

GENDER IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Norms, Ambiguities, and Sensualities



Wooden model of an Egyptian kitchen (men and women engaged in grinding, baking, and brewing), 12th Dynasty, Egyptian Museum Berlin, Inv. 1366, courtesy of Wikimedia user AndreasPraefcke. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian_kitchen_Berlin_2.jpg.

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The broadly accepted definition of gender as a set of socio-cultural meanings and ideas attributed to biological sex (Díaz-Andreu 2005: 14–15) has been adopted by Egyptologists (Wilfong 2010: 164). Differences in gender norms, however, are to be expected, along with temporal and geographical variability.

Gendered Lives in the Nile Valley

The ancient Egyptian gender system can be broadly defined as binary, while still related to a wide variety of other social categories such as age, status, ethnicity, and occupation. For example, in the iconography (figs. 1–2) men and women are consistently portrayed differently, with red skin for men and yellow for women, hidden genitals for men and outlined genitals for women, active roles for men, passive roles for women, and a status-related canon of proportions and positions (Robins 1993; Robins 2008: 212). From the Old Kingdom (ca. 2700–2180 B.C.E.) onward, ageing is more frequently represented in men and women of lower status, whereas elite women are usually depicted in the prime of life and thus as sexually attractive. When elite women are shown with signs of ageing, based on analogy with males, it appears to be an expression of status (Sweeney 2004).

Such differences in aesthetic sensibilities amongst the genders and classes also manifest in grave goods. During the Old and Middle Kingdoms (ca. 2700–1700 B.C.E.) only women and children of the lower social strata were buried with jewelry and other ornaments. By contrast, elite males might be packed off to the afterlife with makeup palettes, kohl applicators, ointment vessels, tweezers, razors, and mirrors, thus providing evidence for upper-class notions of masculine beauty (Dubiel 2012: 61–66).

Although one's social identity was most assuredly predicated upon one's biological sex (*inter alia*), the gulf between the sexes was not as vast as in many other ancient (and modern) societies. In the home, men were mostly the heads of households, but titles such as *nb.t-pr* ("Lady of the House"), attested since the 11th Dynasty (ca. 2130–1990 B.C.E.), show that adult women were sometimes able to manage the economics of a household (Stefanović and Satzinger 2015: 337). Women could also engage in business and trade, as indicated by several private tombs of Old to New Kingdom date, for example the tomb of Apy in Deir el-Medinah (fig. 3) from the time of Ramesses II (mid-13th century B.C.E.) (Stefanović 1999–2000). Nevertheless, the hardships of widowhood appear to have been experienced only by women, as men



Figure 1. Rahotep (left) and his wife Nofret (right), 4th Dynasty, statues from Maidum, 121 cm x 51 cm. Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CG 3 and 4, courtesy of Wikimedia user A. Parrot, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rahotep_and_Nofret.JPG.

generally did not suffer a change in their economic or legal status after the loss of a partner (Díaz-Rivas 2015: 677). Outside of the home, a few occupations existed which were open to both males and females. Both women and men could be, for example, cultic singers, although women more often performed this role. There were occasional female scribes and administrators, although these were generally the spheres of men, and some occupations, such as the military, were only for men (Robins 1993; Sweeney 2011: 3).

Beyond Osiris and Isis?

Anthropologists and archaeologists have recently come to explore gender constructs beyond the “merely” binary. They have shown that gender systems exist which have more than two sexes/genders (Díaz-Andreu 2005: 15–16). Sex and gender in ancient Egypt have also been so scrutinized by scholars influenced by feminist and queer theories (Sweeney 2011: 1–2; Matić 2016; Meskell 1999). Thus, the possibility of a “third gender” has been posited in cases such as that of the New



Figure 2 (above). Wall Fragment from the tomb of Amenemhet and his wife Hemet, painted stone, 12th Dynasty, 31.1 cm x 41.7 cm. Amenemhet is depicted with reddish skin color in front of his wife closer to the offering table, whereas she is depicted with yellow skin color behind him smelling lotus. Art Institute Chicago, Museum Purchase Fund, 1920.262, courtesy of Wikimedia User DcoetzeeBot, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian_-_Wall_Fragment_from_the_Tomb_of_Amenemhet_and_His_Wife_Hemet_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.
Figure 3 (below). Tomb of Apy in Deir el-Medinah, east wall, north side, scene of trading involving men and women, drawing, detail, Davies, Norman de Garis. 1927. Two Ramesside Tombs at Thebes. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Pl. XXX.





Figure 4. Female king Hatshepsut depicted with a female body and nemes cloth worn by kings, statue, granite, 167 cm tall. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession number 29.3.3, currently in Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden (Netherlands), courtesy of Wikimedia user Rob Koopman, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLANL_-_koopmanrob_-_Maat-ka-Re_Hatsjepsot_\(RMO_Leiden\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLANL_-_koopmanrob_-_Maat-ka-Re_Hatsjepsot_(RMO_Leiden).jpg).

Kingdom *Tale of Two Brothers*, in which Bata describes himself as a woman after he cuts off his own penis having been accused of adultery by his brother. Likewise, for portrayals of goddesses with royal beards or an erect penis (such as the mother goddess Mut), and representations of the New Kingdom female pharaoh Hatshepsut (figs. 4–5) with a male body (Wilfong 2010: 167).

However, rather than being evidence for ambiguous or additional genders, these examples actually show how binary gender norms were reaffirmed. The acquisition of male primary and secondary sexual attributes by females pertains exclusively to religious (funerary) contexts and divine beings. Thus, the warrior goddess Neith is said to be two-thirds male and one-third female in texts from the Temple of Esna (Sweeney 2011: 5). Hatshepsut's acquisition of male iconography cannot be related to any changes in her gender, but is to be seen rather as one of the prerequisites of kingship itself in ancient Egypt, where the living pharaoh was understood to be a manifestation of the male god Horus on earth (Matić 2016).

Additionally, it is occasionally the case that what at first appears to be a third gender individual is actually a male or female whose iconography or inscriptions have been misunderstood or misinterpreted. For example, Depauw cites an individual of the 25th–26th Dynasty (8th–7th centuries B.C.E.) who is depicted in a long garment and identified on his funerary stela from Abydos as

one “*ḥ3wty-s-ḥm.t* Isetemdinakht” (Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence 832-1-8; fig. 6). Depauw suggests that the epithet *ḥ3wty-s-ḥm.t* is to be understood as “man-woman” because of the writing of the phallus sign (D52) after ‘*ḥ*’, and because of the garment which he interprets as “typically feminine.” However, another individual with this epithet is known from 25th-Dynasty Abydos under the name of Herwedja, and in this case the phallus does not appear (Depauw 2003: 51). Furthermore, Isetemdinakht is specifically identified as the son of one Padiusiris (Coutagne et al. 1995: 68–71). In the end, the problem is in the identification of the sign next to ‘*ḥ*’ that was read as the phallus hieroglyph. The sign in question is actually the hieroglyph F24, vocalized *ḥpš*, and refers to a strong arm or biceps. This throws us back into the realm of quite normative masculinity.

We should also bear in mind that the evidence for persons of the so-called “third gender” in ancient Egypt is scarce and that there are no safe attestations before the Late Period (post-1000 B.C.E.). Eunuchs in Egypt are mentioned by Greek and Latin historiographers, who state that they occupied important positions in the Ptolemaic court of the second and first centuries B.C.E. However, there is no evidence that this institution is older in Egypt, and we cannot be sure that the function of these men always involved castration (Depauw 2003: 50).



Figure 5 (left). Statue of female king Hatshepsut as a sphinx (male in ancient Egypt) wearing a false beard and a nemes cloth worn by the kings, granite, 164 cm x 343 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession number 31.3.166, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544442>.

Figure 6 (right). Funerary stela of Isetemdinakht (25–26th Dynasty), Abydos, Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence 832-1-8, Coutagne, Terlay and Barbotin 1995: 70–71.

Finally, there are also cases where there is no indication of gender in the portrayal of individuals, such as in the “ancestor busts” (fig. 7) from New Kingdom Deir el-Medinah. It has been suggested that they served as points of reference for both male and female deceased (Wilfong 2010: 167). Or, possibly, what to us seems ambiguous could have been understood entirely differently by the ancient Egyptians.

“Let’s Talk about Sex”

Just as notions of non-binary gender are now being explored in Egyptology, so too are non-heteronormative sexualities. In this, though, some academics may be imposing modern notions on ancient practices, as there are no words in Egyptian which we can translate as “heterosexual,” “homosexual,” or “bisexual” (Büma and Fitzenreiter 2015: 19–20).

Same-sex intercourse is not often attested in ancient Egypt and, when it is, it is shrouded in ambiguity (the most complete corpus appears in Schukraft 2007). As ever, there are more data pertaining to males than females, and most of those data



suggest that the male homosexual act was frowned upon. For example, oral sex seems to have been looked upon negatively when conducted by a man to “a man who copulates” or a man who is penetrated during intercourse (Orriols-Llonch 2015: 845–46).

Although often quoted in the context of homosexual intercourse, the story of the “Contentings of Horus and Seth,”



Figure 7. Ancestral Bust, painted limestone, 41.2cm x 24.5 cm, 19th Dynasty, possibly from Deir el-Medinah. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession number 66.99.45, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545914>.



Figure 8 (above). Ostracon from Deir el-Medinah with a scene of sex a tergo.

British Museum EA50714, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=231692001&objectId=156237&partId=1.

Figure 9 (below). Mastaba of Niankhnum and Khnumhotep, scene of embrace north Saqqara, central pillar of the antechamber.

Courtesy of Wikimedia user Ahmad Badr,

commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mastaba_of_Niankhnum_and_Khnumhotep_embrace_2.JPG.



attested from the Old Kingdom to the Greco-Roman period, actually deals with the planting of seed in the body of an opponent (Schukraft 2007: 312). Although Seth attempts to anally penetrate Horus, he does not manage to do so as Horus catches Seth's semen in his hand and shows it to his mother Isis, who cuts off his hand and throws it into the river. She then places the semen of Horus on the lettuce Seth is to eat and thus manages to get it into Seth's body which eventually leads to the victory of Horus. Thus, neither of them actually penetrates the other, although Seth clearly attempts to do so. Interestingly, after hearing Seth's accusation that he has performed a "man's deed" to Horus, the gods spit in front of Horus clearly condemning it. Some authors interpret this as not so much condemning the same-sex act but the passive role played by Horus (Schukraft 2007: 313). (For the record, Isis does heal Horus' hand.)

The biological sex of possible intimates is not always so easy to identify, either in terms of heterosexuality or homosexuality. Same-sex relations among males or females are sometimes implied in Pharaonic Egypt but they are not explicitly stated. This is seen in the use of terms such as *hnms(.t)*¹, "male or female friend," during the Middle Kingdom as a socially acceptable designation of intimate friendship with or without sexual connotations (Parkinson 2008: 132; Satzinger and Stefanović 2012: 351). Ramesseide love poems, mostly from the workmen's village



Figure 10 (left). Mastaba of Niankhnum and Khnumhotep, scene of embrace and greatest proximity, east wall of the offering chamber, north Saqqara.

Courtesy of Wikimedia user Ahmad Badr, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mastaba_of_Niankhnum_and_Khnumhotep_embrace.JPG.

Figure 11 (right). Statue of sacred bull Apis, limestone (originally painted), 126 cm x 176 cm. Louvre Museum, accession number N 390, courtesy of Wikimedia user Rama, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louvres-antiquites-egyptiennes-p1020068.jpg.

at Deir el-Medinah, are very informative on the expression of affection and, although in most poems the gender of the speaker can be identified, there are cases where this is not clear and it is possible that the lovers deliberately chose an ambiguous identity. Dialogues between lovers are rare;

women tend to be focused on themselves and men on their surroundings, but both genders initiate or evoke sex in their lyrics (Sweeney 2002).

None of these poems are explicit about the sexual act. For this we have to turn to ostraca (fig. 8) from Deir el-Medinah

(Manniche 1987). Before the Greco-Roman period, details of sexual acts are also found in religious or literary texts, particularly those concerned with gods, as in the process of creation. Thus we find the primordial god Atum creating reality through masturbation in the Heliopolitan Cosmogony.

This paper would not be complete without a mention of the 5th-Dynasty tomb of the royal manicurists Niankhnum and Khnumhotep (figs. 9–10), in which these men are depicted very close to each other in what many authors have interpreted as an intimate physical embrace. Although represented in the tomb with their families, none of the associated texts state their relationship to one another. They have been variously interpreted as twin brothers, even conjoined twins, or possibly as a same-sex couple (see Vasiljević 2008: 363–64). If twins, we might note that their names share the name of the god Khnum, who is later depicted creating a man and his double on a potter's wheel, and are in one case even written joined. Names which sound similar are indeed often given to twins. The omission of kinship identifications could be deliberately ambiguous,

as some authors insist, or to avoid any implied difference in status between the two if one were to be identified as the elder sibling (Vasiljević 2008).

The Long Life of Egyptian Sexuality

A final interesting point about ancient Egyptian sexuality in the modern world is the way that folk practices have endured even into the present day. Diodorus Siculus (*Library*, I 85.2–3) tells us that after the funeral of the Apis bull and the instalment of the new one, for 40 days only women could look at the bull and that they showed him their genitals in the sanctuary of Hephaestus at Memphis. Two millennia later, French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, shortly after finding the large statue of Apis (fig. 11) in 1851, writes that a group of 15 women from local villages came to this statue and climbed on it one by one in order to be cured of their barrenness (Marković 2013: 43). Even today, women from Qantir and surrounding villages come to the statue base of Ramesses II (fig. 12) in order to secure offspring, spreading stories of the “Pharaoh who had many children.”♀



Figure 12. Base of a colossal Ramesses II statue from Qantir. Courtesy of Wikimedia user Iri-en-achti, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kolossalstatue_Qantir.JPG.

Note

1. The final phoneme .t is a feminizing element in ancient Egyptian.

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