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Sexual Morality in Ancient Egyptian Literature

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Ancient Egyptian literature often incorporates sexual ethics that are not fully explained or comprehensively explored within the works. It is often difficult for a modern reader to understand these sexual ethics. Generally, the ancient Egyptian literary corpus assumes a cultural context with which ancient Egyptian readers were familiar. In this paper, I argue that the religious and cultural practices of ancient Egypt were inseparable from common customs, including sexual, reproductive, and erotic customs. I appeal to archaeological and other historical records to illuminate some of the more confusing sexual elements of numerous literary works. Throughout, I try to remain mindful of the differences in sexual morality in ancient Egyptian society between commoners and royalty, between the indigenous population and Greek or Roman immigrants, and between inhabitants of the civilization at different time periods.

Ancient Egyptian literature often incorporates sexual ethics that are not fully explained or comprehensively explored within the works. The ancient Egyptian literary corpus assumes a cultural context with which ancient Egyptian readers were familiar. Notably, the pervasive religious and cultural practices of ancient Egypt were inseparable from common customs, including sexual, reproductive, and erotic customs. Contextualizing ancient Egyptian literature with archaeological and other historical records illuminates the more confusing sexual elements of numerous literary works. In turn, sexual morals and certain religious and cultural beliefs concerning sex can be extracted from ancient Egyptian myths and tales. The praise or condemnation of certain sexual acts in Egyptian literature, for example, provides evidence for which sexual acts were considered acceptable and taboo, in what eras, and by whom.

Ancient Egyptian stories appear to present conflicting opinions of the moral status of male homosexuality. In *The Book of the Dead*, a religious text, one of the negative confessions is, "I have not

copulated with a boy,” which seems to outright condemn homosexuality.¹ In *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, the god Seth is condemned after his nephew Horus’s semen is discovered within him. Horus, on the other hand, is not condemned. Whereas *The Book of the Dead* seems to condemn homosexuality, *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* seems to only condemn one partner.

By contextualizing *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* it becomes clear that Seth is not being condemned for homosexuality, but rather his passivity. Ancient Egyptians rarely viewed homosexual relations as loving, but rather as one man raping another to exert domination.² This interpretation of homosexuality explains why the act would be considered sinful in *The Book of the Dead*, and it is consistent with Seth’s emasculation and shame as the receiving partner. Furthermore, the story begins with Seth sodomizing the younger Horus, which was considered a sneaky way to enact revenge, not necessarily an erotic or amorous act.³ This view of homosexuality shines a different light on Isis’s rage upon realizing that Seth attempted to rape her son. She is not outraged that her brother and brother-in-law acted sexually with her son, but that he almost dominated him. This explains her reaction: planning to trick Seth into eating Horus’s semen-laced lettuce. Though by eating semen Seth is not participating in anal sex, he is receiving the seed of another man, which, within the context of ancient Egypt, made him the passive person. Indeed, ancient Egyptian superstitions held that a man’s semen was venomous for other men.⁴

Isis’s decision to disguise the semen in lettuce is not arbitrary but invokes religious symbolism. Lettuce was one of the most common ancient Egyptian aphrodisiacs and was featured in festivals for the ithyphallic god of fertility and procreation, Min.⁵ Isis is dually insulting Seth. Not only is he consuming semen, he is also eating it with an aphrodisiac, insinuating romance and love. Without the knowledge

¹ William Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 2003), 270.

² Lise Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University, 1987), 22.

³ Karol Myśliwiec and Geoffrey Packer, *Eros on the Nile* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 2004), 30.

⁴ Myśliwiec and Packer, 34.

⁵ Jack R. Harlan, “Lettuce and the Sycamore: Sex and Romance in Ancient Egypt,” *Economic Botany* 40.1 (1986): 4.

that lettuce was an ancient Egyptian aphrodisiac, however, it would be difficult to ascertain the double-entendre. For ancient Egyptians this insinuation would have made the episode even more shameful and perhaps funny, because homosexual relationships were rarely considered loving.

However, *The Tale of Neferkare and the General Saset*, a popular folk tale concerning a king and his lover, presents both of the homosexual characters as rather silly. They commit the affair in secret, indicating that it is shameful. Furthermore, Saset is specifically described as a bachelor, which was uncommon for male adults and perhaps looked upon with suspicion or derision.⁶ Some sources outside of the literature suggest that most ancient Egyptians would have considered their relationship an aberration for undermining the traditional family structure.⁷

This characterization of homosexuality does not necessarily contradict that present in *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, however. Though the relations are presented much differently, it is important to remember that *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* describes rape, whereas *The Tale of Neferkare and the General Saset* describes a non-aggressive homosexual relationship. Instances of intimate or consensual homosexual relationships were largely condemned by religious texts as foolish means of satisfying sexual appetite.⁸ Horus does not give Seth his semen as a means of satisfying his sexual appetite; in fact, he does not even give Seth his semen through sexual intercourse. On the other hand, the relationship between Neferkare and Saset is clearly consensual because Saset lowers his ladder so that Neferkare can ascend to his room and join him in bed. Since the ancient Egyptians religion considered consensual homosexual sex a misappropriation of sexuality, the different attitudes toward Horus and Neferkare make sense.

⁶ R. B. Parkinson, "'Homosexual' Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 81 (1995): 60.

⁷ R. B. Parkinson, *Voices from Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Middle Kingdom Writings* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma, 1991), 54.

⁸ Myśliwiec and Packer, 33.

One tomb from the Fifth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom may seem to contradict the religious prohibition of homosexuality by presenting two male manicurists, Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, so intimately that some archaeologists interpret their relationship as romantic. The tombs' various suggestive aspects include images of the two men touching noses and torsos.⁹ Other images in the tomb portray the two men fishing and fowling, sexual metaphors common in ancient Egyptian myths.¹⁰ The intimacy of the two men is very apparent, and appears to reflect a culture accepting of their relationship. However, this tomb is not necessarily incongruous with Egyptian religion. The two men are not necessarily lovers, since the word used to describe their relationship – *sn* – can be translated to brother or friend in addition to lover.¹¹ Also, the two men are not depicted engaging in anal intercourse. Ancient Egyptians may not have been opposed to camaraderie or affection between men, but simply opposed to anal intercourse.¹² If the two were lovers, however, and were known to engage in anal intercourse, there is still the possibility that this relationship does not contradict the religious views they and their society held.

Over the millennia-long history of ancient Egyptian civilization, it would be difficult to imagine no cases of publicly accepted homosexuality or no changes in religious views, such as those towards homosexuality. The first depiction of Horus and Seth's sex as reciprocal from the Pyramid of Pepi I dates to the same period as the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, which suggests that views of homosexuality may also have been changing during this time period.¹³ Furthermore, a scene on the tomb's wall depicts an erotic song about Horus and Seth.¹⁴ Perhaps Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were buried within a dynamic society whose religion temporarily approved of homosexuality, as

⁹ Greg Reeder, "Same-Sex Desire, Conjugal Constructs, and the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep," *World Archaeology* 32.2 (2000): 203, 205.

¹⁰ Reeder, 196.

¹¹ Reeder, 195.

¹² Reeder, 205.

¹³ Reeder, 202.

¹⁴ Reeder, 202.

evidenced by changing thought on Horus and Seth. Indeed, in the early phases of religious development in ancient Egyptian civilization, the idea of adult men living together with mutual consent was considered ethically neutral.¹⁵

As was the case with homosexuality, castration appears in numerous ancient Egyptian literary works, and it is portrayed differently in each work. In *The Papyrus Jumilhec*, Seth commits crimes and takes the form of a bull, prompting the god Anubis to cut off Seth's penis and testicles as punishment multiple times. This punishment is curious because Seth apparently regenerates his penis and testicles each time they are removed, or he has many penises and pairs of testicles to spare. Certain religious symbols and concepts of the phallus add understanding to *The Papyrus Jumilhec*.

Seth's appearance as a bull is particularly noteworthy because of the symbolic significance of bulls in ancient Egyptian religion. Min, the aforementioned god of fertility and procreation, was commonly identified with bulls, and he was described by ancient Egyptians as the "bull, who penetrates females."¹⁶ The imagery of Min as a bull penetrating females is not only sexual but also highly aggressive. This view of heterosexual sex is consistent with the previously mentioned view that homosexual sex was a method of domination. If the bull is considered an aggressive symbol, then Seth's appearance as a bull may have been deliberately symbolic of Seth's aggression. In *The Papyrus Jumilhec*, Seth becomes a bull in one instance to approach Isis and, after he cannot dominate her, spills his seed on the ground. Indeed, an interpretation of Seth as a bull as a sexually aggressive character is consistent with the story.

If this is the case, then is Anubis's punishment the removal of aggression? This may be, since the hieroglyphic symbol for "phallus" also has connotations of violence, specifically sexual violence.¹⁷ However, the castration of Seth is more likely symbolic of the removal of power, which may be related

¹⁵ Myśliwiec and Packer, 37.

¹⁶ Myśliwiec and Packer, 17.

¹⁷ Tom Hare, *ReMembering Osiris: Number, Gender, and the Word in Ancient Egyptian Representational Systems* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1999), 109.

to aggression. Ancient Egyptians clearly associated the phallus with power. During wartime, Egyptians often dismembered their opponents, symbolizing complete power over the enemy.¹⁸ The reverence for phallic power is reflected in *The Papyrus Jumilhac*. For instance, Anubis imprisons Seth after removing his penis and testicles. It is probably not a coincidence that Seth also loses power when he loses his genitalia. Rather, his genitalia are associated with the notion of power.

Associating penises with power was in no way unique to *The Papyrus Jumilhac*; the concept was imbedded in ancient Egyptian religion. The Egyptian cosmogony credited a penis, without the help of any women, with the creation of the world, and the hand Atum used to masturbate was indeed a sacred religious symbol.¹⁹ The phallus received particular attention in ancient Egyptian religious artwork for its ability to inseminate.²⁰ In fact, a common Egyptian justification for the superior status of males was that men bore sole responsibility for creating new life.²¹ The most striking religious example of the phallus as a symbol of power, however, is the myth of Osiris.

In Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris* there is a clear correlation between Osiris's castration and his fall from the throne. Osiris only regains power when his member is reattached. Plutarch was retelling one of the most important myths in ancient Egyptian religion; the myth of Osiris would have profoundly impacted all phallic conceptions in ancient Egyptian literature, just as it impacted other forms of art and culture. Osiris was often depicted with an erect penis and worshipped for his penis's ability to give life.²² Mummies often have bound phalluses, simulating Osiris's erection in death and alluding to the masturbatory creation myth.²³ The cult of Osiris worshipped his immense power, of which his penis was an extension. By procreating posthumously Osiris both regained his throne (Horus was simply an

¹⁸ Myśliwiec and Packer, 27.

¹⁹ Myśliwiec and Packer, 7.

²⁰ Myśliwiec and Packer, 9.

²¹ Harlan, 8.

²² Harlan, 8.

²³ Hare, 25-26.

incarnation of Osiris, as sons were thought to be) and conquered death (he became the king of the afterlife).

The association of the phallus with power also exists in *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, in which Bata voluntarily castrates himself to prove his sexual purity. For example, Bata loses strength and vigor immediately after removing his penis. Additionally, he only becomes a powerful man after he is reborn with a penis.

The Tale of the Two Brothers also draws on ancient Egyptian views of adultery. After Anubis's wife attempts to commit adultery, Bata calls her "a sexually aroused slut."²⁴ Such harsh language suggests a culture extremely opposed to adulterous affairs. However, this position on adultery is incomplete; adulterous females paid a bigger price than adulterous males. Though men could legally keep concubines, adulterous women were often executed, at least before Graeco-Roman times.²⁵ When adultery was discovered, private (and drastic) steps were usually taken to deal with the matter, so official records rarely refer to it.²⁶ This is consistent with *The Tale of the Two Brothers*; both Anubis and Bata execute their unfaithful wives. The execution of Bata's wife could possibly be an exception to the rule of dealing with adultery privately. However, since Bata was the pharaoh at this time, dealing with the matter officially may have been the same as dealing with the matter privately.

Harsh punishments for adultery appear elsewhere in ancient Egyptian literature. In *King Cheops and the Magicians*, Webaoner's adulterous wife is executed. Government officials conduct the execution and bodily desecration, like the execution of Bata's wife in *The Tale of the Two Brothers*. The wife's lover receives a much different fate, however: a magical crocodile ensnares him. This does not necessarily contradict the previously stated unequal punishments for adultery for men and women, because the townsman with whom she slept was not considered an adulterous man, but an accomplice

²⁴ Simpson, 84.

²⁵ Manniche, 20, 21.

²⁶ Dominic Montserrat, *Sex and Society in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Padstow, U.K.: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 104.

to adultery. Some sources state that if the government did intervene in cases of adultery, women would have their noses slit and their male accomplices would receive one thousand lashes.²⁷ Though both sexes received distinct punishments, each punishment was severe.

There may have been religious grounds for the pattern of punishment in the folktales. One religious explanation for adultery's taboo nature was the myth in which a goddess betrayed her husband, the god Monthu.²⁸ This myth also set the precedent of condemning adulterous women, but not necessarily adulterous men. Ancient Egyptian religion stressed the desecration of adulterous bodies (like Anubis's wife and Webaoner's wife) so the souls would not be able to rest peacefully in the afterlife.²⁹ Also, one of the reasons ancient Egyptian religion forbids adultery is to avoid the humiliation of the husband.³⁰ This explains why adulterous women, like those in *The Tale of the Two Brothers* and *King Cheops and the Magicians*, and their male accomplices, like the townsman with whom Webaoner's wife sleeps, were punished: they humiliated the husbands. Since husbands did not humiliate themselves by sleeping with concubines and slaves, this was acceptable.

One sexual practice that was almost universally condemned in ancient Egyptian society, on the other hand, was incest. However, some of the most revered characters in ancient Egyptian literature engage in incestuous relationships. In *Isis and Osiris*, for instance, the sexual relations between two siblings are not only portrayed positively; they were necessary for the eventual triumph of Horus. Other Egyptian myths involve sexual relations between Geb and Nut, Shu and Tefnut, and Seth and Nephthys, without questioning the morality of such relationships.

²⁷ James Bronson Reynolds, "Sex Morals and the Law in Ancient Egypt and Babylon," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 5.1 (1914): 21.

²⁸ Pnina Galpaz-Feller, "Private Lives and Public Censure: Adultery in Ancient Egypt and Biblical Israel," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67.3 (2004): 156.

²⁹ Galpaz-Feller, 156.

³⁰ Galpaz-Feller, 154.

The archaeological record suggests that incest was not common or accepted in Egypt.³¹ Some exceptions did exist, however, in which ancient Egyptians tolerated incest. In the Graeco-Roman era, during which the Greek-born Roman citizen Plutarch wrote, there were many documented instances of sibling marriage.³² This was, in all likelihood, a cultural import. The other exception, which predates the Graeco-Roman era, was that members of the royal family could marry kin.³³ There were practical and religious justifications for this exception.

When ancient Egyptian literary works refer to incest, it often occurs between divine characters, like Isis and Osiris in *Isis and Osiris*, or royal figures, who were considered divine. Since gods were special entities, they could and did have incestuous affairs. It is possible that incest was even a way of differentiating the gods from humans by contrasting their sexual morals. To legitimize power or keep within the royal bloodline, some pharaohs married close relatives, and their actions could be justified because of the religious belief that the pharaoh was Horus. Like the gods, pharaohs' penchants for incest may have existed to deliberately differentiate the king from commoners.

Separating a culture's literature from its cultural and religious practices denies the reader the fullest possible understanding of authorial intent and metaphorical understanding. An examination of ancient Egyptian society and its religion enables a fuller comprehension of the society's literature. The various representations of sexuality and sexual practices in ancient Egyptian stories and myths are sometimes explained through contextualization. They also challenge assumptions of ancient Egyptian sexual life and add to the understanding of ancient Egyptian sexuality.

³¹ Manniche, 29.

³² Brent D. Shaw, "Brother-Sister Marriage in Graeco-Roman Egypt," *Man* 27.2 (1992): 269.

³³ Manniche, 29.

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