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figures with some aspects of fertility and reproduction suggests that, in Pueblo thought, the symbolic job of promoting fertility is not limited to women; the contribution of males is also important. It seems clear, however, that female fertility and childbirth provide the central and enduring metaphors for many kinds of creativity, fertility, and well-being in the Puebloan Southwest.

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Chapter 15

Father Earth, Mother Sky Ancient Egyptian Beliefs About Conception and Fertility

Ann Macy Roth

In reconstructing ancient gender relationships, Egyptologists are fortunate. The ancient Egyptians have left not only archaeological remains, but also extensive texts and iconographic evidence, so that one type of data can be checked against and explicated by other types. The analysis presented here would be difficult to duplicate in cultures that are known to us only from their material remains. The value of the approach used here to archaeologists, then, lies less in its methods than in its conclusions, which offer an alternative model of gender relations. Of particular interest is the apparent connection between the views of human conception in ancient Egypt and Egypt's unusual agricultural cycle.

The Egyptian case also suggests a conclusion about the general relationship between views of fertility and women's social roles that many will find counterintuitive. Some scholars would like to locate women's power in their fertility and ability to generate new life. The analysis presented here, however, suggests that women's association with fertility and creative power may actually limit their autonomy. In ancient Egypt, it will be argued, the power of fertility and creation was identified almost exclusively as a male characteristic, yet the women of this culture had far greater autonomy and parity with men than in most other ancient cultures. They could own property, including land, and transmit it by sale or bequest without the intervention of male relatives (Robins 1993:127–131). They could institute legal proceedings (McDowell 1990:152–153), and in rare cases they could rule the country (Robins 1993:50). They also enjoyed a great range of sexual expression (Fox 1985:298–300, 305–307), particularly in comparison to women in most other ancient cultures.

Male and Female Roles in Fertility and Conception

In historic and modern Western culture, the power of procreation is clearly thought to reside primarily in women. We can see this in the phrases "Mother Earth" and "Mother Nature," both of which refer to the female creative principle, and we can see it in the fact that women are often described as barren (which men never are), and that they have historically been blamed for a lack of children or for their failure to produce children of the desired sex. Even European women's dress in some periods has glorified female fertility by mimicking pregnancy. For example, in the well-known Arnolfini wedding portrait by van Eyck, the new bride's dress emphasizes and exaggerates the roundness of her belly.

This assumption that the woman is the principal creator of new life is so deeply embedded in Western cultural beliefs, that, despite increasingly detailed scientific understanding of the biological process of conception, any female patient in a modern fertility clinic can testify to the degree to which the medical profession views fertility primarily as a female problem.

The roots of this Western view of women's role in fertility can be traced to Classical antiquity. Despite the fact that semen is highly visible and the ovum is not, and despite medical views which held that males were more fertile, Greek science attributed an important role to the woman. The Hippocratic view, which was largely followed by Galen and seems to have been dominant in the medieval European tradition, argued that both men and women produced "seed," although the male seed was supposed to have had more intellectual qualities (McLaren 1984:16–17; Musallam 1983:46). On the other hand, Aristotle attributed a much lesser role to women, arguing that the semen was the sole creative force and that women were passive in the process of conception, even though menstrual blood provided the material for the growing child (Zeitlin 1984:178; Musallam 1983:43–45). This Aristotelian view is also seen in Greek literature: for example, in the *Eumenides*, Apollo argues that, although Orestes has killed his mother, he is not guilty of parricide because he is not in fact related to her, but is the child only of his father (Zeitlin 1984:176–178).

Far stronger and more prevalent than these medical views, however, was the widespread belief that women were responsible for fertility. These folk ideas are seen in many ancient myths. The fertility of the earth, for example, is clearly controlled by a goddess; when Demeter's daughter Persephone is taken away to the nether world, she mourns and the earth grows cold and barren. This myth locates both agricultural and human fertility in the woman, and through her rituals, the goddess Demeter grants women some control over this fertility (Nixon 1995:91–92).

These Greek folk beliefs in the importance of female fertility are also a common mythological theme. In many myths, male gods try to prevent female fertility (apparently never noticing that they could prevent conception simply by refraining from intercourse); in other myths, male gods attempt to appropriate for themselves women's ability to bear children. An obvious example is the story of Zeus swallowing his wife Metis so that he himself can give birth to their daughter Athena (Zeitlin 1984:178–179).

This belief that the woman is largely responsible for fertility persisted in European thought even through early modern time. In England, for example, as late as the first years of the nineteenth century, a woman's pregnancy was thought to invalidate a claim of rape, since it was believed that women could not conceive unless intercourse was consensual (McLaren 1984:27). This belief essentially credited women with control over conception and is consistent with the Western assumption that the power to create new life resides in the female.

Egyptologists have tended to assume that this Western model was also held in ancient Egypt. However, if we define fertility specifically as the act of creation itself, it can be argued that in ancient Egypt, women were not credited with creating new life. Instead, the creative role is attached exclusively to the male sex. This association can be seen clearly in the language, where the verb that we translate as "to conceive a child" is the same as the Egyptian verb used for "to receive" or "to take." In the Egyptian view, then, the woman "receives" the child, already fully created, from the man. This view is stated explicitly in Akhenaton's Hymn to the Aton: praising the god as creator of human life, the hymn says he has "placed seed in a woman and made the sperm into a person" (Simpson 1974:291).

The absence of a female role in creation is also seen in Egyptian myths dealing with conception and birth. The sky goddess Nut, for example, swallows the sun, and then gives birth to it, rejuvenated, but otherwise unchanged (Lesko 1991:118). Clearly, Nut has no effect on the sun; it simply passes through her. Likewise, in the "Tale of Two Brothers" (Simpson 1974:92–107), the hero Bata, who has transformed himself into a tree, impregnates his evil wife when a splinter of wood from this tree flies into her mouth. In time, she gives birth to Bata himself. Reborn, Bata is unchanged, inheriting nothing from his evil wife/mother. These two myths describe how women (the sky goddess and also the wife of Bata) simply receive and incubate their children. They conceive by swallowing the man himself (in these cases the mouth is presumably seen as analogous to the opening of the vagina), and he is reborn through them. However, a man can also be impregnated in the same way. In "The Contendings of Horus and Seth," Seth eats lettuce on which the semen of

Horus has been placed, and at the command of the gods, that semen is born as a sun disk on the top of his head (Simpson 1974:120–121).

Only in later periods is there any evidence that the Egyptians granted the female a greater role in forming a child. For example, a fragmentary story implies that bones were contributed by the father and the soft body parts by the mother (Yoyotte 1962:140–146). This text, however, dates to the Greco-Roman period, and its views may indicate Greek influence or the increased role of medical knowledge in structuring belief. However, there is no reason to assume that technically accurate medical knowledge had much impact on general Egyptian cultural assumptions any more than it currently does in Western culture.

Widespread Egyptian beliefs regarding the importance of male fertility are also indicated by the text on a statue that offers to intercede with Hathor on behalf of women who want a “good (probably fertile) husband.” Baines argues that this text acknowledges a male role in conception (Baines 1991:182–183, esp. n. 160); it could also be interpreted as viewing fertility as an exclusively male responsibility. Other evidence regarding Egyptian belief includes a letter cited by Robins (1993:77) in which the writer advises a man to adopt a child, saying, “You are not a man, since you cannot make your wives pregnant like other men.”

Egyptian belief in the importance of male creativity in fertility may also extend to assigning men responsibility for determining the sex of the child that they create. This view may help explain the lack of evidence of female infanticide in ancient Egypt, which is particularly clear in Greco-Roman Egypt (Pomeroy 1990:136–137). If the sex of a man’s children is viewed as the result of his own creative powers, rather than his wife’s, he might be less likely to expose his infant daughters.

It is also perhaps worth noting that these ideas of fertility were extended to nonhuman creatures. For example, according to Plutarch (1936:27–29), all scarab beetles were believed by Egyptians to be male. These scarab beetles were closely connected both with the rebirth of people and also the daily rebirth of the sun because they laid their eggs in a ball of dung, from which the newly hatched scarabs would emerge. The Egyptians apparently thought that these beetles reproduced without sexual contact, and, therefore, they concluded that the beetles were all males and that there were no female beetles. Again, this idea shows that ancient Egyptians located fertility and the ability to create new life in the male.

These ideas also affect Egyptian ideas regarding the supernatural world. Egyptian divinities connected with creative fertility are either indisputably male or are androgynous but predominantly male. These gods commonly take three forms: one originating in human fertility, one in animal fertility, and the third in plant fertility. The ithyphallic form

(Fig. 15.1) obviously displays the male sexual potency of human reproduction; but by its mummiform nature, it also alludes to the fertility of human death and burial — the burial of both seeds and human beings in the earth, from which new life will emerge. The second form associated with fertility — bulls and rams — is also indisputably male (Quirke 1992:48). The origin of this form presumably lay in the desire for fertility in these two animals that were favored for meat (that is, mutton and beef). But these gods can sometimes also be connected with human fertility, as in the case of the ram-headed Khnum, who created human children on his potter’s wheel, or the divine king who is called “Strong Bull” to emphasize his ability to conceive his successors.

The third form associated with fertility is the “fecundity figure” or “Nile god” (Fig. 15.2) (Baines 1985). These figures are predominantly male and are referred to by male pronouns. But although Baines believes that they are simply fat, reflecting the richness of the agricultural production brought by the Nile flood (Baines 1985:116, 118–122, 126–127), Otto (1938:28) has argued that their sagging breasts and protruding bellies resemble those in the rare depictions of pregnant women and probably reflect a nature that is at least androgynous. In the later period, these figures are sometimes shown with nourishing liquid flowing from their breasts. Baines (1985:118–119) views these examples as a “female ‘reinterpretation’” of the figures.

Otto’s view, however, makes sense in that fecundity figures are personifications of the agricultural fertility of the annual Nile flood, which was closely associated with the androgynous primeval waters of the time before creation. The primeval waters lacked any distinctions in sex (Hornung 1982:171), as they did in visibility, form, time, and space. Out of this undifferentiated pre-existent state came all existing life and, therefore, the analogs to the primeval waters (the annual Nile flood, the waters of the womb, the oblivion of death) also held the promise of new life. It seems entirely consistent with this view to depict the divinities that personified the Nile flood and the resulting produce of the land as essentially male, but with the female characteristics of pregnancy.

Pinch (1993:247) and others have noted the maleness of all these depictions of fertility, but they have restricted their role to animal and plant fertility, assigning human fertility to goddesses such as Hathor. Such a distinction is unlikely, however, because of the blurred boundaries between the plant and animal depictions of fertility (the fecundity figures and the ram and bull gods) and the depiction of human fertility in the ithyphallic divinities. The same divinity can occur in several forms, and all three forms are often shown with black, green, or blue skin. For example, Atum can be both a ram and a fecundity figure; Amun can be a ram or ithyphallic; and the symptoms of human fertility are used in the

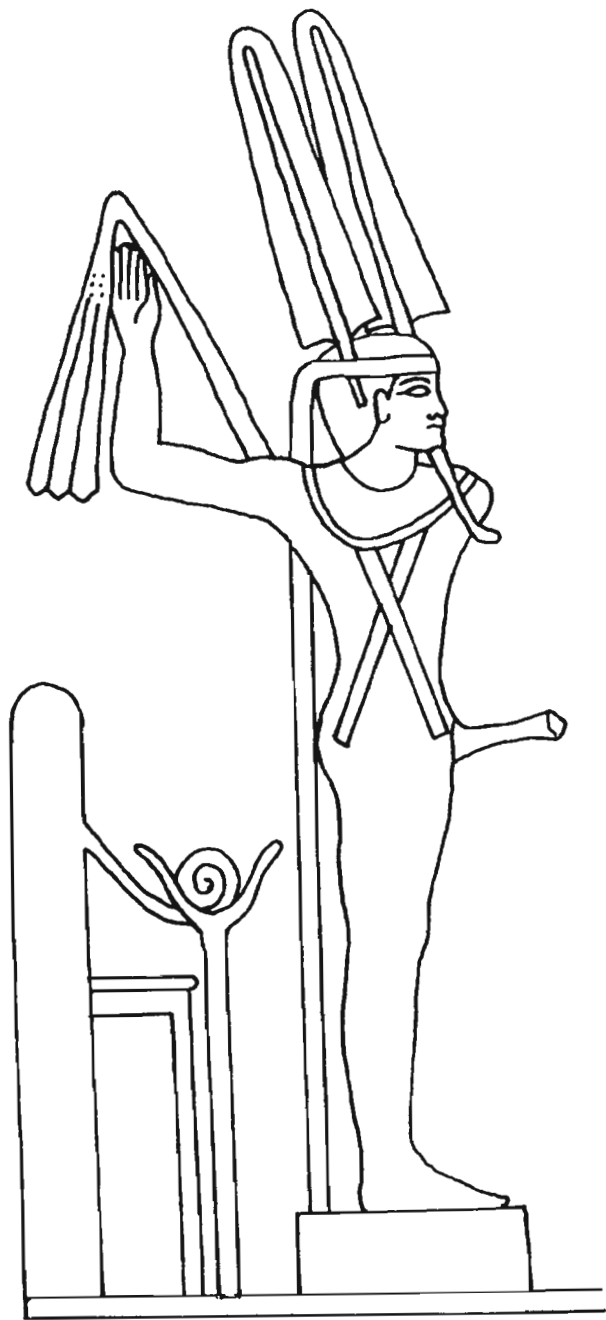


Figure 15.1. The Egyptian god Amun-Re rendered in ithyphallic form (redrawn by the author from the White Chapel of Senwosret I at Karnak, Egypt).

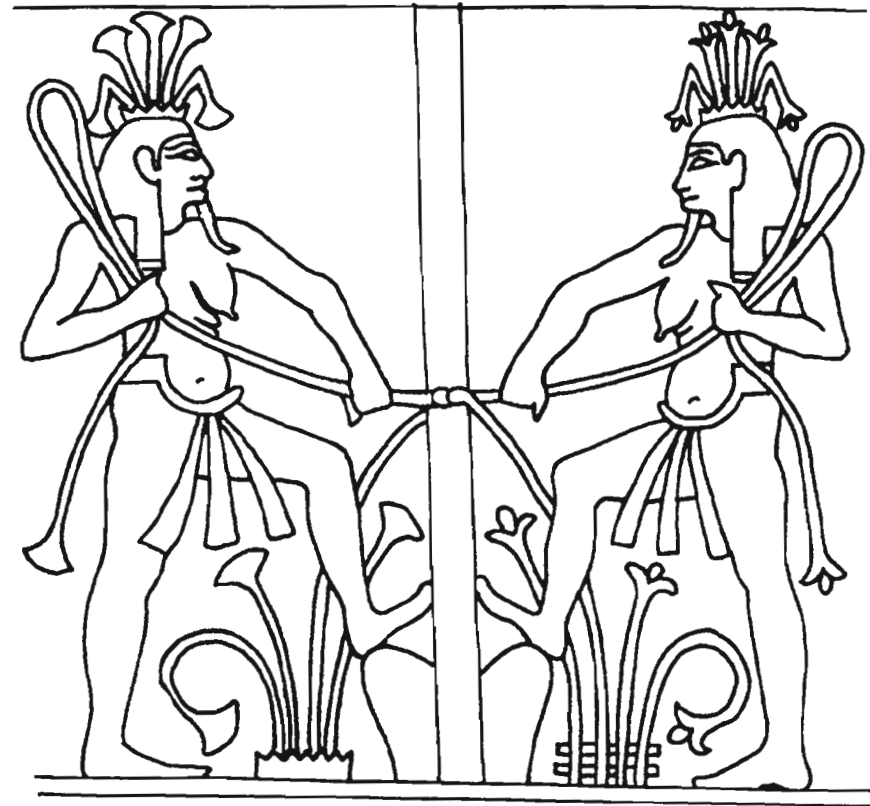


Figure 15.2. Two gods representing the northern and southern halves of the Nile River depicted as fecundity figures (redrawn by the author from a wall relief at Karnak temple, Egypt).

ithyphallic deities and probably also in fecundity figures. In mythology, the fertility god Bata can be represented as a bull; and the phrase “bull of his mother,” implying that a man can impregnate his wife with himself and thus is the “bull” or sexual partner of his own (eventual) mother, clearly applies in a human context, particularly in the case of kings. The major fertility god Osiris, who both represents the ability of the dead to re-engage themselves in the afterlife and of kings to create sons in which they live again, is also closely associated with the planting and sprouting of grain. These overlapping functions and iconography indi-

cate that fertility was seen as the same phenomenon in plants, animals, and humans. Moreover, it was clearly a male phenomenon, with androgynous features deriving from the connection of fertility with the undifferentiated nature of nonexistence.

In Western scholarship, human fertility has traditionally been associated with goddesses, particularly Hathor and Isis. This association is partially justified if one views human fertility as a longer process that includes not only conception, but also the nursing of the child (e.g., Pinch 1993). However, there is no textual or contextual evidence for considering Hathor and Isis to be fertility goddesses in the strictest sense. The evidence suggests that these and other goddesses assisted in fertility, but were not responsible for the actual creation of new life. Like women in general, they played two roles: first, to stimulate fertility in a man; and second, to nurture the results of that fertility, before birth and after. This association explains why such goddesses (and again women in general) are almost always represented as young and sexually enticing, or as nursing a child, rather than as pregnant. According to this interpretation, votives dedicated to Hathor were offered not in the hope that she would grant fertility to women, but that she would stimulate it in men.

One example of this female role in creation can be seen in a puzzling episode in the story about the lawsuit between the gods Horus and Seth. When Re, the sun god, is insulted by a member of his entourage, he lies down on his back, inert and sulking, and thus brings the judicial proceedings to a halt. After a time, his daughter Hathor comes to him and exposes her genitals to him; as a result, he laughs at her and he immediately jumps up and gets back to work (Simpson 1974:112). This incident, I would argue, is a humorous parody of the rebirth of the sun after a night of death. He can be revived because Hathor's gesture has stimulated him sexually and enables him to recreate himself, by himself.

The nature of existence in Egyptian religion, as Hornung (1982:170–185) stressed, is predicated on distinctions and differentiation, the absence of which characterizes nonexistence. Thus the two sexes and their roles in reproduction were clearly differentiated (Hornung 1982:171). These distinct but complementary sexual roles, in which the woman stimulates male creation and nurtures the resulting child, may be at the root of the anomalous social roles of Egyptian women.

For example, Levine (1995:92–110) has noted that a woman's hair, an important symbol of female sexuality in all Mediterranean cultures, was cut at the time of her marriage in both the Classical and Biblical traditions. Egyptian women, by contrast, seem to have cut their hair only at the death of their husbands. According to Plutarch's (1936:31–49) version of the Isis and Osiris myth, the first action of Isis upon hearing of the death of her husband is to cut a lock of her hair; and the word "widow" in

Egyptian is augmented by a sign representing a lock of hair (Erman and Grapow 1971:363, 4–7). In art, women are invariably shown with uncovered heads and long, unbound hair. This convention implies that women's sexual identity (and thus probably also their personal identity) did not disappear with marriage and motherhood. Rather, it was necessary that they remain sexually alluring in order to stimulate their husbands' fertility.

Earth, Sky, and Fertility in Egyptian Life and Thought

There is an obvious reason for the Egyptians' unusual views of fertility: it lies in the forms and functioning of the Egyptian landscape itself and is rooted in the nature of its resulting agricultural cycle. In most parts of the world, the earth is made fertile by rain from the sky. By analogy with human reproduction, the sky is viewed as an active male deity, from which comes the rain that penetrates the passive and female mother earth and causes her to bring forth new life. The rain is crucial, but the creative power resides in the earth. The sky is thus gendered male and the mother earth, female.

In Egypt, by contrast, the earth was fertilized by the annual flood of the Nile, which at the end of every summer covered the fields with fertile silt as well as water. The water and silt, which renewed the land and made the crops grow, came not from the sky but from the earth. Grammatically, both the earth and the floodwaters were regarded as male, and the deities that personified them (Geb and Hapi) were also male. However, the fact that the earth also received the floodwaters (a female role) and the connection of the floodwaters with the primeval waters of nonexistence (which were sexually undifferentiated) probably explains some of the androgynous characteristics of male fertility deities. The Egyptian sky was also the reverse of the general pattern: it was feminine, grammatically and also in its personification as a goddess, Nut.

Earth and sky clearly act out the relationship between earthly men and women. The typical depiction of the cosmos shows Geb, the earth god, lying down, while the nude, star-spangled body of his sister-wife Nut, the sky goddess, arches above him. In some versions (Fig. 15.3), Geb is depicted with an erection, clearly creating new life without any physical contact whatsoever with Nut. Her role, however, was essential: her nude body, stretched out above him, is the sexual stimulant that brings about his erection, and, thereby, his creation. Hers was not a passive role.

Egyptian myths dealing with the creation of the cosmos further illustrate the connection of gender roles with the agricultural cycle. The annual flood was seen as a return of the undifferentiated primeval waters, potentially containing all existence, which had preceded creation and

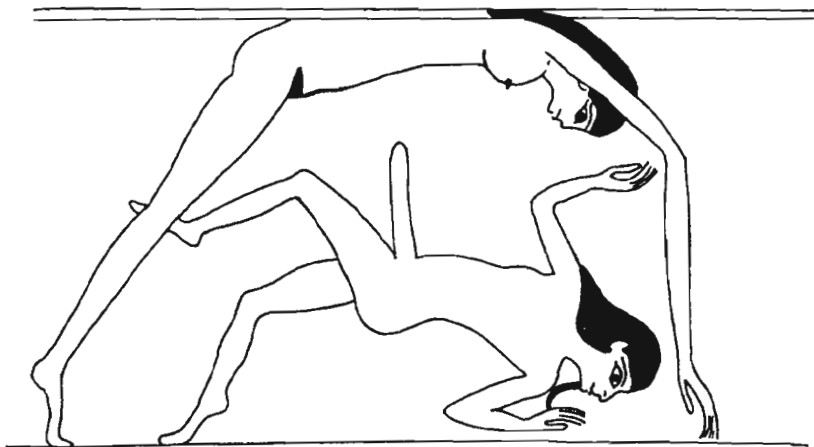


Figure 15.3. The goddess Nut (the Sky), shown arching herself above her consort Geb (the Earth) (redrawn by the author from a papyrus in the British Museum).

continued to exist as a source of both danger and fertility outside the created cosmos. Floating in these primeval waters, the creator god Atum expelled from his body two distinct substances, air (male: Shu, the son of Atum) and moisture (female: Tefnut, the daughter of Atum). This act could be variously described as spitting or as sneezing, or, significantly, as an ejaculation as a result of masturbation (Lesko 1991:92). Atum refers to this mechanism in the text found on Papyrus Bremner-Rhind, dating to the Ptolemaic period, when he says: “I acted as husband with my fist, I copulated with my hand” (Allen 1988:28). Atum’s hand can thus be called the mother of Shu and Tefnut (Blackman 1921:13). The word for hand is feminine, and as such Atum’s hand plays the typical feminine role: it stimulates male fertility. This act metaphorically reproduces the self-fertilization of the earth in which the male floodwaters come forth from the male earth itself. Atum’s androgynous aspects could be expressed by depicting him as a fecundity figure (Baines [1985:121 Fig. 82] though Baines’s interpretation [124] differs from mine).

The androgynous character of male fertility is made clearest by the stories about the gods Osiris and Bata, both emphatically fertile gods, who are both castrated in the course of their myths. In the myth of Isis and Osiris, the ideal king, Osiris, is murdered and cut into pieces; his wife reassembles the pieces and then embraces him so that she is impregnated

with Horus, a new ideal king. Osiris then becomes the ruler of the dead, and every dead king (and by extension every dead person) thus becomes “an Osiris,” effectively being syncretized, or equated, with the god Osiris himself in order to reconceive himself and be born into the next world. The king’s son takes on the role of Horus, taking his father’s place on earth. The only full account of this myth is that of the Greek writer Plutarch (1936:31–49), probably dating to the first century C.E. In Plutarch’s retelling of the story, Osiris’s sexual organ is the only piece of him that is not recovered by Isis; it had been thrown into the river and eaten by three fish before she began her search. This seems a curious deficiency for a fertility god, and Quirke (1992:58) has suggested that this incident was a Greek interpolation. However, the same episode also occurs in another, purely Egyptian, myth.

The Tale of Two Brothers (Simpson 1974:92–107) tells essentially the same story as Isis and Osiris. The main difference is that Bata’s evil wife takes on the role of the murderer, and his good brother Anubis takes on the role of the good wife Isis. Although Bata, the hero of the “Tale of Two Brothers,” is a fertility god, he castrates himself at one point to demonstrate his chastity; his severed organ is immediately consumed by a catfish. This fish motif is clearly important since it occurs in both stories. Red fish appear as erotic elements in love poems, and fish seem to have been avoided in an ideal diet (Brewer and Friedman 1989:17–9), but their exact significance here is unclear. Like Osiris, Bata is later able to father himself upon his wife after his death, and becomes his own heir—all without benefit of his sexual organ. This accomplishment is presumably a testimony to the creative powers of the now-androgynous fertility god.

A third version of the story, very late in date and badly preserved, is the Papyrus Jumilhac (Vandier 1962; Altenmiller 1973). In this version, the evil role is played by the fertility god as the central character himself, in this case Seth. This text tells us explicitly that Seth’s phallus and testicles are cut off though their fate is not recorded and nothing is said about fish. Both Bata and Seth are depicted as bulls in their stories, and both are presumably also reborn as “bulls of their mothers.”

While all of these gods represent fertility, the role of Osiris, in particular, is essential in the process of rebirth after death. To re-engage himself as the “bull of his mother,” every man is identified with this god after his death, and by sympathetic magic, he is able to reconceive himself just as Osiris did. For this reason, a man named Amenmose, for example, would be referred to in his tomb decorations and in his mortuary literature as Osiris-Amenmose, which represents a species of syncretism with the god.

Women's Role in Death and Rebirth

Egyptian views of fertility and birth are most clearly seen in the realm of tombs and mortuary religion. In recent years, it has been argued that Egyptians of all periods took a very literal view of rebirth after death, so that many of the rituals, artifacts, and representations attested in tombs are taken quite directly from traditions and equipment used to assist in childbirth. This can be seen particularly clearly in the ritual of the "opening of the mouth," which, I have argued, was originally an enactment of birth and childhood developments and was intended to allow the dead person to eat his funerary meal (Roth 1992:113–47; 1993:57–79). Similarly the set of four magical bricks buried in New Kingdom tombs are identical with the four bricks that supported a woman while she was giving birth and played a role in protecting the newborn child (Roth and Roehrig, n.d.).

Dorman, working on the related problem of the birth of the sun (which is often used as an analogy for the rebirth of the dead) has noted that the eastern hills, between which the sun is reborn every morning, are rendered as overlapping red folds and are actually labeled *labia majora*. In addition, a potter's wheel, on which human beings are formed at conception, is sometimes depicted as part of the process (Dorman, in press). Moreover, the coffin or even the entire burial chamber of a tomb could be seen as a womb from which rebirth into the next life took place. It is thus quite clear that what the Egyptians expected after death was a very literal rebirth from a female womb.

The tombs and tomb equipment also make reference to an earlier stage of the process of human rebirth: conception. Like a birth, a rebirth clearly required a conception, and in recent years much attention has been devoted to the metaphorical reconception of the deceased. In burial equipment and in tomb chapel decoration, scholars have seen evidence for the assumption that the dead person was supposed to reconceive himself sexually (Desroches-Noblecourt 1953:15–33; Westendorf 1967:139–150; although Eaton-Krauss and Graefe [1985:29–40] contest Westendorf's interpretation). The nude "concubine figures" and other female "fertility figures" found in tombs, which were once thought to be sex toys for dead men, are now generally believed to be part of this process (Desroches-Noblecourt 1953:15–33); they were meant to stimulate a man to (re)create himself, while the children sometimes shown with them ensured that the surrogate mother could nurture his creation successfully. Images of the tomb owner's wife, often posed in sexually suggestive ways, are similarly thought to have served symbolically as his sexual partner in reconceiving himself, so that he could be reborn in the next world (Robins 1989:109–110).

But a problem arises with this mechanism when the deceased was female. It is clear from both archaeological and textual sources that women were believed to be reborn as well as men. However, the overwhelming maleness of the creative sexual role would seem to make it impossible for a woman to re-engage herself and be reborn into the next world. The burials of women offer no special equipment that could serve as a male surrogate in the process, as the concubine figures are assumed to do in male burials. On the contrary, there seems to be an absolute taboo on the representation of the husband in the tombs of women (Roth 1994; see also Robins [1994] for a related phenomenon). Instead, the burial equipment and mortuary texts provided for women are identical to those provided for men (Fischer 1989:8–9; for examples see D'Auria et al. 1987:76–77, 98–99, 118–119, 156, 162–163, 164–165, 169–170, 173–175, and 187–189), implying that the mechanisms for rebirth were apparently identical. Thus, while on the surface it seems unlikely that a woman was seen as the "bull of her mother," there is also no evidence that she served as the "cow of her father" in the facilitation of her own rebirth.

The answer must be that a woman, like her husband, was syncretized with Osiris after death, so that a woman named Nofret would become, at her death, "Osiris-Nofret." This syncretism is well attested for women from the time of the earliest religious texts down to the end of Egyptian history (although, puzzlingly, in a few later period burials the woman is syncretized with the goddess Hathor instead [D'Auria et al. 1987:242]). While syncretism and identification with divinities of the same gender are the normal pattern, a woman's syncretism with Osiris was presumably made possible by Osiris's androgynous characteristics: like a woman, he has no phallus. Bata, Osiris's avatar in the Tale of Two Brothers, at one point tells his wife "I am a woman like you" (Simpson 1974:101). Any woman, then, could become Osiris, without abandoning her feminine identity, which was an important characteristic of her existence and needed to be preserved. At the same time, Osiris's role as an androgynous male fertility god allowed her to re-engage herself just as a man would.

But the question remains, who stimulated Osiris-Nofret to reconceive herself? And, even more interesting, who served as her mother in the rebirth process? In a man's tomb, these roles seem to have been played by his wife or, if there is no wife represented, by his mother. In the rare tombs of women, the most prominent woman depicted is the tomb owner herself. It is thus likely that in regenerating herself in the afterlife, Nofret, and other women, played all three roles. She acted as her own husband, her own wife, and her own mother. The depictions of herself in tomb decoration both stimulated her (male) fertility and nurtured her before and after her rebirth.

Conclusion

During life, Egyptian women's sexual roles were distinct from and complementary to the roles of men. Death, however, marked a return to the undifferentiated pre-existent state, and in this androgynous environment, dead women could be identified with Osiris. By virtue of that identification they could perform the male role of being "bulls of their mothers," thereby re-conceiving themselves in preparation for a rebirth into the next life. Ancient Egyptian women thus played a variety of sexual roles, although some roles were only accessible to them after death.

These patterns have interesting implications for our understanding not only of Egyptian mortuary religion but also of the way that conceptions of fertility affect the roles that women play during their lives. The responsibility for fertility and creating new life was *not* laid on the shoulders of women in ancient Egypt; instead, they were expected to be sexually aggressive, to begin the process of creation by enticing their male partners to create. The Roman perception of Cleopatra as an aggressive seductress (Hughes-Hallett 1990:38–69) may even be based on this perceived societal trait among Egyptian women.

This pattern, which is the reverse of the "normal" Western stereotype, deprives women of the one powerful advantage that they seem to have in our own culture: the perceived ability to create new life. However, the location of fertility in the male may, in fact, explain the unusual independence and autonomy of Egyptian women, who had far greater parity with men than in most other ancient cultures. Perhaps because they were responsible for initiating sexual relations and because they could even take on the male role after death, Egyptian women could more openly show independence in other spheres as well. Furthermore, absolved of any blame for the result of sexual intercourse, women were not seen as the bearers of guilt—there are no Eves or Pandoras in Egyptian mythology. Viewed from this perspective, the fertility assumed to reside in women by Western tradition may be less about female power and autonomy than about female passivity and shame.

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