, since the herdsman declares 'I will never do what she said' (6).²⁰

The literary world of the official who owned these papyri was apparently a very male-oriented field of cultural production and consumption. However, the male-focus of the papyri's subject matter need not have been determined exclusively by the range of literature that was available to our official at this period, since Middle Kingdom poetry as a whole contained references to women as dangerous temptations (e.g. *The Teaching of Ptahhotep* v. 287; see Parkinson 2002, 95–6) and also narratives about near-naked female bodies being viewed with pleasure (e.g. *The Tale of Cheops' Court* 5.1–15), although the prominence of women in this last work is in part a matter of date and also of a different decorum and style (e.g. Parkinson 2002, 144, 183–4). The tomb-owner's selection of such a male-centred group of poems may have been a conscious choice of subject matter, style and register, rather than an unthinking embodiment of the contemporary literary field.

A slightly more detailed reading of *The Tale of Sinuhe* can suggest that this poem self-consciously mobilizes the fact that Middle Kingdom masculinity was not inherently single, stable or monolithic. Sinuhe's physical qualities are important to the narrative which depends at times on his role as a man with 'brawn' (B 105) who is able to dominate with his weapons (B 99–142). However, the plot of *Sinuhe* implicitly sets his brawn while he is abroad against his early improper panic and fleeing from Egypt at the start of the

poem. This conflict between the ideals of masculinity and his own conduct as a fugitive is implicit in his eulogy of the king as a dominant 'nht-man, active with his brawn (*hps*)' (B 51–2; e.g. Blumenthal 1970, 217–18 [F 2.10]; Galán 1995, 30–2), who

destroys the fugitive;

there is no end for the man who shows him his back.

He is firm-hearted at the moment of forcing retreat.

He turns back again and again; he shows not his own back.

(B 56–8)

In the Semna stela, the Nubian who 'shows his back' (1.10) is 'a true back-turner (*hmjw*)' (1.8): Sinuhe fled Egypt and is in effect a 'back-turner', a term which arguably has passive and un-masculine overtones (Parkinson 1995, 66–7). In contrast, the word *nht* has overtones of physical strength, dominance and success, all of which are masculine and are usually implicitly positive in 12th dynasty texts (e.g. Galán 1995, esp. 10–40). The conventional translation of *nht* as 'strength' or 'strongman' perhaps neutralizes the connotations of the word, and I refrain from translating it here in the absence of a suitable English term that can cover a range of meanings from a 'champion' to an 'erection' (as in e.g. CT III, 262c–j; Galán 1995, 35).²¹

When Sinuhe is in Retjenu after having acclaimed the king's strength and power, and after having proved his own strength, he attains favour and begets sons who themselves become *nht*-men and who each 'subjugates his tribe' (B 93) just as the king 'subjugated countries' in Sinuhe's eulogy to him (B 50). Sinuhe too exerts his 'brawn' (B 50) and it is his prowess that endears him to Amunenshi who

loved me, knowing my valour (*qn*).

He placed me as the head(man) of his children, having seen the strength of

my arms (*rd-^cwj-j*).

(B 107–9)

At the point where he has established himself as a dominant and successful male, married and with sons, he is threatened in Retjenu by another *nht*-man, who is a 'champion (*prj*)' without equal (*mn-smw:f*)' (B 109–10); this description echoes Sinuhe's earlier eulogy of the king as a '*nht*-man' (B 51), 'a god without equal (*mn-smw:f*)' (B 47) and 'a champion (*pr-c*) without compare' (B 52). This duel is presented as a contest about who is the most dominant male: the married women²² who jabber over the fight see the challenge as concerning who is the most *nht*, asking 'can the other man (i.e. Sinuhe) be *nht* enough to fight him (the challenger)?' (B 133–4; cf. Cannuyer 1985). Sinuhe voices his position by imagining himself as a bull attempting to oust a rival (B 118–20). This image is redolent of gaining a dominant position and the right to mate – aspects that are also evoked in the use of this imagery in contemporaneous funerary texts and iconography,

including the scenes in the tomb of Sarenput I (Galan 1994) Fig. 4. Using his bow and arrows, Sinuhe is victorious and is embraced by Amunenshi (B 142–3). However, the poem then continues to demonstrate that Sinuhe is not actually successful through this manly victory (*nht*) over his *nht* rival, since it does not enable him to attain a meaningful life: his victory instead provokes the central crisis in his account of his life as he realizes his need to return to Egypt (B 156 ff.), and he describes himself as suddenly physically weak (B 168–71).

The following stanzas of the poem continue the theme of masculinity through the motif of Sinuhe's physical decrepitude. In the royal letter Senwosret summarises Sinuhe's physical aging in verses that mention his loss of virility as he urges him to

return to Egypt!
And you will see the Residence where you grew up,
kiss the earth at the Great Portal,
and join the Friends.
For today you have already begun to be old, have lost *b33wt*,
and have in mind the day of burial,
the passing to blessedness.

(B 188–91)

The word *b33wt* (with phallus determinative) is otherwise unattested,²³ and was apparently either unrecognized by the Ramessid scribe of the Ashmolean Ostrakon, or had already been changed in the version of the poem he was copying. In this later manuscript, the word *b33wt* is replaced by *bmwt*, which is derived from the verb *bm* 'to beget, to be potent, erect'

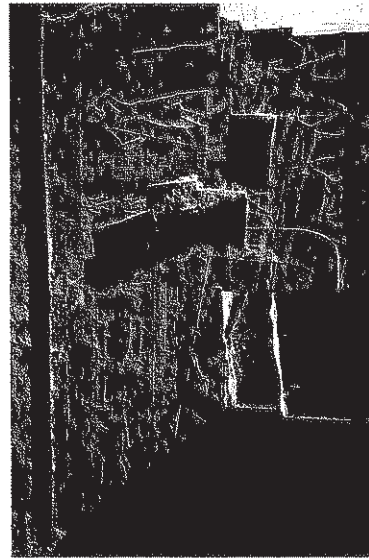


Fig. 4. Sarenput I watching a bullfight on the façade of his tomb at Qubbet el-Hawa (photo: R.B. Parkinson).

(vso 13: Barns 1952, 19). The lack of a suffix might suggest that *b33wt* is an abstract noun, and not simply a phrase for 'your erection'; it may play with the word *b3* 'soul' (cf. Meyer-Dietrich 2006, 334), and was perhaps chosen as a somewhat connotative word, suitable for such a passage of royal rhetoric. Mention of a loss of potency is lacking in Sinuhe's own preceding, more extensive, description of his decrepit state (B 168–71) and also in the roughly contemporaneous and closely parallel presentation of the signs of old age in *The Teaching of Ptahhotep* (v. 8–27). It is unlikely that the king mentions the loss of potency in this context simply because Sinuhe now lacks the ability to beget a proper heir to ensure his funeral, since he already has begotten male (albeit foreign) children. Here, as in religious iconography, regaining potency seems to be associated with ideas about resurrection and renewed life, and its loss acts as a *memento mori*.

Such passages show the extent to which masculinity is a concern of the tale's creation of social and individual identity, as in many societies where manliness involves 'firstly, impregnating one's wife; secondly, provisioning dependents; thirdly, protecting the family' (Gilmore 1990, 48; in general 30–55). These collective social duties also occur without qualification in the idealized self-representations of Middle Kingdom male officials. In generic terms, however, *Sinuhe* is plotted against many idealizing forms of text: its narrative undermines the expectation of the biography genre, and even the king's eulogy is introduced in an ironic context (Parkinson 2002, 156–7). Although Sinuhe achieves success in Retjenu by his brawn and skill, impregnates his wife, provisions his dependents and establishes his families, this masculine success is immediately undermined by the fact that these activities are performed abroad, albeit they are narrated as in accordance with Egyptian ideals. After his physical victory, Sinuhe describes the physical decrepitude that he has suffered abroad in terms which echo the original physical and psychological affliction that caused him to leave Egypt (B 168–71) and, as the king says, being abroad has completely unmanned him (B 190). In this life, ultimate success is not just about the norms of being masculine and hard; rather, Sinuhe ironically loses his potency during his 'victory' abroad and it is only then that he can return to Egypt and resume his true identity. It is almost as if the poet is suggesting that being a true Egyptian man is more than just being macho.

The poem's presentation of the king reveals a similar ambivalence about masculinity. In the eulogy that Sinuhe pronounces, Senwosret starts as a *nht*-man, active with his brawn (*hps*), a champion (*pr-r*) without compare

(B 51–2)

but he is then presented as someone who 'conquers <through> love' (B 66);

this love is not just an extension of phallic sexual domination, since 'he is a lord of kindness, great of sweetness' (B 65). The eulogy's progression from aggression to kindness is embodied in the poem as a whole: Senwosret first features as a figure leading a military expedition (R 11–16), and moves from being a potential attacker of fugitives (B 56–7) to someone who receives a fugitive with humour and grace, and who 'addresses (him) cheerfully (*hnmw*)' (B 254: Blumenthal 1970, 320 [G 4.25]). The king here dismisses his own aggressive fearfulness at the request of a group of women whose erotic lyric urges him to put away the phallic weaponry that has ensured the earlier physical victories in the poem:

Slacken your horn (*ḥb*: i.e. bow?), withdraw your shaft!²⁴

(B 274)

At this climactic moment, the imagery of aggressive penetration is instead transformed into that of penetrating glances (B 278–9).²⁵ In the recognition scene, as in other literary texts (see, e.g., Parkinson 2002, 267), aggression and grace are presented as two contrary modes of royal and masculine behaviour. While these two modes of masculinity are smoothly juxtaposed in the figure of the king, the ideal of masculine dominance is presented in a problematic manner through the character and actions of Sinuhe. While the poem as a whole celebrates the power and brawn of the king and his people, it can also be read as simultaneously providing other visions of masculinity and humanity.

In a similar manner, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* values mercy (*sf*), patience and true speech over the values of forceful aggression, which are exemplified in the narrative by the appropriately named Neminakht.²⁶ Such aggressive and implicitly masculine strength is denounced in the peasant's second petition to the High Steward:

You are *nht*, powerful,
your arm active (*ḥ-k-pr*), your heart selfish, and mercy (*sf*) has passed you by!

(B 147–8)

In this poem, the heroic and erotically-charged sport of fishing and fowling in the marshes, which in tomb iconography displays the glamorized body of the tomb-owner (e.g. Kamrin 1999, 105–15), is turned into a metaphor for 'sailing in justice' (B1 85–93). This quality is associated with behaving in a masculine but un-aggressive manner towards un-privileged members of society; all of these are significantly characterized as unmanly, being either orphaned children or unsupported women (B1 93–5). As the poem progresses, the same glamorized masculine pursuits recur with less positive associations, in an ambivalent eulogy of the High Steward, where they hint at the brutal misuse of strength and privilege:

Look, you are a hunter who slakes his desire,
who reaches out and does what he wants,
who harpoons hippopotami and shoots wild bulls,
catches fish and snares fowl.

(B1 236–9)

For the peasant, being *nht* is not a virtue that is appropriate for a wealthy elite official, but should only be a last resort for someone who is desperate:

A lord of bread should be merciful (*sf*), (whereas) *nht* belongs to the depraved;
theft suits one without belongings.

(B1 152–3)

This reading of these poems suggests that there was more than a single way of conceptualizing masculinity and male strength in Middle Kingdom elite society. It is possible to hypothesize that this varied and nuanced presentation was specific to the social circles in which these poems were composed and circulated, perhaps reflecting, for example, a scribal ethos of the centralized royal court as opposed to a more military ethos of local law-enforcers. However, the variety of attitudes in the poems is perhaps more likely to be common to elite self-reflexive culture as a whole and to embody perceived faultlines in the way in which masculinity was constructed within that period's culture.

Queer perspectives

Masculinity is certainly an object of attention and glamorized celebratory presentation in Middle Kingdom elite culture, and one whose audience was probably primarily male. Masculinity is usually presented in terms of hardness, strength, and dominance, including over other males, and sometimes in sexualized terms. Within this framework of masculinity, texts and art simultaneously present examples of affectionate male intimacy and sociability, and poetic texts occasionally mobilize the existence of same-sex desire and sexual relationships. In this particular cultural context, I consider it likely that the official representations of embraces and erections discussed here were not intended primarily to be viewed as (homo)erotic, and that literary protagonists desiring each other were not meant to be positive images for same-sex desire. However, *Sinuhe's* nuanced treatment of masculinity suggests an awareness of the ideal of masculinity as something unstable and contestable, as does the fact that same-sex desire seems to have been a site of literary interest.²⁷ Given the well-documented existence in this culture of the possibility of same-sex desire and same-sex sexual relationships, these various representations of masculinity could easily have offered a space for such perspectives for anyone who chose to adopt what we might now term a queer gaze or a queer reading (e.g. Sinfield 1994). Modern viewers are not necessarily the first people to read such artefacts as offering images of such desire. In a later,

Christian and Mediterranean environment, the records of the 'Office of the Night' in Renaissance Florence show how easily a culture of male sociability/homosocialism could include sexual elements, although they were officially condemned and did not form a sense of essential sexual difference (Rocke 1996). *The Tale of Neferkare and Sasetet* shows that Middle Kingdom writers and readers could envisage the possibility that the proper 'homosexual' love between a king and a courtier, such as is advocated throughout the loyalist texts of the Middle Kingdom (e.g. Doxey 1998, 131–42, 149–51; Assmann 2003, 135–42) and such as is articulated in *Sinuhe*, could become a sexual relationship. If such a 'homosexual' relationship between king and general could be re-conceived in sexual terms in a work of fiction, could not a sexualized gaze have occasionally been turned on Sinuhe in Amunemhat's arms or the ithyphallic embraces on the pillars of the White Chapel? These representations retain a sexual aspect and remain potentially ambiguous for people who are or were inclined to view them in such a way.

Evidence for a historical example of such a gaze is lacking, but this is to be expected since looking and desire by their nature do not leave many archaeological traces, and we understand little of the way in which Middle Kingdom elite culture accommodated divergent non-normative aspects of life (e.g. Parkinson 2006).

We can only speculate about the social reality that was experienced by individuals. For example, the fat harpist Neferhotep son of Henu from the mid-13th dynasty was commemorated at Abydos in a small stela that mentions no family or children, but which was commissioned by 'his friend whom he loved, the brick-carrier Nebsumenu'²⁸. Fig. 5. We cannot recover his sexual subjectivity, and can only wonder about whether Nebsumenu was a 'friend-friend' or a euphemism-friend', to use the phrase of Harvey Fierstein (1984, 59). In a similar manner, we cannot know whether the owner of the Berlin papyri chose such a male-centred group of texts simply because that was the

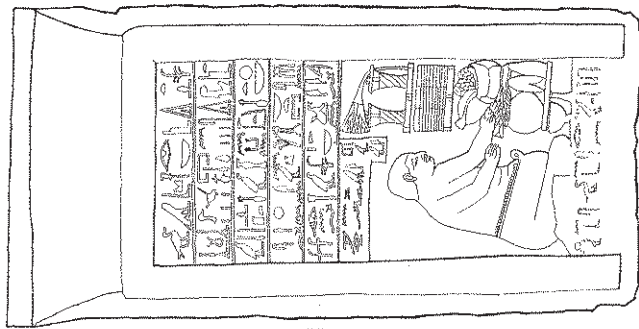


Fig. 5. The stela of the harpist Neferhotep (drawing: R.B. Parkinson).

male-centred nature of the cultural field in the late 12th dynasty, or whether more personal desires played a part in the selection of works to be deposited in his tomb. As one of his poems comments, 'what is in the heart is unknowable' (*Eloquent Peasant* B1 285, 305). However, if we are to try to model the original actor's perspectives, and to recognize that ancient experience was broader – and 'queerer' – than that which is directly documented in surviving elite sources, we should recognize that these same-sex alternatives are a historical possibility, albeit perhaps statistically less likely. 'Heterosexuality' is not historically compulsory. Any elite Middle Kingdom man who felt sexual desire for another man could have known several literary passages that could give him a form of recognition beyond the social norms of male intimacy. Although none of these literary works provide positive images, even a portrayal of same-sex desire with an unhappy outcome can have a beneficial effect on realizing self-identity, as the reactions to the 2005 film based on Annie Proulx's short story *Brokeback Mountain* have demonstrated.²⁹

The history of the study of sexuality shows that as modern individuals we sometimes find it hard to assess the degree to which ancient individuals were both different and similar to ourselves. Likewise, we can sometimes underestimate the variety and diversity of the ancient past. Past societies and artefacts can often present an inherently normative and monolithic appearance, and modern audiences can often assume that surviving works had only a single, intentional, and unvarying reception from their earlier audiences. A search for a subaltern history need not insist on interpretations that place essentially distinct 'queers' and other subalterns in a central and normative position as accepted members of an elite culture (as with some readings of the mastaba of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep). Although such positive interpretations can also run the risk of simply creating another sort of binary normative history. Instead, we can perhaps try to read between the lines about the diverse and nuanced ways in which masculinity was presented; we can thus consider the contingent nature of all cultures, including our own, and in doing so begin to explore readings and histories that are multiple rather than monolithic.

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theoretical attitudes as Parkinson 1995. My thanks are due to Simon Martin for advice on Mayan issues and to Margaret Maitland for checking some items of bibliography; most of all, to Tim Reid for marrying me a few days after the conference. Literary texts are cited following the conventions of Parkinson 2002.

Notes

- General survey of Egypt in western art: e.g. Humbert 1989, Seipel et al. 1994. One potentially homoerotic painting is J.-L.-D. Bouvier's image of an Egyptian youth, now in Grenoble: Seipel et al. 1994, 263 (no. 181). A presentation of ancient Egypt as ambiguously gendered occurs in the late 20th century film *Sargate* (Meskell 1998a, 66–75, and Dowson, this volume).
- Kastan 1999, 30; on subaltern studies see Loomba 1998, esp. 231–45.
- See in general Frankfurter 1998, 265–84; for medieval Arabic awareness of phallic representations see el-Daly 2003, 51.
- UCL 14786; Petrie 1896, pl. 9[b]; Collombert and Volokhine 2005, 47–8. An institutional example of this tendency was the 'Secretum' in the British Museum, in which sexual and phallic images from various cultures were stored together, away from public display; in the 20th century, these items were returned to the academic departments relevant to their source cultures (e.g. Gaimster 2000).
- One love song from the Ramessid scribe Qenherkhepshef's library (P. Chester Beatty I 2.5–9) apparently involves men, and the Egyptological interpretations have embodied the heterosexual expectations about the subject matter (Gillam 2000); the text, however, remains problematic: see Mathieu 1996, 27–8. See also Sweeney 2003.
- Compare, e.g., Halperin 2002, 67.
- While later evidence for crossing gender boundaries is substantial (Depauw 2003), factors such as 'effeminacy' do not necessarily equate with same sex desire or with modern 'homosexuality' (Halperin 2002, 110–13).
- jw-nn-wnw-st-hmt m-[...]*: T OIC 3–4; Posener 1957; Parkinson 1995, 71–4. For the dating of the tale compare now Grajetzki 2005, 58–9.
- A literal reading of a description of the two men's birth on stela British Museum EA 826 strongly suggests that they were twins (Baines 1985; Baines and McNamara 2007), and alternative interpretations of this passage as metaphorical (Shubert 2001) seem to me rather strained rather than plausible readings 'against the grain'.
- Compare Goldberg 2003, 578 on some feminist approaches to Shakespeare.
- Loomba 1998, 243–4; cf. Halperin 2002, 3; compare Yourcenar 1991, 453. As Stephen Orgel remarks, 'however much we may undertake to think ourselves back into the past, no amount of historical perspective can erase the history that has formed our sensibilities' (2002, 128), and as David Halperin comments, 'we can't figure out what it is about our own experiences of sexuality that are not universal' (2002, 63).
- This has been enabled by a modern shift in the significance of the family away from a materially productive institution towards an affective unit which brought with it changes in the meaning of sexual relations' (Bravmann 1997, 6–7).
- e.g. Parkinson 1995, 66; on correlations between manliness and violence see, e.g., Bourdieu 2001, 49–53.
- For arguments against the idea of phallocracy see, e.g., Davidson 1997, 159–82, 199.

¹⁵ 'While non-elite men and male-children can display a flaccid penis, the penis of the elite male was regularly hidden from view' (Robins 2008, 215). See also Meskell and Joyce 2003, 116–19. On phallic figurines and phallic objects see Pinch 1993, 235–45.

¹⁶ A similar dilemma occurs with Mayan culture: compare Joyce 2000 and Meskell and Joyce 2003, 119–27 with Houston 2006, 51–6, 207–18.

¹⁷ See Morenz 1997, 17. The presence of the queen in the poem may have caused any other women to have been excluded: an official of the royal 'harem', Djari, omitted all depictions of women and wives from his tomb (TT 366) and the royal women whom he served apparently took the place of his wife in the iconography of rebirth (Roth 1999, 45).

¹⁸ As Gardiner noted, the song is sung by the royal children (1916, 100), and not by the queen herself; compare Westendorf 1977, 293–6. The singers invoke Hathor in the third person, and the song identifies the queen with the goddess, as in the verse 'Hail to you as to (*my*) the Lady of All' (B 274).

¹⁹ In the parable about a 'little man's' family being eaten by crocodiles, the narrator refers to her as 'his wife' (73), while the 'little man' refers to her as 'that child-bearer (*ḥḥ-mst*)' (77), and states that his grief concerns only 'her children' (78).

²⁰ Even this incident can be interpreted as centring around masculinity: it resembles tales in others cultures where a man is entrapped by a demonic seductresses, reversing his proper independent masculine social role (e.g. Gilmore 1990, 50–1).

²¹ The closest rendering might be 'hard man'.

²² *ḥmw-ḥjw*: Fischer-Elfert 1989, 24, 26 n. 11. Perhaps specifically 'married women' are mentioned in order to imply that even the women of Rejenu who had husbands felt pity for him.

²³ In *Coffin Texts* spell 382 'My father is *b33w*' (CTV, 44f), but in an obscure context.

²⁴ Within the ritual, the arrows may have a mythological aspect (see Derchain 1970, 80–1, Westendorf 1977, 302), but in the broader context of the poem, they also take up the previous imagery of aggression. However 'b' is to be translated (see, e.g. Davies 1975, 49–50), it echoes the militaristic passage of B 54, and – indirectly – the imagery of horned bulls (B 118–25).

²⁵ The vocabulary of the two themes is similar: 'to shoot with glances (*gmḥw*)' occurs in *Pubhotep* v. 124.

²⁶ He is the son of a gentleman called Isry (B1 19–20); Nemtinakht is implicitly the staff of Isry and later bears the peasant with a staff of *jsr*-wood (B1 33; Fischer 1977, 158–60). This wordplay-allusion identifies him with a tool of aggression.

²⁷ This may reflect a more masculine ethos of the literary field of this period, compared to that of the Late Egyptian literature of the Ramessid period, or a general change in ideas of masculinity.

²⁸ Stela Leiden V.5; e.g. Parkinson 1991, 114–16; Morenz 1996, 75–7; he is also featured on his patron's stela, Leiden V.68. These monuments are dated by Marcel Marée to around the reign of Sobekhotep III (pers. comm. 2004).

²⁹ 'Share your story' on <http://brokebackmountainmovie.com>.

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QUEER EGYPTOLOGIES OF NIANKHKHNUM AND KHNUMHOTEP

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Shortly after the discovery of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep by Ahmed Moussa in 1964, questions arose about the meaning of its unique iconography and what it might indicate about the two men and their relationship to each other. An early visit by Mounir Basta, chief antiquities inspector of Lower Egypt, is illustrative of the perceptual problems involved. Basta was impressed by the scenes he saw of the two men portrayed in intimate embrace, something he remarked he had never seen before in all the tombs in Saqqara. His questions about the meaning of what he saw remain today: 'Were they two brothers? Were they the father and son? Or were they two officials in the king's palace who had enjoyed a cordial friendship in life and wished to keep it after death in the nether world?'¹ Their identical titles and similar names only added to the questions: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep 'Manicurist of the King and the inspector of manicurists of the Palace'. The tomb was restored with additional blocks found in the causeway of Unas and published by Ahmed Moussa and Hartwig Altenmüller of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in 1977.²

With the publication of the tomb, Moussa and Altenmüller first suggested the possibility that the two men were twins.³ John Baines followed in 1985 with his seminal article on 'Egyptian Twins' which set out to give a general theory of the nature of twinning in ancient Egypt.⁴ Although nothing was known about twins in the Old Kingdom, Baines based his model on the 'certain twinning' of Sury and Hor, two men depicted on a New Kingdom stela now in the British Museum (BM 826). Baines wrote:

On the stela of Sury and Hor of the reign of Amenhotep III there is what appears to be the only unambiguous reference to twin or multiple birth from dynastic Egypt...⁵ The unusual language on their stela appears at first to support this idea of their 'certain twinning' for they are identified as *snw* ('brothers') and Hor states: 'He came forth with me from the womb on the same day.'