A Royal Queer: Hatshepsut and Gender Construction in Ancient Egypt

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Since its earliest systemized study under Napoleon, Egypt has been a popular “other” for modern Western culture. And not the least of its intrigues has been the Egyptian woman, in various Orientalized guises: the beautiful Nefertiti, the seductive Cleopatra, the manipulative Hatshepsut. King Hatshepsut commanded a mighty empire during the New Kingdom, as part of the Eighteenth Dynasty that brought Egypt back from the turmoil of the Second Intermediate Period (during which Egypt was ruled by the foreign Hyksos), and ushered in an era marked by drastic religious and political changes. Hatshepsut managed foreign affairs with neighboring countries, built monuments noted for their innovation and grandeur, and may have waged military campaigns. But, of course, the overriding interest in the king has always centered on her gender.

Scholarship on Hatshepsut traditionally portrayed her gender as a pre-discursive fact, one beyond her control. In a 2005 Metropolitan Museum of Art catalogue accompanying the most comprehensive exhibition ever mounted on the subject of this king, scholars employ phrases such as “presented herself as male;” “the male [image] of her later persona;” and “in the guise of a male king.” And although scholars such as Gay Robins, Lynn Meskell, Lana Troy, and Heather Lee McCarthy have brought much-needed critical perspectives to the study of ancient Egyptian gender, their ideas of gender fluidity have yet to be applied to the embodied lives of ancient Egyptians. For example, Hatshepsut’s “biological sex” is often still invoked as a given, with various motivations theorized for the maleness of some of the king’s visual representation. As Meskell summarizes, “in our archaeological investigations we have…attempted to locate people from antiquity into a priori Western taxonomies: heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, elite/non-elite.” Within this framework, Hatshepsut is female, but chooses elements of male presentation based on political, religious, social, and ritual contexts.

This experiment-cum-paper instead attempts to do a simple thing: use a queered lens to uncover new possibilities for understanding Hatshepsut’s gender identity. It is my argument that even such a limited case study as this demonstrates the benefits that would proceed from utilizing queered methodologies in Egyptology, which has so far been particularly resistant to them. Based on a broad context of Egyptian religious and mortuary beliefs, and looking at just the small sampling of the extant statuary from Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple, Deir el-Bahri, we can move beyond the binary matrix employed for Hatshepsut thus far and use the more nuanced and accurate understandings of ancient Egyptian conceptions of gender, especially the pharaoh’s gender in relation to the role of kingship, to better see this king. This alteration in
imaginative vantage is a subtle one, but not insignificant. The most common
description of Hatshepsut used to be a woman pretending to be a man, and is
now often a woman enacting maleness (with or without the knowledge of all of
her subjects). What other constructions can be uncovered when we interrogate
the very assumption of Hatshepsut’s femaleness?

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Hatshepsut began her life at court as the daughter of King Thutmose I,
although several brothers in line for the throne ahead of her meant that no
records would survive of her childhood (except those she retroactively
commissioned, when king, about her divine birth and destined coronation). As
was common for the Egyptian royalty, she married her half-brother, and when he
became King Thutmose II she was a chief queen, holding the favored title of
“God’s Wife.” As her historians have noted, up to this point she had
demonstrated no unusual amount of power or ambition at court, although
evidence for the period is admittedly scant. But Thutmose II died unexpectedly
only a short while into his reign, and his heir Thutmose III, the son of Isis, a co-
wife of Hatshepsut’s, was not yet old enough to rule. This situation was
undesirable but not uncommon, and often a regent, typically an older queen,
would partner with the new king in power until he was old enough to reign alone.
So Hatshepsut stepped into the role of ruling co-regent with Thutmose III.

She simply never stepped out again. Hatshepsut eventually took on kingly
epithets, titles, and powers. During her reign she directed a significant trading
expedition to Punt and oversaw an extensive building campaign, especially
active at Thebes. Hatshepsut ruled the country alongside Thutmose III for about
fifteen years, but as the more powerful ruler, at least as evidenced in visual
references. For example, in a wall relief of the barque chapel she built at
Karnak, the two kings are shown as identical figures. Yet Hatshepsut has
retained the place of primacy in front of Thutmose III (indicated by her name in
the cartouche). Some scholars have posited that because Egyptian decorum of
representation did not have conventions for representing females “ahead” of
males, Hatshepsut, as the older and more senior regent, had to depict herself as
male in representations such as this, catalyzing her masculine identity.

One factor complicating Hatshepsut’s legacy is the proscription that took
place around twenty years after her death. For reasons still debated, after
reigning alone for some time Thutmose III undertook a systematic campaign of
effacement against his former co-regent. Her monuments, depictions, and
cartouches were all attacked. When possible, another king’s name was carved
over hers (often Thutmose I, II, or III); when not, the representation was simply
chiseled out or destroyed. As part of this crusade, the statuary of her mortuary
temple at Deir el-Bahri was removed and thrown into a few nearby pits. Because
of this ostensibly unfortunate act, much of the statuary survived for millennia
underground; after discovery of the cache by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in
the 1920s, over thirty-five statues were reassembled. Today scholars put forth
many arguments about the reasons for this effacement, attributing it to questions
of legitimacy or representation. Most now agree it wasn’t any sort of personal
vendetta—which was the earlier sensational version imagined by
archaeologists—as indicated both by the two decades between Hatshepsut’s
death and her proscription and by the fact that she and Thutmose III always shared regnal years, dating to the beginning of their co-regency, and Thutmose maintained this link. He also built his mortuary temple astride hers, clearly identifying himself with Hatshepsut through both location and architectural style.

The desire to sensationalize Hatshepsut is self-evident through the pages of her historical treatment, and in the popular imagination she still has many iterations—as a manipulative seducer who got whatever she wanted; as a puppet being directed by shadowy male court figures; and as a powerful ruler who had everything except the freedom to love her chief steward Senenmut, à la Queen Elizabeth. Her character has been flexible, able to conform to whatever interpretation scholars have projected upon it, but her gender has been assumed to be fixed.

Even a short survey of Hatshepsut's statuary representation displays the king's complicated gender presentation. Accounts of the magnificent Deir el-Bahri works have attempted to situate each statue based on taxonomical groupings, which were lost in the pell-mell way the statues were destroyed and piled in the ground. Some scholars (most famously Roland Tefnin) maintain that the "more male" images were created later, as Hatshepsut warmed to her kingly representation, or that they were reserved for the public areas of her mortuary temple and the "more female" ones for the inner sanctum only, returning to the fixation of audience.\textsuperscript{11} But the use of the qualifier "more" is key here, because the statuary does not fall into the binary provided for it. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition catalogue, Cathleen A. Keller has identified and categorized Hatshepsut's seated statuary from Deir el-Bahri, drawing attention to an intriguing group.\textsuperscript{12} Some statues, such as works 30.3.3 and 29.3.3 (Figures 1 and 2), depict the king as female, coded in the floor-length form-fitting dress worn by elite Egyptian women and a body type conforming to their representation of females. These statues also include female epithets in the accompanying text. Other statues, such as 31.3.168 (Figure 3), portray Hatshepsut as a traditional male king, with the short kilt, kingly regalia, and ideal young torso of a king, and the text includes correspondingly male titles (as do other statues, such as 30.3.1, see Figure 4). But most interestingly, some statues combine gender attributes, creating something beyond clearly "male" or "female." The pronouns and gendered-endings of the inscriptions variously support, counteract, or complicate the gender portrayed in the visual representation. For example, statue 27.3.163 (Figure 5) portrays a male king, but the inscribed text intersperses masculine grammatical forms with feminine ones. Yet another seated statue, number 29.3.2 (Figure 6), depicts the king with male clothing and regalia, a female torso, and feminine-gendered text accompanying the visual representation. These statues also varied skin tone color, which was another gendered aspect of representation in ancient Egypt.\textsuperscript{13} Yet Keller still concludes her nuanced exploration of Hatshepsut's statuary with an unquestioned assumption of femaleness: "Her royal titulary remained clearly female, and there was never an attempt to pretend that as an individual she was anything other than female."\textsuperscript{14}

Even this limited selection of Deir el-Bahri statuary applies subtlety, imagination, and innovation to navigate the complications embedded in material depiction of nonstable gender, and those traits are furthered in the myriad other statues, monuments, and wall reliefs of Hatshepsut's building program.\textsuperscript{15} Clearly
the king did not see her options of gender representation as limited to one of two
categories. Instead, she deployed creative alternatives, combining attributes and
paraphernalia to reflect her roles as former queen, current king, and divine
protector of Egypt.

Gender and Personhood in Ancient Egypt

If we look to other aspects of ancient Egyptian life, especially the
conceptions of kingship and mortuary traditions, it is clear that for the ancient
Egyptians gender did not comprise two discrete categories. Troy, who has done
extensive work on ancient Egyptian queenship, has contended, “[K]ingship was
an androgynous construct in which it was possible to identify both male and
female models.”16 Building on Wolfhart Westendorf’s theory, Troy has posited
that Egyptian gender was a continuum that allowed for movement and flexibility,
and this continuum is presented in the understanding of rulership.17 The
Egyptians had, she writes, “the…perception of a specifically feminine area of
authority.”18 The position of power was dual-gendered, both parts necessary for
the health of the realm. The male king was the leader of the country who ensured
that maat, or truth and order, was maintained through ritualistic, administrative,
and military responsibilities.19 The king preserved the relationship between the
Egyptians and the gods by keeping cult for their statues or having it done in his
name, which involved cleaning, anointing, and offering to them, and he kept
order and decorum in the country by protecting it from menacing foreigners
(which, when Egypt was a military power, usually meant colonizing and subduing
them). The royal women—including, variously, the king’s mother, the multiple
queens, the group of women sometimes called the “harem,” and the
princesses—provided the same service for the king, safeguarding his health,
vitality, and power, as well as bolstering the king’s legitimacy and protecting the
lineage by bearing children.20 They were clearly a step lower in the royal
hierarchy, but still necessary: without a queen, especially, the king would
collapse, and without the king the gods and cosmos would follow in a descent
into isfet, or the always-threatening chaos.

This “androgynous totality”21 of rulership was built into the system, which
itself was predicated on the example of the divine realm. The creator god Atum
was an androgynous being who begat the rest of creation alone. Atum
masturbated, and then swallowed the semen and, playing both roles in the
procreative process, birthed Shu, the god of the air, and Tefnut, the goddess of
moisture. The remaining gods of the Ennead were also twinned. The children of
Shu and Tefnut were Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky, and the
children of that sibling-consort pair were Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephtys. In the
famous story of rivalry between these brothers, Seth kills and dismembers Osiris,
but Isis and Nephtys recover and restore his body, and Osiris is able to
impregnate Isis, who gives birth to the avenging son, Horus. An Egyptian queen
served a parallel role to the king as Isis does for Osiris—caring for him and
ensuring the continuity of his power and lineage. Without Isis, Osiris would have
remained dead and the ascension of isfet, represented by Seth, would have been
successful.
In ancient Egyptian understanding, personhood was simultaneously divisible and combinatory, as some parts of each individual lived on after death, other parts didn’t, and whole identities could be added and integrated. The Egyptian ka, loosely understood as spark of life or soul, would separate from the body of the deceased and inhabit the ka statuary, built to last for eternity and protect the owner’s essence. After death each Egyptian’s name was combined with that of Osiris, so that Amenmose became Osiris-Amenmose. McCarthy and Ann Macy Roth have done fascinating work on postmortem gender fluidity—Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife necessitated regeneration through intercourse and rebirth. Roth argues that because the exemplary Osiride model of renewal was dependent on maleness, after death Egyptian women became male, even while retaining their femaleness to produce their own rebirth. As proof, she cites the presence of wives in men’s tombs but the absence of husbands in women’s tombs; she infers that an Egyptian woman “acted as her own husband, her own wife, and her own mother” in the tripartite structure modeled by Osiris, Isis, and Horus.

Beyond the stories of the gods, Egyptians were masters of syncretism, adept at pun and subtext. As previously mentioned, each king had many names, which contained multiplicities and allusions. Robins has investigated Hatshepsut’s royal names for their skillful use of political propaganda. For example, her First Cartouche name—Maatkare, or “true one of the ka of Re”—contains within it both the words for maat, previously mentioned as harmony and truth, the elemental responsibility entrusted to the king, and Re, the sun god. But its hieroglyphic depiction also resembles the name of a former king, Neferusobek, the most recent documented female ruler (reigning three hundred years prior). The possibilities of both phonetic and visual wordplay have been key to the rich field of Egyptian literature studies.

Figure 1. Hatshepsut Wearing the khat Headdress, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry and temple, lower court, MMA excavations, 1928–30
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.3.3)
www.metmuseum.org
Figure 2. The Female Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, MMA excavations, 1926–29
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1929 (29.3.3)
Torso lent by Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden (L.1998.80)
www.metmuseum.org

Figure 3. Lower Part of a Statue (probably Hatshepsut), Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.) From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, MMA excavations, 1926–28 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1931 (31.3.168) www.metmuseum.org

Figure 4. Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.) From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, MMA excavations, 1927–28 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.3.1) www.metmuseum.org
Figure 5. Large Seated Statue of Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut Quarry, lower court and north of temple, MMA excavations, 1926–27
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1927 (27.3.163)
www.metmuseum.org

Figure 6. Seated Statue of Hatshepsut, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1479-1458 B.C.E.)
From Deir el-Bahri, Asasif, Senenmut Quarry, and MMA tombs 108 and 116, possibly Asasif, MMA excavations, 1926–28/Lepsius 1843–45
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1929 (29.3.2)
www.metmuseum.org.
Viewed next to these nuanced and complicated examples of rendering gender and understanding personhood, the reductive clumsiness of “Hatshepsut in the guise of a male” becomes apparent. Read within the complexity of Egyptian gender constructs, the disjunctions and nexuses of Hatshepsut’s visual representation prove more generative than the standard scholarly depiction of the king as a female working with the visual traditions available to fulfill a male role. Instead, we might ask, How did Hatshepsut conceive of gender? Did she see herself as a woman resisting the preferred state of affairs, ruling Egypt for years while a male heir waited in the wings? Or did he see himself as a king, who took power when the dynasty was vulnerable, and ruled by the favor of the gods? Or, in true Egyptian fashion, was it a combination? While it is clearly impossible to uncover how Hatshepsut understood her own gender to operate within the social matrix of ancient Egypt—and we should not even pretend that such a cogent thing existed—I would argue that a queer methodology at least opens up the possibilities of overlap, fluidity, and combination that the ancient Egyptians skillfully and regularly deployed. Perhaps Hatshepsut was not only fulfilling the gendered-male role of rulership, with the requisite portrayal of the pharaoh with kingly paraphernalia such as the royal kilt, the crowns of Egypt, and the false beard. Perhaps Hatshepsut was an androgynous being in the model of Atum who was able to play both male and female roles when necessary to ensure the vitality and maintain the stability of her kingdom. As Egyptian kings were semidivine, tracing their lineage back to Re or, in the case of Hatshepsut, Amun, and serving as a link between the people and the gods, the multivalence of divine gender roles may have been correspondingly more available to the pharaoh.

Once Hatshepsut took on the role of kingship, by year seven of the co-regency, she began to perform the acts of kingship. Those rituals placed the king in a position of maleness, metaphorically and literally serving cult for the gods, administering the bureaucracy, and protecting the country. Years of enacting maleness complicate any understanding of unitary gender. This argument is not one of voluntarism, claiming that Hatshepsut at a certain point decided to become male. Instead, she started to operate as king and that role necessitated a repetition of acts that in ancient Egyptian culture constituted maleness, and as her position of power shifted from queen to co-regent to king, her gender shifted accordingly, as an equally integral factor in Hatshepsut’s identity. In fact, when Hatshepsut took on kingly titles, her only child, a daughter named Neferure, took on the queenly title of “God’s Wife,” which Hatshepsut had previously held as the queen of Thutmose II. This dislocation of the role of queen suggests that Hatshepsut needed a woman—her daughter—to provide the female aspect of rulership as a counterpart to her own male aspect. Yet in visual representations Hatshepsut could portray herself as both biologically and socially female-bodied, in the dress of an elite Egyptian woman.

Hatshepsut’s case was an unusual one, and she is often discussed in the same breath as Cleopatra VII, Akhenaten’s wife Nefertiti, and other women of ancient Egyptian history who wielded uncommon amounts of power. And with good reason. But the alternate understanding of Hatshepsut I’d like to propose is not based solely on the unique morphology of her statuary. Instead, the feasibility
of her complicated identification was contingent upon the Egyptian understandings of gender in the divine and royal realms, which normalized composite and combinatory formation. This conclusion is not a solution, but a provocation: that a queer methodology may be the only way to reveal ideas of divine and royal gender as nuanced as those of the ancient Egyptians—particularly regarding Hatshepsut, queen, regent, and king.

NOTES


5 Dorman, “Hatshepsut: Princess to Queen to Co-Ruler,” in Hatshepsut, 87.

6 For a study of the familial relationships between kings and queens in the 18th dynasty, including Hatshepsut, and a theory about the consequences of Hatshepsut’s resulting kingship, see Gay Robins, “Problems concerning queens and queenship in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt,” NIN 3 (2002): 25-31.

7 For a thoughtful survey of the visual representation of Thutmose III by Hatshepsut see Vanessa Davies, “Hatshepsut’s Use of Tuthmosis III in Her Program of Legitimation,” Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 41 (2004): 55-66.

8 Cathleen A. Keller, “The Joint Reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III,” in Hatshepsut, 97. For an outline of the conventions of representation used in Egyptian art, see Gay

9 As Cathleen A. Keller points out, the statuary of Hatshepsut (such as that described in this paper) was often unique enough that the common Egyptian tradition of chiseling out a former king’s name and replacing it with another’s was not feasible. Cathleen A. Keller, “The Statuary of Hatshepsut,” in *Hatshepsut*, 160.


16 Lana Troy, “She for whom all that is said is and done: the ancient Egyptian queen,” in *Ancient Queens: Archaeological Explorations*, edited by Sarah Nelson (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 93.


18 Troy, “Ancient Egyptian Queenship,” 2.

19 This paragraph references concepts discussed by various authors in David O’Connor and David P. Silverman, eds., *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).

20 For more on the multi-generational aspect of female royal power, see Lana, “Ancient Egyptian Queenship.”


24 Roth, “Father Earth, Mother Sky” 199 and Ann Macy Roth, “The Absent Spouse: Patterns and Taboos in Egyptian Tomb Decoration,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 36 (1999). Gay Robins finds that with votive and funerary stelae women are very rarely the sole owners or commissioners, but there are exceptions. See Robins, “Some Principles of Compositional Dominance.”

25 Robins, “Names of Hatshepsut as King.”
Although Hatshepsut was referred to by both masculine and feminine grammatical forms and titular endings, her names—including her First Cartouche name, Second Cartouche name, her Horus name, and others—did not change to take masculine form as her visual representation did. Robins has articulated the brilliant wordplay involved in Hatshepsut’s names, displaying how they referenced her kingly legitimacy and responsibilities while motioning towards goddesses and predecessors in a way that male-gendered constructions wouldn’t have. Gay Robins, “The Names of Hatshepsut as King,” The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 85 (1999): 103-112.

Mary Ann Eaverly argues vehemently against such a possibility, and instead suggests that Hatshepsut was trying to “feminize” the role of king, or even “normalize” the idea of a woman king. I have many problems with her analysis, not the least of which that this seems a wishful and contemporary way of understanding women’s achievement. Mary Ann Eaverly, Tan men/pale women: color and gender in archaic Greece and Egypt, a comparative approach (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 65.

Although not speaking about Hatshepsut, Meskell makes this point: “Gender identity should be seen as a complex assortment of networks of signifying practices, varying for individuals over time, as it intersects with other networks of signifying practices located in such concepts as class and race.” Meskell, “Archaeologies of Identity,” 29.

Although we now know of the existence of so many other chromosomal possibilities than XX and XY, I am here following the general distinctions of female-bodied and male-bodied in Egyptian representation, usually indicated by the corresponding secondary sex characteristics.