

Egyptian Folk Humor and Herodotus

by

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*Dedicated to
my father Kellen
and the Blue Blazers Blues Band*

Acknowledgments

Friends and family made this possible. I especially have to thank Allie Madden. For years, we lived in a 325-square-foot spider dungeon student apartment with a caving floor while I was in graduate school. She listened to me rant about ancient Greek and Egyptian jokes as I grew more unkempt and less intelligible over those Michigan winters. Now she has to take medication. (She would laugh reading that joke. I never could have done anything without her. They ought to give her the degree.)

I feel the same about my father Kell for listening on the phone as I made a big deal about ancient manure jokes through civil unrest and a global pandemic. I should thank him for tolerating such a career choice. When I asked, he joked about sending a cow-pie to Michigan for intellectual examination, since he grew up on a farm (to illustrate how similar modern farmers' manure jokes can be to ancient ones) though I decided I'd better not. Thanks, Dad, it's the thought that counts.

Also well medicated now – I hope – are the faculty members who had to read drafts of this dissertation as it crawled like a crustaceous beast out of depths of ignorance. Sara Forsdyke's seminar on Greek historiography (but mainly her work comparing modern folk songs), Ian's work on Egypt and Apuleius, Sara Rappe's hermeneutics of Platonic dialogues and general open-mindedness about philosophy and classics, and Yopie's seminar on reception, Katherine's wonderfully horrible hard class on Demotic. Oh, and Terry Wilfong for ancient menstruation jokes and

psychedelic cat art. Their good humor and reliability were necessary as I got lost at sea looking for islands of talking snakes, hoping not to wreck my ship bringing something from Egypt back to Classics.

I want to thank the faculty on my committee for that rare quality of having a healthy sense of humor with students, about our work and the reality of our often miserable lives. They kept me encouraged about cool potentials of this project because the material is so rich and worthwhile and relevant. I have to especially wonder at the light touch they have brought to bear on the tender webbings of my motivations as they hung in the wind. A special thanks to the Demotocist Katherine Davis for her conversations, support, and good sense of humor. I ought to thank my old friend the philosopher Charlie Huenemann (but to hell with him and I hope his beard starts on fire).

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Preface

Since one of my topics is prudery, I bent a few rules in the writing. A hard-minded examination of a few high texts and their grammar is not what most people around the ancient Mediterranean would ever have done as history. They told stories, usually in the evening time, to pass on creative traditions with family or to blow off steam from work.

This thesis is about what happens to folk humor when it's confined over long periods and pressured into weird modern forms like 'History' or 'Classics'. Stuff from the lower side of popular culture has been excised from entire eras of human experience because of the exclusive and elite nature of 'research' as a sort of professional market. Lives, personalities, perspectives, experiences, and ideas, particularly of workers, slaves, women, children, have been selected out of the record. I think that's what happened to the European narrative about 5th century Egypt. (Where is all the folklore? I tried to get some of it back in there.)

It would be hypocritical to take too serious an approach. Neither Herodotus nor the Egyptians really did history that way, so neither do I because it would miss the point. He and his informants were not cold-hearted intellectuals (facts and just the facts!) but they enjoyed each other's company with very relaxed forms of narration meant to provoke different audiences to think, not only to tell us facts.

If an outcome of this dissertation is a laugh at the limits of human wisdom as it tries to manipulate and control the past, then it's a success. We've gotten one of the elements of Egyptian humor as it influenced Greek, from Setne to Socrates. Learning to laugh with Herodotus and his Egyptian friends at the way Big Men temper history with austerity and authority, we might do a pretty good job getting a feel for what they were they were up to in response, historiographically speaking.

Note on Racism

This thesis is about an encounter between two ancient cultures. But it is not explicitly about ancient ethnicity and modern color dynamics. Modern racism and antiquity is an ocean. It needs real attention, and it's getting it from elsewhere¹ better than what I would have been able to do here. The history of Egypt as a symbol taken up by modern groups – white, Afrocentrist, Jewish, Christian, Arab and so on – would require a completely different approach. I make a small contribution inside the world of Herodotus and folklore studies. This thesis is not intended to make grand claims about racism and history, but rather to think with you for a minute about some really old street jokes.

People have always laughed at some things across difference. My goal here is to bring attention to how some popular ancient African material entered Greek. I was unable to include a wealth of comparative material and folktales I wanted to, especially out of African American or modern Greek folklore. What I can offer now is a narrow study of Herodotus that compares a little Arab and African material I could access in English

¹ Cf. in Classics, Sarah Derbew's *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* on the absence of classical 'blackface' and Ethiopia's ambiguously positive presence in Herodotus (Cambridge, 2022). In Egyptology, Uroš Matić, *Ethnic Identities in the Land of the Pharaohs* (Cambridge, 2020).

thanks to anthropologists working inside their own cultures geographically closer to Egypt. I would have liked to do more, but the world is big and time is short.

Note on 'Classics'

Interdisciplinary work is tough and Classics is not the most pleasant colleague. It still clings to old methods with white knuckles, and it holds on to purity and 'rigor' for dear life as if dangling over the side of some abyss full of writhing unwashed masses. Its narrow focus on elite canon and grammar dictates that any creative work trying anything new will be futile for people without a golden inheritance. I have none of that; many students now have none of that. The powerful elders of the discipline inherited the academic life by luck of their genetics. But for most of us today it's a different game.

I did something anyway. This project does not genuflect to the gatekeeping Classics guard who will never read it. Rather, it transgresses departmental boundaries to think about common people's humor, which is everywhere and not restricted to any one special culture or language. I may only show here how far Classics needs to go to crack open the gates and be included in the rest of the world.

To reimagine the Mediterranean beyond illusions like 'Classical canon' and 'Classical philology', students of this generation are stuck with the choice to betray the old discipline for the sake of getting an education. One thing I know is that it's exciting, and the potential, when we go traveling and listening beyond, is wonderfully bright.

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List of Abbreviations

ATU	Aarne-Thompson Uther Index of Folktale Types.
BCH	<i>Brill's Companion to Herodotus.</i>
CCH	<i>The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus.</i>
ES	Hasan el-Shamy, <i>Folk Traditions of the Arab World.</i>
ES-FE	Hasan el-Shamy, <i>Folktales of Egypt.</i>
ES-TAT	Hasan el-Shamy, <i>Tales Arab Women Tell.</i>
HQ	Hoffmann and Quack, <i>Anthologie der demotischen Literatur.</i>
LA	<i>Lexikon der Ägyptologie</i> , Helck and Otto.
LAC	Lloyd, Asheri, Corcella, <i>Commentary on Herodotus I-IV.</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Editions.
LSJ	Liddell, Scott and Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon.</i>
RVM	Rosaria Vignolo Munson, <i>Herodotus Volumes I & II.</i>
WT	Whitmarsh and Thomas, <i>The Romance Between Greece and the East.</i>

Abstract

Ancient Egyptian humor has been ignored for its great influence. One reason is prudery: it never passed too well into the Classical Tradition. Some writers of high genres from Greece and Rome drained humor and imagination from Egypt just as they filled the Nile with boring scribes and exotic sages. We'll have a look at that tendency in the Introduction.

Herodotus was an odd exception. He preserved earthy material he heard from Egyptian storytellers face-to-face. Their humor about the pharaohs resonated well with Greek thought. Both cultures shared a similar sense for problems of male power. But not too much has been written about the oral narratives he preserved – scattered folktales, jokes, and fibs.

In Chapter Two we consider some theories about folk humor from Anthropology, Folkloristics, and Humor Studies. Traditional oral narration works from simple patterns of incongruity, which I call 'mirthemes'. These units of incongruity pass easily across languages and cultures. But humor takes on different meanings in specific cultural contexts or spaces of performance. Rather than looking for any 'correct' reading of an ancient folktale, I suggest we entertain diverse ancient spaces and audiences ('stand-in' roles): for instance, reading a passage from both Greek and Egyptian angles, as male priests or female peasants, near temples or in rural areas, or from many other valuable intersections of identities that enrich our discussion of the Greek.

In Chapter Three, I move to the modern world to consider a few living humorous storytelling traditions very similar to what's in Herodotus. I discuss some traditional oral Arab and African humor tales as they pass to tourists and ethnographers from diverse informants. If we are generous with analogy, modern dynamics of transmission might help us fill speculative gaps in the ancient record. For instance, street performers of folktales today at busy places of tourism (like the pyramids) tend to fabricate 'mirthemes' on the spot for outsider intellectuals in coded ways (say, to make fun of Western academics). We can reimagine Herodotus by analogy using that sort of interaction as a possible reading.

Chapter Four is an extended discussion of a single anonymous oral narrative someone along the Nile told Herodotus about how a prostitute built one of the pyramids. This was a form of 'oral graffiti' with low quality and lack of scholarly visibility. Rather than reading it as a Classical orientalizing or exoticizing of foreigners and women on the part of Herodotus and the Greeks (as has been done) I consider other perspectives. From an Egyptian angle, the gender humor may have come out of very old traditional comic tales about the pyramids, from Nile women's obscene festival life, with roots in household lore about the sex goddess Hathor. For male priests, it may have had political meaning that can tell us about the mood among Egyptians about Hellenizing cultural influences and democracy. Egyptian comic narrative patterns from extremely old traditions made their way into Classical literature, but remain unseen and completely unappreciated. They were generated out of an 'underlore' of international storytelling among farmers, slaves, women, and foreigners to Greece and Rome reflecting on their own lives. Their creative storytelling was at the roots of the Classics. People can take readings in this dissertation or leave them. I am certainly not the master voice over these texts.

Chapter One: The Case of the Missing Chamberpot

...[Maspero] did decline to translate the climactic phrase
īw ḥnn=f ḥr-ḥn n wˁ.t šḥyˁ(.t)
(which...I take to mean
“with his penis in a pot of excrement [?]”)...²

On Canceling Egyptian Humor

What you see above is Egyptologist Steve Vinson doing his best in 2018 to figure out a really old punchline, something from a short story written by an Egyptian in the 3rd century BCE. Nobody knows exactly what to do with that tricky last word.

(Maspero, an earlier translator, simply refused.) But it’s the climactic object in *The Misfortunes of Setne*, once a popular bundle of stories-within-stories that reads like something out of *Arabian Nights*, with sorcerers, ghosts, sound effects and puns, plenty of bodily and sexual obscenity, stuff probably best performed out loud for small gatherings or households. (Part of it is narrated by an unimpressed ghost telling how her husband got them both killed poking

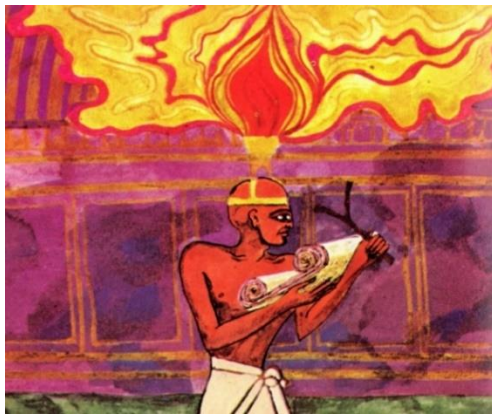


Figure 1: Psychedelic drawing of an Egyptian priest from 1971. Illustrated by Brian Melling, from TGH James, *Myths and Legends of Ancient Egypt*. Bantam Books, 1971.

² Steve Vinson, *The Craft of a Good Scribe: History, Narrative and Meaning in the First Tale of Setne Khaemwas* (Brill, 2017), 52.

into a book of forbidden magic – the fool!)³ Whoever wrote it was brilliantly educated in long scribal traditions, enjoyed women’s folklore at men’s expense, and knew well what seem to have been techniques for live performance. Needless to say, they had a great sense of humor. (Penises are playfully drawn all over the papyrus.)⁴

Only recently has Setne’s situation been considered funny to anybody, least of all to the Egyptian who wrote it down. Work on the topic of ‘ancient humor’ happens almost entirely in regard to Greece and Rome, since famous Classical comedians like Aristophanes and Plautus survived and have enjoyed great celebration.⁵ Curiously, few who study those or other popular



Figure 2: Greek satyr with penis stuck in a jar. Mitchell, Greek Vase Painting fig. 83. *Museu Archeologico Regionale: V651.*

³ Usually called *First Setne*, but an alternate title is from an ostrakon that Vinson suggests (37). Here is a short plot summary offered by Mark Depauw if helpful: “[Setne] Khaemwaset breaks into the tomb of Naneferkaptah, a prince who took into his grave a sacred book written by the god Thoth himself. Khaemwaset wants to get hold of this precious manuscript and when the ghost of the deceased will not give permission, he forces things by using witchcraft. Later on Setne has a nightmare in which a malevolent woman has him in her sway, taking all his belongings and causing him to have his children killed. Setne realizes this dream is caused by Naneferkaptah and decides to give him back the book.” *Companion to Demotic Studies* (Papyrologica Bruxellensia 1997), 87.

⁴ Phalluses are normal parts of Egyptian language, determinatives that come at the ends of words. But here, as Jay (140) noticed, their presence is highly excessive and definitely humorous. “Most overtly humorous is the combination of the phallus sign with words that do not typically take this determinative: sdr (3/6, in which Naneferkaptah “lies” with Ihweret) and mr “to love/desire” in both its verb and noun forms (a verb at 5/9 and 5/19 and a noun at 5/22, with the phallus determinative presumably giving the word the connotation “lust/ sexual desire” in these contexts).”

⁵ Bodily slapstick itself goes back to the earliest written literature on Earth. We do not cover ancient Mesopotamia in this project, but the world’s oldest preserved jokes are in cuneiform, for instance the “absurd pauper’s triumph over his oppressor” in the *Poor Man of Nippur*, according to J.S. Cooper, “Structure, humor, and Satire in the Poor Man of Nippur,” in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 27:3, 1975, 163-174. See also Finn, “Herodotus’ Poor Man of Nippur,” *Classical World* 112: 2, 2019: 13-38; Gurney, “The Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur and Its Folktale Parallels,” *Anatolian Studies*, 22, 1972, 149-148; and George, “Ninurta-Pāqidāt’s Dog Bite, and Notes on Other Comic Tales,” *Iraq* 55, 1993, 63-75.

genres from around that time have thought at all about Setne or a host of other Egyptian 'stock figures' including devious trickster women, foolish adulterers, wise slaves, and greedy kings. But in some ways it's astoundingly similar stuff.

One problem is that there is still almost no scholarship on Egyptian humor.⁶ The notion that Egyptians had any role to play in all the transmission and reception of world wit, or had an obscene sense of humor about themselves, their own body parts and gender roles, has gone without almost any attention whatsoever.⁷ So my question here is – what happened to the chamberpot? Before we discuss that, here's a better summary of Setne's unfortunate situation:

A curious prince named Setne is obsessed with a magic book. To find it, he descends into a tomb, where he meets two ghosts, Nanefkerkeph and his wife, Iahweret. She warns these two men about their curiosity. Her foolish husband killed their whole family when he sought the book himself long ago.

Regardless of her warning, Setne and Nanefkerkeph decide to play a board game to decide who gets the book. The ghost accuses Setne of cheating, and bashes him over the head with the board so hard that it sinks him into the ground all the way up to his penis.

Setne manages to steal the book, but in return he's cursed with a nightmare: In a dream, he sees a sexy priestess of the cat goddess, Tabubu, and desperately wants to have sex with her. Supposing that he's going to be able to, he offers her a small amount of cash as if she were a cheap prostitute. Rejected in a clever series of double- and even triple-entendres (she tells him to go do it to himself)⁸ Setne is finally invited into her house.

⁶ The only publication is Houlihan's 2001 *Wit and Humour in Ancient Egypt*.

⁷ There is only one study of Demotic humor by Jasnow (note 10 below), though Jay and Parkinson touch upon it. But there is no intersection yet with Classical texts, and it's a huge lacuna of scholarship all the way through Lucian and Apuleius and beyond.

⁸ For Vinson's analysis of these puns, see his (2017) chapter *Buffalo Buffalo Buffalo* and 216-217.

Setne does everything he can to persuade Tabubu to have sex: he signs his entire family fortune over, and even allows her to kill his children by hurling them out the window, where they are eaten by dogs and cats.

When he reaches out to get started having sex, Tabubu's jaw drops to the floor in a scream⁹ and Setne snaps awake. He's lying naked in the middle of the street in front of the Pharaoh himself, with his penis stuck in a chamberpot (or something).¹⁰

That last bit of the story is difficult to extract, to say the least. The chamberpot, the “crowning episode” of Egyptian humor, has been lifted up, peered into, and scrutinized by scholars from a variety of angles, but they have mainly looked for its objective historical value – a somewhat stuck pursuit.¹¹

European colonial translators, with sharply high-minded morality, canceled out the chamberpot passage entirely.¹² In 1895, Flinders Petrie damned the cursed thing as a blot on Egyptian culture.¹³ Maspero, in his French translation in 1889, cleaned up and toned down the sexual content by sticking Setne in an oven: “When Setne came to, he was in a furnace chamber with no clothes on his back.”¹⁴ A disgusted Maspero directed everyone to translate the Egyptian for themselves (as if anyone could): “the sense...will be clear to all persons who might wish to refer to

⁹ A common type-scene in Egyptian humor, like a stock character's amazed or horrified reaction.

¹⁰ Adapted from Vinson, 4.39-5.32.

¹¹ Richard Jasnow, “And Pharaoh Laughed...Reflections on Humor in Setne 1 and Late Period Egyptian Literature,” *Enchoria* 27 (2001), 74. Much thanks to Terry Wilfong for reference to this article. At least a dozen historical studies are referenced by Vinson (2017), 51-52.

¹² Aristophanes was well celebrated at the time.

¹³ “...a blot on the Egyptians' moral reputation.” Vinson (2017), 86.

¹⁴ “Lorsque Satni revint à lui, il était dans une chambre de four sans aucun vêtement sur le dos.” Gaston Maspero, *Contes Populaires de l'Égypte Ancienne : Traduits et Commentés Par Gaston Maspero* (Ligaran Éditions, 2016), 57.

the original.”¹⁵ Later, in his *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, Griffith enlightened the page with Old Testament flair – lo’s! and shalt’s! everywhere – with an ellipsis for the ungodly unmentionables:

And lo! Setne awakened (?) being in a burning heat (?), his phallus being in a , nor were there any clothes on earth upon him. At a certain time it came to pass that Setne perceived a noble person riding in a litter (?), many men running at his feet, he being like a Pharaoh.¹⁶

Lichtheim’s translation leaves a mysteriously odorless absence: “[t]he meaning of *šhy*’ is not known.”¹⁷

Setne awoke in a state of great heat, his phallus in a . . . , and there were no clothes on him at all. At this moment Setne saw a noble person borne in a litter, with many men running beside him, and he had the likeness of Pharaoh.¹⁸

Brunsch in 1988 dared a lewder path when he threw in some hot and steamy intercourse:

Setne wakes up and discovers his penis still in Tabubu’s vagina, still hot and wet and slippery.¹⁹

Jasnow in 2001 suggested Maspero may have been right about the translation ‘furnace’, and speculated at length about “tapering cylindrical tips of the blow-pipes...or bellows providing oxygen to the smelting fire.”²⁰ But Ritner’s 2003 translation boldly gives us a ‘chamber pot’:

¹⁵ Vinson (2017), 52. “Amusingly” according to Jasnow, 79.

¹⁶ F.L. Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis :The Sethon of Herodotus and the Demotic tales of Khamuas* (Clarendon Press, 1900), 37.

¹⁷ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume III: The Late Period* (University of California, 2006), 125.

¹⁸ Lichtheim, 123.

¹⁹ *Setne wieder zu sich kommt, befindet er sein Phallus sich noch in Tabubus Vagina, die heiss und feucht schlupfrig ist.* Wolfgang Brunsch, “Tria sunt insaturabilia...et os vulvae...(Proverbia 30, 15-16) und Setne, V, 25-30” in *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 11 (1988), 51-53.

²⁰ Jasnow, 80.

Setna awoke in a heated state, with his penis inside a chamber pot(?) and without any clothing on him at all.²¹ It was but a moment that transpired, and Setna beheld a noble mounted upon a palanquin, who had many men running beneath his feet and who was in the guise of Pharaoh.

Quack and Hoffman's 2007 German edition tidies things up and keeps the pot a little cleaner:

Setne woke up, as he was in a hot state, his penis in a still-damp clay pot, not a bit of clothing on him. Then he saw an aristocratic man on a sedan chair with many people following him and he was like the Pharaoh himself.²²

Stephens' 2013 scholarly analysis leaves out all the slapstick (no head-bashing with a boardgame or stuck penises):

...Khaemwas plays a board game for the book, but when he loses, he steals it. In revenge Naneferkeptah, who even in death had retained his magic powers, contrives a punishment: Khaemwas finds himself fatally attracted to a woman of unsurpassed beauty, Tabubu, whom he saw within the precincts of the temple of Ptah in Memphis. But at the climactic moment, she disappears into thin air. Whereupon Setne finds himself lying naked on the ground in the temple precinct and at a time when the pharaoh is walking by.²³

But Vinson's 2018 edition boldly goes where none had gone before – all the way to 'pot of excrement':

(And thus) it was that Setne awoke: in a state of heat, with his penis in a pot of excrement (?), and with no clothes at

²¹ "The uncertain word, attested uniquely here, is determined by two signs indicating dung and either water or a pot." In Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry* (Yale University Press, 2003), 466.

²² "...Setne wachte auf, indem er in einem heißen Ort war, sein Phallus in einem (noch feuchten[?]) Tongefäß war, und überhaupt keine Kleidung an ihm war. Da sah Setne einen vornehmen Mann, der eine Sänfte bestiegen hatte, bei dem viele Leute liefen und der wie Pharao war." Quack and Hoffman, 149-150. My translation.

²³ See Stephens, "Fictions of Cultural Authority," in Whitmarsh and Thompson's *The Romance Between Greece and the East*, 91-92.

all on his back! It was a moment that went by. (And at what) was it that Setne gazed, (but) at an august personage, who was carried high up on a palanquin, with many men running at his feet, and who was in the guise of Pharaoh!²⁴



Figure 3: An ancient Egyptian toilet. 14th century BCE. Wikimedia Creative Commons. Photo by D. Denisenkov.

Philology fluctuates over time. Humor bobs alongside, or sinks.

In Vinson's recent translation, risk is taken and gaps are creatively filled. Exclamation marks point up the surprise Setne must have experienced at such an ordeal, leading up to what sounds like a punchline from a bawdy stage comedy. Readers are starting to get the feeling that Egyptians had a sense of humor. Not only that, but intelligent, self-aware, highly literary, and extraordinarily dirty stuff full of genital puns that would make a Greek comic like Aristophanes gasp (or give Aristotle a stroke).

Why Setne made Egyptians laugh is not hard to understand. The historical Setne (c. 1285 BCE)²⁵ was a well-known icon to a wide African audience, favored son of Ramses the Great, a richling possessed by Egyptomania, a mystical fad that came and went among a few bored and affluent Egyptians themselves long before anyone in Europe had the chance to get the itch. 'Egyptology' was a a joke for thousands of years along the Nile. For all his hoarding of artifacts, seeking of forbidden knowledge, and amassing of ancient treasures, Setne earned a

²⁴ Vinson (2017), 125-126.

²⁵ Vinson, 5.

pretentious stink in the popular nose.²⁶ It might have helped if he had not put his name all over the place on official reliefs as state propaganda: war hero, great wizard, high priest, king's favorite son, he had titles like 'valiant heir', 'vigilant champion', 'excellent of wisdom, 'King's son of his body, beloved of him, divine seed who came forth from the victorious bull',²⁷ and so on. Setne was brought down to earth in popular culture in terms of his sexual misadventures and failed magical pursuits, stuff that made good fodder for a punchline among priests (who actually *were* in charge of local magic services, cures and medicines, temple economics at a real local level).

A cycle of priestly tales developed over the centuries where Setne went from daddy's favorite prince to the sex-crazed, magic-hungry, ghost-hunting 'sageling' who gets what's was coming to him, a stereotype that became so popular that the text *Setne* survived.²⁸ Egyptians were entertained for centuries that someone like that was beaten mercilessly into the ground with a gaming board by a ghost:



Figure 4: Supposedly the golden mask of Setne. Louvre N2291. Vinson, 30. Image: Wikimedia Creative Commons.

...he hit him over the head with the game box that was before him; he made him sink into the ground as far as his ankles... he made him sink into the ground as far as his

²⁶ Depauw (1997), 87.

²⁷ Marjorie Martin Fisher, *The sons of Ramesses II :an analysis of documented material with catalogue*. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1998, 204-210.

²⁸ "the very opposite of the ideal sage," Jasnow, 73.

penis... he made him sink into the ground as far as his ears...²⁹

What we can see – and Egyptologists are in agreement on – is that Setne is here ridiculously clobbered and has his penis stuck in something.³⁰

What that has meant to different audiences in terms of power and identity over time is a harder question. But a joke about beating the boss's favorite kid into the ground with a Monopoly board (as it were)³¹ is not a schtick performed without a shade of resentment for *somebody*. But there's nothing unusual about encountering humor like this in North Africa and the Middle East, ancient or modern.

Slapstick comedy is a very old and very common sort of human behavior – all ages, all genders, all abilities, all cultures. Storytellers have been sticking men of authority and affluence in pots, so to speak, since the beginning of time. At the very dawn of writing, ancient kings, tyrants, and government officials were mocked from below with bodily humor. (The earliest surviving comic tale on Earth is from Mesopotamia, and tells of a heroic peasant beating up a rich mayor over a goat.)³² We find this sort of thing many centuries before 'Comedy' was invented by the same people who invented every 'democratic' institution, when those special Greeks woke up, blinked their eyes, and suddenly evolved the desire to strap on giant leather phalluses, fake breasts, fat suits, false bellies, and gaping masks to march singing around stage lambasting politicians for how they wear their pubic hair, and fart, slobber,

²⁹ Trans. Vinson, 4.29-30. To Jacqueline Jay (249), "It seems impossible, for example, to see the scene...as anything less than humorous in intent."

³⁰ "To be fair, precisely what Setne's penis is "in" at this point in the tale is a problem, and our 'pot of excrement' for the text's *šhyʿ.tj* is, at best, a plausible possibility. But there is no question that Setne's member is, in the original, the focus of the tale's denouement." Vinson (2017), 164.

³¹ Probably the game of *mehen*.

³² See fn. 5 above.

masturbate and – well, you get the idea.³³ But people had been doing that for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years before Aristophanes (forgive the repetition, but it's a lot of time to fit in one sentence).

Humor punctures pretenses and reduces the abstract to the bodily, down into the deeps, the digestive and reproductive realms, that common material substratum of smelly shared human materiality and imperfection that our bodies share in common as biological fact but our egos fear to openly admit. In folk storytelling all around the ancient Mediterranean, the powerful were (and still are) brought down to the realm of the genitals and bowels, equaled and leveled with the rest of humanity. We find in our earliest stench of tales topics like defecation, fornication, spewage, drainage, spillage, bellies, buttocks, bruising, slapstick, stench, flatulence, desire and copulation – that earthy realm where all are equal and *nobody is above*. Usually, at the same time, the lowly peasant, slave, or princess rises to the heights of grandeur (if only in someone's resentful imagination).

Ancient comedy burbled up out of the creative underworlds of workers and slaves, lowly people who looked up at a high ignoramus like Setne and knocked him down to his penis with board games in their night-time storytelling. Ancient obscenity such as this must have been a beautiful psychological therapy to real people working real lives, insofar as the bodily imagination empowered anyone stuck in a subordinate position (woman, slave, worker) to figuratively stick it to the higher-ups. Humor was a little relief from work, if only in a futile and imaginary way. (Or more cynically, merely some vacation time controlled by the powers-that-be, blowing off steam before plodding back to work). Comic inversion was a small act of relief on the part of the dominated and

³³ "...it seems highly likely that Setna was a popular folk hero, and that the extant Setna stories we possess represent just the tip of the iceberg." Jay, 248.

subordinate, as they fantasized about lifestyles of the rich and the famous in make-believe worlds that would probably never really happen.

Egyptian people's humor – so far as any culture's floating imaginary lore has its own particular flavors, tastes, styles, patterns, inflections, archetypes – was mostly directed at celebrity pharaohs and their princely sons, but it was so good that it spread far and wide as it passed into the hands of Greek and Roman writers, who saw it as a sort of spiced stuff with an exotic feel and a sense of scholarly danger. Later authors drew upon Egyptian folklore to complement their own new higher genres, full of kingly morons and Setne-esque idiots, in works by Herodotus all the way past Lucian and Apuleius³⁴ into late medieval tales, drawings, manuscripts, mock epics and beyond. We will have a look at one moment where cross-cultural proliferation happened in what follows, thanks largely to the work of translators and philologists from the last few years, Egyptian material slowly shifts over time to hazard humorous readings. But receptions have generally been far more austere (or even funny, I think, for how unfunny they are). Before returning to the ancient world, let's have a look at some renditions of *Setne* that seem to have missed the joke.

Prudery, or How to Miss an Ancient Penis Joke

Modern European scholars and audiences have lost (or tossed out) the chamberpot of *Setne* in a variety of ways, as Vinson explores in his fascinating 2018 study. As Setne and Tabubu hurtled through time together, they took new shapes in and outside academia. Oddly, none of them is very funny. Say, austere readings of high and dark literature from Nietzsche (no chamberpot there), to the *Necronomicon* (still no

³⁴ These two 'Classical' authors were, incidentally, a Syrian and African with their own resonance as ethnic outsider comics among Rome's intellectuals who drew on Egyptian popular comedy styles in the 2nd century CE.

chamberpot), into mystic forms of Derridean deconstruction (maybe a chamberpot? hard to tell), to playful and brilliant diasporic jazz-fiction of Ishmael Reed (no chamberpot, but it would fit right in with *Mumbo Jumbo*).³⁵ Receptions portray Tabubu as something like a stern-breasted white-skinned Sex Valkyrie, or Setne as a smoky Don-Juan in a suit. At one point during an outbreak of Egyptomania in France, a fully enwhitened Tabubu became a symbol of art-deco eroticism in nude drawings that sold for immense amounts of money. Setne's search for magic was an inspiration for Boris Karloff's role in the famous horror movie *The Mummy*. (No chamberpot there either.)

The poet Gilbert Murray once took creative license to pluck the offending thing of existence:

And Setne strove to rise, but cloud on cloud
Held him; hot wind and hate and laughter loud,
And one that wept for a world's glory gone,
And dust, dust, dust: and Setne shrieked aloud.

And saw: and, lo, all naked in the day
In a waste place of bricks and shards he lay,
And clutched a burning kiln. And near him passed
The way and much folk jeering on the way...³⁶

In Murray's poetic version (he drew on an English translation), there's no women's sexual humor at the expense of a man's penis. Quite the opposite, it's a manly European Romantic macho man tragically unmanned by an evil feminine force, left for dead with a "world's glory gone," a wilting gothic image of supernatural phallic heroism. Ancient

³⁵ See Vinson's chapters 3-5 for a superb exploration of these. Fawzia Assaad, *Préfigurations égyptiennes de la pensée de Nietzsche* (Lausanne, 1986), Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1989), Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Scribner, 1972).

³⁶ Gilbert Murray, *The Story of Nefrekepta from a Demotic Papyrus* (Oxford, 1911), poem 40.

figures are nothing if not open spaces to map on contemporary fantasies about oneself.

We might criticize Murray for going too far, if not reversing the whole joke of *Setne*, entirely at the expense of a rather dumb and horny man. But to what authority would we appeal? The untranslatable entity *šhyʿ(t)* has left open a poetic space, a gap in the manuscript. Any performance of Setne's nightmare hangs on the desires of the reader on the other end, ancient or modern, who fills a blank with, when it comes to epistemic objectivity, at best a creative guess. Retellings of literary fiction often tell us more about minds in other times and places as part of a transactional process than anything about the text itself. Audiences and readers separated by time, space, and language can fill up an ellipsis in an ancient text however they want. *Even an ellipsis is a form of presence, a deliberate decision not to intervene and declare the line this or that.*³⁷

Egyptian folk motifs about figures like Setne – the sex-crazed wizard or foolish seeker of forbidden magic – appear in Greek popular storytelling in damaged or deranged ways. One good example of a possibly mangled Egyptian comic script, warped and bogarted into something weird, was the *Alexander Romance*. It's the most beloved text among Greeks in the Hellenistic world as they thought about Alexander the Great's invasion of Egypt, where he was supposedly welcomed as Pharaoh. (Two sides to that story, no doubt.) This patriotic biography about the birth of the king was intended to illustrate the rise of a superstar with a celebration of his fabulous adventures. But in some places, it sounds a bit more like a low burlesque out of *Setne*, something meant for comic masks and strap-on phalluses: say, when Pharaoh Nectanebo, master of astrology and magic, sneaks into bed with the Macedonian queen Olympias in the form of a snake. That sly move

³⁷ As Doniger (1998, 40) puts it, "Silence too is a statement, but one that we can only hear when we compare it with other sounds."

explains how Alexander was fathered not by Philip the Macedonian, but by a powerful Egyptian wizard-adulterer (no chamberpot in this episode,



Figure 5: Sex scene from the *Alexander Romance*, smudged by thumb. Why and by whom? Probably to erase the sexual episode involving the adulterous Egyptian sorcerer Nectanebo and the Greek queen Olympias. From an Armenian illustrated manuscript (c. 1280-1310 C.E.). *L'enluminure arménienne profane*, Frédéric Macler, Paris : Librairie orientaliste P. Geuthner, 1928.

though). Nothing on the surface of this part of the *Romance* was meant to be funny about the situation in the Greek, to be sure. Alexander the Great was supposed to be impressive. But Egyptians may have found it hilarious. Something like *Misfortunes of Setne*, a satire of a sneaky sex criminal, whose humor may well have been directed at horny outsiders by an indigenous writer. Reversed, cleaned up, excised and Hellenized, remade into something serious and patriotic: a boyish Greek romance mangled out of what was originally Egyptian storytelling. But perhaps traces of the original tradition remain to a keen eye.

Some readers have no tolerance for obscenity. Worlds of humor (r)evolve over time, or flop into dullery and disappear. Egyptian jokes mostly lost their way down the centuries. As ancient storytelling humor passed from hand to hand, tongue to tongue, it changed to empower new tellers and receivers. Or was wiped off the page entirely by a *misreceiver*. For instance, on a medieval Armenian illustration of the *Alexander Romance*, some character has been “smudged” (likely

Nectanebo having intercourse with the Greek queen). Did some forgotten reader have a negative reception experience? Another case of a lost chamberpot, as it were. Or just an accident of thumb? What the “original text” said becomes less interesting than the rich history about what people have done with it, or to it.

It’s a curious thing that *šhyʿ(.t)* – that troublemaker of a word – has left almost no mark in public reception. That sort of Egyptian humor was in some cases smudged out by critical thumbs and shellacked over with a cleaner version, idealized, sterilized, mysticized or romanticized monolithic illusion of Egypt as the land of death-obsessed scribes and holy priests. Low, obscene, risqué bodily imagery, should it have worked toward the Egyptian people’s self-definition, individuality, or political resistance – if such a thing could even be considered – was left out as a source of discomfort to philology.³⁸

But Egyptian prose was a rich and lively body of ribald narratives that had an enormous influence on world humor as it passed over the tongues and through the fingers of Greek and Roman scribes. Only in 2016 have we started asking the question, “Are the things Greek writers say about Egyptians always crude ethnic stereotyping, or is there to some extent a basis in how Egyptians represented themselves?”³⁹ Why is it then, that in all the history of Setne as a moving target for international audiences, the chamberpot – if there was one – seems to have gone missing? Where has it gone?

³⁸ Saite Egyptian literature could well have been one of resistance. Cf. Ian Rutherford, “Greek and Egyptian Fiction,” in WT 27.

³⁹ Ian Rutherford, “Aegypto-Graeca: Interaction and Translation between Greek Literature and Egypt,” in *Greco-Egyptian Interactions*, 20.

How Do Camels Have Sex? Aristotle Ponders

Greek intellectuals – that small, privately-educated elite who make up more than a fair share of texts that survived history – never recognized Egypt for its innumerable jokes and stories. Rather, in their minds, Egypt was to be respected as a mystical getaway for the deep reflections of wisdom-seekers, investigators who crossed the water and brought back mathematics, metaphysics, law, or biological science to Hellas (certainly not chamberpot jokes). Orpheus, Homer,

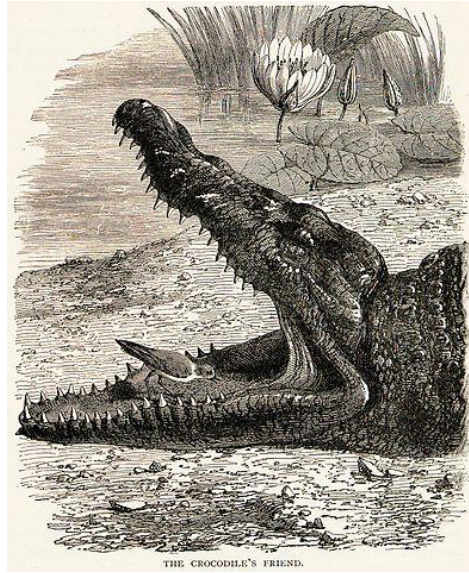


Figure 6: Sandpiper picks out a crocodile's teeth. Henry Scharren, Popular Natural History, 1909. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

Lycurgus, Solon, Pythagoras, Plato, Eudoxus, Democritus: all of them went down the Nile, and according to later legends, curious minds dipped themselves into the hidden mysteries, soaked up arcane mathematical discoveries, and bobbed home saturated with wisdom. Lighter genres fell overboard on the way: 'barbarian' wit from lower-class locals was drowned into scientific surveys where jokes were skewed and flavor was drained from what were originally entertaining traveler's yarns.

Consider, for example, what Greeks learned about camels and crocodiles from informants in Egypt. Aristotle says (correctly) that Egyptian sandpipers fly into the mouths of crocodiles and peck out their teeth:

They say that sandpipers in Egypt fly into the mouths of crocodiles to clean them out by picking out the flesh stuck

in their teeth. The crocodiles actually enjoy it and do not even hurt them.⁴⁰

But he also heard (incorrectly) some bizzarrities about how male camels have sex with their own mothers:

They say that camels in Arabia will not have sex with their mothers. Even if someone forces them, they do not want to. There is a story that once when no male was available, the camel-driver secretly brought in a colt. The colt did indeed mate with his mother, so it seems. But a short while later he killed the camel-driver by biting him.⁴¹

Not an ounce of truth to that second one.⁴² The notion that a young camel has sex with his own mother appears in comic folktales, a vestige of the Oedipus motif, one of the world’s most common storytelling forms told in humorously agricultural ways by farmers all over the world. (Moroccan tour-guides in 2021 still tell this ‘wonder tale’ to tourists to entertain them while they travel.)⁴³ Greeks, apparently, missed the joke.

Camels, like donkeys in world folklore, have always been stars of multitudes of popular oral tales around North Africa. Their weird sex

⁴⁰ Ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ δὲ τοὺς τροχίλους φασὶν εἰσπετομένους εἰς τὰ στόματα τῶν κροκοδείλων καθάιρειν αὐτῶν τοὺς ὀδόντας, τὰ σαρκία τὰ ἐνεχόμενα τοῖς ρύγχεσιν ἐξέλκοντας· τοὺς δ’ ἡδεσθαι καὶ μηδὲν βλάπτειν αὐτούς. Greek text from LCL 307, 242-243. A retelling of Herodotus 2.68.5.

⁴¹ Τοὺς ἐν Ἀραβίᾳ φασὶ καμήλους μὴ ἀναβαίνειν ἐπὶ τὰς μητέρας, ἀλλὰ κἂν βιάσῃται τις, οὐ θέλουσι. καὶ γὰρ ποτε λέγεται, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἦν ὄχειον, τὸν ἐπιμελητὴν καλύψαντα ἐφεῖναι τὸν πῶλον. ὁ δὲ τὸ ὄχευεν τότε μὲν, ὡς ἔοικε, συνετέλεσε, μικρῶ δ’ ὕστερον δάκνων τὸν καμηλίτην ἀπέκτεινεν. Ibid.

⁴² There’s nothing about a camel Oedipus in biology or farm literature: for example, H. Merkt, D. Rath, B. Musa, M.A. El-Naggar, *Reproduction in Camels: A Review*, FAO Animal Production and Health Paper 82. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rome, 1990.

⁴³ “My Grandfather told me that he heard about that some people who did an experiment on an alpha and the results were unbelievable. They say that some men brought the mother of an alpha but they cleaned her and coloured her and disguised her smell with the urine of another female. When she no longer looked or smelt like his mother they put her with the alpha male and he mated with her. When the colour and smell wore off and he realised that it was actually his own mother, he stopped mating with all females and refused to eat for many days until he dies. What I understood from this story is that the camel punished itself for what it did. It drove itself to death for the unacceptable act which was against its nature.” Mohamed El-Gasmi, “Stories of an Alpha Male Camel with morality,” from the blog *Walking with Nomads* March 20, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.walkingwithnomads.com/stories-alpha-male-camel-with-morality/>.

lives have been sites for common hilarity. To somebody it once made for a great story, before Aristotle's academic entourage⁴⁴ compressed it into science for intellectuals to chew on, as a marvelous oddity or tasty academic truth. Aristotle offers an unimpressed version with "there is a story..." (καὶ γὰρ ποτε λέγεται). So one filter for folk humor was the change in genre as it was 'upregistered' into official forms of science for curmudgeons from an expanding empire to stare into their own bellybuttons and ponder the nature of reality.⁴⁵ What were originally fun household stories and travelers' entertainments were condensed and gathered into heaps of severe knowledge. Witty and colorful folk humor melted into blobs of flavorless pudding meant for the prose-writing fingers of wealthy foreign inquirers.

⁴⁴ I work on the assumption that many great Greek intellectuals had hordes of slaves, copyists, tour-guides, bodyguards, and followers as they traveled the Mediterranean.

⁴⁵ Cf. Forsdyke (7), "Occasionally, elite writers mention elements of popular culture in the course of pursuing other agendas. For example, Plato and Aristotle provide evidence for popular festivity even as they construct an ideologically motivated argument connecting festivity with social disorder and democracy."

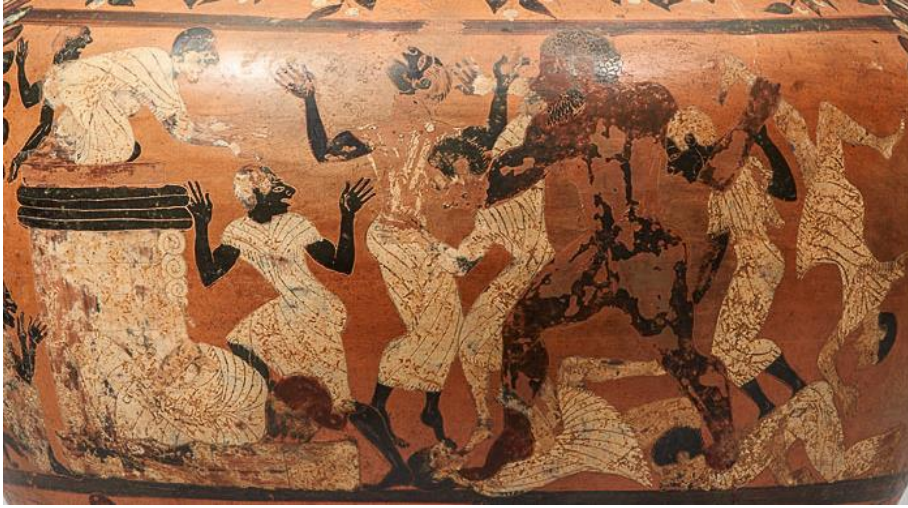


Figure 7: *Hercules attacks Egyptian priests. Hydria, Made in Caere, Etruria, Ca 510 BCE. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Antikensammlung, IV 3576. Beyond the Nile (Getty), 105.*

Greeks publicly mocked everything in the cosmos – including themselves – as a matter of raucous democratic politics. But it was *their* obscenity, especially the jewel of Athens, and Delphi was the center of the mythological universe.⁴⁶ Real Egyptian humor itself failed to make it on to the Greek comic stage in anything other than confusion. The notion that ‘barbarians’ had humor of their *own* is rarely detected in those texts beyond ‘craftiness’ or ‘trickery’ or ‘untrustworthiness’. The 5th century comic stage looked outward from empire and envisioned Egypt through ethnic misunderstandings and mockeries. Greeks who may had never met an Egyptian in their lives laughed while Heracles

⁴⁶ Greek comedies from the 5th century were Athenocentric (staged in imaginary Athens even if performed elsewhere). But they were to some extent designed by and performed for foreigners who lived in Athens – some of them Egyptian immigrants – people from elsewhere who resided in the city. They made up around half of Athens’ population as an international city-state with its own subordinate ethnic enclaves. But Athenians considered Comedy as a Greek thing: a civil institution or duty, part of their cultural inheritance, modeled on ritual phallic or carnivalesque processions that opened the great Festival Dionysia, performed in around thirty major outdoor theaters in the late 5th century but always considered to be “Athenian” flavored. Eric Csapo, “Performing Comedy in the Fifth through Early Third Centuries,” in Fontaine and Scafuro, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, 2014. Our earliest extant comedies proper are from the 430’s BCE but there are illustrations of comic-looking activities centuries before that. Aristotle, for instance, supposed that comedy had its earliest origins in Greek phallic processions still happening around his time: ...ἀπὸ τῶν τὰ φαλλικά ἃ ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐν πολλαῖς τῶν πόλεων διαμένει. *Poetics* 1448a: Megarians claim comedy is theirs because the name resembles what they call villages: κῶμαι, from which arises κωμάζειν, an etymological fallacy.

ransacked Egyptian priests for their cannibalism, a common topic for screenplays for decades in the 5th century. (Egyptians were never cannibals.) Athenian comedians played on humor about Egypt, but they missed Egyptian humor.

Greeks missed some wonderful stuff. The remarkably obscene Middle Kingdom *Horus and Seth* is one important text of pretty obvious Egyptian comedy. It depicts ancient gods and goddesses in grotesque and ridiculous sexual acts, a satire of monarchy and the process by which kings were chosen, mythology as a foil to make fun of current events (similar to the how, say, Aristophanes or Plautus toyed with Heracles and Alcmene to comment on social life in Greece or Rome). Some of it was certainly funny to diverse audiences in gender and age: to wit, in a parodic account of a lawsuit between the brothers Horus and Seth for their father's throne, Hathor exposes her vagina to her father the Sun God, who laughs at her. The brothers turn into hippopotamuses or have a boat race (Seth builds a boat out of stone, and you can guess how well that works). Seth attempts to sexually penetrate his younger brother from the back and spews semen everywhere:

During the night Seth caused his phallus to become stiff and inserted it between Horus's thighs. Horus then placed his hands between his thighs and caught Seth's semen. Then Horus went to tell his mother Isis, "Help me, Isis, my mother, come and see what Seth has done to me." And he opened his hands and let her see Seth's semen. She let out a loud cry, took up her knife, cut off his hands, threw them in the water, and restored for him hands that were equivalent. Then she got some fragrant ointment and applied it to Horus's phallus. She caused it to become stiff and inserted it into a pot, and he caused his semen to flow down into it.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Trans. Simpson, 98.

This ‘penis in the pot’ schtick was a sort of political satire of temple decorum in a kind of smooth and eloquent popular form. Here, sex-with-one’s-mother was intended for an Egyptian audience and the performers, whether scribes, priests, women, or probably children, thought of it just as much as a matter of high religion in terms of ritual. (Ancient religion was joyful about the body in ways modern religion is perhaps not.)

Egyptologists agree that archaic mythical characters like Horus and Seth were intentionally hilarious exaggerated social commentary out of a sort of middle-class popular culture, having something to do with Middle Kingdom political quagmires and debates about the absurdity of kingship. Humor here was rich and complex and all about local problems of Nile power. English can never do justice to the many levels of relaxed, colloquial and playful expressions absorbed into *Horus and Seth*: it is a high masterpiece tailored out of folk voices from below. But we know that earthy slapstick obscenity was a deep aspect of Isis and Osiris myths and festival celebrations from Egyptian documents. Figures like Setne and Tabubu could very well have been expressions of divine or magical forces really operating in human relationships of sexuality and desire in the daily lives of common folk. Self-aware satire performed by foreigners was easily lost on some imperial Greek readers looking mainly for exoticism or primitive carnality. Outsiders seeking after academic truths in such popular lore risked failing to grant its original audience the self-reflection to mock themselves and their own traditions and their own intelligence.⁴⁸

Consider Plutarch, whose screed *On Isis and Osiris* is – tragically – one of our central sources of information about Egyptian myth. There he expounds on Egyptian religion but subdues and tempers it within the boundaries of a Platonic education. Not an ounce of humor left, and not

⁴⁸ For a straight political reading, Bernard Mathieu, “Du conflit archaïque au mythe osirien, Pour une lecture socio-politique du mythe dans l’Égypte pharaonique,” *Droit et Cultures* 71, 2016.

an accurate work by any stretch of the imagination. Without taking it with a grain of salt, Plutarch read some Egyptian text like *Horus and Seth* and did not like the taste. What he called “scurrilous lies and fabrications” of Egyptians made him feel the need to wash his mouth out and spit (since surely the divines could not be so filthy), a posture of Platonic profundity:

...[if those Egyptians] believe such things about the Holy and Imperishable Nature, according to which the Divine must be understood, and they claim and propose that such things actually happened, then “one must spit and clean out one’s mouth”...⁴⁹

Plutarch goes on to say that the Egyptians were a nest of ‘spiders’ who were weaving poorly designed webs, all a bunch of popular writers of “vulgar and barbaric tales” and other “frivolous and shallow fictions.”⁵⁰ Effectively tossing the chamberpot out the window, he turns laughter toward their culture:

Most of these Egyptians worshiping animals and treating them like gods not only fill holy priesthoods with laughable mockeries – but that’s the least of all their silliness.⁵¹

Plutarch’s humor here illustrates what we can call Classical Misreception: an imperial reader’s effort to cut out, reduce and sideline or sublimate another culture by laughing at rather than laughing with, preserving a tendentious remnant of complex voices. Popular Egyptian narratives about Horus and Seth were repulsive to Plato’s later imperial followers so Plutarch misreceived them. That is, excised part of his own library,

⁴⁹ ...ὅτι μὲν οὖν, εἰ ταῦτα περὶ τῆς μακαρίας καὶ ἀφθάρτου φύσεως, καθ’ ἣν μάλιστα νοεῖται τὸ θεῖον, ὡς ἀληθῶς πραχθέντα καὶ συμπεσόντα δοξάζουσι καὶ λέγουσιν, ἀποπτύσαι δεῖ καὶ καθήρασθαι στόμα... Plut., *Isis* 358e-f. Greek text from LCL 306.

⁵⁰ παρανόμους καὶ βαρβάρους δόξας περὶ θεῶν... μυθεύμασιν ἀραιαῖς καὶ διακένους πλάσμασιν 358f. Ibid.

⁵¹ Αἰγυπτίων δ’ οἱ πολλοὶ θεραπεύοντες αὐτὰ τὰ ζῷα καὶ περιέποντες ὡς θεοὺς οὐ γέλωτος μόνον οὐδὲ χλευασμοῦ καταπεπλήκασιν τὰς ἱερουργίας, ἀλλὰ τοῦτο τῆς ἀβελτερίας ἐλάχιστόν ἐστι κακόν’. 379e. Ibid.

leaving us with the weird skeleton he called *Isis and Osiris* in Greek, a text we have to comb through carefully to discover alternate lost voices.

Plato and the Adultery Tales of a Necromancer's Wife

A Greek stereotype of the 'Egyptian priest' arose without any humor that Egyptians had about the priesthood (and they had plenty; see below). Among Greek intellectuals it was serious oriental stuff, but really a reflection of what they saw in themselves: sanctified, secretive sorts navel-gazing into abstraction. Fictions developed around Plato: according to legend, he spent thirteen years among priests, who guarded their hidden arcane knowledge, and had to pass through a difficult hazing ritual, as Strabo wrote:



Figure 8: Grinning Egyptian priest and Greek comic old man. Met Museum 47.105.3 and 13.225.13; "Priest with vase and censer ca. 945–712 B.C.," Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Wikimedia Creative Commons.

[In Egypt] we saw the houses of the priests and the schools of Plato and Eudoxus. Some say that Eudoxus stayed with Plato here and they spent thirteen years with the priests. Egyptians were subtle in regard to knowledge of the heavens, and quiet about their secret mysteries. But Plato and Eudoxus persisted over time to earn their respect, so that they could inquire into their ideas. But the barbarians hid most of what they knew.⁵²

⁵² ἐκεῖ δ' οὖν ἐδείκνυντο οἱ τε τῶν ἱερέων οἴκοι καὶ Πλάτωνος καὶ Εὐδόξου διατριβαί· συνανέβη γὰρ δὴ τῷ Πλάτῳ ὁ Εὐδόξος δεῦρο καὶ συνδιέτριψαν τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν ἐνταῦθα ἐκεῖνοι τρισκαίδεκα ἔτη, ὡς εἴρηται· τισὶ περιττοὺς γὰρ ὄντας κατὰ τὴν ἐπιστήμην τῶν οὐρανίων, μυστικούς δὲ καὶ δυσμεταδότους, τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ ταῖς θεραπαίαις ἐξελιπάρησαν, ὥστε τινὰ τῶν

The legendary Plato learned everything he knew from the Egyptians after a Nile voyage of spiritual training among wizened temple monastery monks, like hermits whose bald heads glowed with enlightenment. Hardly anything was human about them. (None of what he learned was ever funny to anyone: even Thoth, the Hermes-like god of ridiculous trickster humor in Egyptian lore, was reduced by Plato to a sort of concerned authoritarian.)

But there's a problem with Plato's Egyptian voyage. His tutor does appear in some Egyptian popular stories, which we have only been able to read for a decade or so, thanks to translators of the difficult Demotic from recently published papyri. He's a certain Petese, prophet at Heliopolis, an astrologer, sage, and renowned intellectual met with Plato and had a dialogue about the stars (most of that text is missing).⁵³ Given the rest of what we know about this folk character Petese from their popular traditions, Plato's supposed meeting with him becomes more complicated, if not boggles the mind. In popular Egyptian humor from around Plato's time, Petese appears as something like a sleazy wizard, transgressive magician, bumbling seeker of the forbidden, or sloppy and questionable husband, associated with dozens and dozens of scurrilous adultery tales. Have a look at *The Petese Stories*, bundles of tales about 'the Virtues and Vices of Women' (framed in a similar to *Arabian Nights*). The frame narrative goes like so:

θεωρημάτων ιστορήσαι· τὰ πολλὰ δὲ ἀπεκρύψαντο οἱ βάρβαροι, 17.1.29. Greek text from LCL 267.

⁵³ A text from the second century AD entitled Πλάτωνος τοῦ Ἀθηναίων φιλοσόφου πρὸς τοὺς προφήτας, Ryholt 14.

70 Tales of Good and Bad Women (ca. 4th century BCE)

Petese, a high-ranking priest, talks in the courtyard of his house with a ghost, trying to find out how long he has to live. The ghost laughs at him. Petese casts a spell on the ghost to force it to tell him. He's got only forty days left!

Petese become severely depressed, a broken man with a sad heart, and has to prepare his own funeral. But he needs money, so he decides to try to sell access to hidden books he knows about to the temple in Heliopolis in exchange for 500 pieces of silver.

When Hareus, the manager of the temple, denies him money, Petese uses magic to enchant a wax cat and falcon, and he commands them to chase each other across town pretending to be normal animals. They go into Hareus' house and chase each other and make a mess out of it, wreaking havoc.

Hareus is intimidated and gives in, double the amount. Petese spends the money on creating wax baboons, who come alive and write down seventy stories about good and bad women for his wife, Sakminofret Petese makes wax people to oversee his own burial (apparently nobody else will come), as well as two baboons who will write down 'thirty-five stories of vice and thirty-five of virtue'.

Petese dies, and Sakhminofret visits him on a daily basis. Every day, the Sun-god speaks to her through a baboon and tells the stories...⁵⁴[What follows are recitations of the tales by the magical baboons.]⁵⁵

This may be Petese, the Egyptian origin of Western Philosophy, from whom Plato learned astrology and geometry? A failed necromancer-thief who attempts to plunder his boss in order to stage his own funeral and

⁵⁴ My summary from Ryholt's 1999 translation of the text.

⁵⁵ Adapted from Escolano-Poveda, 27: see her bibliography. See also Ryholt, 1999

lie to his wife through a series of adultery tales? Socrates would die with horror.⁵⁶

Any meeting between Plato and Petese might have made a great comic script. To betray magical or astrological secrets to an outsider like Plato would have been a total failure on the part of a priest, so there's a good chance this was relaxed humor – not philosophy or science or anything like that.⁵⁷ Probably the meeting happened in the popular imagination about Greek philosophers and drew on the same oral folk traditions about weird magicians that was always mocking Egyptomaniacs. From Egyptian people's perspective, the voyages of the 'great thinkers' may have become a trope for popular oral entertainment along the outside walls of temples and busy steets where celebrity wise men and prophets purveyed their wisdom. It's possible that, from an Egyptian angle, some rich Greek outsiders were weirdos and their strange philosophies were either exotic or actually boring compared to the much older local wisdom traditions. The conversation between Plato and Petese could then have been quite funny. What little text remains of the meeting is likely the remnant of a popular satire of a Platonic dialogue, not an actual dialogue.

What were originally lighthearted Egyptian stories from popular bundles like *Virtues and Vices of Women* spoiled into sober crockerries of Greek *esoterica*. The late writings of Porphyry, for instance, inherited longstanding Greek stereotypes that Egyptian priests were not storytellers at all and had no fictions: "Their laughter is rare, and if it does happen, does not go beyond a smile."⁵⁸ Priests were so disciplined

⁵⁶ As he in fact does in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, probably a later reception of this very sort of Egyptian tale.

⁵⁷ Cf. Escolano-Poveda below.

⁵⁸ *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* 4.237, translated by Gillian Clark. Bloomsbury Academic, 2000. See also Sauneron, 8.

they never even blinked, walked slowly, kept their hands in their pockets, heads down, never drank a sip of wine, no interest at all in sex, as they huddled around the divine statues all day long and never went out of the Temple. A faceless cohort of hardline Stoics, a projection of solid manly-men with “dignity, divinity, restraint, self-control, perseverance, justice, isolation, holiness, sobriety” and so forth. Humor was out of the question to Greek philosophy, so it was eliminated, repackaged, drained, squared, stomped and squished into scientific curiosities or manuals for the privatized enlightenments of wealthy souls back in Delphi, the center and bellybutton of the world. (Most Egyptians had never heard of Delphi.)

Egyptian priests must have laughed at least once in a while. Humor and play were essential to their deepest ritual cycles, festival performances, and wisdom traditions involving Horus, Seth, Hathor and Thoth (see the chapter below). Priestly writing betrays a much more colorful and entertaining world than most Greek voyagers sought or observed. In assorted genres of literature and humor, Egyptians make light of the priesthood, their marriage lives, adulteries, animals, the pharaohs, the gods and goddesses, outsiders, the nature of wisdom and magic. They loved especially to depict themselves in literature as “very wise men” or “very artful scribes” but we ought to take this with a grain of salt, since their fictional characters were often right out of world folklore, schmoozing with the neighbor’s wife, or battling over their paychecks. Sarcasm might have had a hard time making sense in the scientific works of foreign philosophers curious about what crocodiles were and how camels work.

Modern scholarship has imagined that Greeks were dominant colonialist intruders projecting a ‘mirror’ of themselves outward and the ‘barbaric’ Egyptians were silent, secluded and violated victims of

trampling intruders.⁵⁹ But in many cases that is only the accident of our extant texts: Egyptians were fully capable of speaking their minds back at the empire just as well. To suppose that they were unable to tell tales themselves – to mock their own cultural institutions, or behave in other irreverent or obscene ways toward their own archaic past, their bodies, their wisdom traditions – carries some hazards and keeps open an abyss of misreception. Reading from one vantage point in order to continue to see through Greek eyeballs looking backward into Hellas might leave out positive intersections and enormous quantities of hidden culture as the outcome of lived suffering and celebration in the form of humor. It may silence them by avoiding the complexities of traveling international folklore, always layered, polygenetic, transcultural and inflected in different contexts and languages to suit different audiences. Criticism leveled against the Classical Tradition has the tendency to continue to give stage time to the Classical Tradition.

People along the Nile were fully capable of laughing at themselves and satirizing their own intellectual traditions just as well as any Greek comic. Egyptian remnants may be smaller to some extent, or hidden underneath ‘cleaned up’ versions in Greek, but it’s clear that it was not entirely a one-way conversation, but rather a complex interaction between multiple groups and audiences. Egyptians parodied a world where Greek wine was the source of dangerous profligacy (not beer), Greek science was a ridiculous pretention (not Egyptian magic), Greek epic heroes were lunatics or rapists (not Egyptian men), and Greek literature was mocked or rewritten from a more salacious angle. Yet much of this was actually warm in nature, not hateful necessarily, but a matter of Greeks and Egyptians laughing with one another as they shared beer, wine, and literature across boundaries, peacably in the late

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the negative view through several Greek texts from tragedy to Herodotus (without, however, discussion of nearly any Egyptian texts), see Vasunia 2001.

5th century as allies. Audiences from each world enjoyed the same sorts of jibes in an empathetic way, and must have laughed together over their insecurities about empire, tyrants, pharaohs or wicked kings.

Herodotus is a complex point of comic empathy between Greece and Egypt.⁶⁰ He was somewhere between today's anthropologist and celebrity speaker, and his entourage (assuming he had one) recorded an enormous number of stories for him. He traveled down the Nile in the late 5th century, where he listened to a variety of Egyptian informants and learned a deep appreciation for their storytelling. Unlike other Greek inquirers (those with more prudish sensibilities), Herodotus had a keen ear for a good joke, an inclusive sense of humor, and nothing against chamberpots. In fact, he did a fair job preserving chamberpots in narratives about the pharaohs, now known to have been told by Egyptians themselves for their own entertainment and social commentary.

When Herodotus met them in the late 5th century, Egyptians were thinking deeply (and, as I suggest, laughing) about issues of tyranny, gender, and colonial imperialism on their own terms. It was not itself Greek stage comedy, but it was similar enough to be carried over to Greeks pretty well, because simple comic inversions (mirthemes) pass easily across cultures in festival life, as simple folk motifs do, and Herodotus had been thinking and writing about tyranny anyway.⁶¹

⁶⁰ "Herodotus' *Histories*, in particular, is an invaluable (and unique) compendium of legends, folktale-influenced anecdotes and *novelle* from all over the Eastern Mediterranean; moreover, Herodotus repeatedly emphasizes the oral nature of his sources, and the tales themselves often retain signs of oral composition and style...anonymous authorship, an unrefined style, content incorporating folktale motifs (riddles, trickster-like activity, adultery) and an episodic structure, focused on an individual and showing signs of having been compiled from several different sources." Lawrence Kim, "Orality, folktales and cross-cultural transmission," in WT, 304.

⁶¹ Cf. Forsdyke (7), "...there are literary genres that bear a clear genetic relation to popular non-literary forms. Most important among these genres are iambic poetry, comedy, satire, and the novel. These literary genres often preserve clearly identifiable popular themes (especially reversals of normal relations, obscenity, and grotesque imagery) even if we cannot take for granted that these elements are exact copies of their popular versions." According to LAC (45), "Herodotus believes that in the Greek cities free regimes are superior to tyrannies: tyranny binds

Pharaohs were already oddly comic characters, not always in a good way. Fictions about politics came out of the underlore of workers and women, fantasies where big men were brought down or the lowly and subordinate rose up and became kings themselves. Consider, for example, one folktale Herodotus heard, about how a clever peasant named Amasis overthrew a cruel king Apries, and rose to become pharaoh himself. In this narrative, Apries hears about resistance fomenting among his troops, so he sends his royal messenger named Patarbemis to bring back Amasis, to be tried as a rebel:

When Patarbemis arrived, Amasis, who happened to be riding a horse, propped himself up on his saddle and released a rude fart. He told Patarbemis to take *that* back to his king.

Patarbemis, nonetheless, demanded he come with him. Amasis responded that he had been preparing himself for a long while now to do that very thing – Apries would not be disappointed. In fact, he was going to bring others with him too.⁶²

– bring other farts, that is, and unleash those upon the king as well. The passage draws upon very old forms of Egyptian traditional bodily folk imagery about healthy peasants coming up against wicked kings through use of the lower stratum of bodily, well, stuff. (Note that farts are joyful signs of good health: an army does not generate gas if it's starving.)

and weakens the people, whereas liberty releases their energy and prepares the rise of a state to hegemony... In Egypt or Media, on the other hand, free regimes are brief intervals between periods of despotism, degenerating quickly into anarchy and facilitating the rise of a new monarchy.”

⁶² All Greek text of Herodotus that follows in this dissertation is from *LCL* 119, ed. A.D. Godley, 1920-1924. ὡς δὲ ἀπικόμενος τὸν Ἄμασιν ἐκάλεε ὁ Πατάρβημις, ὁ Ἄμασις, ἔτυχε γὰρ ἐπ’ ἵππου κατήμενος, ἐπαίρας ἀπεματάισε, καὶ τοῦτό μιν ἐκέλευε Ἀπρίην ἀπάγειν. ὁμῶς δὲ αὐτὸν ἀξιοῦν τὸν Πατάρβημι βρασιλέος μεταπεμπομένου ἰέναι πρὸς αὐτόν: τὸν δὲ αὐτῷ ὑποκρίνεσθαι ὡς ταῦτα πάλαι παρεσκευάζετο ποιεῖν, καὶ αὐτῷ οὐ μέμψεσθαι Ἀπρίην: παρέσεσθαι γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς καὶ ἄλλους ἄξιον. *Hdt.*, 2.164.2.

Outpourings from the human body were not unusual to ‘peasant resistance’ from literary texts back to the Middle Kingdom. To wit, in *The Eloquent Peasant*, a disgruntled and abused laborer delivers a series of grandiloquent attacks on the government. The peasant describes the king as incompetent, stupid, evil, lazy, perverse, transgressive, excessive, depraved, immoral and corrupt, a thief of the people who fails the basic duties of his great office. After unleashing a storm of criticisms and accusations against the pharaoh, the peasant invokes the release of fluids as a form of relief:



Figure 9: Portrait of Amasis, the Fart King.
“Portrait of Amasis II” by Raymond Ellis. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

Now my body was full, my heart was burdened,
And it has poured from my body of its own accord;
There was a break in the dam, its water gushed out,
And my mouth opened to speak.
Then I plied my sounding pole and drained off the flood...
I have unburdened what was in my body,
I have washed my soiled linen.⁶³

Herodotus’ figure of Amasis was a folk hero out of these traditional Egyptian notions about heroic peasants using their bodies to criticize the powerful with accompanying physical and emotional relief.

Redrawing the world so that Greece was not in the middle of the whole thing, Herodotus drew the ire of patriots who refused to pay mind to outsiders and foreigners and lesser beings. Centuries later, the Greek

⁶³ Trans. Simpson, 40.

philosopher Plutarch despised Herodotus as a shifty fraud, not only unpatriotically anti-Greek, but dangerously charming in his love for Egypt's tales. Plutarch could not stand that Herodotus dared to say Greek gods were traceable to the Ethiopians and Nubians. Worse – Plutarch pounds the table – he had the gall to muck up the greatest of all poets, Homer when Herodotus dared to suggest Egyptians protected Helen against the scheming and horny Greeks. In Herodotus' version, she sought protection and sanctuary in Egypt, having been chased by these ruthless men driven by lust and greed in a disastrous military escapade to snatch her back. The only part of the mission of the *Iliad* Greeks really accomplished was that Menelaus cannibalized young boys alive (or taught the Persians how to have sex with them).⁶⁴ So goes the version Herodotus wants us to believe, in contrast to his peers. Herodotus had been thinking about contemporary Athenian imperialism, Greeks of his own day, and their excessive desires and lusts for world government, building a pyramid of their own, as it were. If so, that makes his reading of Egypt a radically countercultural reception meant to criticize other Greeks.

Plutarch was spitting furious to read such things. Men like Plutarch who claimed to “stand up for our own ancestors in the name of Truth”⁶⁵ whose bile for Herodotus as a “barbarian-lover” needs little emphasis.⁶⁶

We must watch out for Herodotus' blasphemy and wicked words – like spined beetles lurking among roses, protected by soft and smooth covers – so we are not swindled into

⁶⁴ See Plut. *Malice*, 857b. LCL 426.

⁶⁵ οἶμαι προσήκειν ἡμῖν, ἀμυνομένοις ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων ἅμα καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, *ibid.* 854f. My translation.

⁶⁶ φιλοβάββαρός, *Malice* 857. LCL 426,

believing absurdities and lies about the greatest Greek cities and men.⁶⁷

Plutarch, as it turns out, was wrong and Herodotus was not lying about the Egyptian tales and knew what he was doing with humor.⁶⁸ A few of his folktales correlate closely with Demotic documents, as we explore below. He heard one of the stories from the Egyptian *Virtues and Vices of Women*, so it is probable that most of what he recorded was from Egypt and performed by a local raconteur familiar with floating traditions. We now understand Herodotus as a creative performer, and the local priestly raconteurs he engaged as creative performers themselves, who drew on widely international oral folklore traditions. But these archetypes were much broader than any Greek genre, having floated orally around the Mediterranean for thousands of years. Bilingual informers on streets around temples along the Nile passed along oral folktales that resonate heartily with modern Arab and African stories and storytelling patterns and motifs.

Egyptians had a sharp and wonderfully raunchy sense of humor about their own lives and bodies, and even shared some of their tales with Greek travelers. Today we may begin peeking behind the cleaned-up palimpsest of extant Greek elites and appreciate a deep living underlore of real human life and sharp political awareness on the part of diverse sources all around the interconnected Mediterranean.

⁶⁷ ...ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἐν ῥόδοις δεῖ καθαρίδα φυλάττεσθαι τὴν βλασφημίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ κακολογίαν, λείους καὶ ἀπαλοῖς σχήμασιν ὑποδεδουκυῖαν, ἵνα μὴ λάθωμεν ἀτόπους καὶ ψευδεῖς περὶ τῶν ἀρίστων καὶ μεγίστων τῆς Ἑλλάδος πόλεων καὶ ἀνδρῶν δόξας λαβόντες. *Malice* 874c. My translation.

⁶⁸ Cf. Carolyn Dewald, "Humour and Danger in Herodotus," in *CCH* 145-164.

Chapter Two: What is Folk Humor and How Do We Read It?

Inversion: Lowly Perspectives and Bad Philology

Folk humor is swampy terrain that squirms out of the hands of scholarship, slides out from under systems and categories, and sinks all tools of rational measurement. Egyptologist Richard Jasnow avoids theories altogether, as does Mary Beard from the Classical side.⁶⁹ It's cliché to say that 'humor' is one of the most difficult things to study.⁷⁰ People avoid nailing down a single definition of humor, since nothing could possibly do, given the enormous range of its aspects across world cultures.⁷¹ Any theory is bound stick thinkers in the mud. One problem is that the theorist can become the butt of a joke. Consider the predicament

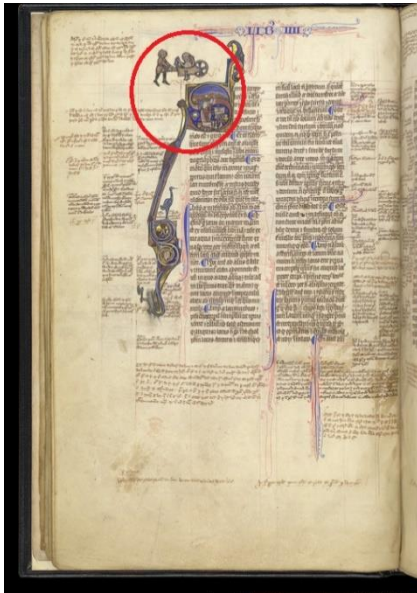


Figure 10: Aristotle theorizing while the student goes mad. 13th century. Harley MS 3487. Retrieved from Digital Bodleian <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.

⁶⁹ “I have myself no wish to present a deep analysis of comic theories, nor to regale you with “funny” passages, as amusing as both attempts might be.” Jasnow (2001), 62.

⁷⁰ Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Cornell, 1985), 13. For Beard (2014), “Ambitious theorizing and ingenious speculation about its nature and causes have gone hand in hand with frank expression about the impossibility of ever solving its mystery.” *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (University of California Press, 2015), 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

through a thirteenth-century manuscript of Aristotle, in the European tradition the great Philosopher of Comedy.⁷² But on the upper left hangs a little anomaly:

A seated sage inside the letter looks up to the stars from his desk, while an undulating groundline above brings us back to earth with a bump, for over it a gawping, leprous idiot is being trundled in a wheelbarrow.⁷³

Aristotle talking about jokes has driven his poor student completely mad. Michael Camille reads this image as a popular comic inversion of the great sage (bottom), who is warned about the dangers of having too much knowledge and losing his mind (top). On the edges of this manuscript, publicly burned at Oxford and Paris for its irreverence, we see a Great Theorist coming into contact with reality. People's humor will not suffer theorists and academics. No piece of folk humor was ever meant to be analyzed in an academic dissertation. Popular folklore has a way of bungling attempts to catch it, as it punctures pretensions toward objectivity, and escapes by crawling up the margins.

Ancient Egyptian popular tales were not meant for dissertations. They were told by farmers and peasants and their wives and children, mostly in the evenings as we can imagine, at sites of international tourism, trade, and a million other everyday activities of life. None of it had anything to do with abstraction or linguistics or philology. Inevitably, a theory will not fully do the job, or disintegrate on entry, since we are handling an acid intended to dissolve systems, categories, hierarchies, objectivities, and other forms of intellectual pretense. Like those who study medieval marginalia, we have need of a

heteroclitite combination of methodologies, aping those of literary criticism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and

⁷² Or potentially Pseudo-Aristotle. For a deep consideration and reconstruction of *Poetics II* (Aristotle's lost book on comedy) see Richard Janko, *Poetics: With the Tractatus Coislinianus, Reconstruction of Poetics II, and the Fragments of the On Poets* (Hackett, 1987).

⁷³ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Reaktion Books, 2019), 23.

anthropology, as well as art history...an attempt to make [our] method as monstrous...as its subject.⁷⁴

Humor Theory, to what extent we dare to use it, comes out of anthropology, politics, philosophy, and even neuroscience. In what follows here, let's see whether some of this recent theoretical work on folk humor might be brought to bear on our topic.

Our first approach to folk humor is through floating structures called comic inversions, sometimes called Worlds Upside Down (WUD's), where public figures, social roles and entire societies are reimagined from a reversed point of view from what's ordinary or acceptable.⁷⁵ Lewd, scatological, disturbing, gender-bending and norm-breaking behavior, performances, narratives, or rituals are involved. Trickster figures, we might think, are singular expressions of this sort of inverted worlds on the narrative level. These are useful for our purposes because they simply flip things up and down, back and forth, so as motifs they pass so easily across tongues and cultures, as they did from Egypt to Greece.

Largely the study of this kind of folk humor happens in anthropology. Barbara Babcock, in her seminal collection on symbolic inversions, collected and examined the relationships between different cultural expressions of topsy-turviness, and set forth a loose definition of 'symbolic inversion':

Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Camille, 9.

⁷⁵ Cf. Forsdyke (2012), 50.

⁷⁶ Barbara Babcock, *The Reversible World* (NCROL, 1978), 14.

The conversation Babcock initiated has largely fallen silent since the 1980's, but I'd like to revive it because this sort of thinking might be helpful when we study Herodotus and his engagement with Egyptian storytellers, who passed around narratives where prostitutes become divine or as powerful as kings, or peasants rise to dominate nations. These reversals appear everywhere in relaxed world storytelling, but also in art, literature, music and drama throughout the world in a huge variety of media. WUD's are beloved structures of entertainment everywhere, regardless of their particular context. (τὰ ὑπέρτερα νέρτερα, Le monde renversé / Mondo a rovescio / Verkehrten Welt / *mundus inversus* / *mundo al revés* / *de omgekeerde wereld*, to name only a few).⁷⁷

Greek and Egyptian comic inversions changed hands across borders of language and identity all the way into medieval and modern times. Greek heroes made their way across geographical and ethnic boundaries, where they were inverted in silly ways.⁷⁸ Consider a marginal case in the Bodleian *Alexander Romance*, where the king Alexander (incidentally, pharaoh of Egypt) battles a dragon. Below that, for purposes that are unclear, "a lady worships at the altar of the anus."⁷⁹ High and low have come into uncomfortable contact here: an elite text – largely concerned with high-flown imperial values, masculine

⁷⁷ Hedwig Kenner, *Das Phänomen der verkehrten Welt in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Klagenfurt, Geschichtsverein f. Kärnten, 1970), 5.

⁷⁸ For the notions of 'great' and 'little' traditions we draw here upon Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Basic, 2009) and Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 2009) and Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e I vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del'500*, ed. Giulio Einaudi, in English *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Johns Hopkins, 1980).

⁷⁹ Camille, 112.

philosophical virtue, racial nationalism, and world domination – has been given a little ‘bump’ down to earth with a receptive reframing within the local site of medieval fecal festivity.⁸⁰ Two worlds collide: the higher realm of fancy literature, and the lower realm of smelly bodily nonsense. Whoever drew this may have not cared too much about the high-register content of the text.

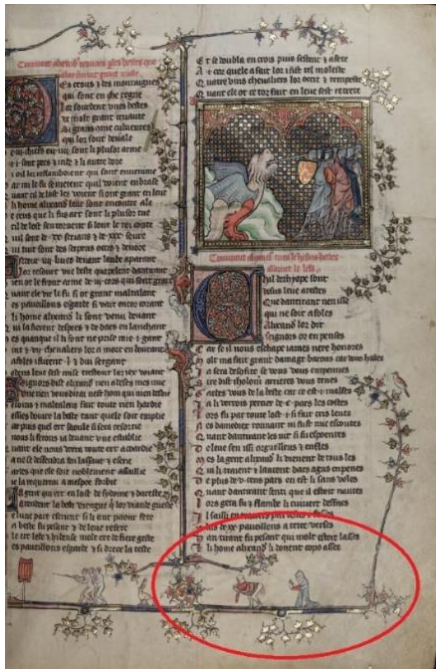


Figure 11: *The Alexander Romance* decorated with fecal folk humor. Jehan de Grise, 1338-44. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, SC: 2464.

⁸⁰ Burke (1978), 55.

Egyptians for thousand of years flipped things backward in their imaginations to mock the contents of their own ‘great texts’ with folk art, or to mock their religion, politics, intellectuals, their bodies and genders and sex lives. They went topsy-turvy and took things unseriously just like anyone else, as we can see, for instance, on the many ostraca from the workers’ village of Deir el-Medina (c. ~1200 BCE). Craftsmen designing the massive tombs of Ramses spent their evenings drawing fantastic cartoons (probably making fun of



Figure 12: Silly Egyptian animal cartoons from Deir el-Medina. Flores (2004).

Ramses) that were animal fables similar to, if not the African roots, of Aesop. We have no idea who made these or why. We may not know so much about specific contextual references of some of these figures (were they mocking Ramses?) but without being prudes, we can safely assume they were funny to someone: say, a pooping kitty leading a procession of pooping priests. It may be a mistake to force our scholarly minds to call that some kind of ‘ritual behavior’ or think about it in a profound way because of the exotic and mystical specialness of the Egyptians. Rather, this was common stuff that humans like to laugh about anywhere you go.

Could we compare Greek images of animals doing silly things? Or would that be a grave and insulting mistake to each culture’s uniqueness?⁸¹ Making broad comparisons can reduce all valuable

⁸¹ For discussion of all these, see Diane Flores, “The Topsy-Turvy World” in *Egypt, Israel, and the ancient Mediterranean world :studies in honor of Donald B. Redford*, ed. Knoppers and Hirsch, Leiden 2004.

difference to mush. But if we wish to undo the toxic seriousness of Egypt as a 'mystical' or 'oriental' land of foreigners to the Classical world, we ought to be able to say that ancient Egyptians were capable of satirizing their own world with similar sorts of humor.⁸² But where do we draw the line?



Figure 13: Egyptian drawing of donkey and lion playing a game. ca. 1250-1150 BC. British Museum, 10016,1. Wikimedia creative commons.

Consider for a moment one animal motif that appears in both Classical and Egyptian sources. Egyptians drew pictures of a donkey or gazelle playing a board game against a rather stupid-looking lion (maybe meant to symbolize a pharaoh losing a match). We are not entirely sure whether this was supposed to be political satire, or whether an Egyptian would find it hilarious or morally offensive to their religion. (Below, there's a discussion of the rest of this particular papyrus, incidentally covered in pornography.) One way folklorists have always approached this sort of stuff has been to compare and categorize similar motifs across massive extents of time and space. The assumption folklorists made for many years was that some structures are universal and polygenetic, although they might take different forms in different cultures. In his recent work on folk humor, classicist John Clarke discussed a donkey-lion scene found on a bit of plaster by chance by an Italian mountain farmer that shows a Roman donkey homosexually penetrating a lion, with what appears to be a gladiator standing behind perhaps helping out with some

⁸² A complementary project to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which was not funny at all. See Vasunia, "Hellenism and Empire: Reading Edward Said," *Parallax* 9:4 (2003), 88-97.

kind of game.⁸³ Some folklorists would classify both this image and the Egyptian one into a collection of similar ‘motifs’ organized under headings like ‘Donkey and Lion’ and call it a day.



Figure 14: A donkey humping a lion. Magdalena cast. Clarke (2007), 114.

‘Comparative Method’ connects similar stuff all over the world in an attempt to superimpose things across vast differences and see how they line up in terms of thematic content, as “stepping-

stones over the gulf that seems to separate cultures.”⁸⁴ In her seminal study of *Worlds Upside Down*, Kenner (1970) found all sorts of donkey-lion imagery from every corner of the earth from Egypt to Mesopotamia to Greece to Rome and beyond, an enormous range of comparative social data. After listing all of it, she established animal equine and feline imagery as common forms of comic inversion around the world, whose humorous content was basically all the same. She went all the way back in time to the famous Bull’s Head Lyre (c. 2550-2450 BCE), a stringed musical instrument from the site of the mass grave at Ur, which shows dancing donkeys and other animals doing goofy things as what was probably a festive decoration for death rituals.⁸⁵ Her assumption was that, across borders, all of this folklore about animals was – in terms of its humorous effect – similar in the way it made people laugh.

⁸³ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250* (University of California, 2007), 110.

⁸⁴ Doniger, 39.

⁸⁵ Kenner, 9. *Das Phänomen der verkehrten Welt in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, 35.

The motif of a donkey ‘conquering’ a lion also appeared in a Pompeii painting offensive enough to some audiences to have been removed and hidden away in storage in 1855, as Clarke discusses.⁸⁶ Here, crowned Victory holds the palm branch of success over an ass who has just inseminated the king of animals. (Is that a smile? Or is it just a scratch?) Italian classicists concluded that the



Figure 15: Pompeii tavern house graffiti of donkey humping a lion. Kenner, 13; Clarke, plate 11.

humor was Roman and only Roman: you had to be a Roman man (definitely not, say, an Egyptian woman) to understand what it referred to: the triumph of Octavian over Antony, since there are passages in Plutarch (*Vita Antonii* 65) and Suetonius (*Augustus* 96) that mention Octavian’s prophetic encounter with an ass-driver on the morning of Actium.⁸⁷ Therefore, these were not universal symbols, but the humor could only have been funny to a particular Roman audience, who recognized that the great Antony was being homosexually demeaned by an overpowering young ass.

‘Contextual Method’, on the other hand, positions humor within a moment of history in order to situate its significance to specific people in that time and place, rather than comparing structures across vast differences. According to this way of thinking, ancient humor needs a lot of extra information to explain *why* it was funny and *to whom*. If we knew

⁸⁶ Clarke, plate 11.

⁸⁷ Antony was fond of using imagery of the Nemean Lion and Heracles, who appear on coins celebrating his leadership and victory. Giulio Minervini, Giuseppe Fiorelli and much later Matteo Della Corte (1951), to summarize Clarke’s bibliography on the topic,

the correct facts about their lives from some other written source, we would have the key to get their jokes. In that case, we draw from some other bundle of more serious higher-register narratives like, say, the History of Rome in Four Volumes.⁸⁸ This sort of top-down theory of humor implies that folk humor is incomplete and needs a narrative created by historians to expose the significance of the lower episode.⁸⁹ Clarke did this sort of thing at Pompeii: using archaeological data, he reconstructs the environment of painting before it was removed to the museum. The building was decorated with other paintings of Mercury and Dionysus, which carried relevant meanings to the Romans about the reversal of fortune. So it must have been a gambling house and, therefore, the ‘meaning’ of the joke on the wall about a sex donkey was to lend luck to somebody trying win a game.⁹⁰ (It took a lot of argumentation to get to this solution.)

The problem with Clarke’s approach to folk humor is that it still assumes the structure was funny to begin with, and then narrows things down even further within a small context (one specific gambling hall) to imply only those people could get the meaning. But people find different things funny for subjective reasons. There would have been so many phenomenological interpretations in an unstable place of flux, commotion, and noise, with many people having many experiences that changed constantly over time. Who’s to say the only thing Romans thought was funny was Actium? Spaces are busy and moving and full of

⁸⁸ Cf. Clarke, chapter 2.

⁸⁹ An approach to Apuleius that John Winkler took umbrage with in his seminal narratological study. I use his terms here for ‘master text’ and ‘Rosetta Stone’. This objective, historical approach was heavily influenced by philology and drew on a “distinctively German tradition of interpreting texts.” Peter Burke (2019), 44.

⁹⁰ “to mount the lion, as it were, and to win the games of dice (*alea*) or whatever game of chance they were playing... the ensemble of images... spelled winning – or at least being on the good side of the gods.” Clarke, 118.

diverse minds. As Michael Camille put it in his study of medieval folk humor and obscenity that decorated cathedral walls:

...spaces, although controlled by specific groups – monks , priests, lords, and burghers – served more than a single audience. They were arenas of confrontation, places where individuals often crossed social boundaries.⁹¹

Even small audiences are extremely diverse. One master narrative about the ‘meaning’ to one audience will never do the trick. We would have to assume the entire category ‘Romans’ refers only to the savvy sorts of male elites who had read up on their Suetonius and Plutarch recently and could invoke from memory a single omen from all the local histories of Actium. Should we imagine ancient Mediterraneans passing from tavern to tavern with heaps of Greek and Latin scrolls on their backs to unfurl at any necessary moment in order to thumb a reference? A small minority of them may have actually had the acuity and genetic inheritance to spend years memorizing Plutarch: and in the theory’s favor, perhaps there was a gaggle of literati who frequented this particular room and fawned over Octavian, but when it comes to popular humor and especially floating motifs that appear discretely in many non-elite contexts, that group is less relevant to reality than our extant evidence makes it seem.

So there are ‘stand-in roles’ of identity that we have to choose to take when reading any ancient text. We have to read from somebody’s perspective – our own? A Roman? An Egyptian priest? A disabled Persian veteran? An unlettered thief sneaking silver out of pockets and scribbling graffiti on walls? We can read things not as ourselves engaged with our colleagues, and not only the male Greek or Roman philologist or historian with a scholarly attitude and access to a bunch of arcane textual information. A clever painter may have coded a symbol to suit a

⁹¹ Camille, 9.

particular inside readership – a bunch of rich Roman gamblers thinking about luck – but that is still only one permutation of what seems to be what we call ‘folk humor’ as the sort of stuff that tends to pass around really easily wherever on earth you go (donkeys and lions acting like humans in silly or sexual ways). Some traveler from outside Rome’s great traditions might have glanced at a Pompeii painting with a mind full of her own culture’s folktales and inversions about lions and donkeys, with their own culturally-specific connotations, and still gotten a laugh at the basic level of inversion going on in the image. She may not have had the master key or Rosetta Stone to the joke and she might miss something, but that does not mean she had nothing to say.

The Roman version may have had a specifically Roman resonance or cultural “flavor” to it.⁹² But it may have made have made nearly any visitor of any background, even one totally unfamiliar with Roman politics, stop and double-take and laugh, so long as they knew that, physically speaking, lions are not normally humped by donkeys. Inversions of reality seem to make people laugh regardless of their contextual meanings. But the site-specific reader of humor instead seeks out a higher fruit, some specific key truth to debug and explain the meaning, the “Rosetta Stone” of some more official-sounding work that’s less funny in order to perform the most convincing act of codebreaking (in this case, drawing on Plutarch and Suetonius to explain a bit of non-literate folk humor). Then the theorist reduces all other people’s laughter to mere silliness and ignorance. We might call this the codebreaker’s approach, since it tries for distance by using big names and imbues the authority of science to humor – and thereby kills the joke.⁹³

⁹² Popular culture takes on different ‘flavors’ in separate cultural contexts: see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (Basic Books, 1984), 65; Forsdyke (2012), 40-41, 135-136.

⁹³ Winkler, 11.

Can a Master Text that is certainly not funny (say, Plutarch) fully explain a popular joke floating around common sites? Sounds fishy. In humor studies in the last few decades, that sort of old philological approach to art has been criticized for its closed and logocentric nature in attempting to seek out meaning in texts without asking about reception: “meaning for whom?”⁹⁴ To most in the ancient Mediterranean, jokes about a donkey’s penis, for example, that floated around pretty much everywhere, would make no sense if they relied on some fancy privatized Classical Education most people in the world did not really have. Only a well-read elite could bring to mind the constellation of star celebrity authors to light the way to the most ‘correct’ way to think about silly animals doing dumb sex positions on a wall.

Clarke therefore calls the Classical approach the “trickle-down” model: it assumes that we need a bunch of elite texts in order to know the meaning of a bit of ancient folk humor. We need our Suetonius, our Plutarch, our Latin minutiae and hardcore grammar to earn our way to a convincing ‘key’ that could (to be honest) get published on the modern capitalist market of scholarly books. We must be peering down from a perch on the upper crust, where those who are in-the-know reside. But folk humor never came from there! This view of comedy assumes there is always a better text known only to the few, accessible only by the most expensive educational avenues, a land-grab attempt at ‘wisdom’ by an imperial leisure class who want to explain things for money. This is one way common everyday folk stuff has been contained and smudged away from big history: academics trying to one-up each other with excessive explanations for simple and real things most people living on earth never misunderstood to begin with.

⁹⁴ Burke (2019), 48.

The codebreaker's method fails with folk humor with its tendency to explain things away because that stuff does not require some higher narrative to pass around among all sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds. Those unwashed non-rich and under-educated passersby who lived their lives beyond the shade of the library's outer walls – unsmiling slaves, dreary handmaidens, humorless foreigners – would never be able to laugh at a Roman donkey's penis just as well as anybody else (they lacked the grooming), but instead stand mouths agape, wishing they had read their Plutarch, goggling with furrowed brows as they struggled to understand why in the world a donkey was humping a lion on the wall. But that's just not the way folk storytelling works in real life: some stories can cross boundaries easily because they're simple and fun, and anyone generates meaning from their own lived experience.

The trickle-down Classical reader of ancient humor transposes the modern scholar back through time to an ancient site in order to 'solve' or 'explain' a joke in the most objective way possible. He has to rely on a manufactured body of other texts from modern learning environments and social communities, like Universities, which never existed in the ancient world. So that Classical approach is just as much of an "anachronistic self-projection and imagining" as any another subjective perspective anyone might take.⁹⁵ The forefather of 'reception theory' Hans Jauss was perhaps the earliest to criticize philology as a 'trickle down' method with the assumption that a small modern nexus of selected texts can be used to create some completely objective 'super-reader' of the ancient past through the pretense of selected languages and written texts from later epochs:

the philologist as super-reader naively presupposed that the later horizon of his knowledge existed in the earlier

⁹⁵ Parkinson, 67.

horizon of the creation of a work...[but] no text was ever written to be read and interpreted philologically by philologists or historically by historians.⁹⁶

The trickle-down method suggests meaning can only be seen by an purely third-person approach, an Innocent Eye, “a gaze which is totally objective, free from expectations or prejudices of any kind.”⁹⁷ But objectivity is always a disguise for desire.

Philology operates like a hero’s quest to describe the real one true text, or historically ‘the way it really was’, but at root one of its real sources is a human desire to figure things out, to control, to supervise and manage texts for other people, to explain, dominate, to draw borders and enclose margins for the sake of finality and containment. But even dictionaries and *apparati critici* are not iron-clad for that purpose, but sediments of reception, formed and crafted within selective parameters of a certain tastes and trends. Folk humor, on the other hand, was made up by and for diverse audiences mainly among who were non-literate. It would make no sense to explain their jokes using highfalutin scholarly terminology.

Reception theory might open some new ways to think about that kind of stuff, since it has challenged the tendency to assume a third-person perspective and a scientific reading, and advocates a pluralistic way. It proposes a dialogical and communal engagement or ‘transactional process’ between text and reader, with many different readings and many different horizons of expectation to open up potentials for different identities and ‘hermeneutic communities’ of interpretation.⁹⁸ Informed readers were only fractions of all the identities

⁹⁶ Hans Jauss, *The Identity of the Poetic Text* (University of Toronto Press, 1985), 18. My italics.

⁹⁷ Burke (2019), 24.

⁹⁸ I refer here to one of the main founders of ‘reader-response’ theory: Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.

who interacted with high culture in ancient sites around the diverse ancient Mediterranean, say, like the pyramids. Plenty of oral material and information about those places was unwritten or created by people who had zero interest in saying anything particularly profound for modern scholars to bicker about. Non-scholars and non-Greeks who traded old folk stories, motifs, and jokes about things like the Great Pyramid did not need any special knowledge that most people on the ground did not really have, aside from a common everyday inventory. But we can allow different sorts of readings, never claim a perfect one as a 'translation', and think about any of them as valuable for a contribution to what we design and call human history.

Little dirty whispered jokes have a genius all their own. Say, was the Great Pyramid built by a prostitute? Egyptians used to say it was, but that tells us more about their local worlds than about the pyramid. Among all of the varied sorts of oral comedies they made up about ancient monuments, ancient people were mistaken, wrong, or playful. By that does not mean those narratives were historically useless or unimportant. Whether people had the proper 'taste' required to make some grand claim about true history is just as interesting as why they equally spread around lies, misconstrued it, misdirected it, or why they did not care about it or how they misread it or mocked it or even just ignored it, or for our purposes here, how they made fun of it or its creator in their own way. When it comes to folklore about monuments, if we read from multiple angles for many plural (mis)receptions, our understanding only becomes richer – rather than looking for The One Reading to Rule Them All, and actually asking how the pyramids were built or why they were so important to Big Classical Scholarship. Little women's lies are as much part of history as big male truths. Ancient oral narratives did not need to be 'correct' to be worth a listen.

So to read the past as intellectuals can sound good but leave out all sorts of perspectives. That savvy Roman elite chuckling at Antony's anal penetration is only one of many possible stand-ins. Sure, there may have been a few Romans who thought about high politics and chuckled at Antony's expense as they had their drinks over some unfurled scrolls of Suetonius. But that sounds more like the modern classicist trying to make history all about himself, and we ought to set that interpretation shoulder to shoulder with many other receptions and open many avenues toward meaning, and infinite horizons of alterity. The philological reading that looks for true historical narratives (as most scholarship on Herodotus' time in Egypt still does) is only one of many ways to approach material from ancient places like Egypt, Greece, or Rome. Among these possible readerships, we do not need to posture toward the most 'informed reader' as the worthwhile one among a number of lesser perspectives ('mere folklore'). Ancient folk humor never needed a philologist to teleport back in time and explain stuff to anybody.

What about uninformed – but not necessarily unintelligent – people in the ancient world? Say, an unimpressed young pupil of forced to listen to a philosopher's lectures about sexually explicit paintings, who knew in his gut that what he was hearing was bunk?⁹⁹ Or a disgruntled graduate student mocking the very intellectuals he was trying to impress?¹⁰⁰ Those are good readings of ancient texts! We might consider people who cared nothing for the star thinkers of the day or even resented them. Ancient sites like Egyptian temples and pyramids were

⁹⁹ Plutarch struggles to keep his students' attention away from smut in his treatise *On Listening to Lectures* (περὶ τοῦ ἀκούειν).

¹⁰⁰ Leslie Kurke speculates that the author of the *Aesop Romance* was "someone within the system of elite education who feels himself to be low-status or oppressed within that hierarchy," *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 42.

crowded and busy centers of storytelling where tales passed over many tongues. People were capable even of making fun of the great traditions and the great scholars like Aristotle and Plato and the Pharaohs. As Camille puts it:

Texts are places, sites of negotiation, like cathedrals, temple colonnades, or ziggurats or pyramids. Texts serve more than a single audience, and they are made of the voices of more than a single author. Inversions are one of the encounters that an audience has within those spaces.¹⁰¹

Philology created a way of reading that reduced or eliminated subjective elements to focus on ‘the text’ and ignore all our own messy lives as human readers bringing all sorts of stuff to the table even as we pretend to be objective about the grammar. Emotion, personal background and personal psychology were pulling adrift from formal structures like language and syntax. What mattered was the text itself, the words on a page. Art works by means of mechanical processes and formal elements that can be examined and quantified through a close study, according to this way of thinking. So a long time ago some philologists argued that “judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine.”¹⁰² Here we have the philologist’s reading, which we can call, from this point on, The Pudding Method.

Diversity has become valuable in the way we think about the reception of ancient texts from many angles and not just one ‘correct’ one that gets the grammar right (although even how we interpret grammar is a pretty questionable process). There are few proponents of the Pudding Method left, since the taste buds of the person on the other end are as important as ‘the text itself’. Sometimes getting the grammar wrong can tell us important and wonderful things about the reality of a

¹⁰¹ Camille, 9.

¹⁰² William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardley, “The Intentional Fallacy” in Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Norton 2001), 1233.

reader's lived historical situation – why cast poor readings out rather than seeing their value? Little missed and skewed readings that fail to figure out datives for one reason or another are just as crucial to the world as big important and correct Philology ones.

Readers bring themselves to texts just as we bring ourselves to art. Humanists now share vastly interdisciplinary tastes for the way that texts exist insofar as they are experienced by somebody or other. As Ursula K. Leguin put it,

The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story.¹⁰³

The 'text itself' (the pudding) has come down to us shaped, sculpted, catered, and changed by its experience as it traveled through time – through translators, philologists, archives, and every form of readership. We ourselves continue to shift the text in every engagement and shape the pudding! That happens in such a small decision as which passages students might read, or how a dative might be construed, or which episodes one selects of interest for a commentary.¹⁰⁴ This is as true for dictionaries, *apparati critici*, and other tools that are themselves selective forms that float and change. Datives move around when they are chased.

¹⁰³ Leguin (1992), 198 as quoted by Willis (2018), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Martindale's 'strong' thesis from *Redeeming the Text*, 7-8.

The Value of Bad Philology

Mistakes that unlearned translators make with grammar and languages are wonderful as forms of folk content. Their errors are expressions that tell us about some real reader's lived experience, personality, and historical situation.

The text itself is a fluid object that comes alive only when it is met and changed by a receiver. There is never only a text, like a bunch of symbols on a page out there in the world. Rather, there must be a transaction, “a combustion fed by the coming together of a particular personality and a particular text at a particular time.”¹⁰⁵ Creativity, and especially humor, operate through a two-way interaction with a text – we bring ourselves to them – in terms of improvisation, spontaneity, play, broken rules, and *faux pas*. Mistakes in reading can be quite juicy, but philology will not admit that this is a truth (being patriarchal, pseudoprofessional, domineering in nature) and can often be an effort to remove those mistakes and clean up the imperfectly-human mess, the real subjective stuff of humanity, into a pure text form, cultivated and presentable for a new and higher register audience of pudding connoisseurs.

A person brings a ‘self’ to the text: a living subjectivity takes on a pose and invents meaning to suit their horizon in their living world. Text are living things. Kristina Triesenberg has used a similar metaphor for the study of humor:

The study of humor in literature is akin to the study of biological specimens that have been dyed, fixed, and mounted on slides...The thing studied has been immobilized and clearly laid out for study...in the same way that a fixed protozoan cannot squirm off the slide,

¹⁰⁵ Rosenblatt (1995), *xvi*.

words that have been fixed on a page cannot be forgotten, misquoted, or misheard, and are not lost in the stream of time...humor as represented by words on a page is only a dry and dead record of what the humor had been when in the wild...¹⁰⁶

That is, only after an original free performance has been captured, killed, stabbed, and pinned to a page does it become a stable, working 'thing' for academic study. Ancient humor, for example, is not meant for modern philology like a fossil to dig at or a butterfly to be examined, but a diaphanous organism with a beat and pulse, since the reader and text are dancing with each other in a creative relationship. We can make a lot of hermeneutic theory simpler with a diagram:

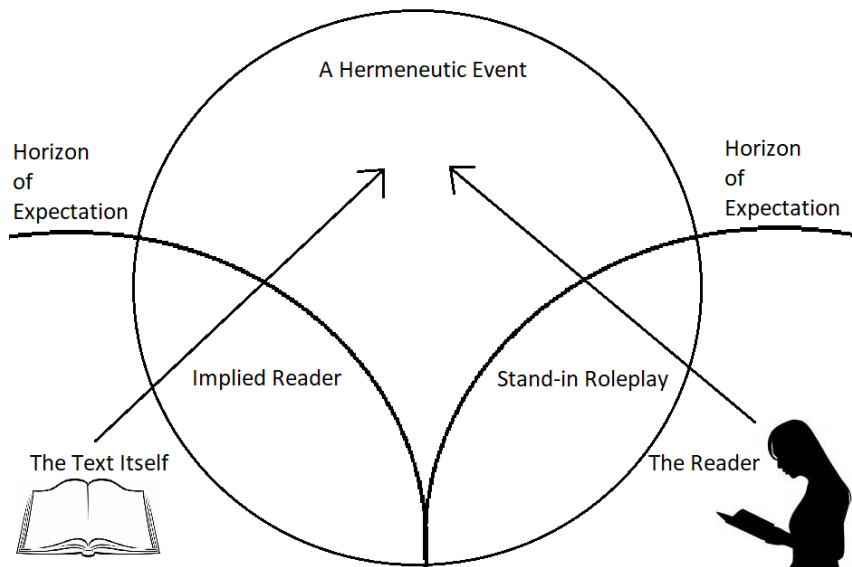


Figure 16: Reader-response Model.

¹⁰⁶ Katrina E. Triezenberg, "Humor in Literature" In Raskin, *The Primer of Humor Research* (2008), 523.

A Receptions Model for Reading

The Text Itself: Scribbles on paper. An ultimately fluid thing that has been layered by its engagement, manipulation, and redesign by passing through time, and remains dead and inert without the subjective presence of a viewer.

Horizons of Expectations: Background information a person brings to a text. Cultural codes, symbols, history, literary conventions, trends, and the social knowledge by which a being makes sense of their particular world at their particular time. Changes the reading immensely.

The Implied Reader: The ideal person a text or work was written for: the one it assumes to be on the other end. Gaps must filled with their background knowledge, abilities, or biases in order to comprehend anything going on.

The Stand-in Role: The identity that today's reader must pretend to be, as if on the other end of the original text, (e.g., I'm an ancient Roman!). Often this is ignored, hidden, disguised, or unacknowledged to actually be the reader him- or herself.

The Hermeneutic Event: A live circuit between the text and its interpreter, a moment in time as the reading itself happens in the world, a two-way transactional exchange between separate horizons of human experience.

The Reader: An ultimately fluid "self" that is an imperfect and constructed bundle of shifting identities in moods, feelings, ideas, genders, and so forth arising out of drives like anxiety, wish, gratification, and self-replication, the culmination of psychological and behavioral conditioning by genetics as well as familial, social, and cultural environments.

To walk through that process:

- **‘Horizons of expectation’**¹⁰⁷ clash. On the one side, a text’s historical or cultural milieu, generic expectations, and some indication of the **implied reader**¹⁰⁸ or the ideal audience it assumes to be on the other end.
- On the other side, today’s reader with their own **fluid identity** in a contemporary world of experience.
- In the middle, there is a **live circuit** when two worlds of imagination romance one another, as it were, generating infinite strange and anachronistic offspring as ‘readings’ from the “intimate pillow talk of textual intercourse.”¹⁰⁹
- Many of these readings will not become authoritative, to be published in scholarly journals, rather rejected by the **interpretative community**¹¹⁰ through the process of artificial selection – babies thrown out – but some that will live long and illustrious lives and absolutely none of which are perfect. By selection, some readings survive and others do not.
- The results of **hybrid encounters** of romancing horizons are the most exciting, genetically and hermeneutically speaking, when two transmitters cross great distances and make great leaps of unpreventable misunderstanding and misorientation due to language barriers (as we ourselves must do with any classical text, or the Greeks did with their own more ancient Near Eastern literary models).

¹⁰⁷ Hans Jauss and the *Rezeptionsästhetik* of the Konstanz School, following Gadamer.

¹⁰⁸ Iser, 1972.

¹⁰⁹ Doniger (1998), 40.

¹¹⁰ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Harvard, 1980.

Cultural horizons tend to share the same chromosomes in the forms of story structures, symbols, motifs, themes, incongruities, comic inversions, and so on. Cultural reception can then be understood biologically, as a chain of writhing and living reproductive acts as similar sexual encounters between readers and texts create multitudes of progeny in the forms of hermeneutical events with diverse shapes and forms. (That is, not as a series of stable but lonely puddings out of which our task as critics is to select the best-tasting.)

Books imply ideal readers. Any work carries some embedded stage directions in gaps of information, assumptions, and references to suit whom it expects. Ancient texts have implicit ideal targets that they project for us (for instance: masculine, a virtuous Roman, educated in Plato) but sometimes these assumptions are difficult to detect between the lines, and by no means do we need to align with them to generate good readings. Going ‘against the grain’ to look for other voices is just as important: a text intended for a bunch of scientific Greeks could potentially be full of great jokes to Egyptians. Stepping into the past and interpreting a piece of art or literature is like walking on a stage and taking or rejecting directions for a role given by a screenplay. Rather, we can always take a pose of resistance and read against the grain, choosing among any number of alternative roles – say, to read passages from Herodotus from the perspective of an Egyptian.¹¹¹

Gibson, for example, has described how good readers can enact multiple roles while they read:

literary experience is not just a relation between themselves and an author, or even between themselves and a fictitious speaker, but a relation between such a speaker and a projection, a fictitious modification of themselves...The realization on the part of a student that

¹¹¹ For more on this see Willis, 77-79, who cites Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. See also Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*.

he is many people as he reads many books ... is the beginning of literary sophistication in the best sense.

That is not to say a student risks having a mental meltdown and multiple personalities any time they open Plutarch (though they may feel like it). Rather, a reader has to invent and roleplay the perspective of the audience that received the narration in the past, using contextual evidence to test and supply a range of possible perspectives.

That brings us to the stand-in role that we play when we meet the text. Do we step into the past anachronistically as ourselves?¹¹² The roles scholars play with ancient texts are almost always just that – scholars. They are generally scribes and sages with pointed quills, poking around for higher purposes – analysis, explanation, linguistics, data-mining – than the original historical reality may have ever been meant for. Those Italian philologists became the only ancient Romans who could get a joke about a donkey – but it was really themselves, having teleported back in time, intruded into a Pompeii tavern with close readings of Plutarch and Suetonius in hand, and a knowledge of modern Latin minutiae in order to expose the intention of the painter. The problem here, of course, is that there is no Classical philologist present in the writings of Plutarch. The character imagined as the Roman who could possibly get this joke appears nowhere in the very text relied on by the reading as a master narrative. So their reading can be pulled apart a little by twisting its undergirding hermeneutic assumptions. Some ancient artifact – say, a religious statue or drinking hall or dirty old joke – was not created to be solved by people impressing one another by referring to important texts, methods, or theories.

¹¹² As Doniger (1998, 45) puts it, “Even though we cannot know the context of the readers (let alone the authors) of many of our ancient texts, we ourselves, as readers, are a context, sometimes the only one to which we have access: we can always know (and sometimes only know) what the texts mean to us. And when we do not know the true voice of the tellers, the original authors and audiences, we must, *faute de mieux*, listen to the voices in the text.”

As stuff enters into academia, it becomes more and more abstract and overcomplicated until it completely detaches from its original world and floats off into new dimensions. There's a heightening sense of seriousness and overcomplexity as objects of simplicity or irreverence and fun ascend to become webbed in a hanging overlay of elite references and scholarship. We can give a name to such movement on the part of popular humor as *upregistering*: common sites of popular humor from the past have the tendency to grow in significance over time as later theorists, especially from imperial projects with ethnological interests (like this one),¹¹³ tend to slather profundity all over the ancient world, really an attempt to impress contemporary social communities, such as academic groups, journals, or dinner parties. There's a problem of theory here.

Due to the institutional trappings of professionalism, readers pass over or ignore jokes, silliness and play as 'mere folklore', and tend to raise history out of its earthy milieu into abstraction and rationality to make it seem worth studying within the profession or institution. So that's one reason scholars of ancient history have sometimes refused to handle folk obscenity as any form of useful data. (For instance, the time period of Herodotus in Egypt has been completely ignored for all its many dozens of dazzling folk stories.) We can call this sort of tendency *highbrow drift*. As Parkinson puts it:

Any transmission of a body of classic texts is a cultural and political construct which can entail the loss of any inconvenient subversive potential or mere pleasure.¹¹⁴

What sort of perspectives are lost thanks to highbrow drift? We might cautiously attempt a (mis)reading from the non-ideal perspective, for

¹¹³ The direct objection is that our analysis of highbrow drift – and the whole of this project – is itself an even higher grade of it. But in that case we are at least in agreement with the premise and are self-aware of the phenomenon in action.

¹¹⁴ Parkinson, 189.

example, of an unread peasant prevented from entering the Great Tradition by a wall of literacy.¹¹⁵ But he or she did know a great amount about broad and obscene oral folktales, and probably substantially *more* about donkeys both in fiction – and in reality – than your average Suetonian. So by shifting the boundaries of the “local contingencies of history”¹¹⁶ we can creatively perform many different perspectival readings by means of separate contexts and plural perspectives. As Fish puts it:

The critic has the responsibility of becoming not one but a number of informed readers, each of whom will be identified by a matrix of political, cultural, and literary determinants.”¹¹⁷

We have the capability to stand in the shoes of any number of ancient audiences and sense things from their perspective based on a vast variety of worlds and human subjectivities, and that would still be ‘doing history’.

So as we move forward, we should keep an eye on what our stand-in(s) look like when we enter a text: are they our own personalities transported back in time? Humor often moves through reception with the fallout of being *upregistered*, a term we will use to refer to moments of (mis)reception when an original comic motif undergoes an ascension into a higher elite form in order to give it some moral, academic or cosmic importance; as opposed to *downregistering*, when a figure does the opposite and enters a low medium. R.B. Parkinson has performed an immersive contextual reading with sensitivity with ancient Egyptian poetry through the contours of the papyrus’ very handwriting and by locating the reader within the temple of the original performance, an

¹¹⁵ Burke (2009), 55. “The elite participated in the little tradition, but the common people did not participate in the great tradition.” Cf Forsdyke (2012), 47.

¹¹⁶ Parkinson, 5.

¹¹⁷ Fish, 87.

approach he fully admits is anachronistic and experimental. As Parkinson notes, “As modern onlookers, we can never recover a sense of ‘being there,’ but an imaginative attempt can reveal the extent of our own limitations.”¹¹⁸ Under our model, this sort of strange and anachronistic behavior is exactly the natural extension of a good reading, being self-aware that it is a creative event that happens in time within the contours of two particular horizons. Bringing them closer to one another results in a different sort of event. The roleplay of a certain character brings blood into the ‘live circuit’ that gives the piece of art a new pulse.

A plurality of readings is possible, and each of them has its own particular value. There may not necessarily be a technique or a method that could ever teach us how to really lay claim to the singular, factual, monolithic, objective understanding of an old joke or funny ancient tale (if we would really even want to). So, in sum, I advocate plural readings and will do a handful of them later

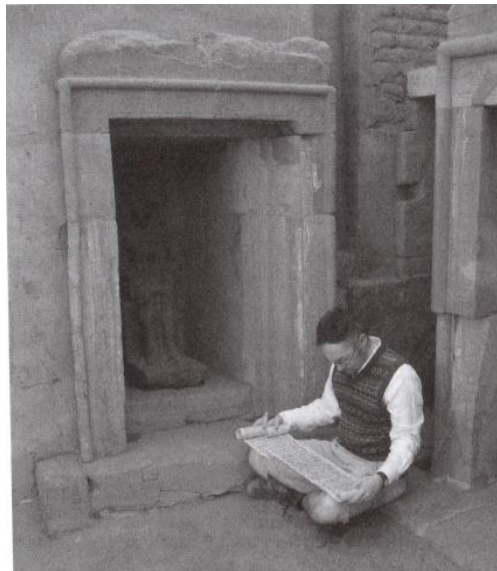


Figure 17: An Egyptologist reads a scroll while sitting in a temple. R.B. Parkinson, Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry, 273.

on in this project in relation to a single dirty joke about the pyramids (below, the ‘One About Pharaoh’s Daughter’). My readings assume the content of the material was probably funny to most people for one reason or another because of its structural *incongruity*, which we turn to here.

¹¹⁸ Parkinson, 30.

Incongruity: Monsters, Mythemes and Mirthemes

It's difficult to say ancient Greeks and Egyptians had similar senses of humor without offending them by trampling their valuable cultural differences along the way. Here we will toy with what it's like to walk that line and (hazardously) define the word 'Humor' in a universal theoretical sense before we move any further – if nothing else, to show the futility of these sorts of academic definitions. The thorny terrain of Humor Studies has been eluded by every Egyptologist and Classicist up to this point. We risk turning humor into something “aloof, closed, cold, airless, cerebral”¹¹⁹ but might at least consider what structuralists and scientists have found and see if it gets us anywhere.¹²⁰

Incongruity seems to have something to do with the way humans find things funny, regardless of their background, social context, time, power, or place. It's the major school of theory among the branches of what's now called Humor Studies, next to Relief and Superiority, positions long nuanced by diverse philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists.¹²¹ We will have a brief look at some neuroscientific and psychological experiments before we offer some new terms and definitions of our own, without going too far into the 'briar patch'¹²² of every terminology among them.

¹¹⁹ Clifford Geertz' criticism of Levi-Strauss as a “wannabe scientist” is debated by Wendy Doniger in “Claude Levi-Strauss's theoretical and actual approaches to myth,” *The Cambridge Handbook to Levi-Strauss* (Cambridge 2009), 196.

¹²⁰ Few studies of humor in classics have really consulted the body of Humor Studies for any theoretical orientation. Beard passes by it intentionally and for good reason of its extreme complexity, with “much less on the three theories than you might expect,” 42.

¹²¹ For summaries of the Big Schools and their appropriate philosophers, see nearly any published work in “humor studies,” but esp. Keith-Spiegel, “Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues,” in Goldstein and McGhee *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (Academic Press, 1972), 4-39; also Beard (2014), chapter 2; Morreal (2009), Orring (2016), and Morreall's summaries in his article “Philosophy and Religion” in Raskin's *Primer of Humor Research* (2008).

¹²² Keith-Spiegel, 14.



Figure 18: Mouse outweighs an elephant on a scale. Roman lamp. 40-70 AD. British Museum 1856 1776 A10

Incongruity theory looks for patterns where there is a violation of normal expectations.¹²³ For example, on a first-century Roman lamp on the page here, a tiny mouse outweighs an elephant on a scale. So long as you, the receptor, within your horizon of experience have some common knowledge concerning these animals, your brain should be able to detect the anomaly and debug it. The patterns and laws of nature are broken, which brings delight to humans, generally speaking (if only to temporarily relieve that we are stuck with certain facts, such as that elephants are heavier than mice).

Neuroscience researchers think that humor in the brain is a form of relief as we debug incongruity in the environment, as “conflict between what a person expects and what is actually experienced.”¹²⁴ The need to rebel against our expectations about the “ordered” universe seems to be an inherent source of joy. The nub of contention in a few recent studies is whether incongruity needs to be resolved in order to trigger certain parts of the brain. Use your brain and see what happens with the following two cartoons:¹²⁵

¹²³ Amy Carrell, in Raskin (2008), 312.

¹²⁴ Pein and Rothbart, “Incongruity and Resolution in Children’s Humor: A Reexamination,” *Child Development* 47:4 (1976), 966.

¹²⁵ Image from Samson, Hempelmann, Huber, Zysset. “Neural substrates of incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor,” *Neuropsychologia* 47, 4 (2009), 1023-1033. A similar experiment using similar cartoons is A.C. Samson, S. Zysset, O. Huber, “Cognitive humor processing: Different logical mechanisms in non-verbal cartoons: An fMRI study,” *Social Neuroscience* 3, 2 (2008), 125-140.

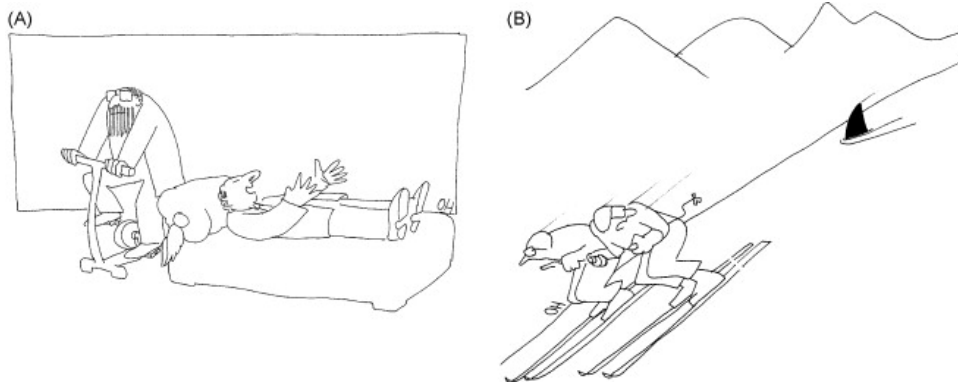


Figure 19: Cartoons illustrating incongruity neuroscience. Resolved Incongruity (A) and Sheer Nonsense Incongruity (B).

In cartoon (A) the incongruity is resolved as your brain decodes it. The therapy session is so boring that the analyst does something else and, ironically, works on his own body. This is an inversion of proper social roles: an official figure, whose public station is to be caring and empathetic, exposes the reality of his humanity and imperfect nature by means of an incongruous juxtaposition of heavy-set therapist and exercise bike. It would not be funny if the author stated forthright the contentious underlying sentiment (“[we] therapists are lazy people who are just in it for the money”). Incongruities cause humor as a result of a neural process of decoding the ‘game’. Here, the ‘Official World’ – a place where things are right-side-up and everything functions and works for the higher good (where therapists care about their patients) – is falsified by the irruption of the ‘real world’, actually full of flaws, imperfection, and shortcomings, exposed to view in a safe way. We will call this sort of resolved incongruity a Punctured Official Transcript (POT).

Because of the presence of the punctured transcript, Cartoon A is a more complex form of social or political commentary than B. In the latter, the incongruity goes unresolved and there's just delight in sheer nonsense. (Why in the world is a shark swimming in the snow?) It remains open and there is no apparent inversion, nor puncturing, bringing-low, or other subversive message about social expectations. But we laugh.

Neuroscientists have found with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) that incongruity-resolution (cartoon A) triggers parts of the brain that do not operate as a result of sheer nonsense (cartoon B). Resolution areas are connected with processes of coherence-building, inference, puzzle-solving, and information-seeking, but not necessarily with the pleasure in humor as expressed in mirth and laughter, which arises just as well in cases of absurdity.¹²⁶ That is, nonsense and grotesquerie bring delight via separate avenues in the neural network: they are different forms of physical response when it comes to humor. Consider as an illustration (and test whether you agree with that hypothesis) in the following popular nonsense tale from a 17th-century

Punctured Official Transcript (POT-shot):

An incongruous moment of play where imperfections of this material world are revealed or admitted, and our 'official' communal politeness and pretense is broken. The reality comes out! The world is a finite, material place, and we ourselves as physical, limited beings, who are nowhere near perfect. Social pretension is deflated, bringing relief of suppressed anxiety about our ultimately false public masks of goodness and perfection.

¹²⁶ "Absurd humor contains an unresolvable incongruity but can still induce a feeling of mirth." Ru H. Dai, Hsueh-Chih Chen, Yu C. Chan, Ching-Lin Wu, Ping Li, Shu L. Cho, and Jon-Fan Hu. "To Resolve or Not To Resolve, That is the Question: The Dual-Path Model of Incongruity Resolution and Absurd Verbal Humor by fMRI," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017), 498. The tempoparietal junction, superior frontal gyrus, anterior medial prefrontal cortex, according to Andrea Samson, Christian F Hempelmann, Oswald Huber, Stefan Zysset, "Neural substrates of incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor," *Neuropsychologia* 47, 4 (2009), 1023-33. But see also a different experiment in Chen et al. "Towards a neural circuit model of verbal humor processing: An fMRI study of the neural substrates of incongruity detection and resolution," *NeuroImage* 66, 1 (2013): 169-176.

German broadsheet called the *'nonsensical world'*, translated by David Kunzle as one of many representations of the world-upside-down (WUD):

A village sat in a peasant, who liked to drink spoons with milk, together with a big bread-roll. His corner had four houses, he harnessed four carts to his horses, his kitchen stood in the middle of the hearth, his hay was full of barn. His courtyard lay in the straw, his stable stood in the horses, he pushed his oven into the bread. He made good milk from his cheese, his twill was made of jacket. He dug an earth in his hole and fields out of his turnips, he threshed his flails with sheaves of corn...¹²⁷

Such playful nonsense, according to Incongruity Theory, is pleasant to the mind in a biological sense. Recent neuroscience studies of imaginary play where the “perceiver enjoys absurd, complex incongruities that are not or only partially resolvable.”¹²⁸ Nonsense that cannot be resolved gives some circuits in brains a pleasant zap.

Incongruous collisions have a specific effect on the physical brain. The evolutionary process (according to one view)¹²⁹ has supplied us with delight in our own cognitive blunders as well as a certain irreverent and innate joy in backward situations (e.g., WUD's). Koko the Gorilla, for instance, toyed with her caretakers by inverting their sign-names with obscene bodily functions (as a sort of incongruous situation Koko's play

¹²⁷ Trans. Kunzle, in Babcock (1979), 78.

¹²⁸ Dai et al. 2017 and Samson et al., 2009.

¹²⁹ An evolutionary model of “fight or flight” is offered by Dennett et al., *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (MIT Press, 2013).

should bring us a bit of joy too).¹³⁰ If the theory holds, the picture here, where Koko seems to be intentionally trying to make us laugh and entertaining herself, ought to cause the reader a particular neural response as an incongruity. (I think she knew and wanted us to laugh.)

It's not a stretch to assume ancient brains were wired to laugh at incongruities just as well as anybody else. For example, in the ways Romans thought about a horny moron magically turned into a donkey by a magic spell, or Egyptians thought about Setne in a chamberpot, most ancient brains found some delight in the structural content, physically speaking, regardless if they were in Rome or

Some Comic Incongruities

Personification: A figure that is inanimate or animal takes on human qualities, or the reverse.

Hybridity: A figure takes on multiple aspects or parts of separate real creatures.

Extension: A figure is enlarged or reduced in respect to one or all of its qualities or appendages.

Juxtaposition: A figure encounters something of a much higher or lower register.

Inflexibility: A figure is thwarted due to its own finite physical nature, usually by natural forces.

Contrafunction: A figure is used for, or takes on the social role of, something impossible or opposite its popular meaning.

Misdirection: Two figures seem identical but are not quite the same and become confused.

¹³⁰ Apes respond to humor with laughter and smiling and recognize incongruities in play with objects, according to Jennifer Gamble, "Humor in Apes," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 14, 2 (2001), 163-179. See also Ruch, 78 in Raskin (2008), who notes that rats express inaudible ultrasonic laughter during tickle and play that resembles human laughter in function and form. See also Morreall (2016), 49 for an analysis of studies of Koko the Gorilla's ability to toy with her caretakers by assigning them incongruous names like 'bird', 'nut', or, when particularly annoyed – 'dirty toilet'. For neuropsychological studies, also J.M. Moran, G.S. Wig, R.B. Adams, P. Janata, W.M. Kelley, "Neural correlates of humor detection and appreciation," *NeuroImage* 21 (2004), 1055-1060. See also S. Coulson, M. Kutas, "Getting it: Human event-related brain response to jokes in good and poor comprehenders," *Neuroscience Letters* 316, 2 (2001), 71-74, and H.L. Gallagher, F. Happé, N. Brunswick, P.C. Fletcher, U. Frith, C. Frith, "Reading the mind in cartoon & stories: An fMRI study of theory of mind in verbal and nonverbal tasks." *Neuropsychologia* 38 (2000), 11-21.



Figure 20: Koko the gorilla being funny. “Ummm....Can I get a closeup of the food with these? Koko ponders as she peers into a pair of binoculars!” Ron Cohn, March 3, 2002. *The Gorilla Foundation*.
<https://www.koko.org/kokopix-photo-blog/1964/koko-with-a-pair-of-bin>

Egypt or wherever.¹³¹ Ancient humorous inversions like these had different subjective effects depending on their varied cultural contexts and entanglements in local worlds, but they were also structures that moved through time and across space in an easy way since mammals evolved to have brains that find incongruities entertaining and tend to pass them around when we can.

Psychologists who have recently been working on humor have generally connected it with incongruity in studies of smiling, laughter, cognitive responses, moods, and personalities.¹³² Experiments in child psychology have shown that in the earliest stages of development the resolution of safe anomalous situations generates humorous responses in play.¹³³ Infants enjoy incongruity in the simplest form in “peek-a-boo” games:

The mother's failure to reappear violates the infant's expectations, and the infant may resolve the discrepancy by realizing that the mother has not vanished but is merely hiding. By looking for and successfully finding her, the infant resolves the discrepancy and laughs.¹³⁴

¹³¹ The *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, to be discussed below.

¹³² For an overview, Ruch's useful and comprehensive chapter on “Psychology of Humor,” in Raskin (2008), 17-100.

¹³³ See Schultz, T.R. “The role of incongruity and resolution in children's appreciation of cartoon humor,” *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 13 (1972), 465-477. Also Suls, J.M. “A two-stage model for the appreciation of jokes and cartoons: an information processing approach,” in Goldstein, J.H. and P.E. McGhee, *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (Academic Press), 1972.

¹³⁴ Pein and Rothbart, 971.

Peek-a-boo provides a good metaphor for the basic neurological activity of humor according to incongruity theory: an anxiety-increasing anomaly in the natural course of things is safely resolved and recognized to have been part of a game. So encounters with absurd exceptions in the normal patterns of daily life cause a disruption in our normal mental state, a cognitive shift¹³⁵ as we curiously suspect the anomaly and process whether it is threatening. Incongruous imaginative play alters our level of anxiety and affects the economy of our underlying psychological tensions, for better or worse.¹³⁶ (In that way, the Relief and Superiority schools of humor theory – which we pass by here but will draw from later – generally study the results of Incongruity.)

¹³⁵ Morreall, 49.

¹³⁶ That's similar to what Freud theorized about expressions of repressed urges: Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (Deuticke 1905), trans. Joyce Crick, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (Penguin 2003). The model of tension and release has also been used to theorize the semantic nature of jokes and punchlines (a large body of complex literature we will pass by here due to its narrow linguistic focus). See Raskin and Attardo for various analyses of joke formats and their narrow linguistic processes and Suls' two-step theory of jokes, "A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis" in Goldstein and McGhee, 81-100.

How does humor happen in the brain, according to Incongruity Theory?

- An **incongruity** appears. (E.g., high priest Setne has his penis stuck in a chamberpot).
- A **cognitive shift** begins as our neural pathways light up and try to debug the anomaly. If the situation could present a potential threat, anxiety increases and we have the stuff of horror: disgust, rejection, fear, projected emotions to protect ourselves.
- But when the **debugged anomaly** is harmless, the tension built up by the anxiety of a cognitive shift deflates and we are relieved and laugh.
- If there's nothing at all in the incongruity to defuse or resolve, it's **sheer nonsense**, which makes us laugh but for our purposes will not qualify exactly as humor.
- If our sense is wonder or intrigue (it turns out to be a religious mythical creature, or an imaginative piece of fantasy art, or a sublime or tragic story pattern), we might snatch a word from Levi-Strauss and call it a **mytheme**.¹³⁷
- If the incongruity can be resolved, and it punctures an Official Transcript as social commentary, we laugh at the absurd inversion of natural or social life, we have what we can qualify in our terminology as a **mirtheme**.

¹³⁷ I use this word in a shallow way after Levi-Strauss but not to the letter. For his specific linguistic discussion of “bundles of relations” that create meaning, as opposed to isolated elements, see *Structural Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1963), 210-211. Wendy Doniger (2009, 202) has a nice explanation of the term as follows: “If you take an early story (more precisely, a story that was recorded early, since no one knows when it was first told) and compare it with later tellings, it is as if the first story was dropped and broken into pieces, and then put together differently – not wrongly, just differently. The broken pieces are the atomic units of a myth, what Levi-Strauss called ‘mythemes’.”

Incongruity Theory and Folk Humor ‘Mirthemes’

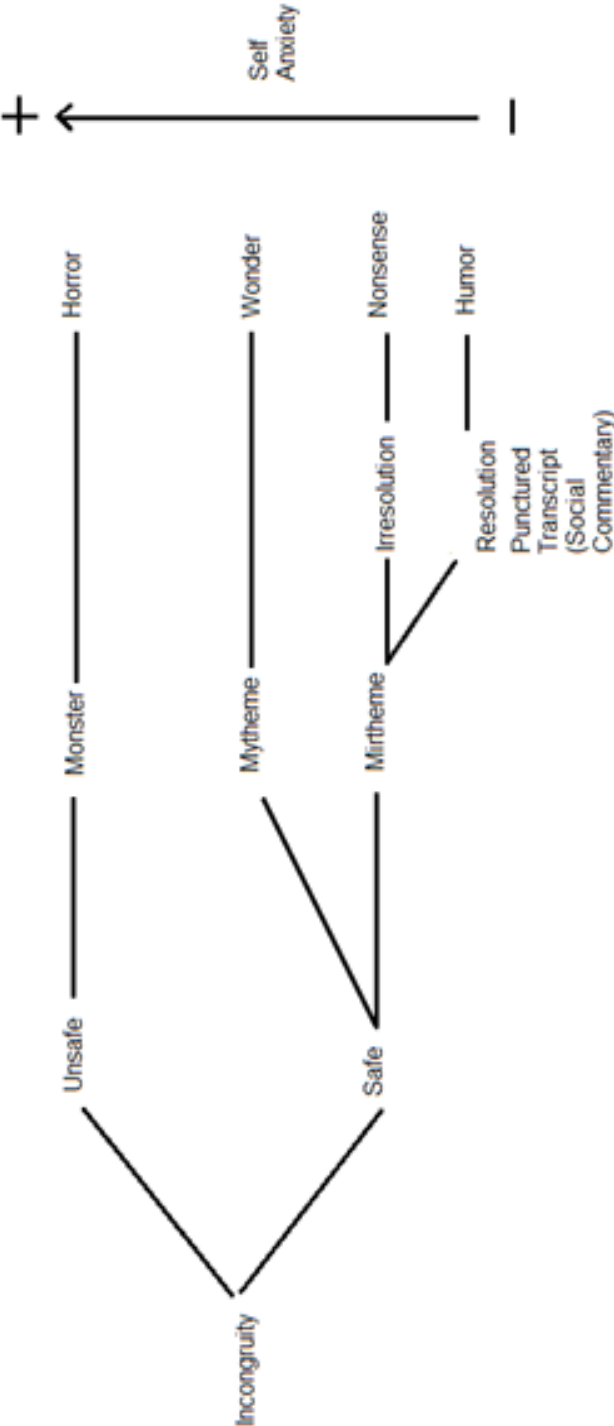


Figure 21: How to Find a Mirtheme (a pointless chart)

What does the above neat little chart have to do with Greco-Egyptian humor? (Maybe it only illustrates the futility of such a chart and the boring scientism of the structuralist way of thinking.) Mirtheme theory may help us as we return, for example, to *The Misfortunes of Setne*, where the *juxtaposition* between a high priest and a chamberpot might be understood as a humorous *incongruity* embedded in a *POT* – a criticism of the priestly class and its tendency toward male sexual excess. That is, we can safely call that episode humorous without deeply offending the ancient Egyptians by projecting our own senses of humor onto their culture.

We can hazard an educated guess that there was similar humor going on between cultures. Some earthy folktales all share the same physical effects on human brains, one might argue, when high social classes are inverted and the pressure of their official transcripts temporarily relieved, depending on the target and the context. Not only are episodes similar in terms of their creative inventory (say, a pisspot), but they are structurally similar in terms of their narratological content. That is, the humor arises not from the object but from a pattern of colliding registers that seems to be funny to almost anyone so long as they have the basic social equipment to debug a safe mirtheme in their neural network.¹³⁸ The mental operation works the same way regardless of the texts' spatial and cultural disconnection, extreme age, alien horizons, and history of smudging and misreception between the two cultures. One way or another, debugging such a literary anomaly seems to theoretically relieve our anxiety at *someone's* expense and, generally

¹³⁸ Levi-Strauss said, "It is probably one of the many conclusions of anthropological research that, notwithstanding the cultural differences between the several parts of mankind, the human mind is everywhere one and the same and that it has the same capacities. I think this is accepted everywhere." We strongly hesitate to take such a view here, and will deploy only a much weaker version of this extraordinary approach. *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture* (University of Toronto, 1978), 19.

speaking, lessen the common subliminal discomfort we have about the Official World and its sober constructs of social phenomena.

If we were to push structuralism to absurdity, we might churn out a mathematical formula to explain how every comic tale we are about to read in the following chapters can be represented as algebraic variables. It might look something like this, to employ Levi-Strauss' formula for "every myth" ever written.¹³⁹

The Formula for Every Joke in the World

$$F_x(a):F_y(b) \simeq F_x(b):F_{a-1}(y)$$

So let us suppose variable *a* represents *a penis in a chamberpot* (Egyptian) and *y* represents *a farting pharaoh* (Greek). Say we include the vagina of a cow goddess somewhere on the left side and a drunken peasant on the right? Should we even continue with this experiment?

Structuralists go too far and might end up with a ridiculous result, or nothing whatsoever – or trundled off in a wheelbarrow like the poor student of Aristotle we saw above. Structuralism must have some limits and moderation to work. There are hard limits to the sorts of universalizing tendencies at play in the Comparative Method, as it appears in the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, among theorists of world folktale, and in the blanket neuroscience above, as we have explored briefly here.

¹³⁹ Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1963), 228.

Infrapolitics: Regressive Reading and Misreception

Dominant groups tended to have access to the means of textual production and therefore the power to remove or manipulate humor out of History. The muffling of subordinate or subaltern worlds of ancient thought is especially apparent in the European 'great tradition' or 'great books', since many Greek and Latin texts were physically created and cultivated by a tiny and non-representative fraction of humanity that has greatly desired to trace its roots to one or two cultures and not to others. Still, some stage-footprints of the performances of slaves, women, foreigners, and so on might remain 'below the surface' of those texts if we look for them carefully.¹⁴⁰

A given folktale... may be retold or ignored, and if retold, may be abbreviated, enlarged, changed, spoken in completely different forms or dialects according to the interests, tastes, and also the fears of the speaker... A possibly seditious folk song can, in this sense, be performed in hundreds of ways: from the apparently innocuous before hostile audiences to the openly seditious before a friendly and secure audience. Those who have earlier been privy to the more seditious interpretations will appreciate the hidden meaning of the innocuous version.¹⁴¹

Oral traditions that seem innocuous can be reworked into higher genres, with suitable costumes that would play better in the public transcripts of imperial systems of morality and education.¹⁴² So, for instance, a woman

¹⁴⁰ From here I draw on Forsdyke whose work in Classics in turn drew on James C. Scott and Robert Darnton to study Greek popular political humor and resistance. She summarizes (40): "Scott's idea is that subordinate groups use stories to create a cultural space for themselves that is separate from that of dominant groups. By telling stories, these groups are able to imagine a world where power relations are different. While these fantasies of 'the world turned upside down' are seldom realized, their retelling serves as a medium for group cohesion and facilitates lower-level resistance to power."

¹⁴¹ Scott, 161-162.

¹⁴² Cf. Forsdyke (47), "...these stories play a role not just in articulating the distinctive ideology of *separate groups* but in mediating tensions *between* groups. That is, these tales are important cultural devices through which elites and non-elites (both peasants and slaves) worked out a way of living together... These stories are a cultural meeting place through which the principles of mutual accommodation are worked out."

slave's animal fable could rise into high Greek prose and metamorphose into a rich philosopher's wisdom. I call a moment where this happens a *paralacuna*: a gap in the historical record that's been plastered up with fictional material tweaked for the purposes of a dominant group.

Classical texts are full of what I am calling *paralacunas*, or rich men's illusions of foreigners, women, slaves and other subordinate groups whose voices were lost in the wind. Instead what we have are laundered tropes dressed up in costumed garb, imaginary creations like the 'clever slave' that delighted those at the top when slaves were, in reality, not happy. If there was desperation or desire for revolution, it was transmuted into harmless fairy-tale form, trickster fable, or a silly comedic sketch, as material delightful to *literati*, who preserved a great amount of humorous material onto paper for bookish eyes, but its original sense of deep resentment or horror is harder to detect. The common mirtheme of the 'wily peasant' has existed as far back as fictional narrative, at least since early Middle Kingdom satires (see chapter below) through, for example, Roman comedy (where it did however enjoy a special authenticity) and medieval farce and into a dozen other genres. A good roasting is one of the highest levels of fawning. But such a potentially dangerous trope might get out of control and often only expressed a limit of irreverence. Any genuinely subversive voice of a real uprising in the ancient world often had to be delicately tamed and emplotted in narratives that justified the existing social order as they were snatched up, written, collected, and purveyed by those on top.¹⁴³

Women's humor is a particularly troubled paralacuna. It's a blank space that has been filled in with roles made up by the masculine

¹⁴³ For a discussion of Roman comedy and its containment, see Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic* (Cambridge, 2017), 40-42.

imagination throughout history. Women's humor has been mishandled or entirely removed due to restrictive and conservative social norms, where there were historical constraints of "prevalent cultural values that emphasize male superiority and dominance together with female passivity."¹⁴⁴ One issue here is the domain of 'women' as a monolithic category, largely an invention of silence from an absence of data with which to differentiate within that group. Recent scholarly textual analysis has tried to dig underneath the surfaces of Classical texts to recover the voices behind, believing that it is possible to use highly misogynistic classical texts to learn about alternative viewpoints by means of close and careful reading against the grain.¹⁴⁵ These researchers draw on anthropological theories of festivals, fools, and other inverted (anti)-institutions and their functions in different cultures.

Anthropologists have thought about clowning, worlds-upside-down, fools and trickster figures, in various societies, as cynical expressions of power dynamics. That's part of the 'Relief School' of humor, by which play is merely seen as a psychological form of therapy: we laugh to be able to suffer through life. At the macro-level, a communal and public function of social ritual gives people some energy (while helping them get back to work for the masters or elites); at the micro-level, we laugh only as a release of repressed sexual and hostile energy to discharge our innate primal aggression and hatred for one another. Victor Turner perceived a function of ritual inversion in his ethnography of Ndembu rituals, and extrapolated what he found to an enormous variety of world cultures and subcultures, from Mormons to

¹⁴⁴ "...in public domains women seem generally not to engage in: verbal duels, ritual insults, practical jokes, and pranks, all of which reflect the competitive spirit, and the aggressive and hostile quality, of men's humor; slapstick; institutionalized clowning; and institutionalized joking relationships with female kin." Apte, 69.

¹⁴⁵ O'Higgins, Laurie. *Women and Humor in Classical Greece*. Cambridge, 2003. Winkler, John J. "Part Two: Gunaikes," in *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*. Routledge (1990), 129-209.

Vice Lords to Hippies and Hell's Angels and in rituals like modern-day Carnival and Halloween, as public celebrations of trickery, bodily delight, and social inversion.¹⁴⁶ For him, these provide a therapeutic release that does not threaten social order so much as it conserves *communitas*, an equal bond between people of differing rank within a group. Sanctioned ribaldry and calendrical recitations of truth-to-power, Turner suggests, occur within socially conservative periods of liminal inversion, during which "the high must submit to being humbled; the humble are exalted through the privilege of plain speaking."¹⁴⁷ In Turner's view, humor would be a functioning apparatus of the dominating system, as a necessary "steam valve" that allows the otherwise authoritarian arrangement of human hierarchies to survive and flourish. In other words, this model effectively reads humor *out* of society.

Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted illicit behavior...By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle. By making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behavior of the high, and by restraining the initiatives of the proud, they underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society.¹⁴⁸

How elites manipulate and control everyone's social play has been a pivotal theory of humor called the "bent bow" or "steam valve" or "wine barrels" approach. To wit, a bow breaks if bent too much; a society

¹⁴⁶ "these tiny earth powers, if not propitiated by treats or dainties, will work fantastic and capricious tricks on the authority-holding generation of householders – tricks similar to those once believed to be the work of earth spirits, such as hobgoblins, boggarts, elves, fairies, and trolls. In a sense, too, these children mediate between the dead and the living; they are not long from the womb, which is in many cultures equated with the tomb, as both are associated with the earth, the source of fruits and receiver of leavings." Turner, 172.

¹⁴⁷ Turner, 179.

¹⁴⁸ Turner, 175-6. "Rituals of status reversal...mask the weak in strength and demand of the strong that they be passive and patiently endure the symbolic and even real aggression shown against them by structural inferiors."

needs to let off steam; wine barrels burst if they are not unplugged once in a while.¹⁴⁹ So the masters on top know that they can let the people periodically play because, in the end, they'll work harder for it.

Humorous relief can be a form of social control, to curb and encompass the potentially dangerous freedom of the disempowered when they start rebelling against the few on top.

The *Hymn to Demeter* (c. 700-600 BCE) is an Egyptian paralacuna of humor, since it was closely connected with Egyptian women's festive ribaldry, although upregistered and sanitized into a masculine Greek version.¹⁵⁰ Here, Egyptian culture has been laundered into another cultural festive context. The *Hymn* bears strong resemblance to many other world narratives about a laughing goddess beyond Egypt, not the least the Sumerian *Dumuzi Texts*. What particularly resonates is the motif of the "Mother's Search": both Damu (Dumuzi's



Figure 22: Baubo figurine with vaginal flashing. Berlin State Museum, TC 8613. Photographed by Ingrid Geske.

mother) and Demeter at one point lose their children in the underworld, go looking for them, and return having divided up the seasons. Demeter searches for her daughter Persephone, who has been snatched away and raped by Hades. Jarringly, at one point during a period of dejection she encounters the female jester, Iambe.

She sat, pining in longing for her deep girt daughter

¹⁴⁹ The earliest "steam valve" anthropology was prompted by an Egyptian chamberpot. Herodotus, in his ethnography of Egypt, relates folk-tales about of the pharaoh Amasis, a common figure of fun for the Egyptians and a symbol of drunken revelry. In Herodotus' narrative, Amasis crafts a golden statue out of a chamberpot and uses it to awe the people into respecting him as their leader. He then theorizes about what humor is for in a society – that workers must have fun once in a while – since "a bow will break if it is strung too tightly." See analysis in chapter 3 below.

¹⁵⁰ O'Higgins, ch. 1. Cf. Thompson, D. J. 1998. "Demeter in Graeco-Roman Egypt" in *Egyptian Religion. The Last Thousand Years: Studies Dedicated to the memory of Jan Quaegebeur*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* (1998) 84/85, 699–70.

Until decorous Iambe, with jokes
And many a mocking jest moved the holy lady
To smile and laugh and have a gracious heart.
Even afterwards she used to cheer her moods.¹⁵¹

O'Higgins regards Iambe as a vestige of women's cultic ribaldry and connects the figure's mythic doppelganger, the icon Baubo, as known from Orphic fragments, inscriptions, and terracotta figurines.¹⁵² Baubo was a more obscene character than Iambe: she lifts her skirts to reveal her genitals and so makes Demeter laugh. This discomfort and absence then, a case of 'smudging' above, creates what we have called above an *antithetical fault* in the Hymn to Demeter, a jolt where an originally festive, oral, private folk humor has collided with the narrative of a high (Greek masculine) text and been edited and reshaped to suit a literary community where there is absolutely no vaginal flashing allowed. So the figure of Iambe in the *Hymn* wobbles, as it were, uncomfortably as "a potentially dangerous individual of (unrecognized or unacknowledged) high status being 'challenged' by someone much lower in status."¹⁵³ That makes the figure a unique and important anomaly.¹⁵⁴

It's possible to recover possibilities for original performances when context is not available for them. To elaborate, let's consider how we might spot a particularly jarring anomaly in a later high reception that seems to be evidence for a joke from an original source. That is, an author of elite status inherited a bit of local or indigenous playfulness and upregistered it – consciously or not – into science or literature, creating a sort of jarring bump in the text where there are traces of colliding narratives, as if geological continents suffering from drift, and a trace of

¹⁵¹ Trans. O'Higgins, 40.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁴ O'Higgins, 51.

folk humor that has been accidentally or consciously smudged away remains only as sediment.

Consider one textual anomaly in Aristotle, a potentially humorous episode of what we're calling Classical Misreception. Both Aristotle (*Historia Animalium*) and the spurious Pseudo-Aristotle (*De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus*) taught their audiences about many aspects of the physical world as part of a high Greek education. Their two works are very similar (often identical) collections of oddities from the edges of the Hellenistic empire likely harvested by Alexander's traveling soldiers in places such as Egypt and retrieved for Aristotle and a learned audience of imperial *literati*. Here stories from the fringes of the Mediterranean passed across great stretches of terrain to be organized, situated, and manicured into a high text with a didactic purpose. No mythologizing or joking is here, at least on the surface.

But consider the case when both authors plainly and humorlessly record "what people say" about a foreign monsters called the *bolinthus*, a bull that that spews flames when it is chased by men with a spear and builds protective fortresses for its babies.

It defends itself by kicking and by voiding dung at them, throwing it up to four rods from itself; it uses this easily and frequently, and it scorches the hounds' coats so that they rub off... They first drop dung around the place before giving birth, and make a sort of rampart; for the beast discharges a great quantity of this residue.¹⁵⁵

Where did Aristotle's biological information come from before it passed into Greek? The implied reader was an educated and sober-minded

¹⁵⁵ Aristotle, *History of Animals* 1.46.630b 5-15 (LCL 437). The passage reappears as follows in Pseudo-Aristotle, *On Marvellous Things Heard*, 830a5.20-25 (LCL 307): ἀμύνεται δὲ λακτίζον καὶ προσαφοδεῖον ὡς ἐπὶ τέτταρας ὀργυρίας· ῥαδίως δὲ χρήται τούτῳ καὶ πολλάκις τῷ εἶδει, καὶ ἐπικαίει δ' ὥστ' ἀποψήχεσθαι τὰς τρίχας τῶν κυνῶν. τετραραγμένον μὲν οὖν τοῦτο ποιεῖν φασὶ τὸν ἄφοδον, ἀταράχου δὲ μὴ ἐπικαίειν. ὅταν δὲ τίκτωσι, πλείους γενόμενοι καὶ συναχθέντες ἅμα πάντες οἱ μέγιστοι τίκτουσι καὶ κύκλῳ προσαφοδεύουσι· πολὺ γὰρ τι τούτου τοῦ περιττώματος τὸ θηρίον προίεται.

Greek curious about natural history and science – no laughing matter. But if the original source of the tale was less interested in the imperial project of Hellenistic wisdom than, say, exactly the opposite, and mocked such an endeavor to its face by drawing upon popular and floating bodily and scatological humor and slapstick exaggerations, we might pause a moment and wonder whether any of that lower registered content has experienced a bit of seepage into a higher medium as it returned from the borders of empire to Aristotle’s home Greek interpretative community.

Bolinthus was the vestige of a biological fact that was exaggerated and distorted as it passed by means of oral storytelling, as if through the ‘telephone game’ around the ancient world.¹⁵⁶ It is a fact that bulls do kick when frightened, which made for some comedy at a farmer’s expense in one of Aesop’s fables: “By stamping his feet [the bull] swiftly scattered the stirred-up dirt and it was blown by a blast of wind into his master’s face as he followed the plough.”¹⁵⁷ It is also a fact not only that cow dung makes great building bricks for insulation, but also that bovines have a tendency toward indiscriminate and uncontrolled self-expression of their emotions through their tail end.¹⁵⁸ That is all basic information to a non-elite source (an actual farmer) and somehow here it has undergone a generous exaggeration.

Some aspects of the *bolinthus* may have been playful embellishments on the part of the indigenous supplier of local knowledge as he or she was confronted by an elite Greek inquirer seeking biological

¹⁵⁶ The telephone game: when people in a circle whisper something to the person on the right (e.g. “defecating bull”) and by the time it comes full way round it has radically changed (“flame-spewing monster”). I have attempted this experiment in classes on paradoxography and the result always validates the unintended humorous consequences of ancient miscommunication.

¹⁵⁷ Fable 132 (Avianus 28/Perry 582). Translated by Gibbs, *Aesop’s Fables* (Oxford 2002), 69.

¹⁵⁸ Raised in dairy country, I hesitate to reaffirm, for the sake of this thesis, what I discovered myself as a child chasing cows with a stick.

information to collect and bring to Aristotle. The vestige of what might be a fossilized punchline in both texts – πολὺ γάρ τι τούτου τοῦ περιπτώματος τὸ θηρίον προίεται (And indeed, the beast voids a great deal of such excrement!)¹⁵⁹ has a sense of anomaly to it that does not quite blend with the scholarly tone in the rest of the work. I take this to be an *antithetical fault*, a place where the content of source material (a dirty joke) does not quite fit with the intention of the new surrounding register (imperial biology). A joke has experienced a sort of subduction between an elite epistemological project and a colliding plate of obscene agricultural humor, and it has left a fault trace here between convergent boundaries in the text, to use some geological metaphors.

The point with our *bolinthus* experiment here is to show how we might theoretically ‘get’ lost ancient jokes that were laundered into dry Classical sources by drawing on later, more modern versions of folklore where the audiences had keener ways of looking at the material than their Greek sources. Later medieval audiences (keener than Aristotle was in some ways) detected something pungent about *bolinthus* themselves. Medieval artists downregistered Aristotle’s record with full-blown comic illustrations as part of popular adventure stories. Here a later audience has shifted their stand-in role away from Aristotle’s implied reader (a sober Greek intellectual). Although living much later than Aristotle, their reinterpretation may have actually been closer in their sentiment to original oral tellers of the tale!

Burke called this sort of reading the Regressive Method:¹⁶⁰ a sort of backward procedure with which we ask if later receptions are better readings than earlier ones, if they got the joke, in order to recover ‘floating’ humorous motifs even after they have been, in other less

¹⁵⁹ Pseudo-Aristotle, trans. W.S. Hett. LCL 307. My exclamation point.

¹⁶⁰ Burke (1978), 123-125.

enthused (mis)receptions, smudged away. There are no hard and fast conclusions about the sources of this floating folk motif, but we can watch it morph over time as it was accepted and denied by various interpretative communities. Medieval artists were able to detect that the tale was originally probably, well, *bullshit*.

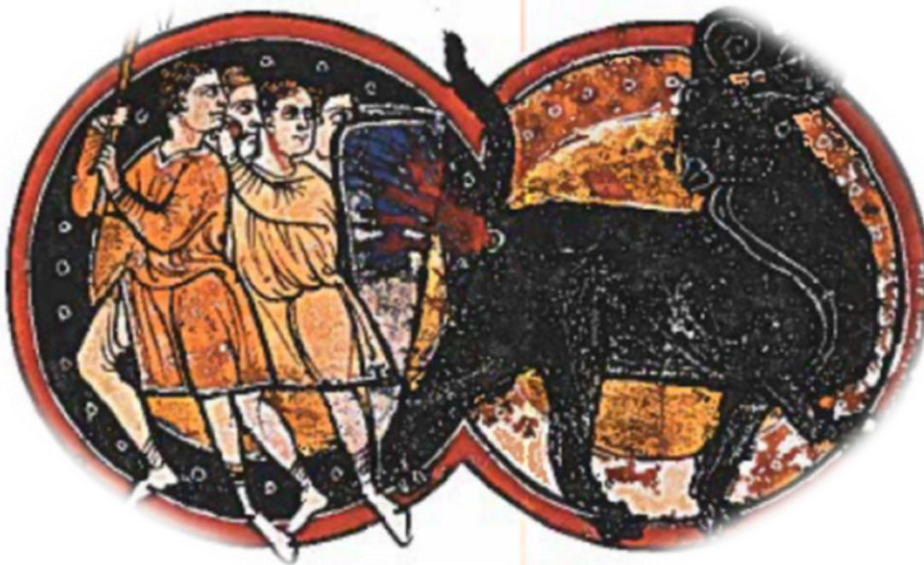


Figure 23: Medieval bull spraying feces. From Heck and Cordonnier, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary* (Abbeville Press, 2012).

A fisherman's lie retold over centuries has the tendency to become more highfalutin when it's written down for distanced, objective scholars. International folk humor taken in by intellectuals from empires deepens to become way too profound or oriental or exotic. I call this general movement of humor *Highbrow Drift*. In some cases what were once dirty jokes or lies or fibs became religiously appropriated into the highest divine heroes, like Socrates or Alexander the Great, who still bear textual vestiges of dappled oral, comic folk traditions from all over the Mediterranean that were never intended to become world literature. The original sentiment of those narratives may even have been to mock such austere authorities at local levels in small, specific communities. Certainly the *Alexander Romance* is full of stuff right out of Egyptian popular comedy. What was originally quite funny rose and metamorphosed to become something else altogether.

We might effectively downregister, disentangle, and relax the Classical tradition a little by using later modern folklore from all over the world.¹⁶¹ Originally relaxed and comic Egyptian women's forms of obscenity and ridiculousness made their way into Greek and along the way much of the content became very serious indeed. But if we use more modern jokes by analogy – assuming people generally laugh at similar sorts of structures – they might juice our historical imaginations. Just as we can look through medieval eyes to help us get the humor that was lost on Aristotle, we might look through later storytellers' eyes to get some humor that was lost or changed by Herodotus and the Greeks. One way we might approach the stories there is to compare them to modern oral forms by analogy. If we read and consider later receptions of world content outside of the Classical tradition, it may help classicists better understand Greek and Latin texts.

¹⁶¹ Cf., Lawrence Kim in WT, 305.

Chapter Three: What Can Modern Folk Humor Tell Classicists?

#Voteforthepimp (انتخبوا العرص)
*illegal Twitter satire of
Egyptian President Sisi (2021)
(Current jail term in Egypt
for mocking the President:
up to three years)*



Figure 24: Twitter
Pharaoh Pimp

Arab and African Comic Storytelling

What ancient Egyptians told Greek tourists about the pharaohs was similar to what working people everywhere often imagine about strong men on top who build monuments to themselves. Farted at,¹⁶² flashed by a soldier's genitals,¹⁶³ as thieving drunks,¹⁶⁴ or stupid pimps,¹⁶⁵ outwitted by their clever wives,¹⁶⁶ doing bizarre experiments on stolen babies,¹⁶⁷ burning their own sons alive¹⁶⁸ – you get the idea. Greeks in the early years of democracy perked up and collected these Egyptian stories,

¹⁶² The Egyptian punchline in Herodotus will be discussed more in the next chapter. In ancient Greek, it goes like this: “The peasant Amasis happened to be on horseback, so he lifted himself up and farted at the king’s messenger, and told him to take *that* message back to him.” (ὁ Ἄμασις, ἔτυχε γὰρ ἐπ’ ἵππου κατήμενος, ἐπαείρας ἀπεματάισε, καὶ τοῦτό μιν ἐκέλευε Ἀπρίη ἀπάγειν, Hdt. 2.162).

¹⁶³ Another punchline discussed further below: when King Psammetichus informed some rebels that they would lose their families if they deserted him, “one of them, showing his penis, declared, ‘wherever this is, there will be plenty of wives and children!’” (... τῶν δὲ τινὰ λέγεται δέξαντα τὸ αἰδοῖον εἰπεῖν, ἐνθα ἂν τοῦτο ἦ, ἔσεσθαι αὐτοῖσι ἐνθαῦτα καὶ τέκνα καὶ γυναῖκας. Hdt. 2.30).

¹⁶⁴ Amasis is both a thief and a drunk, corroborated by fictions written by Egyptians where he is playfully hungover (see extended discussion of those passages below).

¹⁶⁵ Two pharaohs, Cheops and Rhampsinitus, both prostitute their own daughters, but so do many villains in world folklore; plenty on those narratives to come.

¹⁶⁶ Many clever-woman figures are present in Herodotus, but we particularly focus on the famous story of Nitocris taking revenge on her male enemies by trapping them in a room and drowning them with Nile water.

¹⁶⁷ Psammetichus steals peasants’ babies and uses them to gain knowledge of the oldest language (2.1). See below.

¹⁶⁸ Sesostris stretches two of his children to make a bridge across burning flames, but the idea was really the queen’s (2.107). Again, more on this below.

for one reason, because they were relatable and reeking of political unrest. But on the other hand as incongruous little inversions (what I called *mirthemes*) that were just easy to pass around and generally just funny to people across cultural borders.¹⁶⁹ There's one about the rebellious peasant Amasis who leaned up on his horse and farted at the Pharaoh so impressively that the Egyptians nominated him to be the king instead. (Still a central historical explanation for the rise of the dynasty of Amasis, told by some Egyptian a few generations later, since this sort of thing would have gone well into the ear of a grandchild). Greco-Egyptian history in recent scholarly books is still more or less about the shiny accomplishments of the golden kings.¹⁷⁰ So who was on the bottom telling punchlines at their expense? Herodotus himself was just as interested in those voices. Narratives from internationally crowded and bustling Nile streets full of workers, women, and children, and real marketplaces far below the heights of the pyramids came into contact with Greek inquirers long before 'History' became a prose genre.¹⁷¹

The treasurehouse of once-whispered jokes in Herodotus might speak volumes about the ancient everyday lives that surrounded him as he traveled all around the Mediterranean. *Talking* was what Herodotus did most of the time, as Robert Fowler has written.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread*, Introduction.

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Forshaw's otherwise excellent *Egypt of the Saite Pharaohs 664-525 BCE*, where he mentions 'lighthearted' oral folklore as having existed "merely to provide comic relief," but there is little elaboration (152).

¹⁷¹ From here, I follow Jan Vansina through Nino Luraghi's discussion, "*Meta-historiē*: Method and Genre," CCH, 80-89. Given the nature of my topic, I have intentionally avoided some terminology Herodotus scholars use such as "akoē statements" and "meta-historiē" in favor of more grounded non-academic words like "he heard a joke." According to LAC (231), "It is far from improbable that Herodotus had access to high-ranking priests, and the distorted and confused information which he obtained from them, particularly on history, is by no means inconsistent with that view."

¹⁷² Fowler, "Herodotus and his Prose Predecessors," CCH 36-37. "The world he lived in was still predominantly oral in character; books there were aplenty, but they were not privileged over other sources of information..."

The general level of talk in the Greek cities of the mid-fifth century BCE is hard to overestimate: open, dynamic, democratic city-states, materially booming and culturally exploding, generated an incessant buzz: political speeches, legal proceedings, military and civilian councils, philosophical conversations, learned expositions, religious aetiology, tales told for casual entertainment or education of the young, fables...¹⁷³

The lower world of comic imagination is important if for no other reason than it makes up so much of what we have. A great portion of what we know about Egypt in the 5th and 6th centuries BCE comes through Herodotus, who preserves a groundswell of folktales that drift somewhere between fishermen's tales, legends, jokes, witty anecdotes, local wonders, tourist trap lies, street mimes, short novels, or even (as I suggest below) Egyptian board games or festival puppet shows confuddled into narratives by curious Greeks who only partially got what they were hearing.

Popular material of everyday reality in public spaces along the Nile, as I suggest in this thesis, was not coming from a homogenous enclave of mystical, wise, balding Egyptian monks so much as a diverse variety of humans with different personalities – real people of diverse variety who were seasonal 'priests' as middle-men and brought household lore out into public. Bilingual locals must have relayed things between cultures, which is not hard to believe, since the Egyptians had entertained cultures from all over the Mediterranean for hundreds if not thousands of years.¹⁷⁴ Children of elite Egyptians had to have learned Greek in order to handle mercantile sea trades or military matters with foreign mercenaries among countless other transactions – say, intermarriage with Greeks.

¹⁷³ Fowler, 36.

¹⁷⁴ 34% of all archives from Egypt have both Greek and Egyptian written on them. WT, 12.

Storytelling was a cross-cultural commodity for Egyptians to trade with outsiders along the Nile. Egyptians who had to deal with tourists were brilliantly aware of current events and critical of the Greek 'ethnographical project' when Herodotus was there – and they made fun of it – as we can see by looking at the humor going on in their folktales, some of which can be fruitfully read as mockeries of popular Greek science, just in its heyday. Informants had varied talents and training in storytelling. Some of them had connection to a literary past; some did not. Some had a sense of free satire or ambivalence, or even resentment, for tourists and academics and intellectuals. The pharaoh tales were particularly tradable to pesky tourists asking questions about King This and Queen That, as it were, and they could be quite funny in the way they diverted attention *away* from history and *away* from ethnography. Herodotus seems to have encountered some experienced street performers.

Popular humor in Egypt around the time of the Greeks was no different than it tends to be anywhere else, insofar as it would blemish the monuments of autocrats and patriarchs who hold power through violence, claim perfection in mind or body, transcendental knowledge, secret wisdom, divine status, or other egotisms. For the rest of people in the imperfect world, inversion of a narcissist's power, gender, body, or politics provides therapeutic release and imagines things differently: comedy stretches boundaries and releases dangerous, offensive, toxic or forbidden ideas. (A good fart does wonders for autocracy, and Amasis became something of a folk hero.) Humor can bring the high and powerful down, or raise the lesser up. We may detect some of that sentiment from ancient Egyptian storytellers in their own words as they contemplated their own past, recent civil wars, the desolation of livelihoods under Persian occupation, concern about family paychecks, government entanglements and social statuses, and anxieties about

Greek foreigners. They played with humor to criticize not only their own society's ancient scholarly past but also the tourist outsiders in spontaneous, improvisational, creative and casual style, sound effects included (see below). Probably at one point or another those tales were meant to blow off steam and relieve the tedium of daily work.¹⁷⁵

Egyptian storytellers of recent times have said that is what their tales and jokes are intended to do. In the 1970s, the Egyptian professor Hasan El-Shamy traveled the outskirts of Cairo and along the Delta, where he tape-recorded streams of narrative trickling from diverse sources: priests, truck-stop attendants, barbers, street vendors, villagers, farmers, factory workers, street teenagers, shoemakers, janitors, policemen, housemaids, grandmothers, and a variety of people as they circulated jokes, tales, rumors, and other narratives along the Nile. Some of it is remarkably similar to the sorts of jokes we encounter written in ancient Greek in Herodotus (if not once passed down *from* Herodotus). Due to the absence of television, iPhones, and other distractions, traditional performances of Greco-Egyptian stories sometimes still circulate in the households of nonliterate working-class people and on the street near and far from Cairo. Much has changed, but a good joke can be marvelously good at traveling.

For decades, Egyptian folklorists have been collecting and translating into English versions of traditional Arab genres that passed around for thousands of years, such as the *nuktah* (joke), *hikayah* (episodic humorous tale), *nahfe* (weird occurrence), *hikayet hayawan* (animal fable), *mathal* (proverb). Humorous narratives happen in the

¹⁷⁵ The fact that folklore informants are nonliterate does not, of course, entail that tales are purely frivolous. Lefebvre illustrates the false older view with its colonialist distaste, "It was above all to the little people, to the fellahin of the time, easy to please and of undemanding taste, that these tales were addressed, which relieved them of their monotonous and harsh life." (*Car c'est surtout aux petites gens, aux fellahin de l'époque, faciles à satisfaire et de goût peu exigeant, que s'adressaient ces contes, qui les délassaient de leur vie monotone et rude.*) Lefebvre, 72. See also Okpewho, 108-109.

colloquial parlance (*adab ammi*), lower-register linguistic worlds separate from the higher-register classical Arabic.¹⁷⁶ That lower ‘sandbox’ of playful and irreverent language can be ostensibly meant for children, but it’s the hidden private lives of adults that are really at stake: valiant peasants, surly slaves, forbidden spell books, talking donkeys, clever heroines, wicked ogres and ghouls, scheming priests, and hubristic tyrants are symbols of resentment for people’s real troubles among family members, neighbors, and government officials.¹⁷⁷

Older tellers complain that their art form is disappearing due to the creep of industrial media technologies (say, iPhones) that purloin the quiet evening hours once meant for live group storytelling.¹⁷⁸ But young Egyptians of the current generation tell stories in their own way, as grandchildren of traditional storytellers. They are not sitting around performing Herodotean folktales necessarily, but they have new and different ‘industrialized’ commentaries, that is, using cans of spraypaint on alley walls under the glow of street lamps, drawing pulp fictions in graphic novels, or through anonymous dark-net social media, if they can

¹⁷⁶ According to Jacob Høigilt, “In Egyptian schools, traditional poetry is presented as being the ultimate form of literature. Students are presented with a syllabus that consists mainly of poetry with an obvious moral and/or nationalist message, presented in a purist form of Arabic.” See *Comics in Contemporary Arab Culture Politics, Language and Resistance*, I.B. Taurus Press, 2019, 21-22. See Pierre Cachia 2011, 12 for extended literary discussion of popular and classical Arabic texts and linguistic registers.

¹⁷⁷ For these genres, see Ibrahim Mahawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak Bird Speak: Palestinian Arab Folktales*. (University of California Press, 1983), 3; also Dwight F. Reynolds, *Arab Folklore: A Handbook*, (Greenwood Press 2007), 77-129. Pierre Cachia notes that there are no hard and fast categories of Arab folk creativity, which blends with any number of world genres: “The folk literature...dips into any source that flows its way. One encounters in it elements akin to Pharaonic, Persian, Indic, Hebrew, even occasion-ally European culture.” *Exploring Arab Folk Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁷⁸ The Arab folklorist Inea Bushnaq laments the quickness of industrial change she had witnessed in her Palestinian childhood from old folk-telling entertainments to television, radio, and American distractions: “A mother who has a child cradled a rag tied round two sticks [now] buys her daughter a Barbie Doll in pink plastic with yellow nylon hair. What are now looked on as ‘folk arts’ and ‘old-fashioned ways’ were, a mere thirty years ago, regular everyday objects and the normal way of doing things.” (1986, xxiv).

get away with it without being jailed.¹⁷⁹ (At the time of writing it's too dangerous for a document like this one, for example, to be written by an Egyptian under their government.) Egyptian youth have always been known around the Arab world for a caustic tongue for satire. They've mocked recent authoritarian regimes, at the time of writing President Sisi, as his government has grown more militant and oppressive since the 2011 uprising.¹⁸⁰



Figure 25: Modern Egyptian cartoons about pharaohs.

¹⁷⁹ A depiction of Sisi with Mickey Mouse ears, for instance, sent an online cartoonist to jail for three years in 2015. See (among many online articles) Imogen Candlerwood, “Egyptian law student, 22, jailed for three years after posting image of President Sisi wearing Mickey Mouse ears on Facebook” *Daily Mail Online* December 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3367182/Egyptian-law-student-22-jailed-three-years-posting-image-President-Sisi-wearing-Mickey-Mouse-ears-Facebook.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Here's a brief description of recent political humor from Egypt for classicists who may not be familiar with the situation: “The political joke became particularly important beginning in 1952, when [Naguib and Nasser] overthrew a military regime. With the new regime came the end of parliamentary politics and political freedoms, including the right to organize political parties, and freedoms of speech and the press. When open political expression became dangerous in Egypt, the political joke emerged as a vehicle for the criticism of political leaders, their policies, and government.” Samer S. Shehata, “The Politics of Laughter: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarek in Egyptian Political Jokes,” in *Folklore* 1034 (1992, 75). “Egyptians are infamous among their fellow Arabs as lovers of jokes and humorous tales. Much of that humor, however, has an acerbic bite to it and never more so than when they are telling jokes about the political situation in their own country. Nasser was a pan-Arab hero, but during his presidency all forms of criticism and opposition to his regime were ruthlessly suppressed. His handpicked successor, Anwar Sadat, reversed Nasser’s isolationist economic policies by opening the Egyptian economy up to world markets, but this also opened the door to widespread corruption and Western-style opulence among the very rich. Mubarak was Sadat’s handpicked successor, and many jokes portray him as being of limited intelligence and of having done nothing during his decades in office, leaving Egypt in economic and social stasis.” Arab folklorist Dwight Reynolds (123). See Adel Iskandar, “Egyptian Youth’s Digital Dissent,” *Journal of Democracy* 30 no: 3 (July 2019), 154-164. Since the 2011 uprising, the Egyptian government has increased the militarization of its economy, the nepotism of government positions, and the suppression of freedom of speech and the media. Humor is seen as a great threat and extinguished unless transmitted anonymously. Young Egyptians as of the time of writing have lost faith in the political process and fallen into despair, as Iskandar writes. For Sisi’s ‘regime’ of social repression as of the time of writing (2021), militarizing the economy, banning protests, limiting free speech, controlling elections and civil discourse in the name of ‘fighting terrorism’ in the form of radical Islam, see Bruce K. Rutherford, “Egypt’s New Authoritarianism under Sisi,” *The Middle East Journal* 72:5 (2008): 185-208. Also Hazim Kandil, “Sisi’s Egypt,” *New Left Review* no 102 (2016): 5-40.



Egyptian youth relieve their outrage at the authoritarian Sisi with satirical incongruities, exaggerations, gender inversions, bodily obscenities, worlds-upside-down and sexual motifs with generally irreverent distaste for strong man on top. Recent Egyptian comic rebellions have received almost no scholarly attention,¹⁸¹ but have gotten plenty from the authorities: for instance, a

young comedian named Shadi Abu Zeid filmed himself carrying inflated condoms instead of balloons, and tricked military police as they marched for patriotism on Police Day in 2018; as we speak he's jailed indefinitely.¹⁸² Street artists and cartoonists depict Sisi as a ridiculous puffed-up pharaoh declaring a permanent reign with sham elections.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ As Samer S. Shehata (76) writes, "...folklore, in the form of political jokes, provides an infinitely rich and largely untapped resource for the study of Egyptian popular attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and views on politics. One can get at the Egyptian people's views on politics through their jokes..." See "The Politics of Laughter: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarek in Egyptian Political Jokes," in *Folklore* 103, 1 (1992), pp. 75-91.

¹⁸² Iskandar, 155.

¹⁸³ Images of Sisi as a pharaoh are widely available on the Internet. For these, clockwise from the top right: Gado, "The New Pharaoh in Egypt," retrieved from <https://www.theelephant.info/cartoons/2019/04/25/the-new-pharaoh-in-egypt>. "Trump's Favorite Dictator Imprisons Journalists," Monique El-Faizy, *The Markaz Review*, <https://themarkaz.org/magazine/trumps-favorite-dictator-imprisons-journalists>. (Next Page.) "Egyptian cartoonist Andeel posted this cartoon to his nearly 40,000 Facebook fans..." <https://www.pri.org/file/andeeloct2013jpg-0>. (The caption reads: "For shame, sir! I'm really doing a proper job on this one - it'll work like a charm for 30 or 40 years at least! God willing.") Roula Khalaf, "Egyptian satire and the slim textbook of propaganda: The country is more repressive than during the rule of Mubarak" *Financial Times*, April 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/bf73f5e8-0baa-11e6-9456-444ab5211a2f>. Koert Debeuf, "Cracks in

As Sisi urges them to exercise, eat right, and practice fidelity in their marriages, he seems to have also ordered soldiers to hold Egyptian women down and examine their genitals to ‘test their virginity’. Folk humor has roots in frustration, rage, and anger. Imagination, inversion, and incongruity can sometimes be the only outlets for loathing, horror, or helplessness. An illegal Twitter handle ‘The Big Pharaoh’ satirizes Sisi with the obscene hashtag #Voteforthepimp, now with thousands of followers and millions of hits.

‘King Pimp’ is the sort of joke about an autocrat that’s been floating around Egypt all the way back to the 5th century BCE. It brings one of the oldest pharaohs Cheops to mind (26th century BCE). As the story Herodotus wrote down goes, Cheops ran out of money building the great pyramids, so he made a plan: he sat his own daughter in a brothel. She, in turn, took a stone from every man she had sex with, and built *herself* a pyramid. From one perspective, that narrative seems to make *her* out to be a heroine.¹⁸⁴ Herodotus claims he heard that one from Egyptian priests. But why did that, above all things, make its way into high literary Greek when someone asked about the pyramids?

Today, basement satirists in Cairo (both men and women) use prostitute-themed cartoons to mock Sisi as the ‘Pimp of the State’, as if his billionaire allies are selling Egypt herself out to horny American capitalists



Figure 26: Bassem Youssef, famous Egyptian comedian. Can political satire survive in Sisi’s Egypt?” Sunday, February 4 2018, Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/68695>

the new Pharaoh’s throne,” *Politico*, July 2015. <https://www.politico.eu/article/cracks-in-the-pharaohs-throne-egypt-cairo-youth-movement-stability/>.

¹⁸⁴ Hdt. 2.127. See below for text, translation, and extensive discussion of the passage.

under a sham ‘liberalized autocracy’.¹⁸⁵ A cardiac surgeon named Bassem Youssef even made a celebrity career out of mocking Sisi with YouTube sketches from his tiny laundry room. Those videos became so popular among common Egyptians that Youssef rose to become Egypt’s first mega-celebrity, with his own version of the ‘Daily Show’. There he ruthlessly mocked Sisi’s authoritarian government in front of live audiences, and even drew the attention of American media. Jon Stewart became close friends with Youssef and rushed to Egypt to appear on the show, bound and hooded as if captured by the Egyptian military police. In response, the Egyptian government indeed did cancel and capture Youssef, and had him interrogated by military men. Sisi’s police demanded explanations for punchlines they failed to get, material similar to ‘King Pimp’.¹⁸⁶ (One thing authoritarians can never do is laugh at themselves.)

Some hard-right Egyptian academics hear what’s in Herodotus and suppose the pharaohs really were pimps. Radical Islamists preach the destruction of the pyramids as sex monuments. Youssef described how he once watched as

a “serious” Islamist researcher, with a suit and tie instead of your typical Taliban-like outfit, came out and claimed that the pyramids were built through money paid in return for sexual favors! He said that the daughters of the three kings who built the famous three pyramids of Giza slept with men for money that was later used to finance the building of the pyramids. Given that there are more than two million stones in the Great Pyramid alone, well, that’s a lot of sex. Imagine if the pharaohs continued to rule, we would have built a totally new infrastructure through our harem of royal hos.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Jacob Høigilt, *Comics in Contemporary Arab Culture: Politics, Language, and Resistance*, 30.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Prostituting an Ancient Civilization’ is the name of a chapter in Youssef’s book *Revolution for Dummies*, Harper Collins, 2017.

¹⁸⁷ Youssef, 150.

Here Herodotus is employed by an Egyptian to argue for strict patriarchy. But Youssef was right to detect something fishy about the source material. The Greek narrative was likely much closer to comedy, the sort of skit Youssef's team might have written up (had they lived in the 5th century BCE), made at the expense of gender norms, sexual containment, and great men who fail to balance a budget. Cheops' daughter did not actually go into the sex trade – far from it, probably – but that the falsehood survived over thousands of years might tell us something more interesting. The way 'Cheops' daughter' was delivered and performed clues us in that it came from someone not at all fond of the military government, not that interested in telling a long complex tale, short on time or concern, and not even that great a storyteller (maybe someone annoyed at his or her *own* family problems). It's a bit of obscene and offensive street humor mocking gender roles, ridiculous repressive governments, and family units that has now survived for thousands of years. Why?

Before we return to the ancient world's King Pimp (Cheops), let's prime our historical imaginations with some traditional Arab and African folk humor, since that material may help us think about the dynamics of comic performances and audiences when fictions are performed in different spaces.¹⁸⁸ Modern tales can help us deepen the way we imagine Herodotus, if we consider how traditional jokes and stories still tend to happen in real time in different ways in different societies in all parts of

¹⁸⁸ An important disclaimer here that there is not an easy correlation between ancient Egyptian culture modern Arab or North African lore. Whether or not there is any direct genetic connection between modern Egyptian and ancient Egyptian culture and folktales is a thorny issue that's aside our point here. El-Shamy and other folklorists have observed nearly identical tales among the non-literate modern Egyptians and those preserved in hieroglyphs or Demotic languages from thousands of years earlier, but by no means is that some kind of nationalist or essentialist restriction: mainly folklorists are just trying to contain their study geographically in order to be able to control the enormous amount of material in a feasible way.

Africa.¹⁸⁹ Without drawing any hard and fast connections between these societies and ancient and modern Egypt, we might nonetheless add some speculative vibrancy, fill in some gaps, and better visualize how folktales happen in real time as opposed to their somewhat one-dimensional aspect on the page in ancient Greek interpreted by classicists in terms of other classical texts.

Particularly resonant ‘pharaoh’ or ‘king anecdotes’ were tape-recorded by el-Shamy in the 70’s, generations before the Internet came to dominate social life and sucked evening storytelling into a void of glowing screens. Traditional tales were still commonly told in evening hours among non-literate Egyptians, including some nearly exact replications of what we read in Herodotus. Storytellers who had never met a Greek in their lives, never read ancient Egyptian material, and may not have cared at all about the ‘classical tradition’ still enjoyed similar material. Boundary-testing fantasies like ‘prostituted daughters’ and ‘pimp kings’ are central to world folktale fantasy-narratives about, say, evil fathers, kings, stepmothers or stepsisters, stuff that bubbles up from resentfully funny household imaginations essentially anywhere in the world.

Modern folklorists, unlike Herodotus, provide information about the audiences, settings, classes and identities of their informers.¹⁹⁰ El-

¹⁸⁹ An important note here. Whether anyone is ‘essentially’ Egyptian or their folktales are structurally or polygenetically related are not really arguments we are invested in here. Rather, this thesis takes into account modern ethnographers’ direct personal experience with informers, their own senses of humor, as well as their beliefs that some of the tales were either close cousins or direct descendants of ancient Egyptian ones untouched by Greek or Latin writing. With that in mind we shall return to Herodotus with speculative information about how folktales generally happen and how they are performed in real time among some groups today, chosen by a convenient geographical nearness to Egypt but by no means any sort of restriction.

¹⁹⁰ Folklorists have mostly turned from structuralist or psychological studies to contextual performance, that is, the interaction or response between teller and audience at specific moments and during specific times. Carol Krick Oakey puts it well in terms of ethnographies of modern Egyptian peasant women: “For too long in folkloristic scholarship, beliefs have been reduced to items gathered like butterflies and grouped in collections, in accordance with similarities discerned by the researcher. These folkloric specimens have had no context. More often than not, we do not know under what circumstances these beliefs were conveyed or who related them

Shamy interviewed and joked with a variety of people of all sorts, from a 16-year old Bedouin nomad driving a camel to eat street garbage in Cairo, who learned tales from his grandmother¹⁹¹ to a high-status Nubian sheik in his official position as *kammaji* or storyteller.¹⁹² He knew enough local lore to have fun with the conversations, so that people of a wide variety of backgrounds relaxed, opened up, and invited him into private quarters or close family households (not without exception - see below). Public storytelling happens according to the temporal rhythmic pulse of human life. When the sun goes down, off-work janitors told tales because the building they were paid to clean was empty and made for good acoustics.¹⁹³ When night falls, grandmothers tell animal folktales to the children as their own grandmothers had done.¹⁹⁴ A yearly celebration of the Nile flood at a coffeehouse is crowded for a competition where professional raconteurs put on a special show.¹⁹⁵

The pulse of the Nile has much to do with how tales happen: for example, Nubian raconteurs have changed the length and settings of their stories since the forced migrations away from the river in 1964 as the earthly temporal rhythm for their telling was displaced. Those farmers along the Nile, before the building of the Aswan Dam, narrated tales of rich kings' treasuries and clever thieves (motifs that appear in Herodotus' tales of Rhampsinitus) when "during the months of July and

to the fieldworker, nor has much of this literature suggested that these matters are relevant." *Everyday Life Among Middle-Class Muslim Women in an Egyptian Nile Delta Provincial Town*. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1996.

¹⁹¹ ES-FE, 28. H. Ghanim, "The Magic Filly."

¹⁹² ES-FE, 108. 'A. Isma'Aeel, "Which Muhammad?"

¹⁹³ ES-FE, 3. "The Trip to Wag-el-Wag."

¹⁹⁴ Bushnaq has written many she heard herself, as has Monia Hejaiej, *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis*, Quarter Books Unlimited, 1996.

¹⁹⁵ ES-FE, 47. A. 'Aawadalla, "The Royal Candlestick."

August all the fields would be covered with flood water; we would put feed before the animals and have nothing else to do. The story used to take a whole night, maybe two.”¹⁹⁶ Woven into the fabric of daily life in modern Egyptian communities is a specific and unique cultural institution of storytelling with its own categories, frameworks, social hierarchies, and systems of knowledge that follow the temporal pulse of daily existence. Let us consider some of the contexts for the living versions of these very old jokes, such as the *nuktah* about the “Lion and the Mouse” told in 1969 by a nonliterate peasant on the Delta, who heard it when he was fifteen years old. That particular animal story can be found – startlingly close – in the ancient Greek and Demotic versions of the *Oracle of the Sun’s Eye* from the second century BCE (discussed further in chapters below).¹⁹⁷

What in the European traditions are called folktales¹⁹⁸ arise spontaneously in North Africa and the Middle East after the work day, as the sun sets, in places of cool shadow and relaxation, as nightly delicacies and evening amusements among close family or neighbors.¹⁹⁹ Anthropologists have listened to performances in various locations: around campfires among the nomadic Bedouin, at the coffee-houses of Nubian villagers, feasts of Moroccan or Iraqi peasants, workshops of the women of Tunisia, in the weaving houses of Moroccan Amazigh, to name

¹⁹⁶ ES-FE, 4. “The Trip to Wag-el-Wag.”

¹⁹⁷ We might keep in the back of our minds that these tales formed the bedrock of the “invention of history” by the Greeks, and were taken up as the basic formulations of literary narrative from the *Alexander Romance* to Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*. That is a topic for a bigger thesis.

¹⁹⁸ Defining ‘folklore’ is as impossible as ‘humor’ in an academic context, because, as we have (un)theorized above, these genres inherently defy categorical study. Dwight Reynolds (*Arab Folklore*, 26) offers a definition that seems necessary but not sufficient: “the multitude of artistic forms of communication that we learn directly from other people and then perform and transmit repeatedly over time.” See also my introductory chapter.

¹⁹⁹ “Darkness is the best time for fiction,” Inea Bushnaq writes about her youth listening to Arab folklore in in goat-hair tents lit with dim kerosene lanterns, where she listened to traveling raconteurs tell fantastic tales over the scent of cardamom coffee.

only a few we'll discuss below.²⁰⁰ Recent scholarship especially illustrates nonverbal motions, sound effects, audience interactions and sudden asides – [Audience member interrupts: “If such a tale is even to be trusted!” Narrator responds: “it happened and it did not happen!”]²⁰¹ – short or long breaks, exchanges of money, bodily expressions and functions, and so on. Embedded are insider social commentaries and obscene satires of patriarchy and politics, most often made by women, or sometimes by teenagers (now in shorthand social media; see below), and occasionally by men who have become professional traveling raconteurs. Arab-African folklore is especially rich with information about *how* performances tend to happen (or not happen) when an inquirer from outside happens to be nearby.

Recitations take place in the leisure hours, where casual conversations form for the delight of families, relatives, coworkers or neighbors. Friends have no need for high literary decorations because folk get together just to “say something” or improvise sets of jokes together when someone at the right moment happens to say, “Let us

²⁰⁰ I draw on these particular groups not because they happen to be conveniently close to Egypt, but because they are available to me thanks to work done by insiders raised in those cultures themselves, who have handled their own translations into English. Our restrictions here are arbitrary. These folktypes have been told nearly anywhere on the earth. Here I have employed specific groups that Arab scholars have already explicitly compared to ancient Egyptian material and stories in Herodotus, though we might easily compare, for example, folktales of China, Norway, Irish, African Americans, or Native Americans, or many other groups, all of whom share a brilliant creative delight in certain forms of bodily inversion, obscenity, and political satire. For Arab and modern Egyptian material, I draw here on the work of El-Shamy, but also on the French-Egyptian author Pierre Cachia, *Exploring Arab Folk Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Monia Hajaeij, *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunisia*, Rutgers University Press, 1996. Inea Bushnaq, *Arab Folktales*, Pantheon Books 1986. For African oral literature, I draw mainly on Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds Character and Continuity*, Indiana University Press, 1992. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Clarendon Press, 1970 and *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*, University of Chicago Press, 2007. Philip M. Peek and Kewsi Yanka, *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Routledge, 2004. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, Cambridge 2004. Sabra Webber, *Romancing the Real: Folklore and Ethnographic Representation in North Africa*. University of Pennsylvania, 1991. For folk performance in general, *Verbal art as performance / with supplementary essays by Barbara A. Babcock et al.* Waveland Press, 1984.

²⁰¹ Muhawi and Kenaana, 6.

converse.”²⁰² Although many raconteurs are nonliterate, their oral skills are locally well known and perfected for the creative transmission of a rich web of stories that passes down generation to generation. Elderly Palestinian Arab villagers, for example, still enjoy traditional storytelling as a matter of creative improvisation at casual evening family events, where the presence of children enables adults to play at public theatrics and dabble in hilarious obscenity coded in generous sexual euphemisms.

People do not go visiting expressly to hear folktales, but rather because they enjoy each other’s company and like to sit around in the evening chatting (*sahra*). They go where conversation is good, and the evenings entertaining... At these small, intimate, family gatherings people casually drift into telling folktales. Someone might say, “Tell us a tale!” and if the mood is right a session begins. Usually the oldest woman present is deferred to. If she knows a tale and wishes to tell it, she will proceed...²⁰³

A 55-year old housewife named Fatma, who never lived more than twenty yards from the house in which she was born and has given birth to twenty children, laughed along with the children at the bodily humor in the tales.²⁰⁴

Traditional performers lament that their art is being left behind by a younger generation with access to phones, Internet, and virtual social media. Folk humor is kept alive in spontaneous real earth-beds of work, suffering, love and creativity, such as Fatma’s household. Casual evening tales are forms of therapy gently flavored – or entirely sauced – with commentaries on structures of power and identity among family members, neighbors, leaders, politics both local and global, where gender, ethnicity, age, or other intersections come into criticism under

²⁰² ES-TAT, 42.

²⁰³ Muhawi and Kanaana, 4.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 9.

veils of naïve fantasy, imagination, and silliness. Folktales often jar the sensibilities of higher-ups through violations of propriety as wish fulfilment before resolving social chaos back to normality.²⁰⁵ When these narratives are put into a text or otherwise documented into literary collections (such as Herodotus' *Histories*), they invariably tend to be altered and cleaned up.

Rhythms of daily life go some distance to explain why oral tales come in certain formats. We might make assumptions about ancient texts based on dynamics of modern performance: for instance, Egyptian narratives still often come 'inside a box inside a box inside a box inside a box inside a box inside a box inside a box' (to follow the humorous exaggeration in the ancient Egyptian *Setna I*). In reality, that's actually a matter of physical staging, memory aides, and bodily exhaustion: the raconteur knows many small stories, but they need to be extended for a special annual event at a coffeehouse in the village, so they are 'stitched' or 'boxed' together for convenience.²⁰⁶ El-Shamy attended yearly gatherings where villagers would attach popular fantasy narratives with local personalities in especially clever and humorous ways.²⁰⁷ For instance, during a description of a trickster hero's fight against an ogre using a dull wooden sword, there was an interjection:

[One of the audience: "As sharp as Uncle Haggag's razor!"
Roars of laughter from the audience: Hagagg is the hamlet barber.]²⁰⁸

Tales target locals that everyone knows, figures who can be easily tailored for use for social commentary or universalizing messages of

²⁰⁵ Muhawi & Kanaana, 35.

²⁰⁶ ES-FE, 47. A. 'Aawadalla, "The Royal Candlestick."

²⁰⁷ "Aatiyyah narrated with pleasure; he dwelt on details and used allegories, puns, and proverbial sayings to enhance his presentation. He also added a realistic dimension to his fantasy tale by correlating the tale's characters and actual village personages..." ES 192.

²⁰⁸ ES-FE 21, "The Black Crow and the White Cheese."

social inversion and subversion. Raconteurs shift their narrative contours to fit who's who among the audience, what time of day or year it is, and the genders, ages and reputations of those involved. Rhythms of daily life alter the flow of telling.

If our loose analogy between modern and ancient folk-telling holds, we can imagine an ancient 'boxed' tale bears structural residue from original performances – a bunch of small narrative memories stitched together. Ancient texts are literary skeletons of improvised material where a large group had the means to stay a while and listen as someone made stuff up out of structural units, like mirthemes. Often a 'box' itself appears as a piece of inventory in modern Egyptian fiction, as a wink to the raconteur's own long performance, as if to say, "Look, I'm boxing it up!" This offers irony and humor to the immediate audiences about how boring the tale is, how long it's been going on, how confusing its various strands are for angsty families and shifty children supposed to sit for so long. (Good storytellers, by necessity, must be capable of laughing at their own failures and keeping audiences on their toes; the ancient world was no different.)

Arab folklorists have detected ancient Egyptian folk motifs in living tales still performed along the Nile. Some of them are shockingly close, for instance, the ancient *Truth and Falsehood* (13th century BCE) and the contemporary *mathal* or wisdom-tale *The Noble and the Vile* (1969). The latter was told by a Cairo janitor in an empty building after work, chatting with friends during regular evening conversations where stories are passed around and improvised upon after watching the news and reciting the Koran.²⁰⁹ Another version was told by an unrelated Cairo housemaid from a Nile Delta village, though she forgot her grandmother's words and laughed as she tried to remember whether the

²⁰⁹ ES-FE, 262.

Noble or Vile was supposed to be the one riding a donkey.²¹⁰ (Modern Greeks tell a version of this tale as well, and it appears many other places around the world.)²¹¹ Whether a folktale arises on its own in separate cultures, or undergoes many retellings and drifts into specific cultures, political moments, social manipulations, it has been creatively manifested out of very old and very simple structures pleasing to the mind of the teller. Folk humor changes by the teller, but maintains some basic designs anyone can enjoy.

Herodotus is nothing if not a 'mixed bag' of folk motifs. One reason folkloric material in Herodotus has been difficult to handle is that it is not the work of a single great mind but from a range of performers with a range of talents and identities, who gave each piece their own unique stamp of creative authority as they handed down scattered and anonymous oral lore passed down from centuries upon centuries from all over the Mediterranean. Regular passing audiences may not have been necessarily expecting perfect recitations of historical events, but rather bawdy jokes and good stories plucked out on the moment. Drifting comic archetypes, characters, and motifs – the evil king, the lost slipper, the adulterous wife, the talking donkey, the severed penis, the golden chamberpot – can be manipulated to nearly any end, like melodic phrases that decorate narratives in all sorts of ensembles. Unique performances made their way to Herodotus by sheer accident. The 'classic' is not the whole story: there could have been any number of *other lost versions* or *variations* we can only make assumptions about.

Weaving is a useful analogy or the performance of Arab folktales made by Inea Bushnaq, a folklorist who draws upon her own

²¹⁰ ES-TAT, 46-47.

²¹¹ See for instance Megas, *Folktales of Greece*, University of Chicago, 133.



Figure 27: Moroccan women's creative weaving designs. Top: Patricia Fiske, From the Far West : carpets and textiles of Morocco. University of Washington (1980), 31. Below: Susan Schaefer Davis and Joe Coca, Women Artisans of Morocco: Their Stories, Their Lives. Schiffer Craft (2018), 50-51

childhood.²¹² Embroidery done by women villagers in North Africa is creative work that builds upon ancient and simple geometrical motifs. An artist who inherited her craft from generations of experts will have memorized a vast collection of these simple designs. Over years of practice since childhood she learns how to pattern them in unique and complex ways as she spins according to her own tastes on a daily basis.

Often stories are told in the same rooms as the work,

tongues to distract from fingers, and the process by which narrative is 'woven' by working women is remarkably similar to what's happening with hands. The Amazigh designs shown here are from a Moroccan village, with names like the 'calf's teeth' or the 'eyes' or the 'horseman's shoes' or 'flying birds'. Weaving is not easy work, no different than telling a good folktale, which requires years of performance to perfect. At a certain level of expertise, she adds her own colors, decides upon the mixture of patterns, and caters to a particular audience or buyer, often some rich tourist from abroad looking for something in particular. Later, we will think about how this makes a good analogy for local Egyptian storytellers catering their own creative energy to Herodotus.

²¹² Bushnaq, xiv.

Amazigh weavings never become ‘classics’, to be repeated and copied as perfectly as possible *ad nauseam* under the name of a single great name. They have free space for the expression of the individual. Like anonymous folktales, there are no names and there is no possession. Improvised folk narratives never reach a finished state and become standards or ‘classics’ to be remade again and again in exactly the same way, and although they are anonymous, *the mark of the teller is always on the tale*. Designs are all unique, constructed from timeless chunks or structures or patterns. A single tapestry can be tailored and sold off to passing travelers. That’s a useful analogy for the creative process of Egyptian priests as they purveyed ancient folktales to Herodotus, and those colors were patched up into the ‘classical tradition’ over time. We know that because different motifs in Herodotus seem to have been creatively used in various ways before they entered the Greek.²¹³ There were probably many *other tellings* that were much different than what he happened to pick up, just as a weaver’s workshop backroom has a mountain of creative designs invisible to a tourist’s eye.

Improvised music is an analogy that folklorists use to think about the sort of storytelling that Herodotus inherited. Today, a singer (*rawi*) of timeless high or elite Arab genres– epic, love poetry (*gazal*), ballads (*mawwawil*), similar to a weaver, draws upon simple and recognizable aural motifs, but always reinvents the work over time through

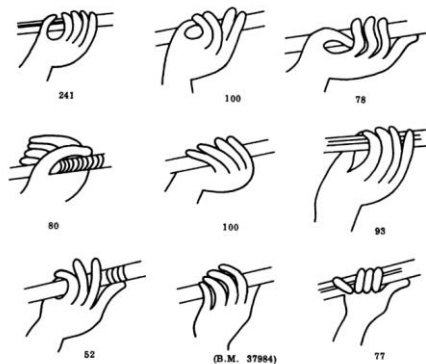


Figure 28: Ancient Egyptian musical hand positions on lutes. Lisa Manniche, *Ancient Egyptian Musical Instruments*. München ; Deutscher Kunstverlag, 197.

²¹³ We shall consider below whether Herodotus had to pay for performances from his informers.

improvisation as a form of ‘composition in performance’.²¹⁴ No two repetitions are exactly alike.²¹⁵ Melodies are repeated but elaborated with small but significant changes, which surprise and delight the audience’s ears, altering the overall ‘shape’ of the piece while it is being performed. That keeps listeners at risk of boredom or distraction attuned, since recitals of epic can last up to eight hours (with necessary breaks for tea and cigarettes).²¹⁶ Oral performances, of course, cannot be written down. Heterophony tends to break rules and bend notes: wild creative spontaneity might create an ‘out-of-tune’ sound that could bother a Western ear accustomed to Classical pieces contained, copied, and replayed to perfection by suited professionals *ad nauseam*. Modern Arab folk storytelling scintillates with a spontaneous element more familiar to those accustomed to ever-changing free-play of jazz or blues, as Arab folklorist Dwight Reynolds points out.²¹⁷ Stories are to be played with and remade.

Let’s have a look at two versions of a one particular folk story: ‘a poor woman takes vengeance on a rich woman’. First, the ancient version: an elite narrative from c. 350 BCE chiseled on the back of an expensive shrine belonging to a wealthy male Egyptian priest named Nesu-Atum. The stela is an elegantly decorated and beautiful black stone *cippus* or pedestal covered in magical protective spells, an overwrought thing that shows off craftsmanship with a taste for archaizing that Nesu-

²¹⁴ Lord 1960 as quoted by Dwight Reynolds, 55. For discussions of these genres and connections to ancient Egyptian material, see Elizabeth Wickett, *Seers, Saints and Sinners; The Oral Traditions of Upper Egypt*. I.B. Tauris, 2012.

²¹⁵ Dwight F. Reynolds, *Arab Folklore: A Handbook*, 136.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 108. I prefer to imagine Herodotus smoking in a candlelit room with local street sages during a break from a long set of tales about Rhampsinitus – just a fantasy.

²¹⁷ “These different notes can at first give some types of Arab music an ‘out of tune’ sound to a Western-trained ear, but to other listeners, particularly those who are used to hearing *bent* notes in jazz and blues, the microtones will sound perfectly agreeable...there is a continuous sense of change that can be summed up with the phrase ‘repetition with variation’,” Reynolds, 136.

Atum was rich enough to have created for him. Water poured over by an official priest would collect at the bottom in a basin and become imbued to cure scorpion bites and other maladies that happened to members of the household.²¹⁸ The magician would recite an ‘official folktale’ about the healing magic of the goddess.²¹⁹

Isis and the Scorpions.

Metternich Stela, c. 350 BCE.²²⁰

Isis is pregnant with young Horus, destined to become king of the gods. She escapes her wicked uncle Seth, and seeks refuge and a place to hide her baby son from him.

Accompanied by seven protective scorpion-goddesses, in the evening she arrives at a city in the marshlands, and looks for somewhere to hide the baby. She tries the door of a rich woman.

The rich woman slams her door in the face of the goddess. The scorpions become angry, so one slips under the door and poisons the rich woman’s son.

Now the rich woman wails and laments that her son is going to die.

Isis, however, takes pity and proclaims that she is a healer of all forms of poison. A maidservant allows her into the house, where she cures the child.

[An instruction to the magician using this stela commands him “Call out ‘May the child live and the poison die!’”]

The rich woman gives many of her possessions to Isis and also to her maidservant, thankful that her own baby was saved.



Figure 29: Ancient Egyptian stela with Isis folktale. "Magical Stela (Cippus of Horus) 36-343B.C. Met Museum

²¹⁸ Including, incidentally, the family cat.

²¹⁹ Cf. Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 145-146.

²²⁰ My adaptation of Nora E. Scott, "The Metternich Stela," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 9, no.8. April 1951, 201-217 and Geraldine Pinch's translation (145).

So the stela tells only one variation of a commonly-told story about Isis, a household goddess whose lore floated everywhere. There would have been any number of other oral tellings of *'Isis and the Scorpions'*: say, outside in the marketplace swarming with diverse people less concerned with curing illnesses and more with entertainment, thanks to the oral and playful nature of popular narrative and the nature of Isis herself, as a tricky and sexual goddess of love and cleverness. Herodotean tales are not like monuments, but a bit closer to free-floating oral content. Have a look at what follows, the same motif performed in the late 1980s by an elderly, nonliterate Palestinian woman, for a private audience of women and children, with an accompanying Arab anthropologist who had earned their trust. This tale can be found in a number of oral variations in modern Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan, but here has a particularly 'Palestinian' flavor:

The Rich Man and the Poor Man (Palestine, 1989)²²¹

A poor pregnant woman was desperately hungry, but her rich and selfish sister would not share any food. So the poor woman and her husband scrounged from their neighbors, planning to host the vizier at their home for a special dinner. But during dinner, the poor woman ate too much cabbage.

Before she was aware of what she had done, she let out a big fart. “Yee!” She cried out, “may my reputation be ruined! And I had to do this in front of the vizier. Earth, open up and swallow me!”

Indeed, the earth opened up and swallowed her.

The poor woman descended into an underworld bazaar, a strange city with shops and people. She wandered through this underworld, begging everyone to tell her: where would she be able to find her fart?

All the townspeople there joined her search: “Who has seen the fart? Who has seen the fart?” Suddenly, “Here I am!” he answered, surprising them. And how did they find him but sitting in a café with his legs crossed like an effendi, all bathed and wearing a cashmere suit with a fez on his head...

“I was pressed tight inside her, utterly uncomfortable,” the fart defended himself. “Now that I’ve escaped, I’ve bathed and dressed up, and I’m having a great time. Why not?”

The cashmere-wearing fart granted the poor woman the ability to drop gold coins out of her mouth, and sent her back up to Earth. There she bought a mansion on par with the king’s palace, and clothes just like the king’s wife, outdoing her rich sister in every way.

When the rich sister found out about this, she became jealous. She also invited the vizier to dinner. She ate too much cabbage, pressed and squeezed out a little fart and also descended to the underworld.

But it was now a rainy and dark place, and her fart was huddled in a dank animal pen, wrapped up in a coarse piece of cloth and shivering from the cold. Forced out against his will, he cursed her, making it so that every time the rich woman opened her mouth, snakes and scorpions would crawl out and bite her.

The rich woman returned to the earth and immediately tried to tell her husband all about it. Snakes and scorpion tumbled out of her mouth and bit her to death. Her husband married another woman, happy to be rid of her.

²²¹ Adapted from the translation of Muhawi and Kanaana (1989), 301-306.

Talking farts wearing cashmere suits do not appear on any ancient Egyptian stela, as far as I am aware. But that playful and relaxed modern Arab women’s oral variation is closer to the material Herodotus heard than anything chiseled on a high monument. Some of the folk motifs that appear in it – ‘descent to the underworld’ (where she finds the talking fart) and the ‘return with a golden item’ (coins dropping out of her mouth) – are similar to what Herodotus learned about pharaoh Rhampsinitus, a king who travels to the underworld, plays dice with the goddess Demeter, seems to humorously lose or draw, and returns with a golden handkerchief. Those details are the common stock of women’s tales told for other women or for children still today.

Rural Egyptian children today learn about ancient kings and other figures from traditional Arab epics by gathering around puppet shows carried around on the backs of itinerant storytellers, men who make a bit of money traveling roads between small villages and transmitting versions of old folktales.²²² The *Sandouk el Donia* is a puppet box shaped like a castle with two parapets, with six-inch holes in the side with magnifying lenses, through which children watch plastic toys dressed up as kings from myth and legend, which an old raconteur moves with hanging wires as he spins stories, jokes, and fables. A tale



Figure 30: Modern Egyptian storyteller’s puppet box. *Sandouk El Donia*. Anonymous. (Photographs of these are difficult to find: thanks to Samet Budak for help searching one down on Arab social media.) Retrieved from *Imgur*: <https://imgur.com/tQpMNCB>.

²²² See Kamal el dien Hussein, “Egyptian Peep Show Storytelling,” in MacDonald, *Traditional Storytelling Today*, 325.

like *Rhapsinitus* has common folk motifs that could easily have been associated with popular media of this register.

Herodotus was probably not peeping through a six-inch hole. But we can imagine him inheriting some of his material second-hand as it passed up from local worlds of assorted physical media and pools of kingly lore, much of which not literary whatsoever in nature. Some of what Herodotus picked up was not the sort of stuff that came from official monuments, but has *rhythm* and *obscenity* and most especially *entertainment value*. It came out of a dimension of everyday life separate from or at least not entirely suffocated by what we might think of as the sphere of official 'Egyptian priests'. When classicists read Herodotus, we should not imagine him always interviewing serious officials conveying expensive narratives from monuments or archives, but diverse and friendly locals comfortable enough with a Greek that they allowed some mildly obscene underlore to escape their tongues and pass to his translators or bilingual members of his traveling entourage. I suggest we imagine Herodotus and his people listening in fringes of public spaces where relaxed oral performances would take place. Early historical prose was to some extent international women's, children's, and worker's tales emerging from the deep energetic underbelly of real household and public marketplace life: *they were the ones telling their own history*, and their irreverent creative brilliance coincidentally found its way into the European 'great tradition'.

'Underlore', as we are calling it, has a tendency not to appear in great works or on monuments intended for public view that have survived down the centuries. Rather, it is a body of collectively inappropriate impurities shared in private among trusted groups in casual oral improvisations, masked in anonymity and by a lowly register usually not worth reading or noticing to dominant classes and outsiders seeking high wisdom. Obscenity and bodily expression therefore have a

tendency to disappear from sight or to be over-translated into polite mush. Horrifyingly obscene folktales can be skewed into pleasantries given the nature of their bowdlerizing mediators. That's especially true when it comes to, say, décor on pyramids or statues or tombs where the elite themselves have tried their best to both appropriate and disguise the creative lore of the locals. High-register contexts tend not to purvey the same information as oral folktales that happen in relaxed situations, where spoken jokes and anecdotes about rich and powerful figures – which disappear with the wind and whose authors remain anonymous – tend to mock the higher-ups in the most obscene ways possible. In tales told by Egyptian, Sudanese, and Palestinian peasant grandmothers to their own grandchildren today, the insufferable rich woman farts herself to death, to be killed off by the scorpions. And good riddance to her.

Traditional underlore illustrates a world of hard themes and entertaining filth: “eating and drinking, defecation, fornication, flatulence – that is because this is the level at which we are all alike and no one can claim a higher status.”²²³ In *The Rich Man and the Poor Man*, scathing commentary on social class, wealth distribution, social decorum, and gender and family roles is hidden behind childish-sounding scatology.²²⁴ Raunchy sexuality, genitalia, bodily functions, slapstick scenarios are celebrated in Arab humor traditions, but not exactly in the open, where violations of social decorum and virtue are punished in extreme manners through fantasies of revenge and inversion hidden underneath naïve-sounding metaphors. And for good reason: today's recitations take place in a highly devout Islamic context and under strict gender barriers at risk of actual punishment, so tales often hide their sentiments behind

²²³ James C. Scott, 75.

²²⁴ Muhawi and Kanaana provide an excellent discussion of such elements in their introduction.

‘silliness’ (talking farts). Any intruding patriarch might ignore that content as beneath his station.

Occasionally an ethnographer overhears something particularly saucy, for instance, the women’s proverb (*mathal*) criticizing men who have multiple wives: “A household with one wife is a source of pride, one with two is a laughingstock, and one with three – uncover yourself and defecate!”²²⁵ Or the proverb about husbands who fail to feed their wives properly: “Shit son-of-shit is he who can provide but renders the woman (wife) needy!”²²⁶ Women rarely expose it to public view, but behind closed doors they are happily scatological. Obscene or directly subversive or satirical content can be intentionally sidestepped or missed in the telling and receiving – and humorous content carefully excised – if the audience is not fully part of the insider group. So these bits of local wisdom get a good cleaning-up as they are translated into codes in the immediate household if men are present, not to mention if hosting a Professor (or some Herodotus) from abroad equipped with a tape recorder or writing utensil.²²⁷ Later we will experiment with some of these dynamics in the Greek of ‘visiting Professor’ Herodotus.

El-Shamy noticed that the further away from downtown Cairo he traveled, the more polite resistance he encountered as an outsider, and the harder the divisions were between genres meant for the children (say, animal tales) while others are specifically for men and teenage boys (blunt dirty jokes). These are false divisions, of course, since behind the official transcripts, in fact everyone tells obscenities to their trusted ones, but only when alone with their safest audiences (particularly men with

²²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²²⁶ ES-TAT 183.

²²⁷ Stith Thompson refused to collect particularly dirty ones. Few of these could be considered children’s stories, of course: like all world folktales, many of them are obscene, violent, racist, misogynistic, dealing with themes of incest, rape, and death, no differently from, for example, the overtly sexual French versions of Red Riding Hood (a coded name for a clitoris).

men, women with women, teenagers with teenagers). For instance, El-Shamy found himself unwelcome among teenagers and had to rewrite the word “shit” when young boys on a street-corner mocking local authority figures refused to tell him the real joke and pretended they meant the word “dirt.” Nearly all of the stories generally have obscene social inversions involving the lower bodily world of scatology or genitalia. Often a blank and humorless quality of delivery in a monotone voice seems to make the joke, but not to the extent of open laughter, which would be a social violation of decorum. But an audience tends toward laughter when they know the references and can fill the gaps. In contemporary Egyptian folktale, there is much winking and careful deadpan, quite similar to Herodotus’ prose humor, a writer who loves punchlines but always remains mysteriously or perplexingly understated.

Women are certainly in on the joke and very often the sources and the best raconteurs of Arab and North African folktales and dirty jokes involving wicked femme-fatales,²²⁸ lusty prostitutes, helpless maidens, overbearing father-figures, and sexually desperate fools who, for instance, have giant (or tiny) penises or, say, turn into donkeys.²²⁹ In fact, it is not unfair to say that in all the collections of Arab performances women most openly delight in breaking the rules of correctness with inversions of patriarchal norms and bodily functions. In 1927, a white woman and European ethnographer named Winifred S. Blackman traveled among Egyptian peasants in the Upper Nile and to some extent castigated them for their ignorance and became revolted that Arab women (and girls) had brutally open and obscene senses of humor about their bodies when they were in private spheres:

²²⁸ To use a term employed by Teyssie. Her work on females in the ancient Egyptian tales is discussed below.

²²⁹ See el-Shamy’s *Tales Arab Women Tell*. Especially the autobiography of Galilah, one of his informants who lived with his family in Cairo for several years (42).

Thus the children from their very early years hear subjects spoken of and joked about in a manner that is most revolting to educated people. What chance have the children in such circumstances of growing up into pure-minded men and women? I am told (for such conversation rarely takes place in my presence) that the women are far greater offenders in this respect than the men, who usually refrain from discussing their wives with outsiders.

However, Lila Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian anthropologist, encountered heaps of inside-humor when she lived with a family of Bedouin women in Egypt and recorded many of their stories, although she still never understood some of the inside puns and references:

The songs were so explicit and immodest that I had a hard task finding anyone willing to explain them to me. The women simply giggled when I looked at them questioningly...

Egyptian rural women have been happier to share dirty jokes with women, of course, like Blackman and Abu-Lughod, than they have ever been with men. When professor El-Shamy met Galilah, a 22-year-old villager from the Delta employed as a housemaid in Cairo, he asked her if she knew any fantasy tales (*hawadit*) and she first responded, “No! My mind does not retain such things!”²³⁰ In context of Islamic rural family life, propriety demands that tales are changed a bit to suit various contexts, especially when telling to men, foreigners, or other outsiders. She later agreed, but provided “cleaned-up” versions of remarkably obscene stories that she had heard from her own grandmother. When El-Shamy asked about particularly questionable tales, she stated she had “never heard that one.” Speaking to close relatives, he discovered was not entirely true.

The further away from the official world El-Shamy went, the more obscene and subversive tales became. While he was recording Sadiyyah

²³⁰ ES-FE, 33 ‘Profile of a Typical Household Tale Teller, 1969-72’.

A., a 38-year-old butcher and native of a rural area called Gizah in southern Cairo, her elder son stormed into the room and angrily refused to allow his mother to “talk nonsense” in the company of strangers. The recording had to be terminated.²³¹ Her folktale, a violent one called *Futmah and the Pickled Fish Head* (a peasant girl marries the king’s son and kills her miserable nagging mother) was only partially transmitted. But that narrative was told in nearly identical form by another woman in a different part of Egypt, who could not stop laughing while she told it! Subversion of power structures from below in the form of “harmless” nonsense and folktale is something that those in power – whether at a family, local or national level – simply cannot prevent. When we consider a source like Herodotus engaging along the Nile and asking locals for kingly stories of an obscene bent, a fundamental rule for reading against the grain is that when anomalously childish inventory appears, it may have been an informer’s clever mask for something off-color perhaps – and this is the big question – not to be shared with an inquiring Greek.

According to another informant El-Shamy interviewed named Tayiyyah, a seamstress who ran a workshop in the city of Zaqaziq, Egyptian women would tell such fantasy tales (*hawadit*) over and over dozens of times while they worked, but only for an inside audience of other women and never for anyone else:

In olden times narrating and working used to go together, now we have the television and the transistor [radio] going on, and business is not as [brisk as it] used to be...twenty or fifteen years ago, I used to have five, six, or maybe seven girls [working for me]...we used to stay up until dawn. This house [where we are now] did not have electricity then; we worked on [the light of] no.10 [kerosene] lamps. I would scissor the cloth and pin the parts together...another would loosely stitch...another would baste...another would sew...another would blind hem...and so on, we may stay up until dawn and maybe

²³¹ ES-TAT 95.

until sunrise. We used to tell fantasy-tales (*hawadit*) and other stories (*hikayatantyah*) [such as]: “Have you heard! Such and such a thing has happened”...due to their insistence, I would tell it again and again.

After this introduction, she performs an entertaining and sexually raucous tale *The Daughters of the Bean Vendor*, about the comeuppance of an arrogant sultan’s son, which can only be described as excellently saucy (and not at all favorable to the intellectual qualities of the male gender). Long and complex, we will not cover its entirety here, but it has resemblance to world folktale and especially the Egyptian style in its delight in paradox, riddles, gender inversions, boxed tales, and unexpected scenarios. Arab women in a conservative household like Tayiyyah’s are completely self-aware that they are getting away with reconnaissance storytelling at the expense of their husbands.

Social context of a performance changes the comic inventory or removes it altogether. Tales pass out of the boundaries of the in-group – say, from women-only to public view – where they must be coded and protected by metaphors and childish-sounding replacements for what were originally barbed narratives about incest, bestiality, murder or any other tabu. Sometimes these are entirely confused into higher genres and become the serious stuff of tragedy. (The Oedipus tale, for instance, is retold with its humorous bent by Egyptian peasants today much differently from Sophocles; see my introduction.) El-Shamy describes how Galilah

spoke rapidly and was obviously embarrassed when presenting materials that were overtly or symbolically of an erotic nature. Her discomfort was particularly observable with reference to an episode of ‘The Ostrich of the Sultan’s Son,’ where the water bottle rolls ‘herself’ downhill over the pottery pitcher and broke ‘his’ spout; symbolically, a water bottle represents a female whereas a pitcher represents a male. Similarly, in outlining ‘The Green Sparrow’...Galilah dropped the word ‘pimp’ from the verse...Also in the humorous anecdote ‘The [Miserly]

Husband and the Leg of Lamp', she substituted the word 'ear' for the indecent 'anus'; thus the phrase 'until fat has oozed out of his anus' was changed to 'until parsley has grown out of his ear'.

Here women's inside humor among daughters and sisters at men's failed sexual advances has been cleaned up in the presence of an male outsider Professor. El-Shamy was self-aware and paid careful attention to how the context of each encounter shifted the telling of the tale in question. Collected by an outside source, no matter the genuine concern and caution by the documenter, the original and elemental obscenity of the in-group might lie disguised within harmless inventory to make it sound as if the narrative's target is children, in order to avoid embarrassment or reproach for material potentially subversive to gender or power roles.

Rumor had it that three Egyptian grandmothers in Cairo were particularly famous for one called *The Man Who Severed His Own Thing*. This saucy tale circulated among Nubian housewives while their husbands were out of town for years at a time working in cities.²³² The grandmothers, of course, stoutly denied they had any knowledge of the story whatsoever.²³³ (Elderly Arab women do not tell sexual tales to adult men, especially outsiders.) One of them, Zainab G., a 70-year old Nubian widow living in a one-bedroom apartment in Cairo, refused to tell tales with questionable content: "No! I wouldn't tell it... Away from you! ...I wouldn't tell it ... it is disruptive to good relations and defamatory!"²³⁴ She also said that her grandchildren were fools because they had no interest in the tales anymore and would not listen to her (too busy with iPhones). "When I narrate, my mind gets relieved...When I am all alone,

²³² ES TAT 208.

²³³ "When approached by the present writer for this tale, both latter women raconteurs summarily refused to allow any mention of the narrative to be made in their presence. The present writer's quest for a woman's rendition proved futile: no woman would tell the tale to an adult male outsider..." ES-TAT 208-209.

²³⁴ ES TAT 208.

I think of these stories of our parents and grandparents, they set my mind at ease.”²³⁵ Obscene theatrics are accepted among elderly Arab women, aged beyond the anxiety of sexuality and concerns about proving themselves to men, bodily humor, irreverence and social commentary become their domain,²³⁶ though they still refuse to share certain sorts of obscenity with outsiders.

In the case of the following tale, the only source El-Shamy could find was a local male schoolteacher, himself a collector of tales, who happened to have overheard it, one way or another, and passed his own version along to the visiting professor. Let us have a look at this living tale before we move back to ancient Egyptian priests as mediators and think about what these dynamics of ‘tale-passing’ and ‘eavesdropping’ might teach us about Herodotean narratives.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Muhawi & Kunaana, 19.

The Man Who Severed His Own Thing, Cairo, 1969.

Among the Nubians there is a very beautiful girl. She marries a man, but he is unable to get her pregnant. She falls ill with a disease, and on her death-bed, she commands him to cut off his penis to prove his love and fealty to her. "If you love me, cut it off!"

So he gets a razor and lops it off. But she regains her health and starts to complain to him and wonder why they are not having sex anymore. She treats him rudely, insults him, and ridicules him. She says, "Listen, two women may not sleep in the same bed. Find another town to live in."

The man moves to another town, where (s)he discovers that the king's daughters are choosing their husbands. All available men are required to show up or they will be executed. The most beautiful princess chooses him. On the night of their consummation he explains his situation. Although they cannot have sex, she is kind and understanding, and stays with him for ten years.

Rumors spread that the man has no penis. His new brothers plan on taking him to the river and watching him swim naked to find out, but the youngest girl warns him beforehand. So he runs away deep into the hills. There he encounters a shadow shaped like his wife. (Virtue personified always appears as a shadow.) The shadow demands sexual intercourse.

When he attempts sex with the shadow, his penis drops out even bigger than it used to be. Overjoyed, he runs down the hills with his outer garment lifted up, and has great sex with his new wife. They beget children and live in prosperity from then on.

The *Man Who Severed his Own Thing* was a chaos of performances eavesdropped, remembered, recited, and re-recited.²³⁷ In my summary, sound effects and nonverbal motions and audience back-and-forth are missing, which the performers themselves enjoyed the most. In elderly Arab women's tales, stage objects are crucial to the narrative. Genitals can be imagined with a variety of imaginative functions: penises are used for cutting down trees, being sharpened like pens, used as weapons, traveling extraordinarily long distances, symbolizing automobile shift-sticks and tree roots and pitcher's spouts, often challenging patriarchal norms by poking fun at the impotence, stupidity, or attractiveness and charm of husbands, young men, or local patriarchs.²³⁸ At one point the male raconteur of *Severed Thing* leapt up:

[Narrator – wearing trousers – stands up and demonstrates how his own source for that version of the tale – who wears a long outer gown – had enacted this scene...”he lifted up his clothes, like this – and ra-a-a-n down...”]²³⁹

By the end of the story, the word for 'penis' has descended in register: it moves through a series of coded euphemisms, from 'phallic organ' to 'subject' and 'thing' and concludes having become the obscene 'penis'.²⁴⁰ When the Shadow attempts to have sex with the man *after* his penis has been removed, the man blames women for his troubles and shouts, “You [women] son[s] of a bitch! ...Why couldn't it have been like this from the beginning?” Our (male) narrator's choice of invective contributes to the comedy here: the severed man has forgotten how to gender his own insults.

²³⁷ A 25-year old Egyptian man near the ruins of Luxor cut off his penis out of love for a woman of lower social class whom he was not allowed to marry in 2009, according to the *Associated Press*. Retrieved from NBC News at <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna31032041>, June 7, 2021.

²³⁸ ES F547.3.6, J1807.3, F547.3.1, Z197.1 et al.

²³⁹ ES TAT 208.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

El-Shamy observed *Severed Thing's* resonance²⁴¹ with the ancient *Two Brothers* (c. 1200 BCE), one of the oldest folklore texts on Earth, with common world motifs like those known in the European tradition as 'Cinderella' and 'Potiphar's Wife', some of which Herodotus picked up and wrote down in Greek, which we discuss below.²⁴² In *Two Brothers*, a young man named Bata cuts off his own penis in order to prove his everlasting fealty to his older brother Anubis, whose wife has attempted to seduce him:

He swore before Pre-Harakhty, "As to your coming to kill me wrongfully, you carried your spear on the testimony of a filthy whore!"²⁴³ Then he took a reed knife, cut off his phallus, and threw it in the water; and the catfish swallowed it. And he grew weak and became feeble. And his elder brother became very sick at heart and stood weeping for him loudly.

Bata is here moved from the world of the male to the world of the female, similar to *The Man Who Severed His Own Thing*. Unable to have sex with his own wife, he later tells her, "I am a woman like you."²⁴⁴ Later, Bata will metamorphose into a well-endowed bull, and eventually become the pharaoh himself, to live happily ever after with wife and progeny.

Both the modern and ancient Egyptian versions of the 'severed penis' motif illustrate a troubled or wrongful family separated by the physical removal of the genitalia, and then renewed into a better one by supernatural means. El-Shamy argues the 'shadow' and the 'seven

²⁴¹ ES 318A.

²⁴² See Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers: The Oldest Fairy Tale in the World*. University of Oklahoma, 1990.

²⁴³ *wn.in.f hr rqw.fn P3-R ˘-Hr-šty m dd | ir p'y.k ˘iyt3 r hdbw(.i) m grg | iw.k hry p'y.k niwi | hry st-r n kt bhw* Trans. Lichtheim. We need to be cautious with 'whore' in translation, a difficult concept in Egyptian. Alternately, "sexually aroused slut!" in the translation of Simpson or „einer schmutzigen Dirne" according to Brunner-Traut.

²⁴⁴ *p3 wn tw.i <m> st-hmt mi qd.t*, trans. Hollis, 105.

Hathors' are deeply connected in terms of folk magic. Both texts question the nature of the 'virtuous' woman and the 'virtuous' man through a fantasy of comeuppance and ultimately love and happy reproduction. We may debate whether the ancient *Two Brothers* was 'comic' in any sense to its ancient audience. But there can be no doubt about very similar stuff told by modern raconteurs trotting around with their trousers pulled up.

Popular comic storytelling everywhere in Africa and the Middle East happens just as it does anywhere else, with dynamics of irony depending on who's who in the audience. The great Nigerian folklorist Isidore Okpewho lived among African tribal communities and, similar to el-Shamy among Egyptians or Lila Abu-Lughod among Palestinians, had insider access to his informants' hidden worlds of puns and obscenities. He was able to gather traditional witticisms, riddles, jokes, tongue-twisters, festival songs, political satires, short histories, and poems; but he also describes where they were told, how they were told, what influence the scholar's presence had, what genders had to do with it, when there was audience laughter, and so on. Unlike Herodotus, Okpewho describes specific contexts and informants' personalities and other dynamics invisible in the ancient world. One aspect he noticed was that comic performances of folktales can be intentionally *dishonest*. Nigerian street performers (*maroka*) sometimes make up stories on the spot for tourists or passersby, but when backs are turned, narratives change into something quite different for the inside audience:

Maroka may stop strangers and begin to sing their praises, pointing out their outstanding beauty even with this is not true at all, all because they expect a gift; when that gift does not come and the stranger walks away in disregard, the *maroka* may change their tune and tell the truth!²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Okpewho, 29.

Ethnographic inquiry is undergirded with an ‘assumption of sincerity’, as anthropologist Deborah A. Kapochan writes: the anthropologist needs to trust that he’s hearing something at face value. But jokes and lies can be made at the expense of the ethnographer, or the foreigner, or the University, if not entirely swindle them all.

Storytellers live real lives in the world. Today, anecdotes about folk kings are effective forms of wisdom performed live in world cultures: that is, they are meant to satisfy a need for someone who is present in the immediate audience: to caution their morality, to show off intellectualism, to make a living, persuade a case, welcome an outsider to an in-group, delight a sitting audience. In some busy and crowded areas trod by hoards of international travelers, tales are tools, and raconteurs edge on charlatans or ‘fake academics’ who ploy wanderers into asking questions about landmarks. That does not mean they are unlearned; quite the opposite, to survive at this career requires both wit and wisdom. One Moroccan informant named Moulay Abdellah was just this sort of professional ‘sciolist’, or someone who pretends to be a public scholar and seeks out inquirers to tell them stuff (*musha’widin*, and proud of it). He would make himself visible in public areas to catch through-traffic and then offer to tell great truths on the spot to satisfy the curiosities of passersby. He was the sort of person who might gain the most face-time with travelers, as he pretended to be a charismatic local with plenty of knowledge about history and culture. Deborah Kapchan encountered this informant:

Moulay Abdellah is now an epic storyteller in a midsize town in the Middle Atlas Mountains [Morocco]. He arrives in the marketplace every day at about the time of the afternoon call to prayer. Sitting on an old wooden box, he recounts the heroic tales of ‘Antar to a circle of about 40 unemployed and aging men. He resides in a quarter below the *suq*, in a brick-converted shantytown. He has opted for permanence, but only after a quarter century of wandering. Although he is a storyteller now, he was once an itinerant

salesman of nonprescription medicine following the market circuit in southeastern Morocco. He tells me how it was common practice to hold a tire gauge against the foreheads of clients and, when the needle began to wiggle, divine their ailments and prescribe a remedy consisting of “pills” sold for twice their cost in a pharmacy – common medicines like Actifed and antacids.²⁴⁶

I’m not suggesting ancient Egyptians put a tire gauge on the forehead of Herodotus to sell him Actifed. But we might imagine his interlocutors in some cases were charismatic raconteurs or purveyors of wisdom tales, who were both religious figures and workers, entertainers, or marketplace men-of-all-trades, who may even have targeted him, and were not necessarily that interested in providing archival truth for historical analysis so much as drawing on their own household imaginations in order to share laughter of wisdom with foreigners. Abdellah was famous for saying, “The day I don’t see you all here listening to me is the day that I know you’ve gotten smart...but as long as you keep coming, I’ll keep telling you stories.”²⁴⁷ The joke, in this case, is on the open-eared listener, but with a sense of warmth and conviviality.

Some popular storytellers around North Africa mix into crowded international marketplaces, where they tailor popular fictions for a living with style and charisma. Tunisian women can take up the raconteur’s

²⁴⁶ Kapchan, “Stories About a Moroccan Storyteller,” in TST (342), “As Moulay Abdellah tells it, he owes his career to lies. He ran away from his home in Marrakech when he was in mid-adolescence upon finding out by accident that he was adopted. Deeply wounded by the realization that his identity was based on a deliberately maintained deception, he went on to Casablanca and got a job busing tables and cleaning a café. The few dirhams he made during the day were spent on going to the cinema. Almost every evening he was there, watching films from India and Egypt. But he also did not waste time going to the local halqa, the public space for performance. HE had grown up listening to storytellers and praise-singers in the main square in Marrakech. Now he decided, he could do as well. Forced to live by his wits (“my master” he says, “was poverty”), Moulay Abdellah would recount the plots of Indian and Egyptian romance and war films that he had seen the night before, changing the names and places of the storyline, localizing them for a Moroccan audience.”

²⁴⁷ Kapchan, 341.

life, since traditional fictions they have learned down the generations are quick sources of amazement to tourists.²⁴⁸ But most of what they do is practical: to describe the love lives and heartaches of travelers, to tell fortunes and cure diseases with magic, as part of the craft of earning a living through *effective trades*.²⁴⁹ Since the 1980s the folklorist of North Africa Sandra Webber collected Tunisian local histories or legends (*hikayat* or in French *historiettes*) as a special genre of narrative performed by storytellers in North Africa (nomadic Bedouin and Tunisian women). *Hikayat* are “history-tellings” where a particular figure of the past often connected with a familiar monument becomes central subject of extended narratives as a hero, fool, villain, or clown. When anthropologists ask Tunisian peasants to tell them about ‘history’, they are directed to consult well-known local raconteurs of *hikayat* – usually elder males, though the real generators of the tales are elderly women – who then tell them wisdom fables based on recent events of the last few hundred years. These are not exactly legends, nor fantasy tales, not exactly jokes, not myths, and yet they do qualify as history in the minds of the tellers because they carry a moral pattern from which the community is meant to learn. *Hikayat* are forms of wisdom meant for evening relaxation and communal reflection on human virtues, just as much as entertainment. The real history-making happens after the telling, when discussion and debate follow upon the tale. By analogy, we ought to imagine Herodotus as a *primer text* in just this way: probably the real ‘history’ happened in the oral discussion with drinking, conversation, or other entertainments after Greeks engaged with his performances or readings.

²⁴⁸ See Sabra Webber, “Tunisian Storytelling Today,” in *Traditional Storytelling Today*, 356-357.

²⁴⁹ Webber, 357

Hikayat are pliable and improvisatory to a great degree and tailored to the daily lives of attendants. They can be shortened for a five-minute interview with a cigarette or lengthened for an hour's coffee. *Hikayat* are never just silly, but disguise social commentary under prominent 'celebrity' historical figures of recent memory. It is much easier to talk about, say, women's sexual roles in society, by doing it through a tale about a long-lost princess or prostitute of the past than by simply stating one's strong opinion on sex. Tempers stay calmer when the difficult conversation is about some ambiguous historical figure: that is the true value of ancient history. Local history can be a sort of stage where fictional characters, who call to mind the teller and listener themselves, come and go, and the point is to provide narrative therapy for current sufferings or to provoke discussion. Through them 'history' is a tapestry woven by a group in the evening as a form of communal therapy, relief, and preservation of tradition in the face of outside anxieties or traumas caused by conflict, most especially dangerous changes brought on by natural catastrophes and outsiders. Storytellers creatively massage harsh recent events so as to intrigue and involve an immediate audience, so the content of narrative changes based on who's listening.

North African *hikayat* resonate well dynamics of storytelling in Herodotus. For example, when Italian tourists float across the Mediterranean and ask locals about the history of the Kelibians, they might hear that according to legend Kelibia was once formed by an explosion that caused a chunk of Sicily to be turned over and float south.²⁵⁰ That's an easy thing to tell visitors, but it seems tailored to Italian tourists to make them feel involved and connected. Similarly, in the ancient world, Egyptians may have tailored tales to Greek culture a

²⁵⁰ Cf. Webber, introduction (9).

bit to make them feel welcome and connected. Herodotean folktales are similarly bi-cultural fabrications of a particular moment of tourist engagement. They have preserved a remarkable sense of two-way conversation between cultures negotiating foreign friendships by invoking one another, even after they have passed across tongues, being diverse in register, content, and tone, and having floated to him from around the Mediterranean and moderately retailored for different purposes, with a delight in basic forms of universal humor. Different variations might even tell us something about what sort of person told the tale and what their interests were in the conversation. (For instance, a short and dirty quip about ‘King Pimp’ was not likely someone with a lot of time or much real concern for Greek pyramid tourists and their questions, and actually blowing Herodotus off.)

Folklorists notice different personalities influence different variations of oral narratives. Variations and inflections of folktales might reveal things about the tellers: their cares, concerns, troubles, loves, and resentments. Okpewho describes how African storytellers’ personalities and lifestyles influence the content of their fictions: elderly Nigerian storytellers are economical and controlled, while younger ones are a little more lavish with details and tend to be more playful and experimental.²⁵¹ Okpewho writes that one of his Nigerian informants named Ajayi Okoh was a troubled middle-aged alcoholic, who quarreled with his wife on a daily basis, and became drunk during a telling of a folktale, where women appear scandalously evil. The tone of the tale was blunt, simple, to the point, and possibly even crude. A more sober narrator, Thaddeus Medupin, had a wealthy household and a somewhat luckier life, and so told a much longer version of the same motif that was

²⁵¹ Okpewho, 37.

much more elaborate, decorative, and for one reason or another less misogynistic in its details.

While one narrator revealed himself through his characters as a self-assured man in full control of his affairs and the world around him, the other narrator showed himself as an internally disturbed person in whose life woman loomed large as a dominant figure, evidently because he himself had a rather unhappy marriage with a wife who wrested the control of affairs from him. It is clear that the second narrator had, rather unconsciously, used his story as a way of unburdening himself of his problems.²⁵²

Classicists might attempt to read the voices of different narrators 'beneath' what Herodotus wrote (that is, not just Herodotus himself). He is particularly potent for this sort of 'under-reading' because he preserves in some cases different tellings: one version of a motif is painfully short, while elsewhere the same motif is part of extended and intricate (see below on 'king pimp'). That implies that there were two different narrators on different days with different contexts and much different personalities and senses of humor going equally well into Herodotus' ear. Consider the following model as a way of thinking about the transmission of folk humor out of households into public spheres.²⁵³

²⁵² Ibid. , 39.

²⁵³ This model responds to and in some ways alters the thinking of Lloyd, Asheri and Corcella (231): "Egyptian priests were certainly not as informed as we are inclined to think... Whatever the precise origin of a particular oral source, it is essential to grasp that the reliability of the information is likely to be impaired. As with any other source, the oral information may be based on a partial view or knowledge of the data, and the memory itself may be uncertain. Furthermore, if the tradition has passed through several intermediaries over a period of time of any extent, the historically specific tends to be eroded: the historical protagonists can be assimilated to stereotypes; folk-motifs may accrete to the narrative; and the teller's sense of dramatic propriety easily leads to modifications which give his version greater impact on the listener. It must also be remembered that oral informants use and purvey only what is relevant to their purpose, and that the longer a tradition exists, the more likely it is to lose elements under the influence of this tendency."

Underlore: A Reading Model for Classical Texts

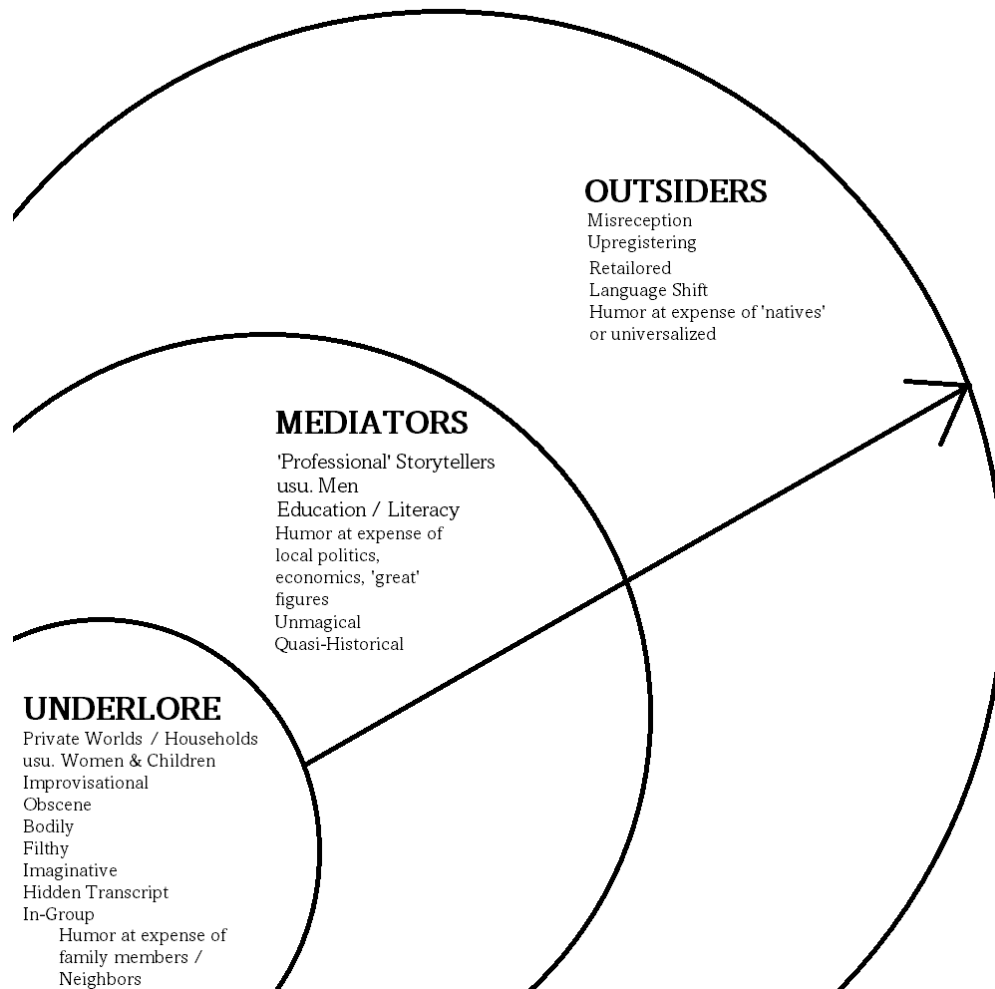


Figure 31: Underlore Model of Folk Humor Transmission

Folk imagination gets stuck in sieves of selection and bowdlerization. A good joke escapes from households into public view with the help of mediators, usually men, perhaps working as professional raconteurs, performers, local tradition-bearers: in Egypt say, priests or wise men, or even tradesmen like camel or taxi drivers, or even tourist-trap charlatans, who change household content out of women's obscene private domain for a new public.

Nigerian anecdotes about 'ancient kings', for instance, pass upward in genre as they move outside of local borders. First, they are generated on farms during periods of rest or boredom during work season, passed from father to son, or grandmother to grand-daughter, from generation to generation, but they pass into new forms as they emerge from that local sphere. One informant Okpewho interviewed, named Charles Simayi, a village medical doctor, barber, builder, handicrafts maker, described his childhood hearing tales about ancient wars as a family habit:

So, when you sat in the farmhouse with your father and it was raining, they (i.e., father and fellow farmers) would lay aside their whisks and ask you to go and fetch firewood. He and his friends would tell tales of war, and you would listen to them as they told these tales. So that was how I learned those tales about events I was not eyewitness to.²⁵⁴

Nigerian farm tales about 'great kings' can float out of the household into complex and practiced forms of public competition, artistry, and social commentary on current events among elite audiences. Simayi was a member of a council of elders who would do sensitive political negotiations to neighboring villages. At meetings, a good telling of a tale is commonly a useful framework for an issue or token of wisdom: what were once farmers' stories, jokes, and tall tales became *commodities*

²⁵⁴ Okpewho, 21.

intended to impress an educated audience and lubricate legal discussions at the local level (similar to the way orators or lawyers know how to charm an audience using idioms, insults, or narratives drawn from pools of popular lore). Among Nigerian raconteurs, storytelling is an effective creative act: an ‘ancient king of Africa’ can be an allusion to a defendant who is actually present, somebody with legal troubles himself, whose life is currently at stake, and whose virtues are being discussed *at the very moment*. A Nigerian storyteller might perform something about an ancestral king who drank too much during the daytime (like the Egyptian figure of Amasis), but in village communities, the intention is to teach and inform, to change the behavior of somebody in the audience who drinks too much and needs to slow down. With what we might call ‘effective telling’, where the referents are in the room, a tale about the ‘ancient world’ is meant to moralize, to influence and change the future just as much as to contemplate the past.

Among the Borana of Ethiopia, there is a genre of short kingly anecdotes (similar stuff to Herodotus) among intellectual provocations known as *mamaksa*, a word that means ‘to liken’ one case to another.²⁵⁵ Gatherings of Ethiopian storytellers among the Borana tell little anecdotes about kings, not to crudely inform about actual events, but in order to start a real discussion, to observe humorous or incongruent aspects of their own society. In the 1990’s the African anthropologist Sahlu Kidane attempted to collect *mamaksa* from the Borana, but he had trouble hearing them because there was often not an actual legal issue at stake. *Mamaksa* are rarely told alone by men for entertainment, but occur during major deliberations where a thorny legal or moral problem is compared to an ancient story or joke. So Kidane had to create an artificial court next to a fire under the shade of a tree with a mock trial to

²⁵⁵ Kidane, 54.

get the conversation going. People refused to tell anecdotes or folktales because it's not the way that these forms of stories are performed within the everyday world of the Borana: there must be a current issue at hand, or *mamaksa* make no sense.²⁵⁶ Oral narratives are embedded in other processes of daily life, essentially parts of other sorts of activities (debates, work, shepherding, tending children). Listeners find the stories argumentative or questionable and the purpose of the humor is in fact to provoke the more serious debate that follows upon the telling. What might appear to a mere tourist's eye from the outside to be silly is a highly engaging part of local politics with deep levels of codes, metaphors, and references at play.

Kingly anecdotes in Herodotus may have been generated from family households, full of raucous sound effects and generous obscenities during moments of creative relaxation from work; but those tales were mediated by local priests carrying on witty intellectual banter with traveling Greeks and their translators, who traded tales like a sort of currency of wisdom. That explains why a meeting-of-minds between Greek and Egyptian men seems to us like a jumbled bag of historical anecdotes, jokes, details, and even sound effects: much of this content was part of an international gathering of intellectuals showing off their down-to-earthedness with appropriations of entertaining household lore. International gatherings of scholarly minds were probably far more lively than we might think around the ancient Mediterranean.

Herodotus does preserve some Egyptian sound-effects and puns we discuss below. Play with words is, of course, common among storytellers everywhere, but the presence of puns indicates a comfortable audience not far from family households of children or public gatherings for entertainment (rather than dry scholarly atmospheres) put on by a

²⁵⁶ Kidane, 8.

raconteur with some good experience with clever ‘ideophones’ or words that sound like the action described. Okpewho describes, for instance, how sound is a deep performative aspect of African comic storytelling when it happens locally and in places of reflection, rest, and contemplation:

You can hear the sound of a person walking on dry leaves (*tswatsuratsura*), a child walking in water (*chuwachuwa*), the frying of maize (*weyweye ndi thethethe*), the hunter chasing an antelope (*suyosuyo*), and the thunder storming and flashing (*gulugulu* and *nh’aning’ani*).²⁵⁷

Sound effects in African oral narrative can easily be exaggerations, oddities, incongruities, or obscene bodily humor. In one oral epic, a villain known as The Scrotum King goes to war with the hero and as he moves...

Kene kpridi, engbe kiri, kpon pake tekie tekie tekie
rolling, his balls trundled along.²⁵⁸

Wordplay is delightful to audiences who know a language and get the puns; outsider visitors might be completely confused at whether they were supposed to be hearing history about some actual ancient king. Writing down in English a ‘History of the Scrotum King’ might be just as much a part of the humorous performance to the original audience as the telling. We must consider these dynamics of misreception in Herodotus.

Folk humor is intentionally false and plays tricks on the listener as it reverses the world. The dominant are always, as we might expect, getting what’s coming to them, whether something oozing out of the anus (see above) or much worse. Tales mock the wicked king, the evil stepmother, the imperial foreigner, the inquiring intellectual, the foolish husband, the hubristic fool. In the imaginary worlds of farmers, workers,

²⁵⁷ Okpewho, 92.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 95.

and the nonliterate, absurd scenarios disorganize power structures of knowledge, family, politics, patriarchy, sexuality, gender, and invert these hard daily realities of suffering as a breath of fresh air for those enduring on the ground in reality. Oppressors come up against trickster figures in the forms of small animals, women, and slaves as the heroes and heroines, roles highly familiar in ancient Egyptian tales. Often a narrative settles back to comic normalcy in order to re-establish and re-imprint moral codes about social decorum and further imprint the value of patriarchy on the listeners. Elsewhere the plot drives the listener to take real action and rebel. Either way, that ‘the strong are abusive’ is a central tenet of folktale and this is no different for Egyptian material whether ancient or modern. El-Shamy writes that folklore has always been an empowering tradition:

For millennia the Egyptian peasant has been both exploited and despised by foreign rulers. Even native urban and nomad groups have looked down on the peasant and considered him to be stupid and at the same time tricky. In the face of the overwhelming odds which the peasant has faced, he has relied on fatalism, suspicion, and trickery for survival. The narrator and his audience, who are members of a farming community, openly identify with the weak, submissive mouse which triumphs over the powerful and abusive wolf.²⁵⁹

Egyptians have always been famous for a biting sense of humor – “their blood is light” as a saying goes.²⁶⁰ This is evident in recent jokes told at the expense of authoritarians such as Nasser, Mubarak, Morsi, and Sisi. Samer S. Shehata traveled through Egypt and collected jokes from a wide variety of groups about recent presidential figures. Some of them were as old as 11th century Arabic, retold to suit new figures.²⁶¹ Torture,

²⁵⁹ ES-FE 192.

²⁶⁰ *damahun khaff*, Reynolds, 120.

²⁶¹ Shehata, 81.

excessive policing, limits on free speech, and rumors about the higher-ups became the stuff of one-liners and short narratives. Sadat's wife Jinah became the target of openly sexual slut-shaming jokes:

Sadat leaves on vacation and puts a special chastity belt on her, which will sever the penis of any man who tries to have intercourse with her while he's gone. When he returns, every member of his cabinet has his penis cut off except for Mubarak. When Sadat admires his loyalty, Mubarak mumbles something incoherently, having difficulty without a tongue.²⁶²

Egyptian jokes of recent times mock Egypt's lofty ancient history and colonial Western academia in terms of current political figures. Consider, for example, a joke on Egyptologists that floated around about Mubarak – brainless and incompetent – during the 2011 uprising:

The One About Mubarak and the Donkey

[Prime Minister] Atif Sidqi went in to talk with Husni Mubarak, but Mubarak's assistant said that he was very busy and that Sidqi couldn't come in.

Atif Sidqi said it very important and he must see him. He went into Mubarak's office and found him playing chess with a donkey.

He said, "You're playing chess with a donkey?" Mubarak immediately said, "Don't call him a donkey, he's beaten me four times already!"²⁶³

Egyptians joke about their colonized past and archaic history as a way to comment upon current events. The joke about Mubarak implies the Turin Papyrus (discussed in depth below), where a rather dumb-looking lion has a game of wits against a gazelle, a creature perhaps mistaken for

²⁶² Shehata, 82.

²⁶³ Adapted by Reynolds (124) from Shehata, Samer S. "The Politics of Laughter: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarek in Egyptian Political Jokes," *Folklore* 103: 75-91. 1992.

a donkey among agricultural laborers who frequent the streets of Cairo. Egyptians have been doing this sort of comic archaism of ostensibly 'great artifacts' all the way back to the Middle Kingdom: each generation picks up really old figures and employs them as comedy to depict the current political environment: let's call this *archaizing* humor and assume it was already happening in the 5th century BCE. Common targets for contemporary Egyptian political jokes are European colonialists, opulent Americans, Egyptologists,

The One About Mubarak's Police

A little ancient Egyptian statue was found but no one could find out anything about it. They summoned experts from abroad, and they still couldn't find out a single thing about it.

The secret police heard about the statue and they said, "Give it to us for twenty-four hours."
"Twenty four hours? What can you do in twenty-four hours?"
"None of your business, just give it to us."

They took it and before the day was over they came back with it and said, "This is King So-and-so, son of So-and -so; he ruled at such and such a time and..., and..., and...!" "How did you find all that out? Did you locate his tomb?"

"No, sir! He confessed!"²⁶⁴



Figure 32: The tiny statuette of big man Khufu. "Statuette of Khufu (Cheops) from Abydos. (c. 2589-2566 BCE)." Egyptian Museum of Cairo.

²⁶⁴ Shehata, in Reynolds, *Arab Folklore*, 123.

tourists, and Arab outsiders.²⁶⁵ Here's another one, told about Mubarak's over-funded and abusive far-right militant police force, known for 'disappearing' hundreds of potential activists on a whim. In this joke, Egyptologists belonging to the authoritarian government are too dumb to examine a little statue.²⁶⁶ (I suspect this is a reference to the art historians debating whether one famous little statuette held in a museum in Cairo depicts Cheops or not.) What was really at stake were political divides about how to manage museums in public spaces under the gaze of an authoritarian regime.²⁶⁷ Narratives Herodotus heard become more interesting when we think of them having this sort of layered or complex ironies about academia. We might assume they appear simple because they were satires of scholars, or playful mockery of over-intellectualizing, stuff tailored to a specific moment in a very similar way, intended to make fun of the idea of 'Greek inquiry' and perhaps intentionally not to inform that over-curious visitor.

Folk narrative archetypes arise from real personalities, whether family members, neighbors or political figures. The anthropologist James C. Scott noticed this after he documented the daily lore-spreading and gossip of nonliterate peasant workers in the Southeast Asian farming village of Sedaka, who spread all sorts of lower-register stuff around about each other. Oral humor legends developed around one particularly miserly landlord (*haji*), who grew from the butt of jokes and nicknames into myths and tales, where he took on humorously exaggerated cosmic characteristics, and became a cautionary tale to other rich people not to be selfish. Like our Nubian barber above, he was the target of popular gossip and became one for the entire community when they would get

²⁶⁵ For tourist jokes, cf. L.L. Wynn and for the pyramids see below on Cheops.

²⁶⁶ ATU J2370-2399.

²⁶⁷ Cf. the "terrible energy" of the pyramid builder, Margaret Alice Murray, *Egyptian Sculpture* (Greenwood Press, 1970), 51-52.

together and converse in casual fictions. Figures like the ‘farting rich woman’ are, then, not entirely silly imaginations: they are sourced from and connected to real characteristics of living individuals. No doubt the ‘farting rich woman who eats too much cabbage’ is a target for someone the teller knows and subconsciously – or consciously – ruminates about.

A string of bizarre recent events in Cairo illustrates how oral fictions can be fabricated out of real events, and shows how silly humor content can mix into other genres like gossip, news, and ‘history’ as travelers engage with current events. Any tourist to Egypt between 1998 and 2003 might have heard, as they inquired into local matters, about two royal figures: Prince Tork (as he came to be known),²⁶⁸ an immensely wealthy Saudi prince, and his wife Princess Hend, the Moroccan woman for whose illicit marriage he was booted from the royal family.²⁶⁹ Exiled for their love affair, the Prince and Princess had moved to Egypt, where they secluded themselves on the top floors of the Ramses Hilton Hotel (pictured) with an army of cooks, servants, bodyguards, celebrities, expensive food and high-class visitors going in and out day and night for two decades.

²⁶⁸ Prince Turki bin Abd al-Aziz and his wife Princess Hend al-Fassi.

²⁶⁹ For the story of Prince Tork, I draw here on L.L. Wynn, *Pyramids and Nightclubs*. University of Texas Press, Austin., 154-159.



Figure 33: The Ramses Hilton. Wikimedia Creative Commons. Muhammad Numan Alhwy, Sep 17 2019.

Folk legends grow out of celebrities and rumors, no differently now than in the ancient world. An international crisis between Saudi Arabia and Egypt followed a popular fiction that the Saudi Prince and Princess had enslaved their Egyptian servants. Word had it two cooks had escaped by lowering themselves out of the 29th floor of the Hilton using knotted bedsheets. One of them fell and broke his back.

A week later, two maids

wrapped a paper note on a 10-pound brick and threw it out the window. (The note claimed they had been imprisoned.) Worse, Princess Hind was later accused of being a jewel thief, having loaned out millions worth of expensive jewelry from a Cairo shop and never paid. Rumors grew into full narratives that Prince Tork's bodyguards were big ogres who shoved people out of the way and roughed them up anywhere he went: a wealth of gossip that fringes on imaginative genres of humor and horror.

Whether reports about the Prince and Princess were true – or tendentious slander arising from cultural distaste between Saudis and Egyptians – is unclear. But newspaper reports are full of folk gossip that began to swirl around these two figures over many years until they gained the status of magical villains. Tales came out of popular imagination to the effect that Princess Hind was an evil magician who used poison apples to seduce the prince and control his mind. A local Egyptian woman declared with absolute conviction

Prince Tork's wife is Moroccan and she uses magic. She put a spell on him, that's why he gave up everything in his own country for her. She's an enchantress. Whenever she wants to summon him, she cuts open an apple and says some magic words and Prince Tork comes to her immediately. She is very beautiful...

Apples, in Arab folklore, are sites of sexual negotiations with dangerous woman figures – if we rummage through El-Shamy's index of motifs– as magical items that ensorcel lovers,²⁷⁰ or as symbols of a woman's sexual attributes,²⁷¹ magical causes of fecundity and conception,²⁷² good places

Gossip about Prince Tork (Cairo, 1998-2003)

...everybody savored his scandals and clucked disapprovingly about the slippery way [Prince Tork] was always managed to get out of trouble... There was a strong element of myth in the stories that circulated about this character... they all refused to speak on record, but among themselves they would gleefully gossip in hushed voices:

“They keep rottweilers up there...”

“the bodyguards play soccer in the corridors; they're bored because the prince does nothing but sleep all the time...”

“When Tork's granddaughter had a birthday they flew in the Gipsy Kings to perform for her and they rented out forty-five rooms...”

²⁷⁰ ES 511.1.1.

²⁷¹ ES (p. 28) Z166.1.

²⁷² ES D1347.

to hide a love letter,²⁷³ a princess' test for potential suitors (as in the golden apple that started the Trojan War),²⁷⁴ or a woman whose buttocks is so high that an apple rolls through as she lies on the floor (?).²⁷⁵

Egyptian women who were asked about local politics and history by and outsider drew from this matrix of sex-apple imagery to slander the Saudi princess, who to them was an exotic female outsider.

Locals had no idea what was going on at the top of the hotel and may have never even been inside. But when people are suspicious of a celebrity, or skeptical about the moral behavior of a well-known magnate – president, pharaoh, king, prince – they make stuff up. They draw upon traditional imagery out of low comedy in order to socket the figure into an imaginative nexus in order to entertain or inflame an audience.

Behind closed doors, distaste for Prince Tork was surely expressed in a more obscene way than any traveling anthropologist would be allowed to hear. The 'mysterious hotel' was a hotbed for a host of anecdotes, fantasies, and outright lies – just as in the ancient world, the great temple or a pharaoh's lifestyle would have been a mystery for most Egyptian people around a marketplace where Herodotus was writing down information. The content of the fabrications was creatively spawned from hotbeds of imagination about monuments that hardly anyone really knew anything about (the pyramids), tailored out of timeworn motifs, and then passed on to Greek tourists.

Tales the ancient Egyptians told Herodotus resonate with the curious case of 'Prince Tork' and 'Princess Hind' as fabrications woven out of popular imaginations that trickled down the generations and were creatively improvised on the spot to describe celebrity historical figures.

²⁷³ ES K1872.3.

²⁷⁴ ES H316

²⁷⁵ ES F575.1.5.1.1

To wit, we have the tale of *Nitokris*, who constructed a secret chamber that would flood and destroy all of her enemies. *Psammetichus*, who performed strange and abusive experiments on goats. *Amasis*, who melted down a golden chamberpot and created a statue of a beautiful goddess. *Rhampsinitus*, who prostituted his own daughter in order to catch a clever thief. The wealth of tales that Herodotus heard from the Egyptian priests was a mishmash of folk motifs, gossip, and rumor woven out of a fabric of deep folk underlore presented by a range of performers like riffs on old musical songs to an inquiring outsider.

Herodotus preserves creative street events in different performance contexts, sourced from gossip, news, rumors, jokes, traditional folktales, or even board games that now, upregistered into ‘classics’, undergird the creation of ‘History’. What passed to him was to some extent manipulated and mediated by gatherings of sub-elite wise men, was in some cases intended to teach or caution or mock the intellectual pursuit, but it had emerged out of the underlore of everyday household life. We should imagine Herodotus as a listener in a sphere or marketplace of international ideas of the late 5th century, where obscene household content was being purveyed and mediated into open, colorful, loud, and well-traversed cross-cultural spaces. Probably, I assume, Herodotus spent time in semi-relaxed drinking *symposia* held in Greek enclaves or welcoming tourist areas not far from Egyptian temples along the Nile. What we know about the ‘priests’ who told stories in those local atmospheres, how and why they would have mediated that content into a cross-cultural meeting of intellectuals, will be our discussion in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: The One About Pharaoh's Daughter

Different Ways to Read a Really Old Joke

The ears of Herodotus must have perked up when he heard a tale trickling along the Nile about the pyramids. Somebody delivered a quip about Cheops, the pharaoh who built the biggest one, and it went like this:²⁷⁶

Cheops was such a wicked king that once, since he needed money, he made his own daughter sit in a brothel. He made her charge some amount of silver. (They did not tell me how much.) She did what he commanded. But she had her mind set on leaving a monument of her own. So she asked every man who had sex with her to give her a single stone. They say that's how the pyramid was built, from those very stones! The one standing in the middle of the three, in front of the Great Pyramid. Every side of it measures a hundred and fifty feet...I measured these very pyramids myself.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ To be more exact, as the Egyptians passed it over thousands of years in one form or another, into his Greek, through the preservation of scribes and scholars over additional thousands of years, and I have shifted it around in English and dotted a little exclamation mark. This small passage is an immense archaeology lore behind it and an even longer trail of receptions. Ioannis Konstantakos describes it as a rich polyphony and counterpoint: "One of the qualities which make Herodotus a great narrator (arguably the first gifted 'short story writer' in the western tradition) is precisely the richness of the substrata which underlie his tales, the multiplicity of ever deeper levels or recesses which lurk under the superficially plain exposition of events and invite the reader to discover them...There is always the feeling that behind or under the story ostensibly told a wealth of further stories is hidden – many other combinations of the events, unspoken motivations, implicit explanations of the happenings, or imaginable interpretations of the characters' destinies, which resound as though from the inner side of the text." in "Time Thy Pyramids: The Novella of Mycerinus," in *Herodotus - Narrator, Scientist, Historian : Narrator, Scientist, Historian*, ed. Ewen Bowie. De Gruyter, 2018, 96.

²⁷⁷ ...ἐς τοῦτο δὲ ἐλθεῖν Χέοπα κακότητος ὥστε χρημάτων δεόμενον τὴν θυγατέρα τὴν ἑωυτοῦ κατίσαντα ἐπ' οἰκήματος προστάξει πρήσσεσθαι ἀργύριον ὀκόσον δὴ τι: οὐ γὰρ δὴ τοῦτό γε ἔλεγον. τὴν δὲ τὰ τε ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς ταχθέντα πρήσσεσθαι, ἰδίη δὲ καὶ αὐτὴν διανοηθῆναι μνημίον καταλιπέσθαι, καὶ τοῦ ἐσιόντος πρὸς αὐτὴν ἐκάστου δέεσθαι ὅπως ἂν αὐτῇ ἓνα λίθον ἐν τοῖσι ἔργοισι δωρέοιτο. ἐκ τούτων δὲ τῶν λίθων ἔφασαν τὴν πυραμίδα οἰκοδομηθῆναι τὴν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν τριῶν ἐστηκυῖαν, ἔμπροσθε τῆς μεγάλης πυραμίδος, τῆς ἐστὶ τὸ κῶλον ἕκαστον ὄλου καὶ ἡμίσεος πλέθρου... ταῦτα γὰρ ὧν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐμετρήσαμεν. 1.126.1. My translation of the Greek text of A.D. Godley, LCL 117. A passage as involved in a "nexus of associations surrounding prostitution. Conflicting exchange systems, monumental building projects...political autocracy, the exotic East, sexual positions and the power/status relations they entail..." Kurke, *Pindar and the Prostitutes*, xx. Prostitution has been a locus of profound humor from the earliest literature, notably the encounter of Enkidu and Shamhat in the 'initiation' of Gilgamesh. See Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death : Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (American Schools of Oriental Research 2001), 18-34.

Is that a punchline?²⁷⁸ It sounds less like one of the ‘great and wondrous deeds of men’ as a stage skit performed with a mask and strap-on phallus.²⁷⁹ Which pyramid were these Greek foreigners supposed to be looking at? “The one standing in the middle – she built *that* one!” (τὴν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν τριῶν ἐστηκυῖαν). Someone pointing the wrong way seems to have gotten directions. That parenthetical phrase off to the side “they did not tell me” (οὐ γὰρ δὴ τοῦτό γε ἔλεγον) sounds like an aside whispered among an audience eager to know – how much for her?²⁸⁰ There’s a hidden pun in there for Egyptian ears only: ‘little pyramid’ sounds in their language suspiciously similar to ‘low woman’ or even ‘prostitute’.²⁸¹

Was Cheops supposed to be funny, and if so, to whom? We might take it too far to impose backward a late-night skit intended to slut-shame the daughter of a bankrupt tyrant after he lost his money building

²⁷⁸ To follow the big three schools of Humor Studies: there is certainly Incongruity here in terms of the physical body, a generous amount of Superiority, and more than a little Relief – either during the building of the pyramids or after it was over. But exactly who’s laughing is a more complex question.

²⁷⁹ Herodotus claims to be in the business of safeguarding the deeds of Greeks and barbarians (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, 1.1) – more than a little tongue-in-cheek given the generous amount of obscene folklore that follows.

²⁸⁰ Munson observes Herodotus employs performative call-and-response as “a habit of certain oral folk-narrators from different parts of connecting the episodes of a story by means of a direct dressed to the audience.” ἀργύριον ὀκόσον δὴ τι, “some amount of silver,” was clearly intended for the ears of a Greek, according to Lloyd, 71. Silver was a specifically Greek import to Egypt in Herodotus’ time. (Boardman,) Several pharaohs were given popular ‘nicknames’ based on the mercantile trade, e.g., Psammetichus; see next chapter. Silver was likely a more extravagant gift among infatuated lovers than mere cash, a thoughtful gift with “personal touch.” Kapparis, 304.

²⁸¹ As Quack suggests. *Si l'on se demande comment l'expression « petite pyramide » se rend en égyptien, on arrive à mḥr nčs. Mais le mot nčs, « petit », disparaît de l'usage régulier dans les phases tardives de la langue égyptienne et, excepté la « petite ennéade », le seul mot de cette racine encore couramment employé est nčs.t > ntsy.t qui, à partir d'une signification originale « femme petite, femme basse », est devenu spécifiquement la « prostituée ». Il est donc vraisemblable qu'un développement du sens de ce mot en égyptien tardif a induit l'interprétation « pyramide de la prostituée » pour ce qui était originalement « petite pyramide », et que cela est à l'origine de toutes les histoires qui cherchent à expliquer un tel sens par des anecdotes différentes.* See “Quelques apports récents des études démotiques,” in Coulon, Giovannelli-Jouanna, Kimmel-Clauzet, Hérodote et L'Égypte, 75

monuments to his own ego.²⁸² We can, however, detect the hint of an archaic smile, a coded smirk, raised eyebrow, or what we might call a throwaway barb at the expense of big man Cheops. It's difficult to pin down exactly where this "deliciously sulfurous legend"²⁸³ came from and why it survived. How Egyptian was it?²⁸⁴ Was it obscene, resentful, rebellious, or just silly? A joke just for men, or funny among women? Or even sex workers?²⁸⁵ Or was it none of the above – nothing Egyptian about it, but rather something made up by rich Greeks peering down into their own bellybuttons and beyond, making up exotic sexual fantasies through the mirage of a sultry Egyptian lady?

Scholarship all the way back to Plutarch has avoided any humorous elements of the little prostitute-pyramid tale. Readers have mostly focused on whether Herodotus got the measurements right (mathematically speaking) but then brushed aside those "empty babblings and silly tales of the Egyptians."²⁸⁶ In Classics, the daughter has

²⁸² We could fruitfully read Athenian humor here directed at any number of contemporary political figures. But it could very well be African historical gossip as well, common in Herodotus; rumors still float around living oral traditions in modern Libya about peoples mentioned by Herodotus and Pliny. (Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 18.) To some extent we need to project our own senses of humor backward. In a discussion of prostitution, Carolyn Graves-Brown writes, "Understanding the past in the light of the present is something we all do. It is impossible to understand ancient Egyptian women other than in the light of the present, and it is impossible to ignore similarities between us and them." It is similarly impossible to avoid our own modern intuition when it comes to humor, as Vinson made clear about his observations of Setne I. I will similarly require some generosity when it comes to making ancient and modern comparisons and speculations.

²⁸³ "fable délicieusement sulfureuse," according to Christiane M. Zivie-Coche, *Giza au premier millénaire: autor du temple d'Isis, dame des pyramides*. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1991, 245. She describes Cheops' plan as "bon usage de l'argent mal gagné!" Good use of badly earned money!

²⁸⁴ Zivie-Coche Cf., Lloyd tends to interpret most of these sorts folktales as skewed Greek, in one case "patently Ionian."

²⁸⁵ Sex workers today use humor about their own feats through public exaggeration and incongruity to satirize puritanical traditions of prudery and containment. Shannon Bell, for example, analyzes many 'profane' 20th century performances that drew on ancient paradigms of 'sacred prostitutes' to form notions of sex work as a sort of healing craft, employing raunchy humor about their sexual accomplishments to publicly reorient what they do as professional labor rather than victimization. Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Indiana University Press 1994), 184.

²⁸⁶ τὰς Αἰγυπτίων ἀλαζονείαις καὶ μυθολογίαις, *Malice* 857d. Plutarch accused Herodotus of gross negligence, a common trend over the years. Commentary has generally made it so that "the

often been ignored as a popular fiction so as to get down to the real business – math.²⁸⁷ ('Classics' has always been a little too obsessed about measuring the achievements of a few men on top.)

Debates about math can really drain the life out of a pyramid joke. Flinders Petrie, for instance, ignored the little folklore element altogether, as well as anything to do with women. He paid no mind to the daughter's story, but did admire the male workforce calculating, thinking, building, working, marching in rhythm like ants, while cooking, writing, singing, and everything else. No Egyptian had a sense of humor. No woman or anybody without a penis had anything to do with a pyramid (aside from doing everyone's laundry).²⁸⁸ Petrie wrote:

Much nonsense has been written about the oppression of the people, their tears and groans. With the splendid organization evident in the work, the people must have been well managed, and there was no hardship whatever in carrying out the work...the immense gain to the people was the education in combined work and technical training.²⁸⁹

Unlikely that Petrie had sex work in mind when it came to 'technical training'. Stargazing in admiration at the pyramids has always happened uncomfortably close to a brothel, thanks to Herodotus, which invites us to ask some questions about why he included that joke, from whom he got it, and what exactly his Greek audience, or we today, are supposed to get out of it.

question of Herodotus' methods and their place in the development of Western historiography boils down to whether or not Herodotus got this or that detail about Egypt (or another land or culture) correct." Moyer (2002), 73.

²⁸⁷ Wolfgang Aly, for instance, passed over the tale: „sie habe sich von jedem Liebhaber einen Stein schenten laffen und davon eine der 3 grosen Pyramiden gebaut" *Volksmärchen, sage und novelle bei Herodot* (1921), 69.

²⁸⁸ Petrie rather strongly insisted that women went to market and did the washing but nothing else. *Social Life in Ancient Egypt*, 26-27.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Did Herodotus write it down by mistake? Was he really that serious when it came to history, pacing around the pyramids counting footprints or measuring their shadows, with help from a bunch of men peering up and pointing, veteran Pythagorean mathematicians and Hippocratic scientists, a motley entourage of scribbling copyists and Athenian sophists following in step? Was a bearded philosopher there telling him how to calculate the lengths of the sides of a pyramid like so:

...[put] a walking-stick upright at the edge of the shadow which the pyramid cast, and, two triangles being formed by the intercepting of the sun's rays...demonstrating that the height of the pyramid bore the same relation to the length of the stick as the one shadow to the other...²⁹⁰

But no, Herodotus relishes jerking us from the heights of achievement downward, down into the mire of a descent into a brothel. Now as we slink into the sex trade and droop with lechery, we find ourselves asking: which measurements were the Greeks really interested in, those of the pyramids, or the barbarian princess? We imagine men sketching diagrams of her form, tracing the buxom figure in the sand as they fantasize about transgressing the mysteries of her inner chambers, doing inquiries and experiments on her body on par with Thales measuring the circumference of the moon or something.²⁹¹ As Dewald would say, "From this august beginning, it is fair to say, thing slide rapidly and comically downhill, or at least down genre."²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Thales' measurement of the pyramid as portrayed by Plutarch, *Dinner* 147B. LCL 222: Trans. Babbitt.

²⁹¹ Cf. Lloyd, 75. Pliny mentions twelve scholars alone who had tried to figure out the measurements: Herodotus, Euhemerus, Duris of Samos, Aristagoras, Dionysius, Artemidorus, Alexander Polyhistor, Butoridas, Antisthenes, Demetrius, Demoteles and Apion (36.79). For an excellent interpretation of such folktales in terms of Greek philosophy, see Tyler Mayo's "Research and Experiment in Early Greek Thought," Michigan dissertation, 2019. Also Rosalind Thomas' *Intellectual Milieu of Herodotus*, 60-75.

²⁹² Dewald, CCH 145.

The delight and difficulty in reading Herodotus is to be confused and caught off-guard with clashes between high Greek philosophy and the low world of international street lore. At one point we gaze at the peaks of the pyramids and at another plunge into the underworld – narratives of the past at odds with one another – and we’re forced as readers to figure our way out.²⁹³ He leaves it up to readers to decide what sort of ‘History’ actually casts value on our lives. Herodotus claims he’s the great inquirer and preserves the great achievements of great and small civilizations – but not really.²⁹⁴ (Some of his listeners or informants may have been sex workers who tended to Greeks at Nile *symposia* and served them bowls of wine or casks of beer, or held their hair while they vomited, and the joke’s one of theirs at the expense of men’s egos.) Playful tales might be taken just as seriously as the monuments to big men when it comes to the meaning of the ancient past for those who once lived in the sand and toiled on stones, something I suspect Herodotus was thinking about in when he preserved these little jokes making fun of pyramid-builders right alongside their big memorials to themselves. Herodotus preserves the Egyptian tale for a reason, and I suspect it may have been told from more than just a Greek men’s perspective at one point or another, and was more in his mind than a silly fiction.

In what follows, I hope to reimagine how Herodotus received his fair share of salt in some ‘native’ stories and to an impressive extent did his best to weave it into his overarching theme.²⁹⁵ But before we do that,

²⁹³ Our interpretation depends on whether we want to follow the official or oral tradition, as Zivie-Coche notes. “*Et la même schéma, le roi, la princesse et courtisane, et la pyramide, peut être interprété de deux manières qui paraissent totalement contradictoires selon que l’histoire officielle ou la tradition orale s’en emparent et la plient à leurs propres lois.*”

²⁹⁴ “The cunning narrator may be imagined to be having a silent laugh, behind the lines of his text, with his insinuated calembours.” Konstantakos, 98.

²⁹⁵ As argued by James Redfield, “Herodotus the Tourist,” in *Greeks and Barbarians*, ed. Thomas Harrison. Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

let's examine other sorts of readings when it comes to 'the one about pharaoh's daughter'.

A Humorless Classical Reading

What if there was nothing funny about Cheops' daughter? Facts and nothing but the facts. The Roman historian Pliny, for example, was flabbergasted that a woman could really have done such a thing: "More amazing than the height of the pyramid is that so much wealth was collected by a prostitute!"²⁹⁶ On that sort of view, held by astonished later Greco-Roman elites, Herodotus sought information and Egyptian priests, being good tour guides or sagely robots, provided accurate data. The flotsam of a common folktale may have floated into a pool of official propaganda by mistake, as it does from time to time. But humor was not intentional on anyone's part, neither Herodotus nor his informers.²⁹⁷ Greeks may have thought it was a genuine record: a few high-class 'sex workers' of the 6th century in Greece could be respected, rich, and powerful, and did indeed leave behind monuments to heaps of conquered men at places like Delphi. The sex trade as domain of powerful women was certainly a Greek concept but without evidence for anything like that in Egypt it's hard to say.

If we read without a sense of humor, as has been done from the Greek angle for centuries, our historical imaginations envision Egyptian informers as boring, unsmiling scribes who kept track of history stone by stone like philosophers,²⁹⁸ no laughing allowed as they unrolled dried-out lists cultivated and organized by dynasty, tucked away into gilded boxes

²⁹⁶ ...*maiore miraculo, tantas opes meretricio esse conquisitas*, 36.83. LCL 419, 64-65.

²⁹⁷ There are many different cultural inflections of this folktale: 'Woman sells favors to obtain [jewels, beautiful clothes, shoes, money, aid]'; The motif appears in literature of Iceland, India, Ireland, or modern Egypt. ATU T455.1-7, and HS T455.2-6.

²⁹⁸ Porphyry heard from Stoic philosophers who liked to compare themselves to their idea of Egyptians: namely, completely lacking a sense of humor. *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* 6.

or laid out for the harvest of curious foreigners, all of them male and none of them having any fun.²⁹⁹ But that image of the ‘wise Egyptian priest’ was only an exotic foil for the Greco-Roman philosopher himself, a man who wanted to appropriate faraway wisdom into his exotic *oeuvre* of performative smugness for elite drinking parties. The humorless Egyptian was a rich Greek’s illusion conjured up from Plutarch to Petrie: thanks to Philosophy, in all that oriental *esoterica* there was no room for Egyptians to be human, with a sense of humor about bodily functions or for women to have a role in basically anything. In all of Egypt, so it went, women were passive receivers of jokes and there was nary a vulva in sight.³⁰⁰ So the humorless reading has been a popular one among men since the famous reading of Plutarch (sadly, he’s been the prime source for European information on Egyptian priests ever since) and anyone else who has wanted to picture all the Egyptians as robotic sages or profound mystics. But bodily irreverence and resentment like a prostitute joke anywhere in the world often tends to be hidden behind transcripts among ‘folk’ only pretending toward loftiness. But which folk, then?

A Greek Misogynist Reading

The one about the pharaoh’s daughter smacks of an ugly aspect of Greek stage comedy just enough to have gotten a response among Athenian audiences who loved nothing more than a good vagina joke, a *blague de vagin*.³⁰¹ If we descend into the mire of misogynistic humor, the tale was just some horrible prosti-trope trotted out from the prop closet of Aristophanes, such as the moment when daughters of a financially

²⁹⁹ Cf. Lloyd, ‘Sources’, 66. Lloyd doubts that any common *web* priest would draw upon official documents so much as folk memory. For Hecataeus, Jacoby FGrH 3A (1943) 83-5 lists some direct sources.

³⁰⁰ See above on Petrie.

³⁰¹ “This is all very Greek...” according to Wallinga, “The Structure of Herodotus II.99-142,” *Mnemosyne* 12:1, 211.

struggling Megarian father, asked whether they prefer to be sold as prostitutes or starve to death, respond “To be sold! To be sold!” (πεπρᾶσθαι πεπρᾶσθαι).³⁰² Cheops’ daughter’s ‘achievement’ in a Greek male mind enjoying popular culture might have recalled the way foreigners, hubristic by nature, drink beer to excess: “Just as a Thracian or Phrygian man sucks barley beer through a straw, she was bent over, toiling.”³⁰³ Diodorus heard somewhere that particular pyramid was funded by provincial tax collectors as a common enterprise to celebrate their ‘group love’ for the princess.³⁰⁴ How many stones could she take? Needless to say, for Greek men there was misogynistic comedy at her expense. Her tale resonates with the sexual adventures of Aesop, such as when the clever dwarf with his enormous penis³⁰⁵ manages to seduce his master’s wife, and also a foreign queen: a Greek sneaks in a romp with a barbarian woman of power. Or it might recall the repugnant spite of Archilochus against the common prostitute (πόρνη) or the low-brow street whore (χαμαιτύπη) who was

very glad to take the coins
 Getting aroused and penetrated deep
 Laid and bonked hard
 Banged and screwed deep
 Stretched and humped all over the place
 ...sucking more and more dick, of every dirty scum
 Trying big dicks, thick dicks
 Those that leave forward, and the ones that hide too,
 Pulling everything into the deep chasm of the terrifying pit,
 Right through the middle and all the way up to the belly button.
 So, the lecherous trollop could really go to hell

³⁰² ...ἀλλ’ ὃ πόνηρα κῶρι ἄθλιω πατρός, Aris. *Achamians* 725-735. LCL 178, 144-145.

³⁰³ Archilochus fr 42W: trans. Allison Glazebrook, and Madeleine M. Henry. *Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE–200 CE*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.

³⁰⁴ ταύτην δ’ ἔνιοι λέγουσι Ῥοδόπιδος τάφον εἶναι τῆς ἐταίρας, ἧς φασὶ τῶν νομαρχῶν τινὰς ἐραστὰς γενομένους διὰ φιλοστοργίαν οἰκοδομήσαντας ἐπιτελέσαι κοινῆι τῷ κατασκευάσματι. Diodorus, 64.14. See Philippa Lang, “Hekataios” in *Brill’s New Jacoby*, ed. Ian Worthington (2016).

³⁰⁵ *Life of Aesop*, ed. Hansen, 245.

With her entire clan of wide-ass buggers...³⁰⁶

And so on. It's fair to ask whether the tale came out of the bilious entrails of Greek invective and whether it ought to be stuck right back in and left there.

The misogynistic reading is still a popular one. Recent readers have situated Cheops' daughter among negative intercultural interactions between Greeks and Egyptians as an orientalizing 'mirage' or 'mirror' by which Greek men stared into a foreign culture but really only saw themselves. On this view, the tale was a fantasy of imperial sexual anxiety and male desire projected outward from *Hellas* and performed Herodotus for male listeners at home.³⁰⁷ Nothing Egyptian about her, nothing women could find particularly humorous, but only Greek men's phallic dread about rich and powerful foreign ladies. Men worried about the *hubris* of exotic barbarian women who desire (*eros*) to have their own monuments and self-aggrandize just like barbarian tyrants. There's something to this argument: in images and metaphors of Egypt on the Athenian tragic stage, we commonly detect sexual anxieties peeking out under the masks of 'bad women': *Greek women conquered by ravenous foreigners*; or, vice-versa, *Greek men sexually conquering a foreign woman*. Here in the second book of Herodotus, the domestic virtue of Greek women does glow in comparison to the darkness and unbounded sensuality of the powerful Egyptian female.

Scholarship compares Cheops' daughter with Rhodopis the famous blonde bombshell, a high-class sex worker famous for her incomparable beauty. These figures are both inflections of the same world folklore motif about a 'dominant sex worker'. Cheops' daughter

³⁰⁶ Archilochus, fr. 328 West, trans. Konstantinos Kapparis, *Prostitution in the Ancient Greek World*, (2017), 16.

³⁰⁷ See Susan Stephens, "Conceptualizing Egypt," in *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria*. University of California Press, 2003.

and Rhodopis were confused over time and have been read as entirely Greek manifestations of men's sexual anxiety about courtesans (nothing Egyptian about them). Rhodopis was a Thracian who wanted to leave a monument (μνημῆιον) to her powers of attraction, so she left 'iron ox spits' at Delphi and was celebrated among the Greeks for her achievements.³⁰⁸ Indeed, a curious monument can be seen at Delphi today, reading "Rhodopis dedicated [something or other]."³⁰⁹ Recently Vasunia, for instance, draws on this episode to emphasize two Greek men's imaginary 'females': on the one hand, the charming Greek 'courtesan' (Rhodopis), on the other, the insatiable and self-aggrandizing Egyptian 'whore' (Cheops' daughter).³¹⁰ On that sort of reading, Herodotus plucked this tale from the thorn-bushes of men's popular Hellenizing obscenities, as they had been twisted and mangled into the form of a lustful and exotic barbarian woman: "black, deadly, rapacious, and dangerous."³¹¹ The tale on Vasunia's reading is mainly an expression of Greeks nervously pondering the nature of foreign women, poking sticks in the sand and drawing up figures of dangerous broads abroad.

On the Hellenocentric reading of Herodotus, he's pawing Greek men's illusions about *exotica* and *esoterica*. For instance, when Herodotus boggles that ladies along the Nile hoisted up their skirts, flashed their genitals, shouted obscenities at everyone, and headed off to a feast where they would drink more together in one sitting than the entirety of the rest of the year³¹² – that was not Egyptian women humorizing about

³⁰⁸ ὀβελούς or dyed handheld bars that were archaic forms of currency particularly among Spartans) See /Kapparis' discussion, 318. Also, Leslie Kurke, "Inventing the "Hetaira": Sex, Politics, and Discursive Conflict in Archaic Greece," *Classical Antiquity* 16, 1 (April 1997), 106-150.

³⁰⁹ [τοὺς ὀβελούς ἀνέθε]κε Ῥοδ[ῶπις τὰ πόλλοι δεκάταν]. Kapparis, 317.

³¹⁰ Vasunia, 82-85.

³¹¹ Vasunia (35) does not correlate 'blackness' with racial skin color, but rather a Greek symbol of death on the tragic stage.

³¹² Hdt 2.60.

their lives so much as Greek men scorning foreign sexual excess or dreaming up a mirage of wish-fulfillment. If we choose to see Greco-Egyptian humor interactions from that angle, we might hedge into moral censorship, as we imagine the Cheops' daughter passage as laughter of superiority³¹³ on the part of visiting Greek males as tourists on an 'Egyptian voyage' to discover their own penises more than to learn anything across the Mediterranean. Women's skirts were being lifted for them, as it were.



Figure 34: Ancient Greek man looking under prostitute's dress. Who's lifting their skirt? The woman herself (left; Egyptian) or a man (right; Greek). Montserrat, 168; Man looking under prostitute's dress. Attic Pelike. Museum Nazionale Tarquiniese, 2989. 525-490 BC. Alexandre G. Mitchell, in *Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humor*, 132.

The image of Herodotus we're bringing to mind here is not a great one: a gutter raconteur who plucked up a dirty joke passed along or perhaps coined on the lips of Greek mercenaries in the high-class sex markets of Naucratis³¹⁴ as tourists boated alongside him on the Nile and flipped

³¹³ Thomas Hobbes famously said that laughter was always directed at the deformations of lesser beings. (*Leviathan* 1.6).

³¹⁴ Herodotus (2.135.5) claims these sex workers were particularly attractive: φιλέουσι δέ κως ἐν τῇ Ναυκράτι ἐπαφρόδιτοι γίνεσθαι αἱ ἑταῖραι.

Greek silvers to exotic sex workers. There were likely saucy ads floating around on tourist tongues to the effect that

...there are very beautiful girls [in Egypt]
In the brothels, whom you can see
Basking in the sun, topless,
And one can choose whatever pleases him:
Thin, fat, rounded, tall, shrivelled,
Young, old, middle-aged, mature...³¹⁵

...or a foreign princess, they may have thought as they peered into the mirage of an upside-down-world, a colonial mirror just as solipsistic as it was horribly misogynistic or potentially racist. Were Greeks validating their sexual perceptions of those rapacious 'dark-armed' Egyptians they had seen portrayed on stage back home in Aeschylus or Euripides, or other nasty ethno-fabrications they wanted to pretend for themselves? ("Did you see that play about the daughters of Danaus? Have you heard the one about the pharaoh's daughter? What about how Egyptian women urinate standing up and men sitting down? μὰ τὸν Δία!")³¹⁶ Imagine the laughs.

A Greek Feminist Heroine Reading

But there are other ways to read. To some Greek audiences, Cheops' daughter would have been a heroine. The princess did in the end gain some respect in 'measurements' by her own work, a place in history not only for her beauty and desirability, but for outdoing a stupid man in a practical way. She has not only done her father one better by saving him financially, but attributed the blame for her situation back on to the wicked king in the role of a folk heroine, as Leslie Kurke

³¹⁵ Xenarchos fr. 4, trans. Kapparis, 286. See discussion of David Halperin, "The Democratic Body," in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 92.

³¹⁶ "By the god!" As exclaimed by the prostitute Theodote to Socrates. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.11.

observed.³¹⁷ The passage is the sort of humor sex workers themselves might have made up and enjoyed. It allows a little poetic space for the presence and voice of her, the daughter. So it's an anomaly for epic male allegories about macho manliness. Unusually, the tale stars the female, and to that extent does not quite fit in with early Greek misogyny, insofar as:

Whatever someone gives to a whore
Is like throwing it into waves of the white sea.³¹⁸

Instead, the princess has created one of the most impressive monuments in the cosmos. Humor of scorn seems to be aimed away from the woman here.

Rather, Cheops' daughter bears similarity to narratives about dominant foreign women from the Near East, for instance, the rise of the Syrian slave girl Semiramis to the assassinate the king Ninus with her own hands.³¹⁹ That is, she calls to mind Greek impressions of exotic barbarian courtesans admired for the spell they put on dangerous kings and entire nations of potential enemies, such as the famous lover of Gyges of Lydia, the famed ally to the Greek military:

Gyges...assembled all the Lydians from the countryside and heaped up what is even today referred to as the Courtesan's Tomb. He made it high enough that when he traveled around the territory on this side of Mt. Tmolus, he could see the tomb, no

³¹⁷ Kurke contrasts this passage to the presence of prostitutes in Pindar. "In Herodotus' account, the Egyptian king proves himself a tyrant by distorting and destroying all public and private relations for the sake of his oversize monument. To achieve his self-aggrandizing goal, he becomes fixated on the economic to the extent that he taints his own family line and the Egyptian royal house by prostituting his daughter. Her pyramid, the commemoration and record of her forced promiscuity, stands for all time as an ironic commentary to her father's excess, his obsession with number and size...the prostitute (or her monument) refuses to retain the blame of her mediating function; instead, she casts the crisis of autonomy back onto the men who surround her." This in opposition to Pindar, whose "appropriative strategy is insidious and complete, absorbing everything into itself, and leaving no gap from which another voice might speak." Kurke, *Pindar and the Prostitutes*, 66-67.

³¹⁸ Alcaeus fr. 117b trans. Kapparis 2017.

³¹⁹ Plut. *Mor.* 753d-e; Laura McClure, 143.

matter where he happened to be, and it would be visible to all the inhabitants of Lydia.³²⁰

In contrast to Gyges' courtesan, Cheops' daughter managed to build her *own* monument by her *own* handiwork, a “world-upside-down” twist to a common trope of the rags-to-riches type.

Cheops' daughter fits better among Greek men's worries about 'black widows' in a world where prostitutes might really become powerful and rich public figures. There were loads of legends about women who achieved a feat of manly virtue and earned themselves sites of commemoration, not quite on par with pyramids, but big enough to make us wonder. Some of them people stroll past confusedly today, such as a temple (*naos*), sanctuary (*hieron*), funerary monument (*mnema*) or dedication (*anathema*) that celebrates the prostitute's power and prestige, gazed upon by head-scratching tourists for hundreds of years. High class sex workers' monuments were always a conundrum for history – to rummage through Athenaeus for a moment – Leaina, the *hetaera* who bit off her own tongue rather than betray her lover Aristogeiton, and was awarded a bronze statue of a lioness; or Cottina, who famously dedicated a bronze bull for the Spartans; or the Corinthian sex workers who prayed for the Greeks and saved them from the Persians and had their names etched on a dedicatory inscription with an epigram of Simonides.³²¹

These monuments were transgressions of religious space to modernize women with democratic license, new power and danger, not only sexual but political and reckless financial danger. Maybe in a typical Greek male imagination in the late 5th century, if she was used by her father to pay off his own debts, Cheops' daughter seemed to be both “prostitute and

³²⁰ Athenaeus, 13.573. trans. Olson, LCL 204.

³²¹ Polyaeus, Strat. 8,45; a bronze lioness was erected to commemorate her. Kapparis, 100.

pimp.”³²² To some extent, then, we need to complicate Vasunia’s negative reading (she’s a stereotype) and consider some other dynamics.

The humor of prosti-tropes like Cheops’ daughter in Greek popular lore was really taking pot shots at the limping folly of men.³²³ These figures illustrate a lack of foresight or self-control, their inability to get an erection and perform for such beauties due to their effeminacy or impotence, their financial capsizing and wreckage, their general anxiety brought on when lowborn women and clever slave girls – succubus-like monsters – hold a man’s life or the entire state “in their very hand,” as it were.³²⁴ High class prostitutes were depicted on the 5th century comic stage as clever madams or authoritative *demimondes* when it came not only to managing brothels of other women, but also dominating groups of elite men by seducing them to their own destruction by their brainless desires, the topic of nervous men’s humor. We need not mention the fabled case of Gnaethena (“Jaws”), who cackled while gobbling down her patron’s testicles, which had been cooked for dinner.³²⁵

Greek depictions of prostitutes were the inventions of men. Aristophanes’ stage heroine Lysistrata, for example, was a men’s stereotype of a female, a male actor wigged up, glossed in makeup and padded in drag and who knows what else. As a stage hero, she appears as a demigod equipped with the comic weaponry of “stiff-penisitis” that forced the patriarchy of Athens to behave as she willed, and provided

³²² Aristophanes’ description of Aspasia, the lover of Pericles. See Henry, Madeleine. *Prisoner of history: Aspasia of Miletus and her biographical tradition*. Oxford, 1995.

³²³ Punctured Official Transcripts, or POT shots, is a phrase I made up to make this sound highfalutin. For more of that, see the theory chapter above.

³²⁴ αὐταὶ βιάζονται; they are labeled in Athenaeus as the ones forcing men, not vice-versa. ἐν τῇ χειρὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἔχοντα, a pun made in Athenaeus, 13.569. LCL 327, 298-299.

³²⁵ Laura McClure, *Courtesans at Table: Gender and Greek Literary Culture in Athenaeus*. (Routledge, 2003), 89.

comic relief about power and gender, Athena and Aphrodite.³²⁶

Xenophon's Socrates admires the hetaera Theodote as a predatory animal. Like spiders and hunting-hounds, working women could spin webs of attraction, entrap and prey upon lovers as flies and hares (just like that inscrutable female icon of Philosophy Herself – that is, the power to catch and ensnare good-looking boys). Other Greek elites timorously joked that these women had a power that could financially ruin a household, as smaller birds fear hawks, a reference to the old fable of the nightingale, descending upon and devouring weaker creatures from above, thankfully prevented only by the advance of old age.³²⁷

They eat sheep and goats and hares they catch in the
mountains, snatching them up into the air, they're so strong.
But when they eventually grow old, at that point
they perch on top of the temples, ravenously hungry;
and then this is considered a marvel.³²⁸

Similar mockery of failed libidos appears in comic gossip around great statesmen, such as pharaoh Alexander the Great, who was in one tradition unable to perform with the prostitute Callixeina even with his mother encouraging him from the back.³²⁹ Prostitution humor, needless to say, can happen at the expense of the client.

In Greek popular men's lore, the power of sex workers to reach the highest echelons of statesmen and lure high volumes of elite clientele – reorienting the economic balance of a city – was paranoia about divine

³²⁶ τέτανον τερπνόν, 553, as Faraone translates it. Priestess and Courtesan, *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*. (University of Wisconsin Press 2006), 216. See also Jane F. Gardner, "Aristophanes and Male Anxiety," in *Women in Antiquity*, McAuslan and Walcot, Oxford 1996.

³²⁷ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.11. in Faraone, *ibid.*, 218. Ίέρακος, Athenaeus 13.570 (LCL 327).

³²⁸ ἐκ τῶν ὀρῶν πρόβατ' ἐσθίουσι καὶ λαγῶς | μετέωρ' ἀναρπάζοντες ὑπὸ τῆς ἰσχύος· | ὅταν δὲ | γηράσκωσιν ἤδη, τότε < . . . > | ἐπὶ τοὺς νεῶς ἴζουσι πεινῶντες κακῶς· | κάπειτα τοῦτ' εἶναι νομίζεται τέρας. Epicrates describes Lais, trans. Olson. LCL 327: 570c-d.

³²⁹ The central source here is Athenaeus 10.45. See Kapparis, 114.

manifestations of Aphrodite Hetaira.³³⁰ This goddess of working love (to the extent we lean on evidence drawn out of popular literature)³³¹ had propagandistic lore floating around with tales or jokes about Solon's taxation of prostitutes as a necessary good for the health of the democratic state, whatever we make of that narrative.³³² Regardless whether Solon had anything to do with anything, more than a few Greeks thought prostitution was part of the freedom of an evolving democracy. From this angle, Herodotus might very well have admired the marvelous progressive achievements of the Egyptians by attributing to them what a Greek would understand as a familiar sort of urbane and familiar sexual economy, a flourishing resentment against tyrants or female thrust of democratic empowerment. On this reading, Cheops' daughter is a femme heroine thanks to her particular gifts, a Lysistrata on the Nile. Political humor was directed back at the stupid king – the wicked tyrant with his lust for power or *libido dominandi*.³³³

Herodotus never tells us exactly what the underbelly of stage comedy is doing in his inquiries, though his work smacks from the beginning with humor about great men's lack of foresight and their weakness to *le charme du vagin*. He frames the opening narrative, for example, with Helen as the cause of the Trojan war – the ridiculous three kidnappings of a sexy lady that caused the entire Peloponnesian War:

³³⁰ Comic quotations are the source of this cult, from Philetaerus and Apollodorus: see McClure, 139.

³³¹ The source is an early third century BC comic poet Philemon: "...you were the first, Solon, so they say, to discover this practice – a democratic one, by Zeus, and a saving one...seeing the city full of young men and seeing them under the compulsion of nature misbehaving in ways they should not, you bought and stationed women in various public locations, equipped and fitted out as common possessions for all." Trans. Halperin, 100. For historical relevance, see Kapparis, 99.

³³² Though 'sacred prostitution is a site of scholarly debate; denied on one hand any historical veracity on the other it empowers sex workers: "Prostitute as sexual healer, goddess, teacher, political activist, and feminist – a new social identity which can trace its genealogy to the ancient sacred prostitute." Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, 184.

³³³ To use a phrase from David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (University of Chicago Press 2017), 5.

Some young men who'd gotten drunk playing Cottabus
went to Megara and abducted a whore named Simaetha.
After that the Megarians,
who were upset and looking for a fight,
responded by abducting two whores who belonged to Aspasia.
That's the origin of the war that broke out
and involved all the Greeks:
three professional dick-lickers!³³⁴

Three 'whores' or *pornas* (πόρνας) are abducted one after another, which caused the Persian War, a transcultural burlesque of the figure of lust who started the Trojan War. The one about Cheops' daughter fits in with Greek satire of male hubris, when it comes to the pursuits of the genitals.

So as we rummage through Greek texts, at first glance it's difficult to believe Egyptian priests could have told 'the one about Cheops' daughter'. The thing practically jumped right off the Athenian stage. It fits right in with popular masculinizing men's lore, in comedy, invective, tragic exoticism, drunken symposia, and other late-night men elbow-jabbing together imbricated in other parts of Herodotus' work right from the beginning. It may be a fabrication on the part of Greek intruders into Egypt with deep insecurities about foreigners and their own sexualities, their (in)ability to perform, and their potential domination by faraway women as they set out on an exotic sexcapade into a mystical land. Such a view resonates with later voyagers Egypt: consider this personification of Eternal Egypt on the part of a later traveler:

Ancient Egypt is like one of those darkly beautiful women who seem to exude an aura of deep and awesome mystery and in whose languid eyes there lurk nameless secrets and desires. She is sometimes radiant with splendid majesty, sometimes shimmering with undulating gleams of languorous sensuality, always glamorous, always entrancing men with the unearthly magic of her fascination. Some men approach her in hesitating awe, and

³³⁴ πόρνην δὲ Σιμαίθαν ἰόντες Μεγαράδε | νεανία κλέπτουσι μεθυσκοτταβοι. | κᾶθ' οἱ Μεγαρῆς ὀδύνας πεφυσιγγωμένοι | ἀντεξέκλεψαν Ἀσπασίας πόρνας δύο· | κάκειθεν ἀρχὴ τοῦ πολέμου κατερράγη | Ἑλλησι πᾶσιν ἐκ τριῶν λαικαστριῶν. 520-530, trans. Olson in *Athenaeus* LCL327 570a-b.

then, fearful of the eventual frustration of their hopes of penetrating the dark and solemn mystery, make a hurried and confused retreat. Others, with a brash confidence engendered of their self-esteem as men of experience, who thereby obviate the expenditure of time, effort, and love necessary for understanding of her, unhesitatingly proceed to create an elaborate picture of the intricacies of her personality, complete with all the details of her ‘mysteries’ and all founded on nothing but the wooly fancies of their fertile imaginations... The result is that our dark lady is a very lonely lady indeed – very famous and glamorous, but very lonely.³³⁵

Colonial male minds have envisioned Egypt ‘herself’ as a steamy mirage, a carnal mirror, a seductive possession and a voiceless victim for the scientific imperialist to possess and drool over. From one angle, we would choose to imagine Herodotus as one of these types: a tourist salivating behind the door in the chambers of a sultry but silent and humorless Egypt.

An Egyptian Traditional Storyteller’s Reading

But – again – there are other ways to read. The problem remains that we have a pun in there obviously intended for Egyptians: ‘little pyramid’ also means ‘low woman’ or possibly ‘prostitute’. Moreover, Herodotus claims Egyptian priests were themselves the ones who told the story of Cheops’ daughter. In fact, he goes an unusual distance to make sure we are aware that “I only write exactly what the Egyptians say, right to the letter,”³³⁶ as if he knows that his skeptical audience is going to accuse him of purveying a bunch of Greek hogwash. Herodotus seems to have caught on to the “Hellenizing” sort of reading already. So

³³⁵ Joseph Kaster, *Wings of the falcon; life and thought of ancient Egypt*. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1968), 1.

³³⁶ τοῖσι μὲν νυν ὑπ’ Αἰγυπτίων λεγομένοισι χράσθω ὅτεφ τὰ τοιαῦτα πιθανά ἐστι: ἐμοὶ δὲ παρὰ πάντα τὸν λόγον ὑπόκειται ὅτι τὰ λεγόμενα ὑπ’ ἐκάστων ἀκοῆ γράφω, Hdt 2.123.

he insists that we do not read the passage as just another Greek joke. This creates trouble for recent Hellenizing readings. In order to maintain the reading of Cheops' daughter as mainly a Greek projection, we need to suppose that Herodotus is guilty of fathering some lies.³³⁷

Did he invent the 'Egyptian priests' or make a mistake documenting sources? Or was he doing a sort of sophistic tongue-in-cheek with a fantastic adventure into a make-believe world where the moon was made of cheese, when he really stayed home in bed? Most convincing of these sorts of cynical readings is to suppose that narrative residue has floated in from what was originally a Greek tale actually about Rhodopis. But to that end, we have to stretch the language a little, and insert some indirect speech: "the sorts of things [*Greek folk say*] [that those foreign priests *might say*]...about the daughter of Cheops (e.g., Rhodopis)." Too complex! If we follow the Hellenized reading, we have to make stuff up, remove the Egyptian priests, and invent our own narrators. Is it impossible that anyone in Egypt other than a rich male Greek tourist would have been able to laugh at prostitutes and pyramids?³³⁸

We can read any passage from a number of different 'stand-in' roles (see Chapter One above). From one perspective, we might take the role of a traditional Egyptian storyteller with familiarity of really old forms of comedy and think that it was no Greek fabrication – or even mainly Greek at all.³³⁹ The incongruity worked on many different

³³⁷ The view of Fehling (7), "Herodotus never made any effort to obtain genuine information in the first place," following Plutarch's accusation of ψεύσματα καὶ πλάσματα (*Malice* 1).

³³⁸ "The Greek historian's material consisted rather of legendary traditions, mythical concepts, popular beliefs, and folk tales, which were circulating among the inhabitants of Egypt (the Egyptians themselves, and by extension the land's Greek settlers or visitors) around Herodotus' time. Most of the motifs of Herodotus' account find close parallels in ancient Egyptian fictional works, myths, or religious customs and rituals." Konstantakos, *Time Thy Pyramids*, 79.

³³⁹ Zivie-Coche points up the ambiguity and dangers of leaning to one side of Greco-Egyptian interpretations (*Giza*, 246): "*Il serait de mauvaise politique pour un historien de renvoyer dos à dos les sources, officiels et égyptiennes, populaires ou grecques. La réalité historique si nous pouvons nous en*

audiences and it was an easy little ‘mirtheme’ to pass around across languages and cultures. It could go many different ways as a sort of ‘nexus of resentment’ about gender, power, and sex for plenty of different people, and that’s why it’s such a fascinating little thing. Humor here could have passed around among diverse Egyptians for hundreds of years in different forms. What Herodotus heard was only one version, a metamorphosed remnant of street performances of Egyptian Cheops storytelling tailored for Greeks in a sexually anxious cross-cultural 5th-century context.

There are good reasons to think the building of the pyramids was not entirely a serious topic to tour-guides with houses or tents nearby, and Cheops jokes were made by locals living along the Nile. Pyramids were (and still are) despised by some Egyptians as giant monoliths of male hubris and selfishness. The workers who built the things with their calloused hands and starved bellies despised Cheops more than anyone who had ever lived – so Egyptians told Herodotus.

The pharaoh had starved the people and defunded temples in order to build towering monuments



Figure 35: Sheep manure in front of a pyramid. “The First Pyramid ever Constructed” Edith Louisa Butcher, Things Seen in Egypt, 16 (1923).

approcher un peu, se contruit à l’aide de toutes. Un souverain, mort il y avait bien longtemps et qu’on n’hésitait pas à accuser de vices notoires, n’en appartenait pas moins au panthéon des ancêtres que, bon gré mal gré, on continuait d’honorer dans ce pays où, par dessus tout, la référence au passé était une valeur obligée.” E.g., “It would be bad policy for a historian to dismiss the sources, official and Egyptian, popular or Greek. The historical reality, if we can even approach it, is constructed with the help of all. A sovereign who had died a long time ago – and whom they did not hesitate to accuse of notorious vices – nevertheless belonged to the pantheon of the ancestors that, willy-nilly, they continued to honor in this country where the reference to the past was an obligatory value.”

for his own family.³⁴⁰ In fact, Egyptians who lived nearby hated the sight of the things so much that they refused to even speak Cheops' name:

Egyptians despise these kings so much they won't even say their names. Instead they named the pyramids after a shepherd named Philitis, who happened to pasture some sheep in the area at that time.³⁴¹

'Philitis' sounds odd to anyone with a little experience with livestock. Sheep are animals whose defecations tend to look like little stones stacked on top of one another.³⁴² Manure around the world is commonly heaped up into pyramids to store fuel for long periods of time, especially around the Middle East. Egyptian farmers today still calculate the amount of manure available for a season mathematically using the geometry of a pyramid.³⁴³ So we might be able to catch the whiff of a joke here on the part of Herodotus' Egyptian priests. It's not a stretch that they were themselves something like



Figure 36: *Sebakh*, ancient monuments turned into fertilizer. "Briques en limon du Nil du mur d'enceinte nord-ouest dans la cour de Nectanebo, temple de Louxor, Égypte." Photograph by Rémi. June 7, 2009. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

³⁴⁰ Cheops may have had a cult up through the Roman era. There were diverse sentiments. Part of our project here is to dislocate "The Egyptians" and "The Greeks" as monoliths. See part 3 below for my translation of the Herodotus passages and problems with the Greek interpretation.

³⁴¹ τὰυτα ἕξ τε καὶ ἑκατὸν λογίζονται ἔτια, ἐν τοῖσι Αἰγυπτίοισι τε πᾶσαν εἶναι κακότητα καὶ τὰ ἰρὰ χρόνου τοσοῦτου κατακλησθέντα οὐκ ἀνοιχθῆναι. τούτους ὑπὸ μίσεος οὐ κάρτα θέλουσι Αἰγύπτιοι ὀνομάζειν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς πυραμίδας καλέουσι ποιμένος Φιλίτιος, ὃς τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον ἔνεμε κτήνεα κατὰ ταῦτα τὰ χωρία (Hdt. 2.126.1).

³⁴² Cf. LAC 334. Raised in farm country, I verified my observations here firsthand on more than one occasion, often by mistake.

³⁴³ "The volume of your animal waste pile can be calculated by transforming the pile's shape into a common geometric shape, such as a cube or a pyramid. To calculate volume, all you will need to know is the formula for the simple shape and the dimensions of your pile." United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Managing Manure Nutrients at Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations*. December 2004. Retrieved from https://www3.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/cafo_manure_guidance.pdf, March 2021.

sebakhin, the modern peasants who loot mud-brick walls of ancient cities to use bricks as fertilizer.³⁴⁴ If shepherds tore down old monuments to burn them as fuel, and spent most of their year working, say, as farmers, and a little time as priests dealing with foreign tourists or dignitaries like Herodotus, they may have conveyed Cheops' big accomplishments as a series of plops from their flocks.³⁴⁵

Popular jokes among people living around tourist sites suggested it was their pyramid, theirs to mock, and theirs to lie about. In their version, the oral one performed for Herodotus, the people are really the ones responsible for the pyramids, namely the local men who went into a brothel and penetrated the royalty (literally). It's an episode that resembles common peasant fantasies of a sexual World Upside Down, an expression of class resistance in obscene form that can be located in subordinate cultures nearly everywhere.³⁴⁶ All of this sounds like an imbrication of subversive festival shows rather than anything out of one or another civilization's official transcript.³⁴⁷ To that extent the humor would orally reclaim the pyramids as cultural sites belonging to the shepherds, women, and workers descended from their actual builders. By prostituting his own daughter, Cheops' genetic lineage, thanks to his own financial failure, inherited the semen and shit of all the disgruntled workers.

Herodotus enjoyed humorous tales that had been drawn up and manipulated by priests from common Egyptian folklore that had tumbled

³⁴⁴ Forshaw, 99.

³⁴⁵ The name means 'herdsman'. An Egyptian name, if we follow the reconstruction of Lloyd, 76. "probably a rags-to-riches story of a common wish-fulfilment type." To Konstantakos (106), "the humble and poor hero, who begins with a lowly trade but eventually rises to kingly power and glory."

³⁴⁶ Cf. Forsdyke, chapter 2.

³⁴⁷ ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, Hdt 1.1.

down the centuries in different forms by diverse communities of laborers, their wives and children, a narrative managed and officiated by a dominant male priestly class in relation to current politics in the 5th century. It is possible the priests preserved or tailored some of these tellings within the archives by accident or design as part of their part-time jobs³⁴⁸ mediating between village and temple. They might have shared with Herodotus a resentment for overbearing monument-building tyrants after the Persian occupation. In that case, the tale would propagandize the comic inversion of wicked old Cheops for the sake of a 5th-century milieu of local Nile peoples retelling their own past in terms of their current suffering. From this perspective, Herodotus would have been delighted to hear the one about the king's daughter. (And imagine the laughs as a foreign Professor wrote it down.)

Very little of what Herodotus heard from Egyptians has been read as humorous to the sorts of people who had to work in the first place. The European historical narrative about Cheops has obsessed over his big accomplishment, its precise measurements and mystique, and other forms of bellybutton-gazing on the part of the mystical orientalized "eternal" Egyptians or the subtle Greeks. But Herodotus has paralleled the Great Pyramid what appears to be have been a local jokes about prostitutes and plops of manure. How could any academic analysis possibly capture the importance of that version of 'History'? Was someone pleased to have gotten a visiting Greek intellectual gazing up and measuring Cheops' accomplishment to write down that one? Maybe the storyteller's desire was to prevent 'great man' history from being

³⁴⁸ Priests were often only in the temples for part of the year and spent a great deal of time out among villagers with other careers, such as gardeners and blacksmiths. Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt*, Cambridge 2011, 17 According to Houlihan, "Whether legends as these were actually told to Herodotus during his Egyptian travels or were purely his own far-fetched concoctions is not certain, but it seems wholly conceivable that some minor official or guide might have imparted to him, an apparently gullible visitor, such amusing yarns of fantasy. His Greek audience could very well have found these barbarisms uproariously funny." 138

done in the first place by damning the kings into a flock of sheep.

*Damnatio memoriae... in gregem.*³⁴⁹

Cheops was a figure of obscene satire about sex and adultery for many centuries before Herodotus. Among Egyptians he was a figure of both high and low popular tastes laughed about, despised by some for all his oppression, cruelty, and bad government. Locals from the less agreeable group probably had a range of insulting material they could share with visitors about the builders of the pyramids, and what Herodotus heard was not from the celebratory side. One Egyptian tale specifically about him survives. *Cheops and the Magicians*³⁵⁰ is one of the earliest preserved texts on Earth with imaginative and scandalous folk humor about magic, sex, and adultery.³⁵¹ It bears similarity to what Herodotus heard much later in terms of a lower-register flavor of satire at a pharaoh's expense. Gorgeous literature such as this, of course, must have belonged to the households of elite and educated Egyptian priests; but the essence of the text was to raise lowly women into heroines who are heroic or even divine. In that sense, this text corroborates reading humor behind some of those Egyptian jokes that celebrated the sexuality

³⁴⁹ As a reference to 'Shepherd Kings' Cf. How-Wells and Waddell, see Lloyd, 76. Modern scholarship has obsessed itself with connecting the official records of Hyksos kings to this narrative, but these arguments are unconvincing. Zivie-coche, 245.

³⁵⁰ Alternatively *The Tales of King Cheops, King Cheops' Court, Tales of Wonder*. The papyrus itself has no author and no title. The papyrus (Westcar; P. Berlin 3033) is written in a careless hand by someone who lived toward the end of the Hyksos period (16th c. BCE), but the story itself is probably the reproduction of an earlier cycle from the Middle Kingdom. From that point, the narrative reaches back in time and stages elites of the Old Kingdom (Cheops and his ancestors) in what is not a stretch to call episodic drama. On handwriting, see Parkinson (1997), 104. For disagreement about dating, see a bibliography of six or seven different centuries in Lepper, 317. Speculation ranges from the 5th to the 17th dynasty, but we will follow Parkinson's most persuasive supposition of the 13th. Whether any the plotline of *Cheops* is actually historical has dominated some branches of scholarship. But it is a literary rather than historical work. Harold M. Hays, *The Historicity of Papyrus Westcar*, ZÄS 129 (2002), 26.

³⁵¹ To follow Lawrence Kim's definition: "Popular texts...share several features that are also characteristic of oral narratives: anonymous authorship, an unrefined style, content incorporating folktale motifs (riddles, trickster-like activity, adultery) and an episodic structure, focused on an individual and showing signs of having been compiled from several different sources." See "Orality, folktales and cross-cultural transmission" in *The Romance Between Greece and the East*, 304.

of a divine female 'trickster' figure whose carnal, corporal seduction was part of humor and horror stories told for entertainment all along the Nile. In Herodotus, as we have seen, all that remains from this rich ancient Egyptian women's literary tradition of the *court of Cheops* is a shadow of a joke about pharaoh prostituting his own daughter.

The plot of *Magicians* is complex (summarized in our appendix) but essentially this: a bad dynasty of the cruel pharaoh Cheops is replaced by a good dynasty born from commoners who are prophesied to be better to the temples. A bad king's behavior earns him comeuppance as the gods renovate power structures through lowly figures. In contrast to the king, the heroes in *Magicians* are magic-wielding peasants, servant girls, and handmaids, while Cheops is depicted as a cruel and overbearing tyrant who's more interested drooling over the sexy legs of young ladies than governing his kingdom. As in Herodotus, subordinate identities (women, especially) challenge the speech acts, magical abilities, knowledge, and lineage of the cruel pharaoh's patriarchal line. His foul hubristic dynasty (the 4th) ends in a humorous fashion to make way for a better government (the 5th) actually sourced from the genetics of the workers. Early Cheops folk humor, that is to say, was patterned into the weak outwitting the strong and the woman outwitting the man. Women in the Egyptian tradition are on top.

The text carries a message of resistance to corrupt earthly government, or 'world-upside-down' humor. Such a narrative must have expressed feeling among the middle classes of Middle Kingdom society fantasizing and having spite for the higher offices of government as the office of the pharaoh became distant and questionable. Different oral versions of *Cheops* probably floated around for centuries among families of commoners and sub-elite priests consistently annoyed at the pharaonic government for interfering in matters of the temple, which was the site of public welfare, food storage, economy, and religious divinity.

Cheops, so the story goes, ‘defunded all the temples’, as informants told Herodotus many centuries later.³⁵² No wonder there were resentful traditions as far back as the Middle Kingdom, if the great monuments like the pyramids were actually economic drains upon local temple and village life, or just giant monuments to awful tyranny.

If they could have had access to it, Greeks like Herodotus would have enjoyed *Magicians* not only for its reversal of power structures, and its warning about men’s hubris and divine fate, but also for its performative storytelling element. The old pattern of *Cheops* lore was quintessential Egyptian humor: sneaky goddesses thwart men’s power through sex within a series of boxed adultery tales. Still in modern Arab and African storytelling, divine comeuppance for sexual infidelity most often comes through women. If not much changed for Egyptian storytellers passing stuff on for all the centuries, in terms of their material’s basic comic incongruities and inversions, Herodotus encountered some remnant of this comic tradition and loved what he heard.

Herodotus’ interlocutors drew upon and changed old motifs, creatively archaizing their comic traditions to make new jokes of their own for visitors about current events while they entertained Greeks as curious tourists of sites like Giza. The ‘prostitute’ then was a 5th century Greco-Egyptian confusion about what was a traditional sort of Cheops tale about the noble infiltration of a wicked dynasty by the resentful common folk.

Oral stories enjoyed by the folk tend to bubble up from the hidden creative worlds of local villagers, laborers, and their families into a

³⁵² “the crux of the text is in the birth and world-to-come of divine kings stemming from a common family.” Hays, 62. See Jacqueline Jay, Assman, Parkinson, as well as Brunner-Traut 1978 (*Altorientalische Literaturen*, 31). “folk tradition is recorded everywhere in high literature and from there shines back down on the people.” („Volksgut wird überall aufgenommen in hohe Literatur und strahlt von dort wieder zurück ins Volk.“).

written form of cultural capital, where they are bottled up by the educated elite as national heritage, public education or 'folk wisdom'. We can call this phenomenon *Top Shelf Obscenity*, where the wealthy few reach down and harvest the 'fermenting' popular culture of the many. Top-shelving changes folk humor and tailors it for an in-crowd. Popular tales take on completely different lives as possessions for the few, such as esoterically educated scribes, thanks to whom literary masterpieces inherit what were once irreverent oral motifs. The process is jarring: originally some of that material often despised the educated, or was tainted with resentment for intelligensia or other official decorum, and it has a strange place within privatized works.

Cheops and the Magicians has been compared to great works of world fiction like *Arabian Nights*, *Panchatantra* or *Decameron*, classical works like *Satyricon* and *The Golden Ass*, or picaresque novels such as *Don Quixote*. All of these, given their radically different and specific cultural inflections, are extended compilations of bodily, sexual, or magical folk stories strung along in luxurious prose that implies elite audiences.³⁵³ The textual content is upregistered out of the oral domain where it was performative, wild, diverse, and varied depending on many audiences and tellings. The ideal readers of written texts like this one were of course not families of peasants at all, but educated middle- or upper-class symposiastic or scholarly gatherings. The audience of the humor of a text like *Magicians* not only needed be literate, but with a high degree of esoteric knowledge and time for extended study.³⁵⁴ Oral tales, then, were materially preserved by those 'in the know' with higher

³⁵³ "These literary genres often preserve clearly identifiable popular themes (especially reversals of normal relations, obscenity, and grotesque imagery) even if we cannot take for granted that these elements are exact copies of their popular versions." Forsdyke (2012), 7.

³⁵⁴ *Don Quixote*, for example, begins with a parody of Aristotelian metaphysics; *Decameron* employs high-flown numerology from Vergil and Dante; *Golden Ass* constantly toys with Platonic philosophy; *Panchatantra* mocks the highest courtly decorum; and *Cheops* parodies esoteric magic probably only known to high priests.

fruit on their minds, with access to the means of cultural production and preservation.

Magicians is top shelf stuff. Described as frivolous, sexy, and picaresque, it draws on an underlore of ribald folk comedy. But it's high literature: a work of immense learning and scribal skill that parodies the highest of linguistic registers and rhetorical devices. In what has been called artsy prose³⁵⁵ it has a high degree of erudition and a generous decor of subtle ironies, puns, and wordplay that Egyptologists have lively debates about. There is an array of *mirthemes* (a term described in our theoretical chapter) – animal metamorphosis (A), magic books (C1), clever peasants (C1), surly slave-girls (A), shapeshifting goddesses (C2) – here upregistered into a specifically Egyptian web of phonetic devices and rhetorical techniques. So the narrator performs common or “lowbrow” roles of peasants and handmaids while employing the most learned expressions in a way that might have been welcoming to mixed audiences. It may have been a script for elite performances, or at least related to a milieu of texts that were partially performative.³⁵⁶ Though it was certainly not a ‘popular’ document, *Magicians* was not enjoyable only to high audiences open to literary sophistication. Anyone can get a laugh out of folklore who sees the adultery comedy behind the allure or danger of a sneaky peasant schmoozing with a high priest's wife in his own backyard (A).³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ ‚Kunstprosa‘ according to Lepper.

³⁵⁶ „Die vielen lautlichen Stilmittel in pWestcar fallen in der Tat ins Auge.“ Lepper, 310.

³⁵⁷ Lepper attributes the humor only to a higher audience that would know all about the protagonists, who were literary sages (309). But see also R.B. Parkinson, *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*, 138, who considers a ‘middle class’ tendency to popularize. Tales in Cheops may have drawn on oral compositions from local folklore but also has complex parodies of various literary registers (Jay, *Orality and Literacy* 36). Jay cites specifically lower register verbal and temporal expressions than *Sinuhe* or the *Shipwrecked Sailor* (34). For connections to modern folktales, see El-Shamy. Gardiner envisioned a “squatting circle of guffawing fellaheen” as the ancient audience of the bawdy *Horus and Seth* cycle. Jay, 41, quotes Alan H. Gardiner, *The library of A. Chester Beatty* (Oxford, 1931), 10–11.

In *Magicians*, folktales about magic and adultery are told to the king to assuage his boredom as he wanders through all the rooms of his palace looking for something to entertain in a gloomy mood, perhaps suspecting his hold on power is in trouble.³⁵⁸ Tales are passed to him in ‘boxed’ fashion, one after another, by his sons the princes in order to satisfy him.³⁵⁹ Such a framework is common to world folklore, where a series of entertainments often serves to alleviate or distract the boredom, drunkenness, or wrath of an overbearing ruler. At the same time the stories parody his various inadequacies, whether intellectual, political, or sexual. Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights* comes to mind, the heroine who whispers tales in evil King Sharyar’s ear to prevent him from killing her. Similarly, Cheops needs to be entertained in his gloomy state. Another easy comparison can be made to the courtly animal advisers of the *Panchatantra*, who tell silly tales and fables because they are the only way for a dangerous idiot of a king to learn anything. Folk animals continuously warn the ruler about his forthcoming doom due to his own stupidity:

When a king is unwise,
 Dimwits will surround him;
 When such men come to power,
 The wise soon disappear...
 When the wise leave the realm
 Policies go askew;
 When his policies come to ruin,
 The line perishes along with the king.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ “I’ve gone round every chamber of the Royal House ... to seek some relief for myself, and I cannot find any.” This part of the text is damaged, but can be inferred based on this later passage from Sneferu (Parkinson, 110), and the *Words of Neferti*, where the bored Sneferu (Cheops’ father) demands that a sage “...speak to me some fine words, choice phrases at the hearing of which my majesty may be entertained.” Instead, Sneferu hears powerful and tragic prophecies of Egypt destroyed. Trans. Lichtheim, 182. Alternatively, “...perfect words” in Parkinson, 1997.

³⁵⁹ There are many names for this technique: boxed, drawer, chain, nest: Brunner-Traut, *Märchen*. Lefebvre, *roman à tiroirs*. . “chain story.” Joseph Kaster, *Wings of the falcon; life and thought of ancient Egypt*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968. “nested narrative (*verschachtelte Erzählung*)” H. Roeder.

³⁶⁰ Damanaka (Jackal) to Pingalaka (Lion). *Pancatantra*, Book 1.

The 'unwise king' of world folklore demands performances of storytelling to distract and entertain him. For instance, in Arab folklore, the wicked king's sons must tell him riddles or explain his worst inadequacies, lest they be beheaded or disowned. Stories-within-stories happen at the expense of a dense but dangerous ruler whose reckless wrath needs to be calmed down. (*Magicians* is a very self-aware text: we as the readers resemble Cheops insofar as we ourselves are like him: we are in need of entertainment to palliate our own spirits and distract us from our fates.) One thing is certain: whoever the Egyptian audience were, they saw themselves in the literature, and did not take themselves and their role in the matter entirely seriously.

Magicians hardly has the effect of ennobling the great pyramid-builder. The climactic episode (C2) is a folk pattern 'inquisitive king attempts to undo a prophecy and fails' (because he's an idiot), the sort of narrative arc essential to later Herodotus that classicists usually associate with Greek wisdom literature but was really world lore. Cheops has insatiable desire to find out information (measurements)³⁶¹ concerning the mystical 'Chambers of Thoth', a place intentionally vague and esoteric-sounding in a probably humorous way.³⁶² Cheops needs this magical knowledge because his genetic line is in danger: his three princes are prophesied to be replaced by divine children born to a common woman. One of her children will have access to the power of the Chambers.³⁶³ The back-and-forth about the possession of magical

³⁶¹ Or 'inventory' or 'inquiry' or 'numbers'. For discussion see Parkinson, 139.

³⁶² The meaning of 'Chambers of Thoth' is "as inaccessible to the ancient audience as to the modern author." Parkinson, 138. It is reminiscent of bizarre prophecies that kings receive in Herodotus involving turtles and pots of stew.

³⁶³ This is a comic and semi-mythological war between rulers over a magic item that may not even exist, humor that resonates with Setna's search for the Tome or the ribald struggle of Horus and Seth.

power which may or may not even exist certainly has levity in it.

Tampering with predestination and prophecy is never a good idea in ancient wisdom literature, particularly in Herodotus.

As a creative experiment, *Magicians* was put on stage in 2003 at the University of Bonn with nine actors led by Egyptologist Verena Lepper, all of whom had read the text in the original language together. The gathering roleplayed aloud and recorded the effect on their interpretation of a text they had only known so far through philological study. Lepper noticed that it was a different world: phonetic games, parallels, frames, allusions, ironies, minor jokes and so on stood out for everyone to a much greater extent, and received a better response, than on paper in a classroom. Nuance came to the surface in oral performance in a way that a commentary does not capture, or even distracts from. A playful listener or creative performer notices different details, and fills gaps in the text with inventive logic.³⁶⁴ One thing was clear by the end of the performance: Lepper – an astute philologist – concluded that *Magicians* was not created *for* philologists.

After the live performance, Lepper hypothesized that *Magicians'* narratives were dynamic, oral and improvisatory to a great degree.³⁶⁵ She suggests the Egyptian audience could easily have been a broad public due to the great number of chances for phonetic and nonverbal expressions that are effective only during performance. So we might hazard some speculations about the performance of this text in relation to later Classical literatures. Middle Kingdom tales could have been to some degree akin to stage comedy as it developed in the later Greek and

³⁶⁴ Lepper, 311. Lepper quotes Parkinson, *Texts or Poems? Some recent perspectives*. Unveröffentlichtes Manuskript 2004, 11. "While rigorous philology and theoretical frameworks are essential for any understanding, the texts were not written for the sake of such philology or theory but for their living audience. One should therefore always remember pleasure and beauty; expressive culture requires an empathetic response..."

³⁶⁵ Lepper, 314-315.

Roman societies. Egyptians long before Aristophanes may not have had what we would recognize as street theater, but they certainly had oral folk performance of a variety of popular genres in public settings and enjoyed rituals with dramatic and comic aspects relating to current events.

Time is an important literary element of *Magicians*. The narrative employs figures from the past (Old Kingdom) to comment upon the 'now' (Middle Kingdom). Emma Brunner-Traut noticed a dramatic rhythm to *Magicians*: the 'triplet' structure of the tales contributes to a sense of tension as the temporal past (the early 4th dynasty) enters the 'fictional now' (the world of Cheops) as a commentary on the 'actual now' when the literary piece was created and performed (the later Middle Kingdom). This sort of playfulness with chronotope probably helped to disguise some of the social messages behind the humor if there was any social commentary. It is less dangerous to satirize current political figures when disguised as ancient mythology on stage. We could compare *Magicians* to Greek and Roman comedies where lines between *mythical time* and *contemporary time* are transgressed: that is, they are satirizing current living political figures of the "now" (*hoc ridiculum*) but disguising them on stage as really old mythological figures of "then" (*illud ridiculum*).

There is a tendency in Egyptian literature that has been called 'royal satire' by which a member of the royal family fails to gain magical power or maintain his genetic line thanks to his own blundering inquiry or (mis)discovery. He seeks after magic or power but the very pursuit of it disempowers or destroys him. That's the opposite of the more official Egyptian genre called 'king's novels', propaganda tales that made the pharaoh out to be a great hero with awesome exploits. In the latter sorts of narratives, rulers tout their military accomplishments, whether defeating foreign enemies or constructing great monuments to

themselves.³⁶⁶ A particularly vivid example of the 'king's novel' is the epic of Ramses II at the battle of Qadesh (in fact something of a disaster) with more than a little fantastic exaggeration. The majestic King strides onto the battlefield, brave and completely alone to fight them all:

His Majesty was mighty, his heart stout: nobody could stand in front of him. All his ground was on fire, for he had burnt all foreign countries with his flame. His eyes were wrathful when he looked at them, and his power flared like fire against them...His Majesty killed the entire army of the Hittite enemy with all its great chiefs and his brothers, and similarly all the leaders of foreign countries...His Majesty was alone, without anyone else with him...³⁶⁷

Ramses is here enhanced beyond the limits of reality (not exactly a daughter-selling tyrant) similar to heroic battle scenes in epic poetry like in the *Mahabharata* or the *Iliad*.

In popular humor, on the other hand, Ramses and his family (especially his son Setne) were targets of slapstick humor at the expense of their prowess or sexual inadequacies (as we recall Setne with his member stuck in a chamberpot). Fantasies like this puncture the pretensions of hubristic, self-promoting big men with generous bodily humor, evidence of resentment from lower classes with histories of oppression. As James C. Scott has written, the fantasies of subordinate peoples often wish harm upon the higher-ups and reverse their high narratives with lower stuff as a form of *Schadenfreude*, a wish to see arrogant men in power inverted and equalized with the rest of humanity:

³⁶⁶ ‚Königsnovelle‘. See and Rutherford, *Greek and Egyptian Fiction in The Romance Between Greece and the East*, 25. Perhaps the inverse of the royal novels (‚Königsnovelle‘), discussed below. But literary categories can only have a loose fit. Royal humor was a genre already well developed in the Middle Kingdom according to Lepper (304), concerned with misrule (Missstände). See Adolf Erman, *Die Märchen des Papyrus Westcar*, (W. Spemann, 1890). Gustave Lefebvre, *Romans et contes égyptiens de l'époque pharaonique; traduction avec introduction, notices et commentaire*. (Maisonneuve, 1949), 70. For a recent philological-historical analysis, see Lepper's full study. This sort of adventurous humor may have operated to flatter or 'roast' those in power as much as to warn them in a cautionary way from below as part of a mediating imaginative terrain.

³⁶⁷ Loprieno, "The King's Novel" in *Ancient Egyptian Literature – History and Forms Probleme der Ägyptologie* 10 (1996), 277.

Fantasy life among dominated groups is likely to take the form of *schadenfreude*: joy at the misfortunes of others. This represents a wish for negative reciprocity, a settling of scores when the high shall be brought low and the last shall be first...³⁶⁸

Prophetic Egyptian texts carry resentment between social classes. Social inversion and cataclysm due to the mixing of classes is a major concern of canonical Middle Kingdom wisdom literature. In a dystopian way, elites and kings fall from power and their places are taken by workers and peasants. The rich become poor and the poor become rich. Order (*Ma'at*) is undone due to a lack of centralized monarchic control, a world “like a wandering herd without its herdsman. | ... cattle are wanderers with no one to herd them.”³⁶⁹ Slaves overtake the government, “the nobles become miserable and the lowly joyful.”³⁷⁰ Foreigners take over the Egyptian throne and corrupt its power. Common folk tropes like *‘the weak are overtaking the strong’* and *‘the slow are overtaking the quick’* – familiar in folk traditions the world over – here express nationalist dread of ferment and uprising:

All happiness has vanished | The land is ruined, its fate
decreed... | I show you the master in need, the outsider
sated | The lazy stuffs himself, the active is needy... | I
show you the land in turmoil | The weak-armed is strong-
armed | One salutes him who saluted. | I show you the
undermost uppermost... | The beggar will gain riches |

³⁶⁸ Scott, 41.

³⁶⁹ Trans. Enmarch, 213.

³⁷⁰ „Die Vornehmen sind voll Klagen und die Geringen voll Freude.“ Assman, *Literatur und Karneval*, 40. For discussion of the seriousness or playfulness of these, see Assman’s engagement with Brunner Traut. *Literatur und Karneval im alten Ägypten*, in S. Döpp (ed.) *Karnivaleske Phänomene in antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen*. Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 40. Lichtheim is unimpressed with simple folk decorations of the ‘order and chaos’ motif as “overwrought and repetitious... Their principal rhetorical device was the reversal of a situation into its opposite: what was great has become small; the high has been laid low; the slaves shall become masters; the masters are slaves; the riverbed is dry; the dry land is under water; and so on.” She finds no political sentiment of actual social upheaval in them (1973, 40).

The great [will rob] to live. | The poor will eat bread | The slaves will be exalted.³⁷¹

Look, rich ladies (sleep) in ditches; | officials are in the workshop | yet he who used not to sleep on walls(?) is the owner of a bed. | Look, the owner of property spends the night thirsty | (yet) he who begged his dregs for himself is the owner of *šhrw*-beer | Look, the owners of linen are in old clothes; | (yet) he who could not weave for himself is the owner of fine linen. | Look, he who could not hew for himself a boat is the owner of ships; ... | Look, he who had nothing is an owner of wealth; | and the official is praising him | Look, the poor of the land have become rich men; (yet) <the owner> of property is a have-not.³⁷²

What tragic phrases such as ‘the slave shall be exalted’ meant in their Egyptian context – propaganda, resistance or decoration? – has been debated.³⁷³ But they clearly attribute cataclysm to the shortcomings of leadership. When kings violate the principles of virtue – self-control, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, impartiality³⁷⁴ – they succumb to the inherent wickedness of mankind and the entire cosmos begins to tumble into chaos as things turn upside-down. Prostitutes rise up to become pyramid-builders, for example.

Traditional Cheops folk humor was about cataclysmic social inversion. In the old comic tradition, divine female figures are representations of the balance and restoration of divine order after the corruption of the wickedness of kings. A dynasty’s cruelty, excess, and hubris lead to cosmic disorder but finally comic renewal, a pattern that

³⁷¹ *The Prophecies of Neferti*, trans. Lichtheim 1973, 187-188.

³⁷² *The Dialogue of Ipuwer*. Trans. Enmarch.

³⁷³ As Enmarch discusses, “A plea for good shepherding from the king and his entourage: they should intervene and subdue chaos resulting from humanity’s imperfection...rather than being counter-cultural, these arguments can be read as mimetic reflections of normative Middle Kingdom ideology...” Enmarch, 59.

³⁷⁴ Lichtheim 1973, 162 reads these ‘gentlemanly’ virtues from the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* and the *Stela of Intef Son of Sent*.

follows in form the mythology of Isis and Osiris as the parents of Osiris as they battle against disorder in the figure of Seth.³⁷⁵ The pharaoh's vengeance, violence, disorder, and the violation of propriety and social order (*Ma'at*) as a representation of Seth are finally inverted with the achievements of magical or mystical females, who are representations of Isis and Hathor, goddesses of reproduction and sexuality, as is common for female figures in Egyptian storytelling. The humor is fundamentally mystical and divine.

In *Magicians* the family of Cheops and the ruling class of his toxic dynasty punish the sexual behavior and choices of women. Adultery itself really was culturally loathed in ancient Egypt, but no document outside of Greek literary texts makes it out as more than a minor offense as a judicial matter. Women had significant rights, at least for the ownership of property, and divorce was common or even materially favorable to women, and punishments for sexual liaisons were not severe, as Teysseire observes.³⁷⁶ But Nebka sends an adulterer to death-by-crocodile and burns the adulteress alive, an act of unrestrained vengeance.³⁷⁷ In a moment of class crisis (a peasant is sleeping with the high priest's wife) the response from leadership is to torch a woman to death. The folktale thus depicts how the government ought (not) to respond to entropy. A rowing girl talks back to the king, or a peasant sage possesses powerful magic that the king does not. The king and his court's responses are all wrong: burning an adulterer alive (too much),

³⁷⁵ See Steve Vinson, "Good and Bad Women in Egyptian Fiction," in Ruthorford, *Greco-Egyptian Interactions*, 245-266.

³⁷⁶ Teysseire, 79. Herodotus wrote that the pharaoh Pheros burnt an entire town full of adulterous women; Diodorus Siculus wrote that adultery was punished with "thousand blows of the rod" for the man and "having the nose cut off" for the woman. But this is all an exaggeration and fabrication of documents and records that show a different reality. See Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 67-72.

³⁷⁷ There is a lacuna here. See Parkinson on fire as a potential punishment but not for adultery, n.12, 121.

allowing a rowing-girl to talk back (too little), or seeking forbidden magic in order to thwart a prophecy of the goddesses (far too much). In that sense it is a comedy of errors about a failed monarchy.

Restraint and moderate judgment were admired qualities in kings, or at least literary embellishments for sub-elites to suck up to them. The *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, for example, warns against mistreating peasants in court and encourages fair reasoning through courts of magistrates:

If you meet a disputant in action | A poor man, not your
equal | Do not attack him because he is weak | Let him
alone ... | Wretched is he who injures a poor man | ...
You will beat him through the magistrates' reproof.³⁷⁸

On the other hand, in the playful folkloric adultery tale of *Magicians (A)*, there is hardly due process. Rather, Ubainer is excessive with vengeance against the man who sleeps with his wife: he goes too far in his response to her misbehavior, abusing dark magic when he employs a wax crocodile.³⁷⁹ The crocodile was a figure of chaos or danger (for obvious actual reasons), but in the imaginary world of folklore could represent a bad king who rushes to judgment too quickly or is immoderately angry and makes hasty decisions.³⁸⁰ Ubainer is at fault here, not his wife, necessarily. The high priest is unable to restrain himself to legislate good judgment, and instead resorts to the use of unrestrained magic. The crocodile was an adversary of the Sun god Re, whose worshipers (the 5th dynasty or the Sun Dynasty) happen to be exactly the ones who shall replace Cheops.³⁸¹ It seems we are supposed to be rooting for the wife and the handsome peasant hero.

³⁷⁸ Lichtheim, 99.

³⁷⁹ Parkinson mentions the problems behind such 'programmatic' readings, 103.

³⁸⁰ LA „Krokodil“ III. 794. The crocodile was also connected to darkness in mythology, dwelling in the water at night, which contrasts with sun-worshipping 5th dynasty that will replace Ubainer.

³⁸¹ LA 795.

Ubainer's wife resonates with the later Greek one about the pharaoh's daughter in Herodotus, insofar as she's a female folk figure whose sexuality acts as a site of resistance to male authority. (In 'prostitution' goes the other way: *she* is the one buying off a handsome guy with a gift.) Ubainer's household, then, is in the process of ruin. A peasant has infiltrated his home to 'have a good time' with his wife – and *she* sought *him* out.³⁸² A carnivalesque liaison between peasant and noblewoman follows, a common form of folk fantasy. In these tropes, a small and powerless trickster sleeps with the master's wife, or a noblewoman sneaks away to enjoy sex with a lower-caste individual more attractive than her overbearing husband. This folk motif tends to float around as a residual literary form of resentment from within the households of dominated or abused women. In that sense, his wife's sexual liaison with the handsome peasant was, while it lasted, an act of freedom and empowerment on her part.

But the sex party ends jarringly as Ubainer has the peasant and his own wife killed. To be eaten and then spewed up by a crocodile is not a happy death, but a sort of double resurrection or horrible necromantic vengeance: the peasant will die two deaths, and Cheops enjoys the show. Here we see *wrongful humor* at work, joy in cruelty and subjugation: an excess punished by a worse excess. Indeed, Cheops acclaims the brutality of the execution and praises Nebka in the highest manner:

Let an offering be made of a thousand loaves,
A hundred jars of beer,
One ox and two balls of incense
To the <Majesty of> the Dual King Nebka, the justified! ...³⁸³

Cheops admires the performance of the tale, although it is pointedly a parody of poor speaking. Humor here operates at the expense of

³⁸² Literally, 'having a good time', a playful euphemism for sexual adventures in the Egyptian tales, along with 'roaming the marshes' and 'taking a holiday'.

³⁸³ Parkinson, 109.

Cheops, who admires the faults of rulers rather than their strengths. He misunderstands *Ma'at* in terms of balanced judiciary action and divine moderation.

Humor of Cheops erased his accomplishments from history and replaced them with silly folktales, a sort of *damnatio memoriae*, in the sense that it's the priests' and scribes' way of removing his big accomplishments (no pyramids in the text at all) and replacing them with a foolish search for forbidden magic with light folklore undertones. *Magicians* undoes the damage of a previous dynasty by providing a mythological etiology of a more favorable one. At one point, Cheops laughs at dying peasants. In return, with the advent of the Sun Dynasty, the audience can reflect on the nature of good government, just men, good kings, and themselves laugh at the dying line of Cheops.

An Egyptian Women's Festival Reading

Long before Greeks set foot in Egypt, New Year celebrations were held along the Nile in honor of the agricultural cow-goddess Hathor as patroness of fertility, music, love, and (interesting for us) female trickster storytelling. Some remnants of fictions about Hathor's humorous relationship with men have come down to us, since her myths undergird an assortment of Egyptian tales. Hathor's trickery brought flavor to Egyptian popular humor. When she was involved in a narrative, women thwart a patriarch's capacities not only to sexually perform, but to run a household or a government at the highest level. We can assume any Egyptian would have known a bit of Hathor myth and humor – Greeks, perhaps not. Let's have a look at Egyptian festival life as one site-specific model for reading 'the one about pharaoh's daughter'. One 'stand-in' role³⁸⁴ we could take would be an Egyptian woman familiar with festival sex humor, coming from a world of raucous bodily celebration and sexual expression.

At Hathor fest, throngs along the Nile would sing, dance, travel, drink beer, relax,



Figure 37: Egyptian festival women on a wine bowl. Demotic inscription. Persian period (likely). British museum EA47992.

³⁸⁴ See Chapter 1 above for our model of reading with different 'stand-in' roles.

and enjoy rejuvenation from work and ideally plenty of healthy baby-making.³⁸⁵ Erotic self-expression, dancing, competitive games, musical performances, drunkenness and public humorous storytelling³⁸⁶ by professional raconteurs (likely both women and men) would have happened among a wide variety of social classes, ages, and ethnicities, including masses of foreigners.³⁸⁷ A text from a temple at Edfu pungently illustrates:

There are all kinds of bread in loaves as numerous as grains of sand. Oxen abound like locusts. The smell of the roast fowl, gazelle, oryx and ibex reach the sky. Wine flows freely throughout the town like the Nile bursting forth from the Two Caverns [its supposed source]. Myrrh scattered on the brazier with incense can be smelled a mile away. The city is bestrewed with faience, glittering with natron and garlanded with flowers and fresh herbs. Its youths are drunk, its citizens glad, and its young maidens are beautiful to behold; rejoicing is all around it and festivity is in all its quarters. There is no sleep to be had there until dawn...³⁸⁸

Greco-Egyptian bicultural fictions must have come most alive in year-round festivals where performances would happen thanks to enormously well-funded celebrations centered around temples, with massive participation and throngs of crowds with smaller versions in rural areas.³⁸⁹ Herodotus claims that 700,000 locals participated in the festival at Bubastis.³⁹⁰ Processions made obscene gestures and played music on instruments as they attended great social events of meat-eating and

³⁸⁵ From here I draw heavily on the work of Egyptologists Montserrat, Teeter, Jay, Manniche and Robins in an attempt to help convey some of recently explored rich cultural contexts into Classical studies of Herodotus.

³⁸⁶ As Brunner-Traut speculates concerning the transmission of animal fables and other Marchen.

³⁸⁷ as “a time of sensory stimulation through sound, movement, scents, and the nervous anticipation of being in the company of the divine.” Teeter, 56. Vinson, and LA Kultspeile 3.856.

³⁸⁸ Trans, Teeter, 58.

³⁸⁹ LA „Feste”.

³⁹⁰ Calendars are preserved from the Old Kingdom onward. LA „Festkalender.” II.191.

wine-drinking fueled by provisions from a temple economy of vast proportions. Dramatic enactments in cult and ritual (and probably just easy-going street play) may have been performed by priests and priestesses, in some cases from official-looking ‘scripts’³⁹¹ that combined traditional mythological lore with playful and entertaining tales of comic inversion or even political satire, such as the bawdy *Horus and Seth*. It's hard to believe that folktales were not aroused and transferred across great distances around the Mediterranean in seasonal festival milieux.

The cultural conveyors of folktales around Egypt may have been itinerant ‘bards’ or traveling peddlers of wisdom who made a living thanks to festival culture. That may explain how Egyptian tales seem to have been patched together, if they were ‘woven’ from a fabric of folktale motifs floating from place to place. Priests would then have conveyed bits and pieces to foreign inquirers such as Herodotus, but probably not the entire unit that might have been available in book form or known by a teller with a particularly strong memory. Indeed, Herodotean tales are chunks of Egyptian narrative but rarely whole units (the long tale of Rhampsinitus is an exception), so we can assume that he was hearing a patchy trickling of narratives from here and there as they passed around busy areas. Festival groundswell of “popular humor” would have been flowing around as a wine-soaked undercurrent of tales upon tales and a thriving polyglot underlore from widely enjoyed inversion and drunkenness. Hathor and her womanly trickiness set the mood in the background for all the stories told. And Herodotus, that pious nearby Greek inquirer, took on a wide range of messy information and scratched his head to decide what qualified as *history*. Hathor had a deeply intimate association with the act of ‘male inquiry’ in popular comedy (namely,

³⁹¹ Recently an argument for ‘stage directions’ in a Demotic text has been put forth by Gaudard, *The Demotic drama of Horus and Seth* (P. Berlin 8278a, b, c; 15662; 15677; 15818; 23536; 23537a, b, c, d, e, f, g).

sticking the penises of inquirers into chamberpots). Here I want to suggest that Hathoric popular culture around Egypt should color our understanding of the tales in Book II. Hathor's humor of historical inquiry, I would like to suggest, beguiles the Greek text of Herodotus in ways that have not been considered.

Visual arts give the impression that ecstasy, dancing and music were enjoyed by large mixed crowds at festivals of Hathor.³⁹² Celebrants may have danced under the full moon (the returned Eye of Ra) as mystic rites were dramatized within the temples.³⁹³ On Thothfest during the New Year inundation of the Nile, priests of high rank brought a golden statuette of Hathor up from an underground crypt and exposed her to the rays of the shining Sun for the impregnation by the rays of the Sun god Re.³⁹⁴ Later that month (Hathorfest on 20 Thoth) the great celebration of 'drunkenness' with the 'greatest of all feasts' celebrated the goddess' return from Edfu with much drinking and meaty sacrifices. Women on the walls of the temple at Dendera are depicted playing traditional tambourines in a group of seven, the Seven Hathors – these sorts of creatures have been called in Western folklore 'faeries' – taking on the goddess' roles in ritual enactments. Needless to say, in this sort of world of culture, both genders are commonly depicted vomiting from drinking too much.³⁹⁵

³⁹² Graves-Brown, *Dancing for Hathor*, 167.

³⁹³ 'Libretti' with stage sets for reenactment the humorous Horus myth and other celebrations have been preserved. LA „Kultspiele" 3. 857.

³⁹⁴ LA „Hathorfest" 2.1036.

³⁹⁵ Von Lieden, 49.

Depictions of a festival of Hathor not far from Herodotus' time show women in sacrificial procession headed toward a great feast of drunkenness, where they would apparently flash their vaginas at onlookers while keeping rhythm with tambourines and – if we are looking at this image the right way – by slapping their backsides.³⁹⁶ It would be difficult to argue even for the most hard-



(enlarged from above)

minded anthropologist or moralizing patriarch³⁹⁷ that there was nothing fun to crowds of women, workers and children about festival atmospheres where human sexualities were openly expressed, even if we remain cynical that festival humor was only a steam valve of psychological relief from daily suffering at work.³⁹⁸

New Year festivals followed mythical cycles of Hathor where she goes out on an adventure, gets angry, and needs to be appeased with lots and lots of beer. One element of these myths is the act of storytelling itself, with its ability to calm a listener down and soothe them. For instance, the return of Hathor is illustrated in the late Demotic *Myth of the Sun's Eye*,³⁹⁹ where Tefnut (Hathor) bickers with her father Re and angrily leaves for Ethiopia. There she takes the form of a ferocious lion Sekhmet.

³⁹⁶ As observed by T.G.H. James, *Sacred and Obscene Laughter*, 219. "...she appears to be slapping her uncovered bottom along with the rhythm!"

³⁹⁷ Much information of ancient festival was transmitted through moralizing criticisms of the church fathers; see Montserrat 'Festivals of License,' 165-166.

³⁹⁸ Montserrat, 165.

³⁹⁹ Depauw, 92 gives an overview. Papyri from the first or second century Greco-Egyptian milieu but likely a recitation of much older themes as depicted on New Kingdom ostraca (next page).

Her father does want to live without his beloved daughter, so he sends the clever Thoth to calm her down in the form of a dog-ape or jackal-monkey,⁴⁰⁰ bring her back to Egypt, and – importantly – not get eaten on the way. To that end, Thoth offers entertaining music, dancing, wine, a tasty dish of jelly and several humorous fables, some of which appear in later Greek and Latin Aesop.⁴⁰¹ With performances of wisdom, Thoth makes the angry goddess laugh and seduces her to return to her father.⁴⁰² Visual

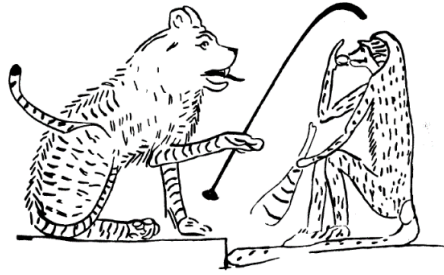


Figure 38: Egyptian ape and lion animal fables. Brunner-Traut, *Märchen* 136; Thoth begging not to be eaten up. *Spiegelberg* 6.

depictions on interior temple walls as well as sketched cartoons on workers' ostraca show Thoth begging for his life or putting on charming performances for the dangerously bipolar goddess. Clearly this cycle was immensely popular among literate and non-literate audiences alike, of all ages and genders.

⁴⁰⁰ There is contention over this translation. See Jay, 226.

⁴⁰¹ The *Sun's Eye* themes resonate with later Greek philosophy and epic poetry – like justice for the weak, taming the angry loner (say, Achilles) and nostalgia or homesickness (say, Odysseus). For Spiegelberg (7) „der Stärkere in die Lage kommen kann, von einem schwachen Wesen gerettet zu werden.“ The four *Sun's Eye* fables are philosophical conversations on the part of scribal intellectuals held in a misleadingly naïve context of mere animal tales. These have not received the attention from ancient philosophers that they deserve. They resonate deeply with early Greek sophistic and pre-Socratic questions of moral relativity, the strong and the weak, and the use of speech and wisdom in relation to tyranny. A central theme is the reliance of the Strong upon the Weak, which was the moral of the Aesopic fable. See Kazuya Akimoto, *Ante-Aesopica: Fable traditions of the ancient Near East*. Vanderbilt dissertation, 2010, 198-199.

⁴⁰² Leiden Dem. Pap. I 384. Some late copies of this narrative include stage directions that suggest ritual use, according to Jay, *Religious Literature of the Late Period and Greco-Roman Egypt*. *Religion Compass* 1/1, 2007, 96. de Cenival, F, 1988, *Le Mythe de l'Oeil du Soleil*, G. Zauzich, Sommerhausen. 1984. Smith, M. *Sonnenauge, Demotischer Mythos vom, LÄ V*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.

Hathor was a household goddess. Humorous fictions about her would have reflected the intimate relations of husbands and wives, mothers and children, but especially those who handled childbirth and issues of menstruation. As the mediator of the feminine cycle, goddess of the female body, Hathor was the power of eternal creation

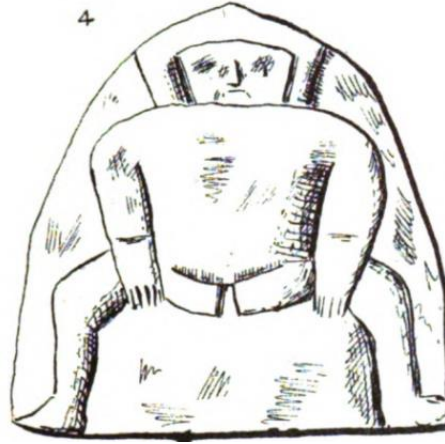


Figure 39: Egyptian Hathor flashing her vagina From *Naukratis*, Petrie 1886, 155)

and celebration, overseer of reproduction and renewal, and in a political sense the midwife of pharaohs. But she was also the jester of the divine court in literary satire. In *Horus and Seth*, she performs a cosmic unveiling of her pudenda for the entertainment of her father, the Sun god:

The great god spent a day lying on his back in his pavilion, his heart very sore and he was alone. After a long while, Hathor, Lady of the southern sycamore, came and stood before her father, the All-Lord. She uncovered her nakedness before him; thereupon the god laughed at her.⁴⁰³

A family in need of therapy? The myth of the ‘laughing vagina’ may have been what inspired women at Bubastis to flash their genitals in large crowds, which boggled Herodotus as he passed by and heard all about it. Greeks would not have thought all of this was too exotic or foreign, but in fact they seem to have appropriated the Egyptian style of festival eagerly. Hathor was probably one early inspiration for the Greek figure of Baubo/Iambe (but there are much older goddesses who share

⁴⁰³ *Horus and Seth*. Trans. Lichtheim, 552-553. An overtly humorous episode. Jasnow and Jay, 104. A similar female jester figure is the Greek Iambe/Baubo, who cools the temper of the goddess Demeter: ...decorous Iambe, with jokes | And many a mocking jest moved [Demeter] | To smile and laugh and have a gracious heart. O’Higgins and Winkler did not connect Baubo to Egypt, however. Trans. O’Higgins, 3.

trickster qualities from the Middle East). The gender inversion here calls to mind symbolic inversions from societies in many times and places.⁴⁰⁴ But much Greek comedy centered around women's roles as figures of power in myth and also in politics. Women at the women's festival *Thesmophoria* seem to have appropriated a semblance of Hathor into their private cultic laughter that celebrated a female jester, who made obscene jokes at the expense of men – so we know that some Nile storytelling about the goddess made its way on to the stage of Aristophanes. That popular Greek women's laughter had roots in major Nile festivals whose forms of comedy could have easily transferred back home to Hellas in one form or another, just like any popular tourist commodity like a neat scarab or fashionable jewelry.

Hathor's fashionable story was about her anger management issues. She needed to be calmed by music, wine, food, and humorous storytelling. She was called the 'Distant Goddess' in liminal narratives where she moves there and back again, from Nubia to Egypt, from anger to appeasement, from lioness to cow.⁴⁰⁵ In the late Middle Kingdom *Destruction of Mankind*, humanity rebels and annoys the Sun god Re, so he commands his Eye (a distinct entity) to take the lioness form of Hathor (Sekhmet), descend into the world, and destroy all of mankind. After Hathor kills a few of them in the desert, Re realizes he has made a mistake. He devises a trick to calm her down: mixing red ochre into seven thousand jars of beer:

⁴⁰⁴ E.F. Morris, for instance, compares Hathor to the Japanese Shinto myth of Uzume 'the Dread Female' who "exposed her breasts, and pushed her skirt-band down to her genitals," in order to make the sun goddess laugh from Morris, *Sacred and Obscene Laughter*, 199. Egyptian Stories, Schneider and Szpakowska. Mesopotamian illustrations to late medieval European broadsheets See Assman, „Literatur und Karneval im alten Ägypten." In *Karnevalische Phänomene in antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen*," ed. S. Döpp 1993.

⁴⁰⁵ Pinch 191. Junker, *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien*. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 1911. Hornung, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh :eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen*. Spiegelberg, W. *Der Ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenaugen*. Strasbourg, 1917. Stephanie West, "The Greek Version of the Legend of Tefnut." *JEA* 55, 161-83. Tait, W.J. "A Duplicate Version of the Demotic *Kufi* Text," in *Acta Orientalia* 35, 32-37.

Then the fields were flooded three palms high with the liquid by the might of the majesty of this god. When the goddess came in the morning she found them flooded, and her gaze was pleased by it. She drank and it pleased her heart. She returned drunk without having pleased mankind.⁴⁰⁶

In the pictures below, you can see the shift from the peaceful kitty Hathor to the enraged lioness Sekhmet. This transition as it appeared in lost narratives was probably elemental animal folk humor: much of the content of the cycle is directly similar to material found in the animal tales of the Greek Aesop, if not its original inspiration.

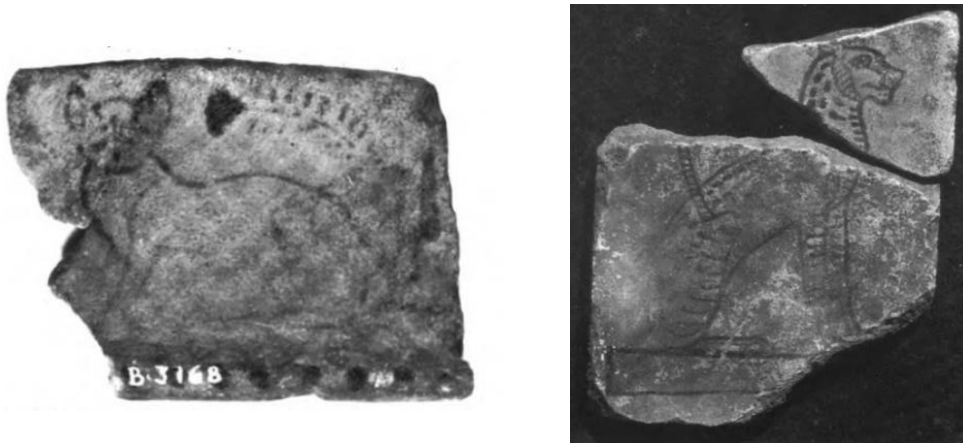


Figure 40: Tame housecat and angry lion Hathor drawings. Faience cat plaque from Serabit el-Khadim, temple of Hathor. Votive offerings to Hathor / Geraldine Pinch. Plate 44. Bastet, the less vengeful form of Hathor. Probably leptilailurus serval, the African cat, according to Pinch, Plate 45b.

Hathor drinks the blood and becomes inebriated and pacified. This myth may be an etiology of the return of the star Sirius (the Eye), the flooding of the Nile, and the beginning of the agricultural season, when the Sun god ejaculated rays into Hathor, and the yearly celebration of excited sexuality and reproduction began for people enjoying annual festival life.

⁴⁰⁶ Trans. Lichtheim, 534. The red ochre has been interpreted as an erotic symbol of menstruation or, alternatively, the flood of the Nile; it may be connected to springtime sexuality and the return of the winter Sun; see Pinch, 194.

That sort of Hathor lore was taken up by Greeks in later times in cloudy ways. For instance, there's a passage in Herodotus where Greek mercenaries allied with Egyptians emulate the blood-drinking of Hathor as they fight against Cambyses. They were betrayed by a man named Phanes (3.11). Enraged at him, Greek mercenaries perform a sort of Hathoric blood-drinking ritual to become enraged and fight with passion (like the lioness Sekhmet):

The Persians marched across the desert and took up their position near the Egyptians in preparation for meeting them in battle. At that point, the Greek and Carian mercenaries of the Egyptian king, who resented Phanes' leading a foreign army into Egypt, schemed to punish him in the following way. They took the sons of Phanes whom he had left behind in Egypt, into the camp, and after placing a wine bowl between the two armies, they led each of the sons up to it in full view of their father and cut their throats over the bowl, one by one. When they had thus slaughtered each of the boys in turn, they added wine and water to the blood, and then each of the mercenaries drank from the bowl. Thus fortified, they went forth into battle in which the fighting was quite fierce, so that a large number of men fell on both sides, but finally the Egyptians were routed.⁴⁰⁷

Hathoric blood-drinking had made its way into popular soldiers' narratives about the Greco-Egyptian resistance to the Persian occupation. Mythology of Hathor was a cross-cultural political symbol of nationalism to both Greeks and Egyptians living, working, and intermarrying together under the late Saite pharaohs. Stories about Hathor's rage no doubt had a pointed political feeling to them in Herodotus' time, as the local Egyptian priesthoods were still feeling the

⁴⁰⁷ Adapted from the translation of Strassler in Purvis (2009). ἦσαν τῷ Φάνη παῖδες ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ καταλελειμμένοι: τοὺς ἀγαγόντες ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον καὶ ἐς ὄψιν τοῦ πατρὸς κρητῆρα ἐν μέσῳ ἔστησαν ἀμφοτέρων τῶν στρατοπέδων, μετὰ δὲ ἀγινέοντες κατὰ ἓνα ἕκαστον τῶν παίδων ἔσφαζον ἐς τὸν κρητῆρα: διὰ πάντων δὲ διεξεληθόντες τῶν παίδων οἶνον τε καὶ ὕδωρ ἐσεφόρεον ἐς αὐτόν, ἐμπιόντες δὲ τοῦ αἵματος πάντες οἱ ἐπικούροι οὕτω διη συνέβαλον. μάχης δὲ γενομένης καρτερῆς καὶ πεσόντων ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν στρατοπέδων πλήθει πολλῶν ἐτράποντο οἱ Αἰγύπτιοι.

squeeze from a Persian monarchy involving itself in economical matters and taxing temples dry.

Hathoric storytelling was a form of festival inversion, which has been highly theorized.⁴⁰⁸ Festival humor tends to flip things upside down, with a special delight in sexual obscenity. Women's cults of reproduction, fertility, death and rebirth around the ancient Mediterranean celebrated the low and bodily, something Bakhtin did not fail to notice.⁴⁰⁹ He thought about festival as symbolized in the image of the old crone goddess Demeter. He studied figurines of old women from the cult of the Thesmophoria (but these would have been inspired by the much older Egyptian Bubasteia). In his study of medieval folklife, he used these images of Demeter in order to think about festival as 'degradation', when the world of high political figures is brought 'down to earth' into the 'marketplace' in sanctioned cultural expressions. Symbolism shifted away from pretensions of permanence, power, wealth, or intellectualism – the head and eyes – down to the belly, bowels, stomach, orifices of urination, defecation and procreation, shared grounds of humanity Bakhtin named *Earth*, an ever-flowing, changing, and regenerating world of ever-moving incompleteness. During times of festival, human beings became more down-to-earth, as it were, regardless of their official status celebrated shared imperfections, as finite creatures with bodies.⁴¹⁰ Shared mockery of higher-ups and elites during festival inversions keeps societies healthy, as a form of public exposure by which dangerously toxic intellectual or tyrannical pretensions of the few on top were periodically brought low and neutralized by the throngs of people on the bottom:

⁴⁰⁸ See Babcock et al; see above.

⁴⁰⁹ For women's cults, see Karanika and O'Higgins.

⁴¹⁰ Parkinson, on the other hand, eschews applying Bakhtinian carnivalesque to *Cheops* and the *Shipwrecked Sailor* (186) due to no clear "two worlds" of high and low culture.

Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth: it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.⁴¹¹

“Down to earth” movement of humor helps our reading of pharaoh stories in Herodotus, where big kings are cut down to size by incommensurate meetings with lower figures. Egyptian fictional encounters between kings and Hathor were carnivalesque in nature, inversions from right out of the agricultural ground and the household storytelling of farmworkers and their wives and children imagining heroines and goddesses as political heroes.

What Bakhtin did not know was that Demeter was so closely related to the Egyptian Hathor. Women of the Egyptian literary imagination were tricky, dangerous, powerful, sly, untrustworthy, a bit magical, out of line – sometimes benevolent but always a little too clever – as Teyssere concluded with her analysis of femme fatales, mother figures, adulterers, prostitutes, and surly servants in the tales. Literary humor was essentially anxious about genders and violations or crossings of them.⁴¹² Fictive scenarios about stereotypical females appear in a variety of Egyptian genres and sources, from villagers’ real legal

⁴¹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

⁴¹² In what follows on literary Egyptian women I draw on the work of Teyssere in her 1998 Yale dissertation (under Ritner and Simpson) *Portrayal of Women in the Ancient Egyptian Tale* as well as Susan Tower Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian “Tale of Two Brothers,”* University of Oklahoma Press, 1990, and Vinson’s *Good Scribe and Jay’s Orality*. For the Hathoric content I am following largely Geraldine Pinch’s *Votive Offerings*.

accusations against one another of adultery,⁴¹³ to jokes sent as personal messages to one another, to the highest literary works intended only for private school scribes. Women often lurk like crocodiles⁴¹⁴ off the side of the road to redemption traveled by faux heroic male allegories like Setna and Cheops, figures that bear comic resemblance to, say, Don Quixote or Lucius the Ass. In the Egyptian tales, mystical ladies move briefly from subordinate to a dominant roles, a mythical tendency that we can detect in many of the oral literatures passed on eventually to Herodotus.

Egyptian trickster figures could be aspects of Hathor with her connection to the mystique of the female body in men's eyes and women's private lives as forbidden or transgressive places. For instance, in the *Tale of the Herdsman*, a shepherd tells a horror story (to other male shepherds) about his encounter with a terrifying womanly apparition with messed-up hair:

Look, I went down to a marsh
That is nearby this lowland.
I saw a woman in it
Who was not a human being.
My hair crawled when I saw her head-pelt,
Because of the smoothness of her skin...

...this goddess accosted him
as he was heading to the basin.
She came shedding her clothes
and messing up her hair.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ Legal accusations of adultery – both the seduction of men by women and vice-versa – appear in letters from workmen at Deir el-Medina, but they also may very well be comic fictions or at least somewhat performative, as suggested by A.G. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 1999, 46-49.

⁴¹⁴ In literature crocodiles are associated with betrayal and adultery, as we see in Westcar (below).

⁴¹⁵ Trans. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian Literature: Eight Literary Works of the Middle Kingdom*. Cambridge, 2015. An ambiguously folkloric text that draws upon esoteric information, according to Parkinson, 142.

The lady with the messed-up hair was probably Hathor in her vengeful aspect, a scary sight to behold. But another way to read it is humorously, if we think about what a bunch of dumb men the narrator and his group were if what the Medusa-like monster with crawling hair was, in fact, just a woman.



Figure 41: Egyptian drawing of a mysterious naked woman.. Ostrakon from Deir-el medina. Manniche,fig. 59.

The story resembles wider African tales and myths about ogresses and naïve men who encounter them and run away scared, both in the ancient and modern renditions, who appear to trouble the order of things and challenge a male hero.⁴¹⁶ As usual in the tales, she appears as a source of conflict intended to push along a narrative mainly about a tantalized antihero who may be (mis)handling magic. These ‘femme fatales’ were generally elemental to ancient storytelling and it would be no big surprise if Herodotus heard something about the ‘sex worker’ builders of the pyramids out of this sort of oral folklore, that was just as much intended to be a self-immolating joke on the raconteur as anything else.

Women’s folklore is almost always at the expense of men. The common pattern of ancient Egyptian folk humor is that a goddess appears as a trickster: she’s in the business of setting men straight because of their stupidity, and particularly in setting the pharaoh’s dynasty straight. Trickster heroines star in cautionary tales, which were probably intended to be funny to both husbands and wives, daughters

⁴¹⁶ *Contextualizing the Tale of the Herdsman*, T. Shneider, *Egyptian Stories*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, 2007. Vinson 264.

and sons. Consider the figure of Isis, as she appears in *Horus and Seth*. Here the gods are in an uproar about who shall take the throne, the rightful (but weak) prince Horus or the powerful (but wicked) brother Seth. Grouchy and mean-spirited old Seth refuses to debate with the young Horus as long as his mother Isis is in the room. So the Sun god holds the deliberations on a special island, and forbids Isis from attending.

Tricky and irreverent as she always is, Isis breaks her father's rules and sneaks to the island by transforming herself into an old woman walking with a stoop and wearing a gold ring with which she bribes the ferryman. She then transforms herself into the image of 'the sexiest woman of all time' (a common folklore trope and certain sign of incoming danger for the man dumb enough to fall for the trick). Seth, of course, being the foolish antagonist, desires her intensely. As he peers out at her from behind a sycamore tree luridly, she tells him a little riddle:

I was the wife of a herdsman and I bore him a son. My husband died, and the boy began to tend the cattle of his father. But then a stranger came. He sat down in my table and spoke thus to my child: 'I shall beat you, I shall take your father's cattle, and I shall throw you out!' So he spoke to him. Now I wish to make you his defender.⁴¹⁷

Seth thinks it's not right that someone else inherits the cattle when the rightful son still lives. Isis then changes into a kite and flies up into an acacia tree, where she proclaims, "Your own mouth has said it. Your own cleverness has judged you!"⁴¹⁸ So Isis has duped Seth to admit, by his own logic, that he does not deserve the throne, when the rightful son Horus still lives. (There's something Socratic about the process here.) Isis

⁴¹⁷ Lichheim, 554.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

employs low agricultural imagery (cattle) to undo the logic of the interlocutor at his own humorous expense.

Another important figure of degradation, useful for comparison with Cheops' daughter, is Tabubu, the ghostly "prostitute" who outsmarts the avaricious Setne. As we have seen above, the crowning moment in Egyptian humor is the moment Setne, trying to have sex with a high priestess Tabubu, through a series leading questions and trickery on her part (very similar to Isis), gives her his family estate and lets his children be murdered. He then has his penis stuck in (what is probably) a chamberpot. Vinson has read this moment fruitfully as a playful Hathoric mythological rite of passage. Tabubu as a "prostitute" was in fact a divine figure (see below). The fact that the chamberpot may have been a bin for discarded women's menstruation products only makes the joke funnier and the shame upon Setne that much worse.

Oral storytelling works because people can remember certain sorts of plot lines easily and repeat them in different ways. Hathor humor was this sort of memory pattern for Egyptians generations before Herodotus. In these narratives, Hathor disguised as a human woman comes in to conflict with other stereotypes – to make ontological descent – the divinities, the king, the scribes, the workers, and the foreign enemy. The audience would have known what was going to happen. The humor



Figure 42: The cat goddess suckles a pharaoh. British Museum. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

is cyclical: male elites are threatened or entirely uprooted by figures down the ladder (animals, foreigners, women) so that the higher-ups come to learn their proper relation to the Divine on top, and the cycle returns chaos to normalcy.⁴¹⁹ By the end, order (*Ma'at*) is restored and a mythological cycle comes to a close, as the *patriarchy* is rejuvenated and reigns supreme in high literary comedy. This bears similarity to World Upside Down story patterns in oral folklore worldwide, which reimagine the power structures of society so as to provide comic relief through negation and inversion.⁴²⁰ In the hands of educated priests, humorous storytelling may have been a tool to uphold *communitas*, to strengthen the body of patriarchal mediators, a group from which most folk by dint of their illiteracy were excluded.⁴²¹

As a popular figure, Hathor embodied liminal periods of transition in the agricultural concept of time – the rising of the Nile – as it was linked to the annual performances of ritual dramas and storytelling. In Hathoric narrative adventures, a figure in the tales goes ‘out and back again’ as a matter of change and renewal. The adventure-world proceeds from order into anarchy, back to order; and from the faraway to home (say, from Nubia to Egypt). Patriarchy must pass through times of temporary chaos and mayhem before it finds balance (*Ma'at*), rejuvenation, regeneration and reproduction. Hathoric folktale therefore can be understood as patterned comedy, an early source of ‘picaresque’ novels where the world falls into disorder but in the end reaches comic rejuvenation with the reaffirmation of a strong and renewed patriarchy.⁴²² On the way, the male ‘Egyptian priest’ is himself the target of playful

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Chaosbeschreibung, as discussed by John Dillery, “Manetho,” WT 49.

⁴²⁰ Cf. Forsdyke above.

⁴²¹ Burke, 55.

⁴²² Not at all unlike Aphrodite or Venus in the Greek and Roman traditions.

transgressive comedy. With this understanding we can read some of the dynamics of the pharaoh tales in Herodotus as very old ‘chaos humor patterns’, where transgressive elites find their comeuppance through the gods, something that Herodotus not only loved to tell stories about but deeply believed himself. He and the Greeks were not the only ones around the Mediterranean who had traditions about hubris and its results.

The male search for forbidden sex or power or magic was the essential comic core of Egyptian tales. A typical narrative cycle goes as follows: a blundering or horny priest or prophet too curious for his own good seeks to fulfill his undeserved desires, goes too far, and suffers the interjection of a divine female agent, as a representation of Hathor. Men cursed by avarice of the testicles or lust for magic or forbidden knowledge fall to their own lack of foresight and plunge in a sort of descent (*katabasis*) into a place populated by figures such as dangerous women, handmaids, magicians, ghosts, talking animals and other inversions of patriarchal normativity.⁴²³ (Why has nobody connected these patterns to Apuleius, I wonder?) The ‘divine female agent’ was an important encounter for the male elite seeker of *exotica* and *esoterica*. Dynasties are ended or begun through the work of folk females as representations of the goddess. In the tales, manifestations such as a phantom prostitute, surly servants, dancing girls, and other confluent goddesses like Isis,⁴²⁴ appear on stage as tricksters. Hathor provides conflicts of love, betrayal, or vengeance around adultery, prostitution, obscenity, drunkenness, sexuality, class inversion, trickery and disorder. Much Egyptian humor arose from the simple narrative structure of Hathoric initiation, following Teysseire:

⁴²³ Reception of Egyptian patterns of comedy in Greek genres can be found from Homer through Plato’s *Republic* to the world of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* and beyond, all of it beyond our ken here.

⁴²⁴ LA Hathor, 2.1025-1-27.

Seduction, deception and destruction are placed in the hero's path so that he may overcome these obstacles and successfully accomplish a rite of passage.⁴²⁵

Such 'rites of passage' are often comically obscene, drawn up from an underlore of common folklore adventures as we have seen in modern Arab and African tales.



Figure 43: Turin pornographical-satirical papyrus.

The Turin Papyrus is essential to any study of Egyptian humor, though it is one of the most difficult objects from which to draw any conclusions. The only certainty is that it is to some degree comic in nature. Likely drawn by well-educated, sub-elite craftsmen at Deir el-Medina who designed nearby tomb complexes, its scenes of exaggerated sexual incongruities, enormous penises, impossible positions, gender inversions (a female standing on the pharaoh's chariot),⁴²⁶ and lusty vocalizations of mysterious characters, have boggled centuries of mostly male scholars.

⁴²⁵ Teyssiere, 165.

⁴²⁶ Omlin, 52.

In one scene, a woman expands her vagina, more likely anus,⁴²⁷ with an enormous upturned jar or a fragrant incense cone.⁴²⁸ The comic caption above, as if part of a pulp fiction cartoon strip, reads:

I make your job a pleasant one. Do not fear. What would I do to you? You...you who knocks in, you who turn around! Look here, come round behind me. I contain your pleasure, your phallus is with me. You have not brought me...lovely, my bastard!”

Any reading here will likely say more about the scholar than the object.⁴²⁹ The document’s history tells a fascinating story of shifting scholarly sexualities and moralities. A disgusted Champollion described it as *un obscénité monstrueuse* – a monstrous obscenity in the face of proper Egyptian culture.⁴³⁰ Maspero, on the other hand, admired the “gallant adventures” of a high priest of Amun prancing among the harem.⁴³¹ Kees and others attributed it to lecherous Asian or Near Eastern influence seeping in and tainting Egyptian society. Helck saw it as a negative ‘world upside down’ insofar as it represented exactly the opposite of everything Egyptian society really was. Erman thought it was a necromantic sex guide or Book of the Dead describing the ghostly rituals of an entombed elite. Other scholarship has been curious about whether it is a depiction of a member of the Ramses family corrupting “morality” by profaning a temple. In the 1940’s the piece was hidden away in storage lest it shock the innocent gazes of Italian schoolchildren.⁴³² More

⁴²⁷ *coitus posterior in situ posterior*, the unnecessary scholarly term in case we need it.

⁴²⁸ Salbkegel, according to Omlin. Bild 4: 33.

⁴²⁹ Ibid. Van Lieven compares a tapel blocks that show jackals, a goose and a crocodile.

⁴³⁰ “...qui me donnent une bien singulière idée de la gravite et de la sagesse egyptienne.” Omlin, 18.

⁴³¹ „die galanten Abaneuer eines Priesters mit der Amonssangerin,” Maspero 1887.

⁴³² Van de Walle compared it to silly children’s storybooks and described the eroticism as just plain bad work, since “the witty spirit of the Egyptian is healthy and never crosses those boundaries.”

recent interpretations are nuanced and allow for different moralities with ulterior comic content. Houlihan detects an obvious sense of humor at work.⁴³³ Manniche sees the drawing as a comic window into a brothel of prostitutes serving a variety of local clientele in a workmen's village.⁴³⁴ Prostitution may have been common at Deir el-Medina.⁴³⁵

Alexandra von Lieven's reading allows for both humor and ritual drama. On her view, the men here are "bald priests of Hathor,"⁴³⁶ a group to which many different levels of the social hierarchy belonged.⁴³⁷ They are engaging in orgiastic behavior during a New Year's festival of drunkenness and inversion. The half-bald haircut gives it away. A group of statues of Hathor priests, documented and translated by Clère, portray messages about festive offerings of beer, wine, and food made to women

⁴³³ "there can hardly be any doubt that we are experiencing a unique glimpse behind the screen in a whorehouse at Deir el-Medina." Manniche, 107.

⁴³⁴ Manniche, *ibid.*

⁴³⁵ Omlin, 37.

⁴³⁶ Clère, Jacques J. *Les chauves d'Hathor. (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta)*. Peeters, 1995.

⁴³⁷ „Die Glatzköpfe stammten aus unterschiedlichem, teils jedoch sehr hohem sozialem Milieu.“ Von Lieven, 53.

both noble and common as representatives of Hathor and Isis, who were gathered together to anoint a sistrum-holding priest with unguent:

Take offering bread for yourself, beer for your mouth. We bring freshly brewed (beer), drinks ... choice breads, ale, the beverage of ...All of you who are in the forecourt, noble ladies as well as common women, anoint Isis' servant...and my left hand holds the august sistrum of my sovereign, the royal wife, the divine mother... ⁴³⁸

I am the bald man of the goddess, the spokesperson for the Mistress. Anyone who has any requests to make, let them say them in my ear and I will repeat them to my Mistress in her hour of appeasement. Put beer in my hand, date juice in my mouth, creamy ointment on my baldness and a garland of fresh flowers on my neck, and make me a libation with



Figure 44: A half-bald priest statue. Cf. Clarè.

⁴³⁸ "Prende pour toi des pains d'offrande, de la cervoise pour ta bouche. On apporte de la (bière) fraîchement brassée, de la boisson...des pains de choix, de la cervoise, le breuvage du...Vous toutes qui vous trouvez dans l'avant-cour, nobles dames aussie bien que femmes du commun, oignez-donc le serviteur d'Isis...et ma main gauche à maintenir le sistre auguste de sa souveraine, l'épouse royale, la mère divine..." Clarè, 76.

wine and beer, because I am a bald man
the goddess ... the Mistresses likes a bald
man to be satisfied...⁴³⁹

The Turin Papyrus may therefore illustrate or satirize New Years' festival rituals, to follow von Lieven's thinking, when local half-bald priests of Hathor from a wide variety of backgrounds enacted the Sekhmet-Thoth cycle with offerings and underwent sexual initiation by means of orgy. Some of the messages on Hathor priests' statues are reminiscent of prostitution: "those who do not make an offering sleep alone!"⁴⁴⁰ The Turin cartoon, then, exaggerates the moment when local men of various castes would be initiated into the priesthood of Hathor by engaging with perhaps "noble ladies as well as common women."

Women in these depictions temporarily have positions of power, both erotic and political, acting the role of Sekhmet the Lioness in a brief festival inversion where they gain sexual dominance, something similar to the festivals of inversion at Bubastis where women briefly flashed their privates at large audiences.

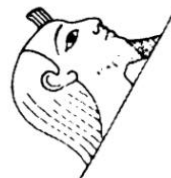


Figure 45: Hairstyles of Egyptian farmers and peasants. Clarè fig. 2.

⁴³⁹ "Je suis le chauve de la déesse, le porte-parole de sa Maîtresse. Quiconque aura des requêtes à formuler, qu'il les dise à mon oreille et je les répèterai à ma Maîtresse à son heure d'apaisement. Mettez-moi de la bière sur ma main, du jus de dattes à ma bouche, de l'onguent onctueux sur ma calvitie et une guirlande de fleurs fraîches...à mon cou, et faites-moi une libation avec du vin et de la bière, car je suis un chape de la déesse...la Maîtresse aime qu'un chauve soit satisfait, et versez pour moi de l'eau sur le sol." Clère, 91.

⁴⁴⁰ „Wer hingegen nichts opfert, muß alleine schlafen.“ Von Lieven, 52.

Inversive festival humor is implied in literature as well, in fictional ‘novels’ in tales about legendary figures, such as Cheops and Setne, who seek after sex or magic only to encounter women in a dominant roles. What I suggest is that this traditional style of Egyptian inversion humor about pharaohs is imbricated in what Herodotus heard and wrote in Greek in the later 5th century. Egyptians fantasized about women’s bodies as dangerous, beautiful, and sexual manifestations of the divine. Men, in all their lust – well, less so.

Baldness was common in Egypt as anywhere else in the world (Ramses II was bald as a Nile crocodile egg), but Egyptian elite men hid it under a wig for idealized depictions on tombs and monuments.⁴⁴¹ Farmers, craftsmen, fishermen, servants and laborers, on the other hand, are shown disheveled, too poor for fake hair, mostly bald, and wearing loosely tied kilts. We see this stereotypical ‘peasant’ on tomb and chapel iconography with captions about a worker’s laziness, drunkenness or other bawdiness, such as stealing wine on the job, falling asleep at one’s post,

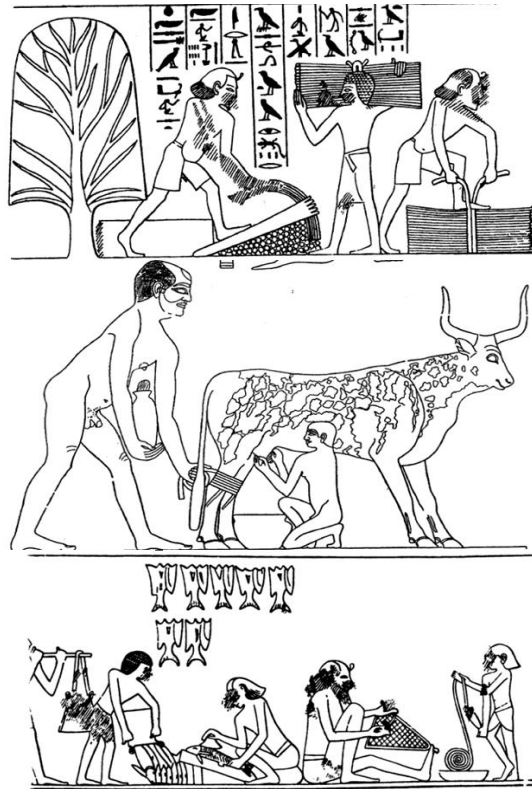


Figure 46: Egyptian farmers milk a happy cow. Clarè, Fig. 5 and Houlihan, fig 33. Bald farmer from the Tomb of Pakeri. Naked peasants milk a happy cow. Saqqara tomb chapel, 5th Dynasty. Houlihan, Fig 53.

⁴⁴¹ Clarè, 4.

dropping a hammer on one's foot, and so on.⁴⁴² In one episode a bald worker brags to a boy: "Even if you bring me 11,009 (bundles of flax), I will be able to comb them all!" The boy responds, "Hurry up and don't talk so much, you old bald-headed field hand!"⁴⁴³

These field-hands were stereotypes of popular comedy in the way they engaged with priestesses, the Turin Papyrus seems to suggest. From what remains of the vocal captions, women are in full control: "Since you are trembling, I'll make the job easier for you! Do not have anxiety! What am I to do with you?"⁴⁴⁴ Before one of the women has had a chance to refresh her anus with the cone of fragrance, the man raises his hands in a pleading



Thothlike gesture as if to say "Please no!" Here the myth of Thoth pleading with Sekhmet



Figure 47: Thoth Sex Comedy

is exaggerated into an obscene sort of political satire (similar to the way Aristophanes exaggerated Greek myths to comment on Athenian politics, even similarly using ritual myrrh as a prop for jokes about sex

⁴⁴² Houlihan, 27.

⁴⁴³ Houlihan, 41. These 'comics' were intended for the postmortem entertainment of the wealthy master in the afterlife, who may or may not have been a pleasure to work for.

⁴⁴⁴ Omlin, 66. „wegen dem Zittern, ich mache angenehm die Arbeit. / Habe keine Angst, was mache ich gegen Dich?"

ointment).⁴⁴⁵ Hathor figures were aspects of Sekhmet's danger and dominance who 'consumed' men as sexual objects. At the end of the journey, it is clearly *he* who is the butt of the joke: drained and spent, the rustic with the giant penis lies both defeated and initiated through a process of smelly rough anal sex.

Egyptian images of balding and scraggy peasants undergoing obscene rites of sexual passage may have had something to do with laborers or farmers who donned the garb of priests briefly during festival seasons. The awkward intrusion of local workmen into sacred temple spaces, with change in employment from farmer to orgymaster, made for incongruous humor. The women depicted on the papyrus identify themselves as (or at least pretend to be) singers for a ceremony. In that case, one way to see it is that an aged, rural, ugly old man intrudes into a women's private space intended for ritual performances during a drunken festival of Hathor. Von Lieven's reading here complements other incongruent literary humor we find in *Shepherd's Tale*, *First Setna*, and other Egyptian texts like the *Dream of Nectanebo* or *Amasis and the Skipper*. Usually a priest enters into a fantastic world full of sex and danger, secret mystic rites, malfeasance, delinquency, and sexual hubris, narratives implying Hathoric initiation for a starring male antihero.

Greek archetypes of the intruding *agroikos*, the satyr-esque "rustic bumpkin" come to mind.⁴⁴⁶ We might think of Aristophanes' character Mnesilochus, the surly old peasant with an enormous penis who sneaked in drag into the Thesmophoria, as we mentioned above, an Egyptian-inspired festival, where dirty jokes about all manner of sexcapades ensues. Mnesilochus' journey is a transgressive mystical sex inversion

⁴⁴⁵ βούλει μύρω σε; "shall I perfume you?" Myrrhine asks Cinesias in order to make him stink less, but uses the wrong ointment accidentally and makes it even worse (*Lysistrata* 940-950; Greek text from LCL 179, 396).

⁴⁴⁶ ἀγροιώτας Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazuse* 59 (LCL 179, 464). Omlin included pictures of satyrs in his volume for comparison.



Figure 48: Greek satyrs and Aesop the storyteller. Mitchell, (2009) fig. 16.

with a very similar sort of humor about ‘intruding old peasant-priests’. Sexual comic inversions like this (or mirthemes as we’ve called them) were easy to pass around across languages in oral storytelling. Potential for conflict in the private ritual women’s worlds inspired a genre of popular humor that stayed in vogue for centuries among the Egyptians.

Egyptian men spent only liminal time doing cult rituals for a few months a year, which might have resulted in conflicts of interest with women in private religious or temple spaces. So Egyptian audiences enjoyed ‘very wise priests’ as foils for horny or licentious farmers or princes who had exaggerated intercourse, as it were, with priestesses of Hathor and Sekhmet.

Egyptians and Greeks (drinking) together enjoyed nothing more than a clever tale about gender-transgression, a quick

anecdote, or even what seems to have been little more than a bawdy political joke about the sexual deviance of the heroic sex worker.⁴⁴⁷

In turn, as these old structures of inversion passed to Herodotus, they expressed particularly 5th-century dissatisfaction or even resistance

⁴⁴⁷ Classical commentators on Herodotus have not looked much for humor among the Egyptians. An exception is Konstantakos, who argues there are genuine Egyptian traditions behind the “apparent medley of sensational and piquant stories,” 79. Many Demotic texts have only recently been translated and many thousands more remain. Vasunia hesitates to make comparisons lest it lead to false binarisms between cultures, e.g., “there is no trace of an anti-Cheops tradition in Old Kingdom texts, but elements of one do appear in the Middle Kingdom Westcar Papyrus...and there are signs of negative attitudes to the Old Kingdom in general elsewhere in Egyptian

on the part of priests thinking about their government (more on this below). They thought about recent political events through comic motifs that had been trickling along the Nile for thousands of years. Comic inversions that Herodotus recorded in Greek align with Demotic Egyptian tales in terms of low register and wit as lively performances salted with slapstick, such as farts (2.162.3), pisspots (2.172.3-5), severed limbs (2.121), prostitutes (2.126), drunken parties (2.174), armies of mice (2.141), and so on – material of delight and entertainment with strong resonance in Demotic tales as well as modern Arab oral traditions.⁴⁴⁸ So we can draw fruitful comparisons with modern material and imagine relaxed settings, a non-official domain of language, interpersonal comfort in a public bicultural milieu of listeners who were themselves fond of making jokes at the expense of government figures. So who were these priests and what political relevance did the humor have for them? Let's have a look at these scattered tales and think of them as forms of resistance humor or as we have defined above *infrapolitics*.

literature. It is furthermore possible that the tradition on Cheops...was contaminated by the folk motif of the tyrannical ruler." *LAC*, 2.124.

⁴⁴⁸ For instance, the modern Arab 'Year of the Fart' (HES P781.1) or any number of 'clever prostitute' jokes (X520) and an identical tale of mice gnawing the armaments of the enemy as what appears in Herodotus (K623.1).

A Egyptian Political Satirist's Reading

Only recently have Classical historians entertained the notion that ancient Egyptians were people with an outward-looking political awareness of events around the Mediterranean, rather than a closed-up secretive society.⁴⁴⁹ From here, we might consider the 'stand-in' role of an Egyptian priest during the 'bourgeois' late Saite period, someone aware of recent events and tuned into local legends about the pharaohs, commenting on them in a curt way to Herodotus. If some of these Egyptians were canny about politics (and it's hard to believe they were not) we can read 'the one about pharaoh's daughter' as arisen out of a mood on international matters in the late 5th century. Storytellers in public venues around tourist sites must have had an inkling about what was happening with the Greeks, about Greek culture and philosophy, about music and festival and popular media, including northern literary trends like Homeric epic, all of which had not only influenced the highest reaches of government but the lowest dregs of popular street culture as well thanks to the loosening of Egypt's borders in the late 7th century. It's important to point up the potential historical awareness on the part of an anonymous joke-teller, no different than a contemporary street artist today working on graphic novels, cartoons or other popular media conveys important perspectives on current events from below.⁴⁵⁰

One text from less than a century before Herodotus' visit, *The Petition of Petese*, is worth some discussion because it's about Egyptian politics, and illustrates a few details about the daily lives of Egyptian

⁴⁴⁹ The notion that Egyptian priests were people writing their own past started with Ian Moyer's *Limits of Hellenism*, 1999.

⁴⁵⁰ So we can look at other Egyptian texts and build a nexus of meaning within their horizons that might give the joke a deeper political sense. (This is the "trickle-down" reading we warned against in the Introduction – that is, to use some high-level historical data to explain a simple dirty joke – but taking an Egyptian rather than Greek perspective.)

priests during the Persian era. A letter to a government figure with some inventive literary coloring and folklore in it, *Petition* gives us rich details out of the worlds of priests.⁴⁵¹ Set in the reign of Darius (c. 513 BCE), it describes two generations of men named Petese, and the elder lived under Psammetichus (c. 664 BCE). It's a complex narrative about a man his family's inheritance down the generations and how it was stolen. This was possibly a complete fiction, but it's impossible to tell. We can glean information about the day-to-day lives of Egyptian storytellers, or at least what they imagined their lives were like, to read Herodotus beyond a heap of Greek appropriations or orientalizations.

The overall theme of *Petition* is harsh vengeance upon priests who commit injustices. Texts like these help us understand something about what was going on in some imaginations among literate grandfathers and grandmothers of the generation Herodotus may have spoken with. If we trust *Petition*, its many colorful details may enrich our reading of

⁴⁵¹ From here I draw on the German commentary by Günter Vittman, 1998, but I have adapted the translations to be easier for classicists (for instance, removing long titles and focusing instead on the narrative).

Herodotus from a different 'stand-in' perspective than a Greek tourist.

Namely, in their imaginations they

- drank beer together for days at a time,
- tended cattle on the side as part of priestly duties and rituals,
- managed small cities as prominent officials,
- mimicked the pharaoh at a minor level as they built small properties and tombs for themselves,
- boated up and down the Nile associating with workmen and farmers,
- argued directly with the Pharaoh and his officials over money,
- traveled with the king and his army as advisers or astrologers,
- surveyed land along the Nile,
- traded constantly in wheat and silver as capital,
- sold their sons to daughters in marriage (men paid the dowry),
- schemed against one another for property,
- yelled at each other ("May they be thrown into an oven!"),
- beat one another with staffs,
- imprisoned each other in cages under the Sun to scorch them,
- prosecuted each other in sham courtrooms full of bribes and intimidation,
- threw each other's monuments into the river,
- kept their own small mercenary armies for intimidation with around fifty hired thugs...

The Egyptian audience of this sort of local history resonated with violence, money problems, family honor, and taxation as points of interest. The storytellers were real people whose comic imaginations drew on imperfect institutions, complex problems, and heated inter-relationships. But *Petition* is not about pharaohs. Rather, it's concerned with the personal financial problems of men, the state of the temples, and the economic downfall of urban areas as they ran dry due to taxation. The lives of the pharaohs are not that important. When Psammetichus dies, nobody seems to care much: he flops over and the priests get back

to business trying to appeal for their payment.⁴⁵² It shows us that some priests had ambivalent feelings about the priesthood as a tradable and transferable commodity, a shaky office undergoing serious troubles in terms of its prestige and worth in relation to the government infrastructure in the late 6th century.

Herodotus heard almost no facts about the pharaohs. They were so *boring* to the priests that they skipped hundreds of them and seem to have gotten right to the juicy stuff with the *Vengeance of Nitocris*. Rather, the pharaohs were figures of entertainment, like kings anywhere in the world's lore, with big personalities. But like all folk figures, the 'pharaohs' in some ways represented tellers themselves, as these artists reimagined social and gender roles with details out of their everyday environments. They fabricated wisdom tales and comic narratives about the past out of current material on the spot to deliver to a foreign visitor. These humorous folktales tell us about the real daily concerns of these Egyptian men and women as they pondered their roles in society, narrated the ancient past to one another.

Petition follows the story of Petese's attempt to correct an injustice, the theft of his inheritance by other Egyptians. Priesthoods came with prestige and inheritance, with a regular 'paycheck' of foodstuffs out of temple stores, making those who had them prominent community members. That made it an office amenable to bribery and intimidations embroiled with the government and bitter local politics. The plot revolves around the city of Teudjoi, which had been wrecked economically due to Persian taxes that people were unable to pay. There were apparently decades of 'bad times' from just before Herodotus' visit:

It was your grandfathers who were priests in this temple,
the richest house of Amen-Re, king of the gods. Then

⁴⁵² "...the mundane – yet highly significant – attitude which the Egyptians had to their king, and at this time the difference between the *Ideabild* and the *Realbild* of the Pharaohs is most marked." Anthony Spalinger, "The Concept of Monarchy during the Saite Epoch – an essay of Synthesis," *Orientalia* 47:1 (1978), 13.

came the bad times. One made the great temples of Egypt pay taxes. This city had high taxes imposed on it. They could not pay the high taxes imposed on them. They left. Behold, despite having exempted the great temples of Egypt, they come to us saying 'Pay the taxes!' to this very day.⁴⁵³

Long before Persian invasion and taxation, the Saite pharaohs already in the late 7th century had begun plunging the people for money, heaping up silver for mercenary armies in an attempt to rejuvenate the archaic nationalism of old Egypt in what has been called a sort of 'Renaissance'.⁴⁵⁴ As part of this plan, Psammetichus set up hard borders around Egypt using his Greek mercenaries, and tried to invade Eastern lands and sack Syria.⁴⁵⁵ His mixed military had drained the income of temples up and down the Nile to pay off Greek mercenary armies headed off to the edge of the world into Syria (The map on the right shows part of his journey).⁴⁵⁶ These foreign conquests and nationalist economy may not have gone well with some priests, if the temples were the sources for all the income needed to pay for imperial adventures abroad and Greek mercenaries to do the sacking.

Psammetichus became a popular figure, legendary as something of a failure, perhaps in memory for how long his imperial crusade once took.⁴⁵⁷ His attempt to sack Ashdod took something like twenty-nine years, but that may itself have been an oral exaggeration of a fact meant

⁴⁵³ Adapted from Vittman's translation, from "Ancient Egyptian Texts: 4.6 The Petition by Pediese, a Priest of Amen," accessed 1/16/23, <http://www.attalus.org/egypt/pediese.html>.

⁴⁵⁴ I mainly draw on Forshaw's recent *Egypt of the Saite pharaohs* and Garcia's *The State in Ancient Egypt: Power, Challenges and Dynamics*, Bloomsbury, 2019. However, no author has considered the folktales of Herodotus in relation to history of this era.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. Forshaw, 80.

⁴⁵⁶ Forshaw, 81.

⁴⁵⁷ "successful in spite of himself," according to Spalinger, 16.

to stretch the truth.⁴⁵⁸ His son Necho was vilified by the Egyptians and “the ideal aspect of the Pharaoh had fallen to a low level at this time.”⁴⁵⁹ Fortresses set up all along Psammetichus’ journey were manned by paid Greeks, but he himself probably died after all that time on the journey.⁴⁶⁰ He may have become in the Egyptian popular imagination similar to Ramses the Great, who had promoted himself as a world conquerer, though in reality there’s evidence his big wins at famous battles like Kadesh were totally tendentious.⁴⁶¹ The nationalist Saite monarchy caused an enormous shift of economics for the priests, whose livelihoods were now squeezed under the imperialist (and partially Greek) military program of Psammetichus and his heirs.

So Egyptian folk humor was cooked up by workers fomenting annoyance for powerful men with ambiguous and somewhat resentful feelings about Greek-loving Saites (Necho, Apries, Amasis, and Psammetichus II & III). Here is where we find humor coming up from below about the ‘great world conquerer’ narratives made as state propaganda, probably oral narratives generated out of urbane places like Naucratis where these figures were merely big celebrities people told rumors about (similar to our ‘Ramses Hotel’ situation in modern Egypt, discussed above). This urbane disregard and sense of developing genres of satire on distant monarchies has gone totally unnoticed in scholarship on Egypt of this time.

Two or three generations after Psammetichus, grandchildren of his soldiers or administration may have been the ones who spoke with Herodotus. What explains the presence of obscene or silly folktales may

⁴⁵⁸ Hdt 2.157; Forshaw, 80.

⁴⁵⁹ Spalinger, 20.

⁴⁶⁰ Forshaw, 83 & 89.

⁴⁶¹ Psammetichus took a ‘royal tour’ to celebrate his victory over Kush all the way into modern Palestine in an act of extraordinary ‘vaingloriousness’. Spalinger, 23.

have been a local family history of impoverishment. Egyptians faced a failing economy and, worse, foreign occupation. They resented or ignored the office of pharaoh, since it had entirely failed them as an economical apparatus, as a sort of ghost appendage on the temples, traditionally the sources of economy and power for cities along the Nile. It's no wonder if the priests imagined pharaohs as drunks or murderers or incestuous fathers, as Egypt's great plans for nationalist rejuvenation had reached a stunning and embarrassing halt under figures like Necho, Apries, and Psammetichus III, who lost Egypt to Cambyses, and was publicly humiliated and killed before the temples were ransacked by the Persians. Rather than parroting back the atrocious messages of war and conquest, workers on the bottom instead generated fantastic and funny tales for Herodotus drawing on details out of their personal lives.

Humor often begins in frustration. Egyptians experienced generations of strife between temple and government figures – pharaohs and their men, local sub-elites with some property and accumulated wealth, mercenaries, and now foreign military colonists from Persia – eating up temple stores in the form of taxes. The Egyptian audience of *Petition* had emotional responses to stories about family squabbles, neighborly lawsuits, elite prosecutions, public beatings, and hidden murders. It's a genre probably to some extent about real events without almost any mythological elements.⁴⁶² Long before Greek prose authors, Egyptian priests kept track of local histories by documenting an imbroglio of cosmopolitan conflicts up and down the Nile.

Consider the elaborate tale in Herodotus that we can call *Rhampsinitus and the Thief*, which is a long and relaxed performance

⁴⁶² Demotic texts give us pause to assume Greeks invented 'rational' prose history, since it was already happening in Egypt in the Persian era. It incidentally makes us second-guess Herodotus as the first 'prose-artist', if we care all that much about Big Firsts anyway.

about Ramses the Great someone gave for Herodotus.⁴⁶³ The story was right out of the Egyptian folk underlore, including an underworld-journey remarkably similar to Setne, with some other elements probably right out of popular creative media, board games like *senet*. In the Greek the act of playing Ramses on a living game board became what Herodotus calls (without really understanding what he was hearing) ‘dice-throwing’.⁴⁶⁴ Clearly the story was part of a living milieu of creative play.

As the folktale goes, miserly Rhampsinitus amassed a huge amount of silver and stowed it away for himself, sharing it with nobody. The builders of his treasurehouse find clever ways to sneak in and steal all the silver. Through a series of slapstick comedy adventures, one of these peasants manages to marry the king’s daughter. There are some strong resonances in this tale with other Egyptian texts. For instance, in one part of the story the tricky thief gets the treasurehouse guards drunk by ‘accidentally’ spilling wine all over the road from sacks on his donkey and pleading with them to please drink it all, lest it go to waste:

The guards became really drunk from the abundance of wine: taken by sleep, they lay down right where they were drinking.⁴⁶⁵

Similarly, in *Petition*, after the old man Petese is thrown in jail, some guards pass out during a festival from too much beer, and one of the prisoners escapes:

They seized me, my son and four brothers of mine and tortured us. They threw us in jail in the *pastophorion*

⁴⁶³ For a high metanarratological analysis of the Greek – the underlying point that Herodotus shows remnants of live performance – see Rosalind Thomas, “Herodotus’ Use of Prospective Sentences and the Story of Rhampsinitus and the Thief in the *Histories*,” *The American Journal of Philology* 114:1 (1993), 27-44.

⁴⁶⁴ For the tale’s underworld journey and its connection with Setne, see Delgado, Jose M. Serrano Delgado, “Rhampsinitus, Setne Khamwas and the Descent to the Netherworld: Some Remarks on Herodotus II, 122, 1,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 11 (2011) 94-108.

⁴⁶⁵ δαψιλίει δὲ τῷ ποτῷ χρησαμένους τοὺς φυλάκους ὑπερμεθυσθῆναι καὶ κρατηθέντας ὑπὸ τοῦ ὕπνου αὐτοῦ ἐνθα περ ἔπινον κατακοιμηθῆναι (2.121d.5).

(temple courtyard)...During the festival of Shu, all the people who were in Teudjoi began drinking beer, including the guards. They fell asleep and one of the prisoners escaped and they could never find him. When the *lesonis* (administrator) returned, he and his men beat us with their staves until I was almost dead.⁴⁶⁶

Here, drunken guards were here part of a true story, or at least an exaggeration about the recent pasts of Egyptian priests and their families. *Petition* may have been a recounting of real events, or at worst an elaborate fictionalized legal argument, but either way, it's a small jump into the world of oral folklore into the kind of stuff that Herodotus heard a few years later.

On more than one occasion on temple steps (*pastophoria*) there probably really were a drunken guard or two sleeping on the job. Priests, as we read in the narrative, were occasionally imprisoned around temple courtyards to be tortured or bake in the Sun for one reason or another. Guards could easily have had too much to drink at a nearby festival. So the fictional comic version in Herodotus draws more heavily from inventory out of Egyptian local imaginations than has been thought. Over the years a tale like the Greek Rhampsinitus developed out of real Nile inventory from festival life around centers of incarceration and temple storage of silver.

Fantasies about stealing silver would have come from somebody with money on the mind. Silver bullion was in fact amassed and stowed away by elite men around Egypt for their own benefit in their glorious afterlives, after having taxed it from the people.⁴⁶⁷ Dozens of hoards from

⁴⁶⁶ Adapted from Vittman (1998), II.10-15.

⁴⁶⁷ *Hacksilber* or solid bullion chips was a form of coinage in Egypt long before the Greeks, but they brought loads of it over with them and fundamentally shifted the economy into a coinage market. "The increased availability of silver in turn allowed the state and temples to collect sales taxes on exchanges as a fraction of the value of the exchange; customs duties on imported goods as a fraction of the value of the goods; and occupational taxes as a surcharge on specific occupational activities. These taxes not only targeted occupations that were likely to use silver, they were collected at point of use bottlenecks." Muhs 189 and *ibid* 285. See also P.G. Van Alfen,

around Herodotus' time have been excavated, packed full of silver coins, some of them with rough bullion and cake ingots.⁴⁶⁸ Elites employed hordes of workmen and peasants to grow their food and build complexes to stash away glimmering heaps of treasure for their spiritual enjoyment. The Persian satrapy, during Herodotus' time, appropriated the economy and reorganized Egyptian temples as storehouses, where uncut bullion in big chunks of silver was heaped up and then shipped back East to the great monarch.

It's tempting therefore to read fictions about stealing silver from Ramses as politically edged Egyptian fantasies from below, about stealing back what the Persian military or the elite nomarchy had been hoarding like parasites on the temples for decades right up until Herodotus met them. People did not have money and they dreamed about it. If a storyteller along the Nile fantasized about stealing silver out of a horde, we can assume this was a person resentful to the occupation and dreaming about taking back what the military had milked off their ancestral temples or whisked off to foreign lands. *The Tale of Rhampsinitus and the Thief* was a lament for the wealth lost in the war due to the end of the last native Egyptian government, seen by priests as the 'golden ages' or 'festival times' of the late Saite period. In another sense, it's a wide criticism of the greedy ineptitude of any autocratic figure. The humor was not so much mere silly folklore but pointed, political, and relevant in the time of Herodotus.

Many of the pharaoh tales in Herodotus have a decidedly late-fifth-century political flavor to them. For instance, in the very beginning of Book II, there's a tale of the famous linguistic experiment of the pharaoh Psammetichus. The king steals a couple of peasant babies and

"Herodotus' 'Aryandic' Silver and Bullion Use in Persian Period Egypt," *American Journal of Numismatics* 16/17 (2004-5) 8-13.

⁴⁶⁸ Muhs, 191-192.

locks them away alone with goats in a hut in order to discover the earliest human language (a little questionable kingly behavior). When read aloud the passage sounds suspicious:

When Psammetichus was king, he wanted to know what race of men was the earliest...He was unable to make any headway toward figuring it out on his own. So he contrived the following scheme: he took two newborn babies from some people he chanced upon and gave them to a shepherd to raise among his flock, where he would give them a special sort of upbringing. He commanded that nobody was to speak a single word in front of them, but they must be placed in a desolate hut by themselves. Every day the shepherd would bring goats to them, giving them milk and the other things they needed. Psammetichus arranged all this and instructed the shepherd to follow his orders, since he wanted to hear from the children, after they had grown out of wordless infant babblings, what sort of speech they would break into first. And this is what happened, at any rate. After two years of the shepherd doing as he was told, the children finally ran to him with their hands stretched out, as he came in opening the door, crying “Bekos!”

When he heard the word, at first he stayed silent. But the same word kept coming to his ears as he entered the hut taking care of them, so he finally informed his master and led the children into his presence, as he was commanded. Psammetichus, having heard the story, sought what race of men had a word “bekos,” and through his own inquiries discovered that it is the word Phrygians use for “bread.” And because of this, the Egyptians conceded to the point and conjectured that the Phrygians were indeed older than themselves. So it goes, as I heard it from the priests of Hephaistos in Memphis. But Greeks say all sorts of foolish things, such as that Psammetichus cut out the tongues of women and he made them this way to live alongside the children. So much for what they said about the rearing of the children, but I heard other tales in Memphis, when I had conversations with the priests of Hephaistos. And I traveled to Thebes and Heliopolis too, since I wanted to find out if they agreed with what was said in Memphis. For the Heliopolitans are said to be the wisest of all the Egyptians.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁹ My translation (2.2). ἐπειδὴ δὲ Ψαμμήτιχος βασιλεύσας ἠθέλησε εἰδέναι οἵτινες γενοῖατο πρῶτοι...Ψαμμήτιχος δὲ ὡς οὐκ ἐδύνατο πυνθανόμενος πόρον οὐδένα τούτου ἀνευρεῖν, οἱ γενοῖατο πρῶτοι ἀνθρώπων, ἐπιτεχνᾶται τοιόνδε. παιδία δύο νεογνά ἀνθρώπων τῶν ἐπιτυχόντων δίδωσι ποιμένι τρέφειν ἐς τὰ ποιμνία τροφήν τινα τοιήνδε, ἐντειλάμενος μηδένα ἀντίον αὐτῶν μηδεμίαν φωνὴν ἰέναι, ἐν στέγῃ δὲ ἐρήμῃ ἐπ’ ἑωυτῶν κέεσθαι αὐτά, καὶ τὴν ὥρην



Figure 49: Egyptian goat doodle. Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches*, Plate XXVII.

“Bekos” sounds like the bleating of a goat: *ba-a-a-akos*.⁴⁷⁰

Scholars have noticed an Egyptian pun on *beḳ* too, maybe to do with milk from the nipple as ‘white’ or ‘oily’.⁴⁷¹ But this gem of a tale has mainly been read as a

humorless Greek concoction from sophistic debates about *physis* and *nomos*, or somehow related to medical or astrological texts.⁴⁷² These are all fruitful readings, but we ought to consider the humor here more

ἐπαγινέειν σφι αἶγας, πλῆσαντα δὲ γάλακτος τᾶλλα διαπρήσσεσθαι: ταῦτα δὲ ἐποίεε τε καὶ ἐνετέλλετο Ψαμμήτιχος θέλων ἀκοῦσαι τῶν παιδίων, ἀπαλαχθέντων τῶν ἀσήμων κυζημάτων, ἦντινα φωνὴν ῥήξουσι πρώτην: τὰ περ ὧν καὶ ἐγένετο. ὥς γὰρ διέτης χρόνος ἐγεγόνεε ταῦτα τῷ ποιμένι πρήσσοντι, ἀνοίγοντι τὴν θύρην καὶ ἐσιόντι τὰ παιδιά ἀμφοτέρω προσπίπτοντα βεκὸς ἐφώνεον, ὀρέγοντα τὰς χεῖρας. τὰ μὲν δὴ πρῶτα ἀκούσας ἤσυχος ἦν ὁ ποιμὴν: ὥς δὲ πολλάκις φοιτέοντι καὶ ἐπιμελομένῳ πολλὸν ἦν τοῦτο τὸ ἔπος, οὕτω δὴ σημήνας τῷ δεσπότῃ ἤγαγε τὰ παιδιά κελεύσαντος ἐς ὄψιν τὴν ἐκείνου. ἀκούσας δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Ψαμμήτιχος ἐπυρθάνετο οἵτινες ἀνθρώπων βεκὸς τι καλέουσι, πυρθανόμενος δὲ εὔρισκε Φρύγας καλέοντας τὸν ἄρτον. οὕτω συνεχώρησαν Αἰγύπτιοι καὶ τοιοῦτῳ σταθμησάμενοι πρήγματι τοὺς Φρύγας πρεσβυτέρους εἶναι ἐωυτῶν. ὧδε μὲν γενέσθαι τῶν ἱρέων τοῦ Ἡφαίστου τοῦ ἐν Μέμφι ἤκουον: Ἕλληνες δὲ λέγουσι ἄλλα τε μάταια πολλὰ καὶ ὥς γυναικῶν τὰς γλώσσας ὁ Ψαμμήτιχος ἑκταμῶν τὴν δίαιταν οὕτω ἐποίησατο τῶν παιδίων παρὰ ταύτησι τῆσι γυναιξί. κατὰ μὲν δὴ τὴν τροφήν τῶν παιδίων τοσαῦτα ἔλεγον, ἤκουσα δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἐν Μέμφι ἐλθὼν ἐς λόγους τοῖσι ἱερεῦσι τοῦ Ἡφαίστου. καὶ δὴ καὶ ἐς Θήβας τε καὶ ἐς Ἡλίου πόλιν αὐτῶν τούτων εἵνεκεν ἐτραπόμην, ἐθέλων εἰδέναι εἰ συμβήσονται τοῖσι λόγοισι τοῖσι ἐν Μέμφι: οἱ γὰρ Ἡλιοπολίται λέγονται Αἰγυπτίῳ εἶναι λογιώτατοι.

⁴⁷⁰ Tyler Mayo explored and provides bibliography in his 2019 dissertation, 160-173. Aristophanes had a pun in the *Clouds* with βεκεσεῖληνε. According to Mayo (2019, 165), “The Greek words for goats’ (or sheep’s) bleating are βληχή or μήκη (cf. the μηκάδες αἶγες of Homer). Both are very roughly approximate the consonantal sounds found in βέκος (i.e., labial + velar). Some later grammarians differentiate between the two, saying that sheep βληχᾶσθαι, but goats μηκᾶσθαι (e.g., Poll. Onom. 5.88), but this is just an artificial schematization, probably based on the Homeric epithet. In other sources they are ambiguous or interchangeable (e.g., Ar. Pax 398; Opp. C. 2.365; Hsch. s.v.)”

⁴⁷¹ *beḳ* can mean ‘oily, white, clear of character, or innocent’, referring to milk. Mayo, 167.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

deeply. The pharaoh's love for a good 'jug' of Greek wine, I'd like to add, was part of the pun: a jug was called a Βῆκος or "Bikos!" With a stretch, we might imagine the storyteller showing a little sauced, showing off an unthinkable level of cleverness: bleating like a goat, a Phrygian, and Egyptian, and a Dionysian satyr – while simultaneously calling for another round of drinks. This was someone with immense talent, complemented by Herodotus in Greek. Before he enters the bulk of his Egyptian inquiry, before a long night of tales and marvels from faraway lands, *Psammetichus' Experiment* was a sort of satyr-play of its own about hybridity and cross-cultural linguistic confusions. (One does not often make goat sound effects in a fully sober state.)

We must stress the brilliant and multilayered performance context that would have allowed for *Psammetichus' Experiment* to happen between languages at all. The room must have been warm. Sound effects have always been sources of entertainment for the world's storytellers, and that's just as true around the Nile Delta. Any village grandmother around rural Cairo today can tell the story of a wise goat for the delight of her little grandchildren, or an eleven-year-old peasant says *baa-a-a!* in a recital of an animal fable (remarkably similar to one from ancient Egypt or Greece).⁴⁷³ Or a raconteur exclaims *ghauu!* for the sound of vomit or *itfou!* for spit or *takk! takk!* for hacking down a field of onions, and so on.⁴⁷⁴ Goats themselves have always been figures of aural and slapstick humor around Egypt.⁴⁷⁵ To wit, the one who gets a whistle caught in its

⁴⁷³ *The Nanny Goat with the Iron Horns, Open for me, O my kiddi-i-i-es milk is in my boobi-i-i-es [i.e., little udders] and grass is on my horni-i-i-es!* (HES-TAT 65-66. FE 202, 101, 129).

⁴⁷⁴ ES FE.

⁴⁷⁵ Aristophanes, *Wealth* 295.

anus,⁴⁷⁶ the one that chews its cud and angers a local fool who thinks he's being mocked,⁴⁷⁷ the one that causes a chain of disasters by refusing to go home,⁴⁷⁸ or has a beard like a little sage but is completely stupid, among hundreds of other local oral narratives.⁴⁷⁹ Performers of folk humor anywhere love onomatopoeic sounds when it comes to animals and bodily functions, just as much as any ancient comic like Aristophanes (from *'ba-a-a'* βληχηθμός to *'pff-ft'* παπαπαπὰξ). The love of a good pun has always been an essential element of oral performance.

⁴⁷⁶ ES B184.5.

⁴⁷⁷ ES J1835.

⁴⁷⁸ ES Z39.1

⁴⁷⁹ ES J2368.

Herodotus was likely aware that the content he was working with was of variegated register and questionable content. Embedded sounds in both Egyptian and Greek were well-crafted, smoothed over by many retellings as witty raconteurs or professional Egyptian storytellers visited with outsiders in public places. For them, Psammetichus was a great stereotype of an entertainment, the seeker of magic or knowledge, similar to Cheops, Setne, Nanaferkaptah, and Petese. There are traces or residues of original performances here that are smack of the Egyptian flavor of storytelling. When the shepherd runs off to tell “Bekos!” to the pharaoh, who then tells a tale to the Egyptians, who then tell the tale to everyone else – and, ironically, now to Herodotus – we notice a remnant of a typical Egyptian comedy or tale-within-a-tale. This is a form of Egyptian ‘boxing up’ of tales, where a live narrative passes around from one to another to another, is evidence of an old oral story that makes light of its form.

I suggest we reimagine the passage as an encounter between Herodotus and a performer as a test of Herodotus’ ear for wit. Laughter may have been a sort of ice-breaking between Herodotus (as a visitor) and his priestly tour-guides. In the case of Psammetichus’ Experiment, we have evidence they laughed together at complex cross-cultural language humor in the form of puns (*bekos!*). Egyptians were famous not only for their love of wordplay, but for testing the wits of Greeks before initiating them into



Figure 50: Greek goat herd and shepherd on a wine jar.ca. 600-560 B.C. Louvre, F 69.

the teachings of the nitty-gritty aspects of wisdom. For instance, anecdotally Pythagoras had to submit to a hazing regime by Egyptians before he was introduced to any real knowledge.⁴⁸⁰ Plato ostensibly spent years studying at Heliopolis before learning anything from the astrologer Petese.⁴⁸¹ In any case, the goat pun was relaxed way to break the ice about their communal historical inquiry, or even a playful joke on translators themselves if any were nearby.

Psammetichus' Experiment can be read as Egyptian humor about historiography. It parodies the way imperial strongmen misunderstand or dominate the past and use it control and manipulate the present to their own downfall. So Herodotus reworked the tale to frontload his entire inquiry into Egypt, ironically and not without a high sense of self-awareness, where the empathy between he and his informants would be strongest through convivial humor about the flaws of great men. The passage would have provoked a conversation about immediate matters at hand: confusion between cultures and languages in the transmission of oral sounds, words, and stories (Phrygian and Egyptian and Greek). Herodotus knew that his interlocutors were thinking about ancient history. They enjoyed brilliant irony here about their lineages and their own desire to know, all the while with a tension between Greek and Egyptian knowledge and control over the past at stake. It has been a great mistake to read the passage as a 'patently Ionian' invention.⁴⁸²

Folk storytelling transcends borders of identity, being unofficial and nonliterate, diverse, talkative, wide-ranging in register and meaning, but it reflects real relationships, struggles, and emotions at the individual level of the teller. These silly folktales must not be skipped over, but

⁴⁸⁰ Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 7. Sauneron, 115.

⁴⁸¹ Ryholt, *Petese Stories* II.

⁴⁸² Cf. Lloyd, LAC.

must be read carefully as individuals' commentaries on hegemony and power in context. Herodotus would have collected what he heard from a wide range of informants. He boasts that he even preserved narratives he found a little ridiculous.

Let anyone who finds them persuasive make use of these Egyptian tales. My rule in regard to my entire work is to write down what was said by others just as I heard it.⁴⁸³

But he preserved the tales of priests at Memphis, Thebes, and the 'especially learned' Heliopolitans (λογιώτατοι, 2.3). The following tales have a sort of living 'comic consciousness' that can tell us about cross-cultural life in the late 5th century, when cultures had undergone deep and conflicted intermixings.⁴⁸⁴ One thing on their minds was the notion of 'History'.

Psammetichus appeared in popular narrative as a curious inquirer, trying to figure the world out, ironically similar to Herodotus.⁴⁸⁵ But through a failure of language, he undercuts his own legacy and makes Egypt out to be younger than the Phrygians. Like Oedipus discovering something he did not really want to know about himself, Psammetichus thinks he solves the riddle and proclaims Phrygians to be the oldest race of men. The throwaway punchline here is at the expense of Psammetichus. Crucially, he did not understand that the babies were bleating like goats – having no sense of humor, the king was unable to do proper historical inquiry. Therefore it can be read not only as a profound passage from the Egyptian angle as a remnant of an old folk storytelling motif, but something re-engineered by Herodotus in order to suggest

⁴⁸³ τοῖσι μὲν νυν ὑπ' Αἰγυπτίων λεγομένοισι χάσθω ὅτεω τὰ τοιαῦτα πιθανά ἐστι: ἐμοὶ δὲ παρὰ πάντα τὸν λόγον ὑπόκειται ὅτι τὰ λεγόμενα ὑπ' ἐκάστων ἀκοῇ γράφω (Hdt. 2.123).

⁴⁸⁴ As Moyer (50-51) established: "The voices of the Egyptian priests are ubiquitous in the second book of the Histories, and Herodotus engages in a dialogue with these voices and their historical perspective."

⁴⁸⁵ See Matthew Christ, "Herodotean Kings and Historical Inquiry," in *Classical Antiquity* 13: 2 (Oct., 1994), 167-202.

that without wit, a historian trying to discover the past is only bumbling around.

Empire-expanding nationalists and power-hungry autocrats have always been the sources of folk narratives about their stupidity. The ‘inquiring king’ was not a Greek invention. As far back as the Old Kingdom, pharaohs were eager to figure the world out as part of their projects of expansion and domination, even looking for wonders and marvels to decorate their courts. The earliest narrative about this sort of thing is the boy-king Pepi II (c. 2300 BCE), who pleaded with one of his officials named Harkhuf to bring back a pygmy from expeditions to Nubia to add to his collection of dancing dwarves. (Harkhuf proudly displays his success in his tomb.)

Come north to the residence at once! Hurry and bring with you this pygmy whom you brought from the land of the horizon-dwellers, live, hale, and healthy, for the dances of the god, to gladden the heart, to delight the heart of King Neferkare who lives forever! When he goes down with you into the ship, get worthy men to be around him on deck, lest he fall into the water!...When you arrive at the residence and this pygmy is with you live, hale, and healthy, my majesty will do great things for you...⁴⁸⁶

This is a very early example of a king’s abundant desire for the exotic, peculiar or marvelous. (Or, as someone lower in the hierarchy might say, Pepi actually had a cruel lust for decorations for his own consumption, and misuse of power for another court slave or jester as a distraction.)

Long before Herodotus, self-absorbed over-curiosity to the point of naivety was one way Egyptians laughed about kings. Curiosity-for-curiosity’s-sake would have been a violation of propriety. A pharaoh was not supposed to be curious, but rather self-controlled, peaceful, truthful, reliable, honorable, loyal to the people, humble when it came to

⁴⁸⁶ Trans. Lichtheim, 55-56.

wisdom and knowledge, almost obeisant to the sub-elites of his court.⁴⁸⁷ Pharaohs were not supposed to indulge themselves too much and in some cases controlled by the structures of society below them that upheld their power. Diodorus (to what extent we can rely on him) imagined an Egyptian pharaoh's daily schedule to have been entirely regulated by the priests: he was managed and monitored constantly, from his dress to the food he ate and when he had sex with his wife, required to begin every morning with a prayer that he was "in control of himself, just and magnanimous, without falsehood, generous with everything, and stronger than all of his own desires."⁴⁸⁸ An ideal king was not to go off on his own, say, for scientific experiments, and certainly not to unlawfully punish or disturb the common folk – say, to snatch their babies.⁴⁸⁹ Rather, he was supposed to protect, supervise, and nurture the kingdom, not dally around seeking forbidden answers to his own silly questions. We find notions of a king's proper virtue set up by his indoctrinated sub-elites everywhere in classical Egyptian wisdom texts, such as the *Maxims of Ptahhotep*:

Don't be proud of your knowledge,
Consult the ignorant and the wise...
The fool who does not hear,
He can do nothing at all;
He sees knowledge in ignorance,
Usefulness in harmfulness.
He does all that one detests
And is blamed for it each day;
He lives on that by which one dies,
His food is distortion of speech.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ Cf. Lichtheim 162.

⁴⁸⁸ ἐγκρατής τε γάρ ἐστι καὶ δίκαιος καὶ μεγαλόψυχος, ἔτι δ' ἀψευδής καὶ μεταδοτικός τῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ καθόλου πάσης ἐπιθυμίας κρείττων (Diod. Sic. 70.2).

⁴⁸⁹ Diod. 71.

⁴⁹⁰ Lichtheim, 110.

Similar admonitions to a pharaoh's virtue appear in the *Eloquent Peasant*, where a lowly farmer castigates the pharaoh as a hypocrite devouring his own people. The pharaoh fails in every way imaginable, becomes like a 'herdsman' who has failed his flock, or a teacher who has failed to teach:

Lo, you are a hawk to the little people,
One who lives on the poorest of the birds....
You are a herdsman...
...There is no silent man whom you gave speech,
No sleeper whom you have wakened,
None downcast whom you have roused,
None whose shut mouth you have opened,
None ignorant whom you gave knowledge,
None foolish whom you have taught. .⁴⁹¹

Psammetichus teaches nobody anything. The priests of the 5th century, familiar with older forms of wisdom instruction, reduced them to playful genres with sound effects meant for different audiences: internationals, children, women, tourists. Long before Herodotus or the Greeks, pharaoh's 'curiosity' was a literary trope in prose humor traditions and Egyptian imaginative stories. As is common in folklore, the king demands something from faraway, but the actual process of investigation, inquiry, and retrieval demonstrates his lack of control over his own court. One example is *The Shipwrecked Sailor* (c. 2000-1700 BCE), the popular narrative of an official who failed his quest and has to explain himself to the king. He makes something up – a sort of fisherman's yarn – and the story goes as follows:

The sailor was shipwrecked in the faraway land of Punt, on an island with a giant talking snake, whose many children were extinguished by a falling star. The snake empathizes the castaway, laughs warmly at his quandary, and provides him exotic gifts of myrrh, oil, laudanum, spices, perfumes, eye-paint, giraffe's tails, lumps of incense, elephant's tusks, greyhounds, long-tailed monkeys, baboons, and "all

⁴⁹¹ Lichtheim, 222; 225.

kinds of precious things.”⁴⁹² None of was what he was actually sent for. (That’s similar to Psammetichus in a way, in that what he actually finds was quite different from what he had desired.) The king – naively – not only believes him but gives him a big promotion. Other officials are not so impressed. They warn the narrator that it’s only so long before fortune changes: “Who would give water to a bird at dawn when it will be slaughtered later in the morning?”⁴⁹³ Perhaps, in other words, “Your fortune is good for now, but it’s only a matter of time before you’re cooked.”

Shipwrecked Sailor was a popular early imaginative story illustrating conflict between the king and his officials when the pharaoh seeks out exotic information from the edges of empire. We can detect these sorts of comic narrative ‘curious Pharaohs’ behind much of what Herodotus heard from his raconteurs. Egyptian literature had long caricatured the stereotype of the pharaoh as curious to the point of abusing lesser beings (children, women, slaves, peasants) to get what he wanted, whether magic or power or money. In the mind of the folk such misbehavior provoked his own comic downfall through divine retribution. In *Magicians*, as we have discussed above, the pyramid-builders are inquirer figures. The bored Sneferu wanders through his palace anguishing for a good time, so he takes a boating trip full of half-naked girls, a transgressive mockery of festival ritual really aimed at sating his own desires. When one of them drops her beloved turquoise pendant in the water, he says he will buy her a new one. But she resists and speaks up to him. To recover it, Sneferu relies on a priest’s magic to split the water and reveal the pendant. Here is an essential key to

⁴⁹² Lichtheim, 264.

⁴⁹³ Only one way to interpret this famously strange line. Translation adapted from John Baines, “Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990), 55-72.

Egyptian humor directed at the pharaohs: he seeks but does not have the ability to find. That is, he relies on a subordinate to do the work for him through divine magic. The heroes of the story are the woman and the magician who has to solve his problems.

Similarly in *Magicians*, Cheops has a great curiosity about magic and wants to see an Egyptian's cut off and rejoined. But the peasant sage Djedi stoutly denies his request, and instead performs the trick on a goose. (Insert laugh track.) Cheops still has insatiable curiosity and seeks after the number of the secret chambers of Thoth. Led by his curiosity through intrigues involving divine handmaids, the only thing Cheops ever manages to do is to cause the downfall of his own dynasty, similar to the way Psammetichus' desire for ancient history brings him only the loss of Egypt's eminence to the Phrygians. Greedy for entertainment, abusive to lower figures, the cruel pyramid builder Cheops searched for knowledge, transgressed, and led to his own downfall in a comic way. Again, the imperialist pharaoh seeks but does not have the ability to find. These were old comic patterns retooled for the ears of Herodotus.

So with such themes in mind, returning to the folktales of Herodotus, the storyteller's notion that Psammetichus went off to seek the earliest humans would have been common to Egyptian comic traditions, not only Greek ones. His goat experiment is something like 'seeking out the chambers of Thoth', as Cheops had done in *Magicians* when there really was no chamber to find. Part of the humor here was about magic: Egyptian magicians did actually practice learning the languages of the animals in esoteric and mysterious forms into which a king or other elite would have no place trespassing. 'Speaking with goats', as it were, was a reality of Egyptian magic, as we can see in the preserved *Book of Thoth*:

[The magician] knew the form of speech of the
baboons and the ibises.
He understood the barkings of these

and these cries of the land of the fathers.
He made the four pleas of the wild beasts,
one by one...He understood them.⁴⁹⁴

Magic about speaking with animals was part of the priestly ritual profession. A foolish king, on the other hand, trying to learn languages from animals was a comic trope in Late Egyptian literature, long before anything reached Herodotus. For instance, in *First Setne*, Nanaferkaptah was a sort of naive ‘Egyptomaniac’ wandering around trying to read ancient monuments out of his own obtuse curiosity. (His wife is clearly unimpressed, and she narrates the tale.) A mysterious old priest laughed at him, and dared him to read a real magical text, and then took him to find one. This ‘Book of Thoth’ was promised to provide him the power, among other things, to speak with herd animals:

Old Priest: ...If you recite the first formula, you will magically encompass the sky, the earth, and the underworld, the mountains and the seas. You will discover the things that the birds of the sky, along with the herds shall say, without exception...

Nanaferkaptah: ‘Oh! may he live! Let me be told of some favor that you wish, so that I may have it done for you; then you shall send me to the place where this Book is!’⁴⁹⁵

Greatly desiring magical power, Nanaferkaptah follows his curiosity. But the discovery and use of the magic book leads only the horrific deaths of him and his wife, after Thoth finds out and punishes both of them. They appear as ghosts warning Setne not to poke his nose into the forbidden and seek knowledge he does not deserve. When oral storytellers thought about empire-expanding autocrats and tyrants seeking out the edges of the world, harvesting knowledge for themselves to revel in, they created comedy about their failures.

⁴⁹⁴ Jasnow, 43-44.

⁴⁹⁵ 3.13-14. Adapted from Vinson’s translation, 114 and 118.

Priests likely considered themselves the proper magicians, not the military government of the pharaoh. Priests were officials who made their everyday living dealing with worldly matters by means of magic. Pharaohs, on the other hand, seemed like cardboard cutouts and far-off military celebrities, and we know this from tax records, receipts, slave exchanges, magic codices, laundry lists, lawsuits, Nile records, economic information of diverse variety where priests handled the real affairs of everyday life in urban communities: the sale of a local cow, a daughter's adultery, too much or too little Nile flooding, a slave's contract, a magic spell, local goat troubles – these were matters that actually mattered on the ground to real people and often required magical solutions.⁴⁹⁶ The pharaoh may have even gotten in the way of inquiry, as a sort of bureaucratic pesk overseeing and intruding into the complex temple economies.

Pharaohs like Psammetichus or Amasis appear tardy, missing, rude, or even hungover in some narratives. Higher-level priests did rely on the king in face-to-face meetings to negotiate local matters of importance, especially their own stipends that might feed their families. If a government figure like Psammetichus was off dallying around asking questions about the world's earliest humans, it would have been a violation of good government (*ma'at*) even without him stealing children and emulating the sounds of goats in weird experiments. Problems of inquiry in the real world were less enthralling.

Psammetichus, obsessed with his own antiquity, sought to rejuvenate ancient architecture, as we can see on 'archaizing' statues of fancy sheer black stone schist and diorite in the famous Saite style.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁶ These observed in the long narrative of Papyrus Rylands 9, but also assorted documents from worker's sites of Deir el-Medina, cf. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*. See also Vittman and Griffiths.

⁴⁹⁷ E.g. the seated Montuemhat and his son Nesptah. Forshaw, 68 & 96-97.

The Saite style has long been recognized in high art, but scholars have not considered 'archaizing comedy' as a similar low form. Just as monuments were rebuilt in the images of the Old Kingdom, so oral narratives with humorous content were being revived about characters like Psammetichus, who bears similarity to Naneferkaptah and Setne in his search for archaic patterns to carve out for himself, as a folk stereotype of the failed antiquarian. These comic figures attempt to use a forbidden sort of method to gain esoteric information. Psammetichus' goat experiment might therefore be understood as a corruption or perversion of the process of proper Egyptian animal magic. As the opposite of a qualified sage, he only accidentally and fruitlessly speaks with animals as part of his Greek 'experimental method'. So the priest storytellers may have been satirizing Greek intellectual visitors as pseudo-magicians, from their own perspectives as actual practitioners. They were the true keepers of *real* arcane lore and magical texts. In their eyes, Greeks and their celebrity intellectuals, like traveling sophists they may have been familiar with, may have been asking too many questions, crossing into forbidden territories of knowledge, performing a debauched sort of divinations with dangerous new ways of thinking.

If an Egyptian storyteller were familiar with Greek traveling sophists or 'merchants of wisdom', he might connect them with stories the Egyptians had about magicians, like Setne or Imhotep or Petese (the tutor of Plato). Persuasion (*peitho*) was conceptualized by Greeks as magic.⁴⁹⁸ Gorgias comes to mind as a celebrity Greek 'magician' that Egyptians might have seen or heard about, one of many traveling speakers known for the sway of their words at public events, some of which would likely have taken place in international border areas like Naucratis. Gorgias in particular was famous his words' power in debate,

⁴⁹⁸ See Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge, 1975.

to charm anyone into agreeing with what was obviously the wrong answer (such as when he persuaded a crowd that ‘nothing existed’ – including them). Excessive Egyptomania on the part of pharaohs and their princes was already present in popular humor for hundreds of years before the sophists. It would not be surprising if traveling Greek intellectuals had in fact attended the court of Psammetichus around Sais and Naucratis.

In the later Greek mind, African kings became legends similar to sages or sophists. Plutarch wrote that an Ethiopian king was a curious riddler who challenged Amasis to a “contest of wisdom” (σοφίας ἄμιλλαν).⁴⁹⁹ Egyptian ‘fool sages’ like Naneferkaptah, Setne, and now Psammetichus, greedy for knowledge ‘above the sky, earth, and underworld’, remind us of Greek jokes about charlatans, like something out of Aristophanes, where he makes fun of philosophers in the *Clouds* teaching empty-headed nonsense in a sort of sham Thinkshop:

Strepsiades: I want to be a pupil of Socrates! Open up this little door! (Peers inside.) By Heracles, what in the world are *these* poor beasts?...Why are they staring into the ground?

Pupil: They are seeking below the depths of the earth.

Strepsiades: Like pigs digging for truffles? Don’t bother – I know where you can find some big juicy ones. And who are these ones over here, bending over like that?

Pupil: Ah, well, this one here gropes about in the darkness of Tartaros.

Strepsiades: So why’s his asshole looking up toward the sky?

Pupil: It’s learning itself astronomy all by itself.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁹ Βασιλεὺς Αἰθιοπίων ἔχει πρὸς ἐμὲ σοφίας ἄμιλλαν. *Seven Sages*, 151c.

⁵⁰⁰ ...μαθητιῶ γάρ: ἀλλ’ ἄνοιγε τὴν θύραν.
ὃ Ἡράκλεις ταυτὶ ποδαπὰ τὰ θηρία;
...ἀτὰρ τί ποτ’ ἐς τὴν γῆν βλέπουσιν οὗτοι;
Μαθητῆς: ζητοῦσιν οὗτοι τὰ κατὰ γῆς.
Στρεψιάδης: βολβούς ἄρα
ζητοῦσι. μὴ νυν τουτογὶ φροντίζετε:
ἐγὼ γὰρ οἶδ’ ἴν’ εἰσὶ μεγάλοι καὶ καλοί.
τί γὰρ οἶδε δρωσιν οἱ σφόδρ’ ἐγκεκυφότες;

When Psammetichus deposits his stolen infants in a lonely hut with a little door (θύρην) for his experiment, Greek satires of sophistry come to mind, like Socrates' little door (θύριον) on his little workshop (φροντιστήριον) full of experiments, where he brainwashes the locals, sticks Persian socks on a flea, or measures the fart of a gnat, and in the end learns only the sound of his own flatulence (παππάξ παππάξ...παπαπαππάξι!).⁵⁰¹ Psammetichus recalls the sort of stereotype of Socrates from popular culture, since he too has a sort of navel-gazing goat-themed Thinkshop with a little door, and inside are his little beastlings. Egyptians too made spoofs of their sophists and 'wise men' and criticized them with obscenity in popular oral traditions just as much as they celebrated their sagitude. It might have been funnier to the Egyptians (particularly shepherds) to pretend the Greek-loving pharaoh's intellectual inquiries happened on goats.

Zeus-Ammon, an amalgamation of Greek and Egyptian religious symbols, was implicit in Egyptian tales about Psammetichus and his Greek armies. Goats in oral folklore might have conveyed some higher political meanings for the Egyptian priests about Thebes and Amun as nationalism and unification with Greece (if we try a "trickle-down" contextual reading of the sort we described in the introduction).⁵⁰² Zeus-Ammon represented the conjoining of

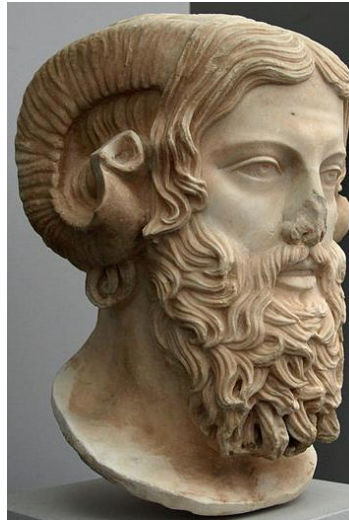


Figure 51: Goat-horned Zeus-Ammon statue. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

Μαθητής: οὔτοι δ' ἐρεβοδιφῶσιν ὑπὸ τὸν Τάρταρον.
 Στρεψιάδης: τί δῆθ' ὁ πρωκτὸς ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν βλέπει;
 Μαθητής: αὐτὸς καθ' αὐτὸν ἀστρονομεῖν διδάσκεται.
 (Arist. *Nub*, 183-189. LCL 488, 30-31).

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 390. παππάξ παππάξ, κάπειτ' ἐπάγει παπαπαππάξ...

⁵⁰² P. 49 above.

Hellenic and Egyptian economies into a political powerhouse alliance of the Saite Empire, thanks to Psammetichus, as is clear from coins minted along the Nile and near Libya during Herodotus' day.

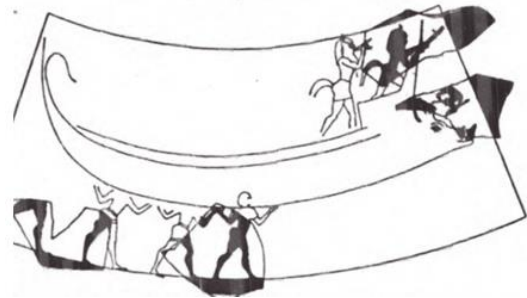


Figure 52: Greek satyrs and Egyptian goats. New Kingdom ostrakon with priests carrying the barque of Amun (Egyptian Museum Berlin; Wikimedia Creative Commons). Below, Greek pottery found at Karnak. Greek satyrs enact the rituals of Amun the goat god, ambiguously parodic and celebratory (Boardman, 138).

Goat humor was popular because of connections made in the minds of Greeks and Egyptians between mythological figures like satyrs and Amun, as popular festival cultures combined into each other. Greek symposiastic culture became meshed into Egyptian religion, and vice-versa. Greco-Egyptians around Herodotus' time drew cartoons of the priests of Amun leading the barque of the Sun God with its goat-headed prows,

decorated with silver and gold and brought out for annual festival celebrations. These images had some political connotations that contributed to the humor, concerning the transition of Greek symposiastic culture into Egyptian religious cult. Here, the priests leading the religious procession have been transformed into satyrs. (The scene recalls the myth in which Dionysus was saved by pirates.) In other words, they were hybrids with the Greeks, part of a unified monarchy between the pharaoh's Northern powerhouse near the urbane Canopic Mouths conjoined with the Southern Theban goat god. Therefore in comic folklore, priests of Amun who had embraced the rule of the Saites were little 'goatlings'.

Priests would have connected big local symbols and monuments to their own local contemporary world of politics. Consider the Nile itself: early in Herodotus' second book there's a debate between Egyptians and Greeks about the nature of the Nile as a 'gift'.⁵⁰³ The Nile was (and still is) a precious treasure for Egypt, since it sustains the entire agriculture and economy. Early Greek visitors must have been entranced, if not jealous, at such natural wealth. The Nile became a thing of intense desire, a wondrous prize to seek and obtain, but also a marvel to inquire into, grasp, ponder, theorize about. The question of the Nile's depth and source made for a lively intellectual back-and-forth.⁵⁰⁴ There were strong opinions on both sides. One thing at stake was cultural or ethnic pretension: which civilization was the oldest and had the best blessing of a natural endowment – Greece or Egypt. But the future was also on their minds: if the Nile is actually finite and shallow, and the only source of crops, who then would starve to death first?

Any discussion of the Nile as a "gift" – its depth, its origins, or its value as an agricultural source – had political ramifications for Greco-Egyptians involving hegemony, tyranny, and rulership over Egypt (not to mention immediate contemporary relevance if an army of Athenian soldiers recently died of thirst while crawling across the Egyptian desert).⁵⁰⁵ At the time of writing, Herodotus and his Egyptian friends may

⁵⁰³ δῶρον τοῦ ποταμοῦ (Hdt. 2.5.2).

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. Rosalind Thomas, "Intellectual Milieu of Herodotus," CCH 63.

⁵⁰⁵ Just recently in Herodotus' time, Greeks and Egyptians had fought alongside one another over control of the Nile, as they attempted to repel the Persians away from the 'White Wall' of Memphis. The native Egyptian Inaros had joined forces with the Athenians. There was an enormous battle over the control of the Nile, but a disastrous defeat for the Greeks. Athenians dragged themselves across the desert to escape to Cyrene, but only a handful made it. The rest died of starvation and thirst, and lost control of the waterways. So Herodotus' suggestion about the Nile drying up around Memphis may have triggered recent memories about the disastrous Siege of the White Wall. For discussion of the Nile generally, see See Helen Elizabeth Todd's 2015 Oxford dissertation, *Rewriting the egyptian river: the Nile in hellenistic and imperial greek literature*. "Herodotus had the Egyptian king Psammetichus engage in Nilotic inquiry, and a correlation between political expansionism and scientific pursuits is especially pronounced in the tradition that associates Alexander with a quest for the sources of the river. Strabo associates the

well have been thinking about the Athenian Empire and its embroilment in Nile politics.⁵⁰⁶ The ever-flourishing river, a source of bountiful food and sustenance, was a lucrative draw for colonialist expansion among Mediterranean powers and foreign rulers for many centuries. Despots and their armies invaded and lined up around the Nile like feeding crocodiles. Egyptian priests were familiar with Greek inquiry enough to joke with Greek visitors about it, knowing full well the treasure they held in their great river, but also with a private knowledge of the river's mystical and forbidden religious divinity.

The depth of the Nile made a hot question for Greek explorers, not just for a scientific intrigue about a *thauma* or marvel, but as real potential for power and exploitation. So the undertones of folktales told between these two cultures about the Nile were complex in terms of agricultural survival in relation to the imperial and foreign acts of inquiry, discovery, and possession. Consider how the Egyptians thought they were superior because of their access to the Nile. They warned Herodotus was that all the Greeks would soon perish because they were not so lucky as to have the Nile, but relied on mere rainfall (that is, Zeus):

Egyptians said the Greeks would be cheated out of their high hopes and starve horribly, since the whole land of the Greeks was watered only by rain and not by rivers like the Nile. What they meant is that if Zeus wishes to stop sending rainfall to them but cause a drought, the Greeks would be taken by famine, since there is no other source of water except Zeus.⁵⁰⁷

ability to undertake research about the river, and to govern it effectively, with Greek and later Roman rule; his correlation of knowledge, political power and hydrological control is significant in its reversal of the trope that Egypt is the source of Greek wisdom" (20).

⁵⁰⁶ The theory set forth by Fornara and elaborated upon in the volume *Interpreting Herodotus*, eds. Harrison and Irwin (Oxford, 2018).

⁵⁰⁷ My translation. πυθόμενοι γὰρ ὡς ἕεται πᾶσα ἡ χώρα τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἀλλ' οὐ ποταμοῖσι ἄρδεται κατὰ περ ἢ σφετέρῃ, ἔφασαν Ἑλληνας ψευσθέντας κοτὲ ἐλπίδος μεγάλης κακῶς πεινήσειν. τὸ δὲ ἔπος τοῦτο ἐθέλει λέγειν ὡς, εἰ μὴ ἐθελήσει σφι ἕιν ὁ θεὸς ἀλλὰ αὐχμῶ διαχρᾶσθαι, λιμῶ οἱ Ἕλληνες αἰρεθήσονται: οὐ γὰρ δὴ σφι ἐστὶ ὕδατος οὐδεμία ἄλλη ἀποστροφή ὅτι μὴ ἐκ τοῦ Διὸς μόνον. (Hdt. 2.13).

Here a priest of the late 5th century mocks Zeus and challenges Greek cultural superiority in a somewhat lighthearted way. Herodotus agrees, but he goads the Egyptians by asking them: if land around Memphis should rise and the Nile dry up, would the Egyptians not go hungry? At some point in the future, they will lose their relaxed Egyptian lives and turn to harsh agriculture like the Greeks. I would suggest this was an exciting back-and-forth dialectic between Herodotus and Egyptian interlocutors, which must have been held in a warm but argumentative atmosphere and it was important enough to an outside audience that Herodotus wrote down the conversation.⁵⁰⁸

When seeking the origins of the Nile, Herodotus encountered one Egyptian he thought was laughing at him. A scribe living at Sais – a city with a temple to Athena only a few kilometers from the Greek-inhabited Naucratis – claimed to be the only man in the entire world who knew the source of the Nile.⁵⁰⁹ Herodotus was taken aback, having interviewed everyone else in the area, Greeks, Nubians, and Egyptians, and found nothing. So he wondered whether this particular Saite scribe was putting one over on him: “I thought he was joking...” (οὗτος δ’ ἔμοιγε παίζειν ἐδόκεε).

He seemed to me to be joking with me when he claimed he knew exactly. But this was what he said: ...there are two pointed mountains, and their names are Krophî and Mophî. The bottomless springs of the Nile flow up out of these mountains... Pharaoh Psammetichus did an experiment to figure out whether if the springs really were

⁵⁰⁸ “In the field of ideas, one result of this polemical attitude was the discovery or the invention of universal historical space and a first attempt at reappraising the role of Hellenic culture within the larger outline of human history.” LAC, 36. I have suggested above that due to the nature and register of some of what he heard Herodotus and his informants must have been very close and convivial as they created history together.

⁵⁰⁹ *śš pr hq n Nt*, a ‘scribe of the treasury’ according to Lloyd, 257.

bottomless: he had a rope of a thousand fathoms long woven and dropped in, but never found the bottom...⁵¹⁰

Herodotus was right to detect something fishy going on with the oddly-named Krophí and Mophí (they still have not been found anywhere). This was indeed a sort of joke being told at the expense of the inquirer. The ‘king’s failed mission to a fantasy land’ is a universal oral folklore motif, already a trope of Egyptian humor long before Herodotus (as we have seen above in the *Shipwrecked Sailor*). The Nile-measuring experiment is not alone among Psammetichus’ adventures into Greek pseudoscience. Failed experiments, especially in cultivating the Nile or creating dams or waterways to foreign lands, were core elements of pharaoh lore. These imperialist world-conquerers grew into sham Dr. Frankenstein figures in the earliest ‘science fiction comedy’ out of lost Greco-Egyptian bundles of folktales or even a lost novel about pharaoh’s adventures as a ‘kingly inquirer’ who went to the edges of the earth and back and did all sorts of weird things there.⁵¹¹ We are likely missing some Psammetichus novels similar to other partially extant literary novels about, say, Sesonchosis. If there were any, they may well have been comedic, illustrating Psammetichus’ failed career as an explorer, adventurer, and inquirer.

The mishmash of folklore motifs about Psammetichus and the Nile are, incidentally, still performed by nonliterate storytellers. In modern Egyptian folktales where kings play a central role, we commonly

⁵¹⁰ My translation. οὗτος δ’ ἔμοιγε παίζειν ἐδόκεε φάμενος εἰδέναι ἀτρεκέως: ἔλεγε δὲ ὧδε, εἶναι δύο ὄρεα ἐς ὅξυ τὰς κορυφὰς ἀπηγγμένα... οὐνόματα δὲ εἶναι τοῖσι ὄρεσι τῷ μὲν Κρῶφι τῷ δὲ Μῶφι... τὰς ὧν δὴ πηγὰς τοῦ Νεῖλου εὐούσας ἀβύσσους ἐκ τοῦ μέσου τῶν ὄρεων τούτων ῥέειν... ὡς δὲ ἄβυσσοι εἰσι αἱ πηγαί, ἐς διάπειραν ἔφη τούτου Ψαμμήτιχον Αἰγύπτου βασιλέα ἀπικέσθαι... πολλέων γὰρ αὐτὸν χιλιάδων ὀργυιέων πλεξάμενον κάλον κατεῖναι αὐτήν καὶ οὐκ ἐξικέσθαι ἐς βυσσόν (Hdt. 2.28).

⁵¹¹ Probably a mock version of a ‘king’s novel’ about him, similar to the *Königsnovelle* of Sesostris. Cf. WT 25.

find quests for the bottom of the sea,⁵¹² extraordinary mountains,⁵¹³ lies about faraway hills,⁵¹⁴ hair braided into an impossibly long rope,⁵¹⁵ riddles of measurement.⁵¹⁶ These patterns imply that Psammetichus was a popular folk figure by the time Herodotus learned about him. What Herodotus received here was not a ‘historical’ or official narrative at all, but a playful jest out of the creative underlore of local popular culture. That is not surprising at all, since a great deal of entertaining legendary lore and storytelling about pharaohs made its way into Greek novels that survive to some extent.⁵¹⁷ Psammetichus as a figure bears all the marks of oral performance, and resonates with relaxed modern tales. For instance, in a modern Arab folktale, a bird drops a lock of hair from a beautiful princess into a river, and a king goes seeking downriver after it; this tradition was attached in Greek to Psammetichus, but appeared much earlier in the Middle Kingdom *Two Brothers*, and appears nearly everywhere in the world.⁵¹⁸

Herodotus was inquiring about the depth of the Nile. But in response, a playful Saite scribe told him a cautionary tale about Psammetichus’ failure of scientific inquiry. Was there irony in the delivery? What if we assume this Egyptian had as much intelligence or wit or political consciousness as any Greek sage? If we are to be as generous to the Egyptian’s complexity as classicists usually are with the

⁵¹² ES H1371.2.

⁵¹³ ES F750.

⁵¹⁴ ES X1520.

⁵¹⁵ ES F848.1. Ropes could have been camel hair, papyrus, or another plant, but the length alone denotes something fantastic. See Emily Teeter, “Techniques and Terminology of Rope-Making in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 73 (1987), 71.

⁵¹⁶ ES H696.

⁵¹⁷ There was a lost Alexander-esque novel written about Sesonchosis in 2nd century CE. See Trnka-Amrhein, Yvona Kristina, *A Study of The Sesonchosis Novel*. Harvard University, 2013.

⁵¹⁸ ES H1213.1. See also Stephanie West, “Divine Anger Management,” in WT 83.

mystique of the great Greek minds, this may have been a witty jab at Greek science intended for the rest of the Egyptian audience.

We might imagine a talented professional performer of folklore working at a popular ancient site with heavy foot traffic. For one thing, the ‘know-it-all’ is a common *persona* in world folklore, where raconteurs in busy areas of travel harangue travelers or tourists (who always ask the same questions) and impress them with a quick one (or ironically insult them if they do not pay up). There is no reason a learned scribe could not have acted this way by drawing upon long traditions of mockery about the hated Psammetichus and his love for Greek inquiry. Or at least someone familiar enough with pharaonic lore to resonate with a small audience. It was a warm atmosphere.

Folk wisdom teaches or warns through silly-seeming tales, inversions, and incongruities, which are often hard for us to catch in dead languages because they were intended to avoid detection, to be anonymous, childish, or irrelevant to the topics with which they actually deal. The Psammetichus tale, like an Aesopic fable, was difficult to translate, or performed haphazardly or offhand, and misconstrued to have actual scientific or historical content by Herodotus. The meaning of ‘measuring the Nile’ was not scientific, but rather a common sort of trope that would have been all too familiar to any performer who made a living. The tale of Psammetichus measuring the Nile was a moral fable about inquiries into forbidden subjects, as a cautionary tale about exploring places off limits. That fits strongly enough with Egyptian comic literature about ‘inquiring’ figures (from Cheops to Setne) that the scribe can hardly have not known what he was doing.

Psammetichus’ adventure down the Nile was delivered in such a way that Herodotus thought he was hearing a joke from the scribe. That is not to say the informant was an unlearned or unserious person, but quite the opposite. Here, Herodotus thought he was listening to a

sophist, a public performer in the business of toying with an audience.⁵¹⁹

Yet Herodotus only got the joke halfway and continued searching around for answers:

So the scribe explained it (if he was saying things that had really happened). But it seems to *me* that some strong eddies rushed against the rope, so that when the water was rushing against the mountainsides, the fallen rope was unable to touch the bottom. I was unable to learn anything from anyone else. But I did continue my most intense investigation, traveling all the way to Elephantine to see it myself, and beyond that inquiring through hearsay.⁵²⁰

The figure of Psammetichus mirrors Herodotus' own activity of measurement and inquiry.⁵²¹ Herodotus even went so far as to explain how to use a rope and test it out for himself. But in the Egyptian's version the rope is impossibly long – inventory in a fantastic tale.⁵²²

Greek sophists of Herodotus' day made careers out of their traveling celebrity performances of all-encompassing knowledge. Greeks thought about sophistry or wisdom-performance as a form of magic bordering on the ridiculous. But these sorts of 'contests of wisdom' were tropes of Egyptian comedy too. Magicians battling each other over forbidden knowledge and magic in ridiculous ways was the essence of

⁵¹⁹ The word παίζειν was used by Gorgias, who considered his cleverly performative *Defense of Helen* to be a sort of 'plaything'.

⁵²⁰ My translation. οὕτω μὲν δὴ ὁ γραμματιστής, εἰ ἄρα ταῦτα γινόμενα ἔλεγε, ἀπέφαινε, ὡς ἐμὲ κατανοεῖν, δίνας τινὰς ταύτη εἰσὺσας ἰσχυρὰς καὶ παλιρροίην, οἷα δὲ ἐμβάλλοντος τοῦ ὕδατος τοῖσι ὄρεσι, μὴ δύνασθαι κατιεμένην καταπειρητηρίην ἐς βυσσὸν ἰέναι. ἄλλου δὲ οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν ἐδυνάμην πυθέσθαι. ἀλλὰ τοσόνδε μὲν ἄλλο ἐπὶ μακρότατον ἐπυθόμην, μέχρι μὲν Ἐλεφαντίνης πόλιος αὐτόπτης ἐλθῶν, τὸ δὲ ἀπὸ τούτου ἀκοῆ ἤδη ἱστορέων (Hdt. 2.28.5).

⁵²¹ Cf. Christ, see above.

⁵²² "If Herodotus is conscious that he is in some sense following in the footsteps of inquiring kings, however, his critique of their techniques and motives suggests that his inquiry is intellectually and ethically superior to theirs. The historian's superiority arises from the fact that he observes rather than spies; asks questions rather than makes demands; draws inferences cautiously and self-consciously, and not simply to confirm his own assumptions; and seeks knowledge as an end in itself rather than as a means to power or self-glorification." Christ 167-202.

Egyptian literary humor. For instance, at one point Setne and his son Si-Osire visit the underworld out of curiosity. There they behold dead men pleating ropes of infinite length, while donkeys eat the other ends.⁵²³ Because of their wicked acts in life, these men have been punished by the gods in death to eternally repeat their failures, constantly trying to produce a livelihood but never accomplishing anything. Psammetichus' endless rope lowered into the depths of the Nile similarly fails to achieve his desires.

When Herodotus encountered a priest, we could imagine that their telling of 'Psammetichus and the depth of the Nile' may have been a public event that drew a sizeable audience, or even a small audience within part of a temple among a few priests. We might imagine that Herodotus was well-known, probably traveling with an entourage in public through a city like Sais, and encountered or planned a meeting with a local 'performer of wisdom' who had some celebrity status among an insider group of priests. In a public arena, the back-and-forth was seen and enjoyed by an audience of perhaps two or three, maybe a handful or more onlookers, who were familiar with this sort of performance. If that was the case, we might fruitfully imagine that a professional Egyptian raconteur was impressing his own audience just as much as conveying information to Greeks, when he invited Herodotus into a known form of public display. This may have been a common sort of interaction with foreigners, inherently performative, comic, and to some degree ironic display of a storyteller's ability to draw in a passing tourist and involve him in a story. Imagine the delight when this gathering of sages began entralling its diverse audiences and the Egyptians laughed at Greeks trying to achieve their desires by getting answers to all sorts of pesky inquiries.

⁵²³ Lichtheim, 747.

To measure the depth of the Nile was an old trope that resonated with Greek notions of sophistic wisdom, where topics focus on miniscule details and outlandish discoveries (e.g., the breadth of a fly). Members of each community – Greek and Egyptian – would have found a meeting of minds entertaining for different reasons drawn from their own horizons of cultural inventory. Constant streams of traveling tourists from faraway lands would have made streets around the Nile conducive to local feats of performative wisdom and other exciting opportunities for entertainment. People may have envisioned the meeting of Herodotus and the Egyptians as a comical sort of back-and-forth between mysterious sages. (In the Egyptian popular comedy, there were notions of ridiculous sagely battles such as *Setne II*, where the young wizard Horus casts spells back and forth with a Nubian sorcerer.) From the Egyptian local's perspective, the intellectual conversation could have bordered on the ridiculous. Rather, when he met the laughing scribe at Sais, Herodotus played interlocutor for a cycle of comic tales rehearsed for the moment in order to perform a little playful sophistry back at the Greeks.

Consider stories about Amasis, the Peasant King, who (as we saw earlier) gained the throne by rebelliously farting on Patarbemis, the fancy chief administrator of king Apries. The Egyptians were so impressed by the fart that they decided that Amasis deserved to become king. In later Greek traditions, the fart was, in fact, a bouquet of flowers:

...Amasis, who was originally an ordinary private citizen, got the throne as a result of the gift of a garland, which he wove out of the most beautiful flowers of the season and sent to Patarmis, who was the king of Egypt at that time and was celebrating his birthday.

Patarmis was delighted at how beautiful the garland was, and he invited Amasis to dinner; afterward he made him a member of his inner circle, and sent him off at one point as a general, when the Egyptians were attempting to revolt

from him. Because they hated Patarmis, they made Amasis king.⁵²⁴

In this version told by Athenaeus, the “most beautiful flowers of the season” are given on Patarmis’ birthday. That’s suspiciously different from the version in Herodotus, where he gets a big stinky fart. (A disgusted Plutarch later called that one the vulgar version.)⁵²⁵ Priests did indeed carry ‘bouquets of Amen’ for the military as part of their official duties as negotiators or representations of the King:

In year 4 of the pharaoh Psamtek he sent a message to the great temples of Upper and Lower Egypt as follows: “The pharaoh is going to the land of the Syrians. May the priests with the bouquets of the gods of Egypt come in order to take them to the land of the Syrians with the pharaoh.”

The version of events Herodotus heard somewhere along the Nile was ‘degraded’ into bodily imagery of the bowels and guts. That odoriferous incongruity came from an unserious attitude priests had when it came to their roles in the pharaoh’s government. When Amasis becomes king, the Egyptians resent him at first, but through a trick with a golden footbath he persuades them otherwise in a wonderful story Herodotus tells as follows:

At first the Egyptians held him in no high regard since was only a common man from came from no high family. But Amasis afterward with cleverness rather than arrogance showed them otherwise. There was among his many possessions a golden footbath in which he and his many dinner guests often washed their feet. Having broken it into pieces, he made an image of a god out of it, and put it in the most visible part of the city. The Egyptian people

524 ... Ἄμασιν Αἰγύπτου βασιλεῦσαι, ιδιώτην ὄντα καὶ τῶν τυχόντων κατὰ τὸν πρῶτον βίον, διὰ στεφάνου δωρεάν, ὃν ἐπεμψεν ἀνθέων πλεξάμενος | ἐτῆ ὥρα περικαλλεστάτων γενέθλια ἐπιτελοῦντι Πατάρμιδι τῷ τῆς Αἰγύπτου τότε βασιλεύοντι. τοῦτον γὰρ ἠσθέντα τῷ κάλλει τοῦ στεφάνου καὶ ἐπὶ δεῖπνονκαλέσαι τὸν Ἄμασιν καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα τῶν φίλων ἕνα αὐτὸν ἔχοντα ἐκπέμψαι ποτὲ καὶ στρατηγόν, Αἰγυπτίων αὐτῷ πολεμούντων· ὑφ’ ὧν διὰ τὸ τοῦ Πατάρμιδος μῖσος ἀποφανθῆναι βασιλεία. Athenaeus 15.680c-d, trans. S. Douglas Olson. LCL 519.

⁵²⁵ Plutarch, *Malice*, 866c. Ἀμάσιδος ἀποψόφρησιν.

passing by greatly revered the image. When Amasis learned what they were doing, he called the Egyptians together and said that the image had come from a footbath, into which the Egyptians pissed and vomited before and washed their feet, but now they all worshiped it greatly. He said that he himself was similar to the footbath, as a man who had formerly been a commoner was now a king, and he commanded them to honor and respect him. (2.172.1)⁵²⁶

On the one hand, this tale was a satire of Greek sophistic performance, which Aristotle refers to as “The Footbath Speech” (περὶ τοῦ ποδανιπτῆρος λόγον). So it was well-known enough to have its own famous Greek title.⁵²⁷ But from an Egyptian angle, the Amasis footbath drew on inventory out of priests’ actual lives. At one point in *Petition*, Petese is sent to investigate problems with taxation in Teudjoi. When he arrives, he discovers that the temple has been abandoned as a result of the king’s excessive taxes. In order to persuade all the locals to return to the city, Petese has a heap of gold and silver melted into bowls and converted into a shrine of Amen. All the other folk around the city are brought in to marvel at the renewal of the temple, to be persuaded that they ought to start paying taxes to the Saite pharaoh and his family:

Petese came to Teudjoi. He sent for the workmen. He gave them 200 silver deben and 20 pieces of gold. He told them to work it into bowls of silver and gold for Amen. He ordered them to build the shrine of Amen. He had the priests, the pastophores and all the temple workers

⁵²⁶ My translation. τὰ μὲν δὴ πρῶτα κατῶνοντο τὸν Ἄμασιν Αἰγύπτιοι καὶ ἐν οὐδεμιῇ μοίρῃ μεγάλη ἦγον ἅτε δὴ δημότην τὸ πρὶν ἐόντα καὶ οἰκίης οὐκ ἐπιφανέος· μετὰ δὲ σοφίῃ αὐτοῦς ὁ Ἄμασις, οὐκ ἀγνωμοσύνη προσηγάγετο. ἦν οἱ ἄλλα τε ἀγαθὰ μυρία, ἐν δὲ καὶ ποδανιπτῆρ χρύσεος, ἐν τῷ αὐτὸς τε ὁ Ἄμασις καὶ οἱ δαιτυμόνες οἱ πάντες τοὺς πόδας ἐκάστοτε ἐναπενίζοντο· τοῦτον κατ’ ὧν κόψας ἄγαλμα δαίμονος ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐποίησατο, καὶ ἴδρυσεν τῆς πόλιος ὄκου ἦν ἐπιτηδεύοντες· οἱ δὲ Αἰγύπτιοι φοιτέοντες πρὸς τῷγαλμα ἐσέβοντο μεγάλως. μαθὼν δὲ ὁ Ἄμασις τὸ ἐκ τῶν ἀστῶν ποιούμενον, συγκαλέσας Αἰγυπτίους ἐξέφηνε φᾶς ἐκ τοῦ ποδανιπτῆρος τῷγαλμα γεγονέναι, ἐς τὸν πρότερον μὲν τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους ἐνεμέειν τε καὶ ἐνουρέειν καὶ πόδας ἐναπονίζεσθαι, τότε δὲ μεγάλως σέβεσθαι. ἤδη ὧν ἔφη λέγων ὁμοίως αὐτὸς τῷ ποδανιπτῆρι πεπρηγέναι· εἰ γὰρ πρότερον εἶναι δημότης, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ παρεόντι εἶναι αὐτῶν βασιλεύς· καὶ τιμᾶν τε καὶ προμηθέεσθαι ἐωυτοῦ ἐκέλευε. (Hdt 2.172).

⁵²⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* 1259b.10.

brought back to the city...he ordered sacrifices to be laid before the new shrine of Amen. He furnished Teudjoi in the manner of a great temple and appointed his children priests there. He built a large house with a yard surrounding it and a temple court (pastophorion).



Figure 53: Greek footbath & vomit bowl. Metropolitan Museum of art. Cf., Milne, "A Greek Footbath in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 48:1 (1944), 26-63.

So Amasis was probably less of a historical figure and more a self-representation of priests laughing at the nature of their religion as manipulators of the public. (They had minds

of their own: they were not all brainwashed devotees of the pharaoh, after all.) The storyteller was likely someone with actual managerial power and a sense of humor about it. It would be no surprise if Egyptian priests thought about footbaths as ambiguously symbolic objects of magical charm, persuasion, or even charlatanism. Amasis fits right in with Setne and Naneferkaptah and other stock figures with too-sly minds out of Egyptian magic comedy. He manipulates people with bodily humor of incongruity about genitals and piss and vomit.

From one angle, the 'Footbath Speech' was perhaps an Egyptian way of connecting charlatan priests to Greek sophists, who were known as manipulative sorts around the Mediterranean. Herodotus' word for footbath (ποδανιπτήρ) was an early form of the generic washbowl (λεκάνη): these sorts of bowls were associated not only with drunkenness or foot-washing but with ritual lecanomancy, or magic by which someone would predict the future, reading ripples of water (that's performed by pharaoh Nectanebo in the *Alexander Romance*). In that case, Amasis was to them a humorously questionable magician tricking

the naïve people, not so different from the way Greeks thought about sophists or Socrates introducing new gods.

What Herodotus heard may have been Egyptian magic-humor relating to the workaday lives of late 5th-century priests, set into the allegory of a historical folk legend. So this again goes some distance to establish that Amasis lore was not entirely a Greek invention damning Egypt as a land of lazy drunks, but rather drew from a Nile inventory out of sub-elites imagining themselves transformed into more powerful figures. The storyteller satirized the religious gullibility of his own culture and the ladder-climbing nature of the hierarchy of priestly power. Folk heroes sneaked into popular traditions as people looked back on the good old days and imagined them through the images of drunkenness and festivity. Just as an Egyptian peasant could indeed become a priest, then begin melting down gold in order to build shrines for the people, and gain wealth for himself as he rose in the state hierarchy (as Petese did).

Greek democracy influenced Egyptian folk humor. There's a sense of democratic liberation to Amasis. That is, a peasant can climb up to become the king by dint of his bowels, as it happened in the imaginations of the working people, and as a sort of demagogue he uses the charm of his words to win over a popular crowd. The 'ascent out of a pisspot' was about the real desire for social ascent of men and their families along the Nile. People chose this figurehead to lead the state – and that makes it not so much a silly folktale as an important fiction in the earliest



Figure 54: Egyptian Silenus carrying a wine jar. Found at Naucratis. Leonard, 401.

years of Mediterranean (not just Greek) democracy. These tales could tell us more about how a peasant-priest of the late 5th century felt about his needs and wants than anything about the actual history of the pharaohs.

Ancient bowls once for piss and vomit are preserved in some cases in the archaeological record from their place centerstage at certain kinds of parties – those with a lot of wine. The Saite pharaohs bought

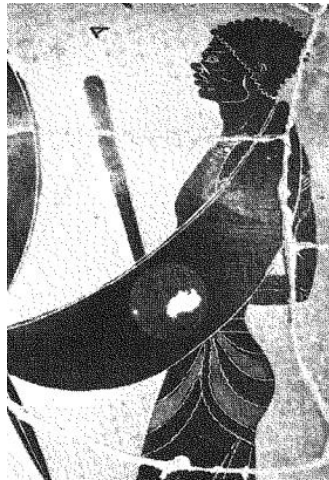


Figure 55: Greek depiction of Amasis. Boardman, 153,

uncountable gallons of Greek wine for their mercenaries. There are remnants of wine jars scattered all over the Canopic mouths, along the Nile all the way into border-fortresses where armies of mixed ethnicity set up camp, not to mention many later Greek fables and tales about how these pharaohs were “drinking up the Sea.”⁵²⁸ Greco-Egyptian soldiers, families, and everyone else needed something to drink at night – and probably during the day too.⁵²⁹ We must not underestimate the influence that popular alcoholism had on the bicultural imagination, not to mention people’s attitudes, dreams, feelings, sex lives, and everything else.

The very names of the Greek-loving Saite pharaohs became clever puns for drunkenness in Greek and Egyptian languages, as they were celebrated or scorned as cross-cultural booze traders.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁸ ἐκπιεῖν...τὴν θάλατταν. Plutarch, *Seven Sages*, 151c.

⁵²⁹ Quaegebeur, 262-264.

⁵³⁰ “La documentation présentée ici permet de conclure, à notre avis, que l’étymologie populaire du nom de Psammétique s’explique, selon toute probabilité, par le commerce de vin -mtk que Psammétique Ier a

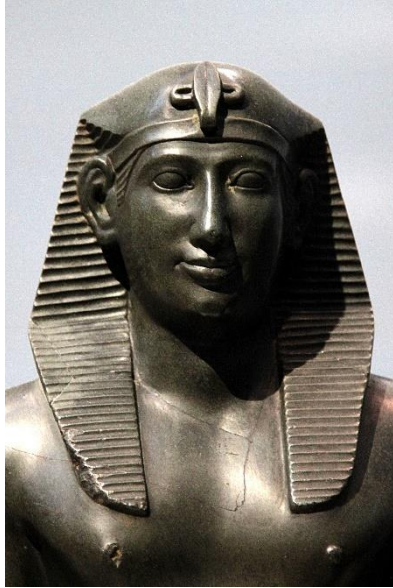


Figure 56: Grinning, probably drunk, Psamtek II. Le pharaon Psammétique II (595-589 BCE). Paris, musée du Louvre. N 830. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

‘Psammetichus’ is a complex pun in both Egyptian and Greek that meant ‘man-of-the-mixing-bowl’: the humor here refers not only to the mixed-ethnicity armies, but his great fondness for Greek maritime imports – loads of wine, if we follow the archaeological evidence.⁵³¹ Typically, the pharaohs’ names were celebrated in a ritual setting for their ability to libate with beer: Cheops-is-drunk, Mycerinus-is-drunk, Sahure-is-drunk, and so on.⁵³²

(Mycerinus wandered around both night and day drunkening himself anywhere he could find a good party.)⁵³³ But in later

times the implication had to do with mixed international festival life and particularly Greek wine. ‘Amasis’ from ‘Ahmose’ is suspiciously similar to the Greek word for ‘chamberpot’ *amis* (ἀμίς) from the comic stage and out of proverbs warning against pissing away one’s fortune.⁵³⁴ The drunken trickery of Amasis smacks of Greek sophistry spiked with a little saucy Egyptian humor. There’s probably a reason for the famous ‘Saite

inau- guré très tôt dans son règne, sans doute en premier lieu pour approvi- sionner en vin ses mercenaires grecs et semitiques.” Ibid, 264.

⁵³¹ Hoards of Greco-Egyptian vessels are held in a collection on Naucratis by the British Museum, and it’s often impossible to tell where the Greek influence ends and the Egyptian begins, or vice-versa:https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20190801105436/https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/ng/naucratis_greeks_in_egypt.aspx.

Eudoxus, for instance, heard from Egyptians that Psammetichus popularized the drinking of wine As relayed by Plutarch in *Isis and Osiris*, 353b-c.

⁵³² LA „Wein”.

⁵³³ That Mycerinus goes ‘into the swamps’ clues us in that it’s an Egyptian story, since this is typically refers to having sex with lots of women. Cf. Athenaeus, 438c.

⁵³⁴ LS 83.

smile' that appears grinning on statues around this time, which made its way into Greek statuary.⁵³⁵

Greek symposiastic wine smoothed into elder Egyptian traditions of ritual beer libation, as we can see from innumerable symposiastic objects from Naucratis where evening cultures converge.⁵³⁶ Oral narratives have been less studied than the physical remnants of pottery from that area. But what we read in Herodotus is complementary to the archaeological evidence: because of his boozy democratic leanings, Amasis was exaggerated in storytelling into a sort of Greek Dionysus, a playful and lazy drunken Peasant King, so much so that the Egyptian priests seem to have begun to worry about his ability to rule. I would suggest from one angle this was decidedly Egyptian anxiety about what happens when the people elect one of their own, and the tendency of the government to, as it were, become Greekified.⁵³⁷ Psammetichus was associated with tyrants like Polycrates, thanks to whom he met and entertained traveling sages like Pythagoras in his court, according to legend.⁵³⁸ His Greek connections tainted him in the popular Egyptian imagination with drunkenness, since he was loved for his Hellenic mercantile and political relations (or by different people despised, or mocked, or hated).

Amasis and the Sailor is a short Demotic work that was part of many relaxed popular fictions, from which Herodotus heard a few things. In this tale, Amasis is bored one day wandering around looking for something to do (similar to Cheops in *Magicians*, which we studied

⁵³⁵ Cf. Lateiner's book *The Archaic Smile of Herodotus*.

⁵³⁶ Cf. Boardman.

⁵³⁷ "La discussion autour de l'origine, grecque ou égyptienne, des différents thèmes et surtout de celui du roi qui boit trop s'est décidée en faveur du caractère proprement égyptien de ces anecdotes transmises par Hérodote." Ibid, 265.

⁵³⁸ Diog. Laertius, *Lives* 8.3

above) and decides what he would like to do is this: to drink as much wine as possible – the ‘unmixed’ kind (which is extremely potent).

Amasis says to his court that he’d like to drink a bunch of unmixed Greek wine for the fun of it (*klby n Kmt*). They respond that it’s quite difficult to do that! And probably not a good idea. Still, he commands them to bring wine while he sits by the edge of the river with his wives, enjoys their company, and greedily chugs down as much as he can. He falls asleep and the next day he’s so hungover that he can hardly get up to perform basic tasks. So he asks members of his court to soothe his thunderstruck brain with a nice story. A priest tells him the story of a young sailor in love with his own wife and lamenting that she has left...⁵³⁹

Demotic Egyptian texts date from later centuries from Herodotus, but they are probably copies of old storytelling traditions from long before him, passed down even from the Middle Kingdom.⁵⁴⁰ *Amasis and the Sailor* was a popular and entertaining reception of the very old traditional Cheops tales. Again, a bored and lustful pharaoh with a harem wants to listen to stories or hear about ‘marvels’ to distract him from work. Traditional Egyptian oral storytelling of this style implied that a pharaoh’s reign was in trouble because he was unvirtuous, lazy, horny or incompetent (as we’ve described above). So the narrative may satirize Amasis, who loved the Greeks and their wine a bit too much. This makes sense because Amasis had indeed alienated the priests (particularly in the South) with a preference for Mediterraneans and Greeks and a high taxation of the temples – though he had embarrassingly failed to protect the Nile from the invasion of Persia at the same time.⁵⁴¹ Humor about his drunken laziness was part of ambiguous but partially resentful priestly

⁵³⁹ My adaptation from the translation of Simpson.

⁵⁴⁰ Here I draw heavily on Escolano-Poveda.

⁵⁴¹ Dieter Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, 83-84.

tales about what they saw as a sort of urbane and atheistic wine merchant rather than a divine protector of the temples.

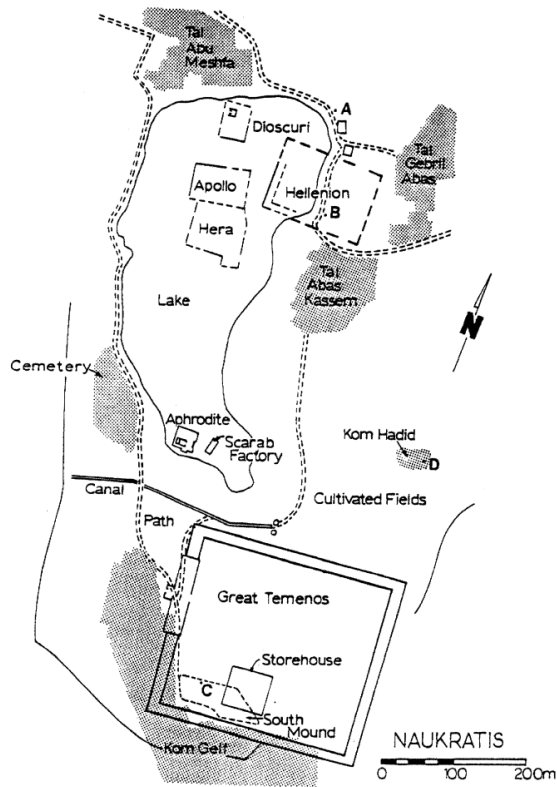


Figure 57: City layout of Naucratis. Leonard, 22.

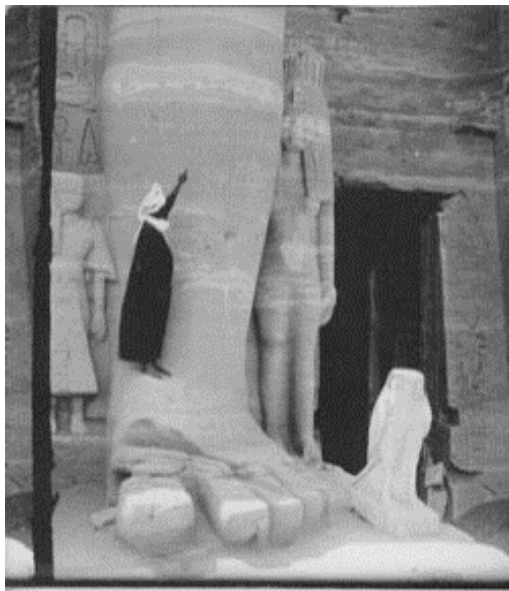
‘Hungover Amasis’

might be read as a critique of Greek culture coming in to Egypt passing around in oral narratives. Greeks metaphorically inundated the Nile with wine, drunkened the pharaoh and turned him into a lush. Priests who were mildly resentful of the Greek presence could have been mocking the urbane, mercantile, cosmopolitan foreigners. It’s from the same pool of popular stuff about ‘kings prostituting

their daughters’ since, along with wine, the Hellenes perhaps enhanced or became involved in Aphrodite’s cult around Naucratis, where there are remnants of buildings dedicated to her that (we can take an educated guess) had something to do with sexual reproduction. These Egyptian jokes about Greekified pharaohs came out of a lively cross-cultural symposiastic night life where there was plenty of sex and drinking. Of course mercenaries living and fighting and drinking and living across

ethnic boundaries in close spaces would have had a little sharp humor about themselves on either side.

Egyptian priests were to some extent ‘roasting’ Greek culture when they passed Herodotus their tales. The folktales provide evidence that two cultures could make fun of each other in peaceable ways using old traditions and puns and relaxed forms of communication. And of course they did! They lived in close proximity for centuries in places like Naucratis, so much that strict ethnic categories of Greek and Egyptian



ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΕΛΘΟΝΤΟΣ ΕΣΕΛΕΦΑΝΤΙΝ ΑΝ ΨΑΜΑΤΙΧΟ
 ΤΑΥΤΑ ΕΓΡΑΨΑΝ ΤΟΙΣ ΨΥΧΑ ΜΜΑΤΙΧΟΙ ΤΟΙ ΦΕΟΚΛΟΣ
 ΕΠΛΕΟΝ ΒΛΘΟΝΔΕΚΕΡΚΙΟΣ ΚΑΤΥ ΠΕΡΦΕ ΒΙΣΟΠΟΤΑΜΟΣ
 ΑΝΙΒΑΛΟΓΛΟΣ ΟΣΩΝΕ ΠΟΤΑΣΙ ΜΤΟΑΙΓ ΒΠΤΙΟΣ ΔΕ ΑΜΑΙΣ
 ΕΓΡΑΦΕ ΔΑΜΕ ΑΡΧΟΝ ΑΜΟΙΒΙΧΟ ΚΑΙ ΠΕΛΕΡΟΣ ΟΝ ΔΑΜΟ

Figure 58: Greek graffiti on the giant foot of Ramses. Image from Matthew P. Dillon, “A Homeric Pun from Abu Simbel,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 118 (1997) 128–130.

probably stopped making a lot of sense. Some of them had shared a sense of political humor in their earliest encounters. For instance, mercenaries of mixed ethnicity carved their names on the giant foot of Ramses the Great in the early 6th century BCE. The words at the end are what seem to be humorous pun claiming it was written by ‘Chisel, son of Nobody’. This is likely a reference to Odysseus, the famous trickster figure from Homer’s epic who called himself ‘Nobody’ as he outwitted the Cyclops.⁵⁴² Some Greco-Egyptian soldiers thought of themselves

⁵⁴² Matthew P. Dillon, “A Homeric Pun from Abu Simbel,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 118 (1997) 128–130.

humorously outwitting a great authoritarian by desecrating his monument with the ancient equivalent of spraypaint.

Greek oral traditions preserved playful versions of ‘Amasis-the-Drunk’ for centuries. Consider, for example, a much later tale about Amasis told by Philostratus: a Greek man leads a tame lion on a leash and feeds him honey cakes and fruits. The lion behaves strangely: it remains calm even in sanctuaries, where it avoids licking up the sacrificial blood. Rather, it prefers to drink loads of wine. Apollonius claims the drunken lion has the soul of Amasis, and therefore must be worshiped and taken care of by the Greeks, as a good king.⁵⁴³ (So, perhaps Amasis had been pacified by wine and now became a harmless creature for the Greeks to control.) This was originally not some Greek oral tradition, but an Egyptian sort of humor about Amasis. Folk humor about taming the pharaohs as if they were lions was an Egyptian sort of storytelling that went back centuries before the Greeks took it up. Many centuries before, in the Egyptian *Magicians* (we saw above) the peasant magician Djedi ‘leads a tame lion on a leash’. The incongruity (mirtheme) about a king as a ‘tamed lion’ traveled back and forth and took on different meanings as it traveled.

Long before Greek comedy, priests were satyr-like stock characters in popular Nile fictions for wide audiences of live oral storytelling (probably over drinks). Egyptians created a stereotype of the ‘slimy’ or ‘sneaky’ magician to mock the priesthood’s greed, lust, deception, immorality, and its slapstick physical abuses of one another,

⁵⁴³ ‘... Well, this is Amasis, the king of Egypt in the Saite district.’ When the lion heard this, it gave a pathetic, mournful roar, and collapsed in sobs, shedding actual tears. Apollonius stroked it and said, ‘I advise you to send the lion to Leontopolis to be dedicated in the sanctuary, for I do not think a king who has turned into the king of beasts should have to scrounge like a human beggar.’ ...ἔστι τοίνυν Ἄμασις οὗτος, ὁ βασιλεὺς Αἰγύπτου <τῆς> περι τὸν Σαίτην νομόν.”Ἐπεὶ δ’ ἤκουσεν ὁ λέων ταῦτα, ἀνεβρυχήσατο ἐλεεινὸν καὶ θρηνηῶδες καὶ ὠλοφύρατο ξυνοκλάσας, δάκρυα ἰεὶς αὐτά. καταψῶν οὖν αὐτὸν ὁ Ἀπολλώνιος “δοκεῖ” ἔφη “πέμπειν τὸν λέοντα εἰς Λεοντόπολιν ἀνακεισόμενον τῷ ἱερῷ, βασιλέα γὰρ εἰς τὸ βασιλικώτατον τῶν θηρίων μεταβαλόντα οὐκ ἀξιῶ ἀγείρειν, καθάπερ τοὺς πτωχοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων.” LCL 17 (86-87), trans. Christopher P. Jones.

just as much as priestly heroism, charm, magical power, and dignity, as we can see in a range of literary genres that survive. Legendary ones like Imhotep and Setne were known to everybody, and folk narratives came with a generous salting of fiction. These texts are full of puns, sarcasm, irony, obscenity, inversion, folk motifs and so on, and we can detect that ‘priests’ in Egyptian culture were figures of humorous ambiguity. Many Egyptians enjoyed all genres of performance: for instance, epic heroic tales of battle potentially modeled on Homer, such as *Fight for the Armor of Inaros* or *The Fight for the Sinecure of Amun*, where priests take on roles similar to Achilles and Patroclus fighting over ‘prebends’ or offices at temples with high paychecks. It is hard to say whether some of these are exaggerated or potentially satirical of Greek epic traditions. The heroes of the tale are young ‘herdsmen’ warring with a great king.⁵⁴⁴ It’s not hard to imagine Herodotus’ priestly informants with longstanding and embedded senses of humor about their own offices, if we read their own fictions.

One Egyptian text is of special interest to us, since it dates around Herodotus’ time, and part of it appears in his writing translated into Greek. That’s the humorous tale about Pheros washing his eyes with the urine of his cheating wife (2.111) that appears in Herodotus as follows:

During his reign the river flooded over the land to a greater extent than ever before; it rose to a height of twenty-seven feet, and when it overflowed the fields, the wind drove it to surge in waves like a sea. They say that this king, in reckless arrogance, took a spear and cast it into the eddies in the middle of the river, and that immediately afterward, his eyes were afflicted with disease and he became blind. His blindness continued for ten years until, in the eleventh year, there came an oracular response from the city of Bouto stating that the duration of his punishment was over now and that he would regain his sight by washing his eyes with the urine of a woman who had been with her husband alone, having had no

⁵⁴⁴ Escolano-Poveda, 16-17.

experience of any other men. And so he first tried this with the urine of his own wife, but this failed to restore his sight. He then tried all other women, one after the other, and when he finally regained his sight, he brought together into one city – which is now called Red Soil – all the women he had tried except for the one whose urine had restored his sight. When they were gathered together there, he set them all on fire along with the city itself. But he took as his own wife the woman whose urine he had washed his eyes and regained his sight.⁵⁴⁵

This Pheros tale is found also in an Egyptian text *70 Tales of Good and Bad Women*.⁵⁴⁶ The bulk of that text is a collection of adultery tales, thirty-five about ‘good women’ and thirty-five about ‘bad women’. The *Blinding of Pheros* is only one of these tales, which points to an interpretation that it was the source for Herodotus and not vice-versa.⁵⁴⁷ (We summarized the frame narrative above in the Introduction.)

The Egyptian humor cycle *G&B Women* was an enormous and enormously popular collection of assorted gender-inversion or sexually-themed folktales enjoyed by diverse people around the Nile and probably all of North Africa in Herodotus’ time.⁵⁴⁸ It tells us a bit about his priestly informants. Priests may have made some money, earned credibility, or gained a reputation performing stories around temples. Likely they were passing Greek tourists popular stories, either sourced

⁵⁴⁵ ... τοῦ ποταμοῦ κατελθόντος μέγιστα δὴ τότε ἐπ’ ὀκτωκαίδεκα πήχεας, ὡς ὑπερέβαλε τὰς ἀρούρας, πνεύματος ἐμπεσοντος κυματῆς ὁ ποταμὸς ἐγένετο: τὸν δὲ βασιλέα λέγουσι τοῦτον ἀτασθαλίῃ χρησάμενον, λαβόντα αἰχμὴν βαλεῖν ἐς μέσας τὰς δίνας τοῦ ποταμοῦ, μετὰ δὲ αὐτίκα καμόντα αὐτὸν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τυφλωθῆναι. δέκα μὲν δὴ ἔτεα εἶναι μιν τυφλόν, ἐνδεκάτῳ δὲ ἔτει ἀπικέσθαι οἱ μαντήιον ἐκ Βουτοῦς πόλιος ὡς ἐξήκει τέ οἱ ὁ χρόνος τῆς ζημίας καὶ ἀναβλέψει γυναικὸς οὐρῶν νιψάμενος τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, ἧτις παρὰ τὸν ἑωυτῆς ἄνδρα μόνον πεφοίτηκε, ἄλλων ἀνδρῶν ἐοῦσα ἄπειρος. καὶ τὸν πρώτης τῆς ἑωυτοῦ γυναικὸς πειρᾶσθαι, μετὰ δέ, ὡς οὐκ ἀνέλεπε, ἐπεξῆς πασέων πειρᾶσθαι: ἀναβλέψαντα δὲ συναγαγεῖν τὰς γυναικὰς τῶν ἐπειρήθη, πλὴν ἢ τῆς τῷ οὐρῶ νιψάμενος ἀνέβλεψε, ἐς μίαν πόλιν, ἣ νῦν καλεῖται Ἐρυθρὴ βῶλος: ἐς ταύτην συναλίσαντα ὑποπρῆσαι πάσας σὺν αὐτῇ τῇ πόλι: τῆς δὲ νιψάμενος τῷ οὐρῶ ἀνέβλεψε, ταύτην δὲ ἔσχε αὐτὸς γυναῖκα. Trans. and Greek text from Purvis 2009.

⁵⁴⁶ Called ‘Stories of Petese’ by Ryholt.

⁵⁴⁷ Praise (*hs*) and scorn (*shf*).

⁵⁴⁸ There are multiple extant manuscripts across centuries, from the 4th BCE to the 2nd CE; see Escolano-Poveda, 27.

from oral underlore, or recited out of a ‘handbook of stories’ that was passing around. It’s possible someone had purchased a copy somewhere and transmitted it to translators for Herodotus. Regardless, *G&B Women* bears strong resemblance to *Magicians in Cheops’ Court*: a bit sleazy, earthy, festive, and slapstick humor, with a frame tale and then a series of shorter stories many of which seem to have involved the power of magic and the dangers of women as agents of Hathor.

Petese is a high-ranking priest or prophet and a “very wise man” (*rmt rh m-sš*). But that title that must be humorously sarcastic given his behavior when it comes to his misuse of magic for intimidation, as he attempts to squeeze forbidden information about the underworld from a ghost, who then laughs at him. It is hard to believe that a scene where a cat and falcon rush into someone’s house and chase each other around, spilling furniture, destroying food, and who knows what else, was not a source of comedy in performance.⁵⁴⁹ It seems suspicious that he records stories of sexual shenanigans and has them written by baboons for his wife. We know from texts like *70 Tales of Good and Bad Women* that the Egyptian notion of a ‘priest’ was a narrative stereotype in the popular mind that carried a strong sense of playfulness. The stories told were, in Egyptian, often about entertainingly scummy or unscrupulous figures.

Herodotus’ Egyptian informants drew on traditional storytelling humor about ‘very wise men’ Petese and Setne. ‘Wise man’ was a tongue-in-cheek title for a man who was anything but wise, someone not taken too seriously at all. Tropes in Egyptian about the misbehavior of magicians were popular around the Canopic mouths of the Nile long before Greek philosophers began sailing over with quests to seek out and

⁵⁴⁹ Cats are always figures of humor in modern Arab folklore, where they bury their feces, attack their own anuses, transform into women, and generally misbehave. ES 79.

consult those ‘wisest of Egyptians’ about science, astronomy, mystic voyages of the soul, and so forth.

Wealthy Greeks traveling across the sea on *voyages égyptiens* to ask all sorts of questions about the forbidden temple rituals and other possibly private information, from the other end, may have seemed very much like Setne and Petese stumbling into domains better left alone. Greek ‘Egyptologists’ from afar could have resonated as Setne-esque figures on doomed journeys of transgression into forbidden areas of knowledge. Herodotus and others like him in the late 5th century may have seemed like something out of a comic tradition, a transgressor poking into areas of knowledge intended only for the initiated. Consider in the popular *Setne I* the way an old priest laughs at the magician Naneferkaptah for wandering around attempting to read the writings on the sides of Egyptian tombs, similar to what tourists do gazing at hieroglyphs:

It so happened that he was walking along behind the procession, reciting the writings that were on the chapels of the gods, [when a certain old priest looked at him and he laughed. “Said Naneferkaptah to him, ‘Why is it that you are laughing at me?’ Said he, ‘I am not laughing at you. If I was laughing , it was because you are reciting some writings for which no one at all has any use!”

Here an old priest seems to mock a foolish ‘Egyptologist’ for wasting his time with monuments. It’s possible that many of these stories were delivered in order to delight an Egyptian audience at the expense of the Greeks who were collecting them in order to seek ‘history’.

One interesting conversation comes at the beginning of the second book, where Herodotus has a face-to-face conversation with Egyptians about whether the Nile will dry up one day, or the rainfall stop.⁵⁵⁰ That Greek sort of scientific attempt at reading the future

⁵⁵⁰ Hdt. 2.13-14.

resonates with typically popular Egyptian comedy about fortune-telling. Petese, for example, tries to force a ghost to reveal hidden knowledge about the length of his own lifespan, a form of fortune-telling and clear violation of Egyptian propriety (if not an entire genre of necromancy humor).⁵⁵¹ Egyptians might have thought Greeks trying to figure out the future of whole environments or ecosystems or natural landmarks was quite a strange thing. Questions about the future may have sounded odd in the ear of a traditional storyteller dealing with tourists, armed with a heap of tales about magic, even out of the realm of comedy for someone familiar with the Petese tales. Greeks pondering the future of things with bizarre and foreign radical theories and philosophies, the sort of material we read from Heraclitus to Pythagoras, may have sounded odd to traditional Egyptian priests with their own internal wisdom systems, who either had no interest in these sorts of things or thought of the Greek culture as babyish and naïve in comparison to their own.

In Egyptian humor, the pursuit of knowledge, whether forbidden or divine ends terribly with death or worse, as we saw above in *Magicians*. There are clear instructions not to mess around with oracles or manipulate magic in wisdom texts meant for moral education, and so it seems that Petese is a sort of foil or folk comic archetype of the ambitious or even sleazy transgressor or breaker of rules. The stories of ‘bad women’ are then somewhat ironic given his own behavior as a ‘bad priest’. If Herodotus asked around for ‘wise men’, it appears that he was misled and encountered popular tales of the Petese tradition that in fact were making fun of inquirers who go around looking for knowledge. That would explain why there’s strangely humorous content Herodotus wrote

⁵⁵¹ Escolano-Poveda, 35.

down in Greek. The irony is that the humor all about inquirers appears in his *Inquiries*: surely Herodotus knew that he was part of the joke.

When we read the urine/blinding *Pheros* tale in Herodotus, we can assume that some of the rest of what he wrote down came out of a similar comic underbelly of Egyptian popular storytelling about adultery, infidelity, and immoral male priests getting their comeuppance through Hathor humor. That pattern, as we have discussed, arose from festival atmospheres celebrating sanctioned foolishness among mixed international audiences. It helps us better understand Herodotus to see what other sorts of tales were right next the *Blinding of Pheros* in the Egyptian mind: for instance, have a look at a remnant of an adultery story with a plotline as follows:

The wife of the prophet of Atum goes to Pharaoh complaining that she is pregnant by the prophet of Nebethetepet, and that the wife of the prophet of Nebethetepet is pregnant by the prophet of Atum. She asks pharaoh to make an exchange once the babies are born, which is done and everyone seems to be happy in the end.⁵⁵²

Two prophets have sex with each other's wives and they exchange babies. Sounds like the setup for the script from Greek comedy. What's certain here is that it's not archival pharaonic history or a king list, the fidelity of the priesthood is not taken seriously, and women have the final say when it comes to who gets to speak to the Pharaoh and straighten things out economically speaking. Herodotus was taking in material from

⁵⁵² Escolano-Poveda, 40.

a popular world of sketches or skits or street mimes about incongruities or sexual confusions.

Tales among the seventy confirm that Herodotus was hearing out of an collection of popular Egyptian humor stories. Consider a few of their plots, close kin to any Roman or Greek comedy:

- There's one about a son who comes home, climbs up a tree, looks through the window of his house – and there sees his mother having sex with a soldier, definitely not her husband. He scurries down and runs off. But she also sees him out of the corner of her eye, and the rest of the comedy (if that's what we can call it) she probably plots about how to prevent him from telling her husband.⁵⁵³ It would be difficult to read this narrative as anything other than a typical folk adultery story.
- Another tale stars Setne the magician (it's fragmentary), but we know he was a comic archetype for centuries.
- In yet another one, *The Rape of Hatemhit*, a priest lusts after a married woman, the wife of a tavern bartender, and takes her home where he rapes her.⁵⁵⁴ She tries to take vengeance through the law, but her own husband instead ends up in jail. She tries to free him, but the story's ending is lost. It's unclear whether there was humor here or it was simply an adventure tale, but it seems likely that Hatemhit was a heroine similar to other Egyptian types who would eventually bring around comeuppance to the priestly rapist.
- In another tale, a woman is thrown out of the royal harem for adultery committed against the Pharaoh, and she can perform a 'divine consultation', again a tale where it seems she becomes a heroine in contact with the divine and it is

⁵⁵³ Ryholt, Petese 83.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, 43.

the Pharaoh who is the lustful and transgressive antagonist.⁵⁵⁵

The common theme here was that a high-ranking man transgressed the boundaries of propriety in his dealings with women, a core of Egyptian popular storytelling. Female Egyptian comic figures provoked laughter for an inside Egyptian audience as narrative agents of the festive household goddess Hathor/Isis (as we've suggested above). Popular adultery stories out of women's underlore made their way into male priestly and scribal narratives that were shared with outsiders.

Greeks like Herodotus understood what they were hearing to some extent, but maybe not the inside references to mythical cycles or folk religion, let alone getting the 'high fruit' of some of the brilliant puns and wordplay that Egyptologists have now begun to uncover in literary texts. Sophisticated religious dramas and cerebral boxed tales of raconteurs were distilled into simple ethnographic Greek prose, but the notion of the 'tricky woman' and the bumbling powerful male transferred over easily enough to entertain any audience. Below two worlds of language lay a polygenic 'implied spider's web'⁵⁵⁶ of common folk motifs that were easily transferred across cultural boundaries, since they were so amenable to oral performance. The Egyptian journey of the comic soul under the divine gaze of Hathor – plots designed and maintained likely by almost entirely elite male priests over generations – had content that was simple enough in form for international audiences to enjoy together in a simple performative fashion.⁵⁵⁷ The question is what each teller wanted to invoke for his own inside audience. There is a possibility

⁵⁵⁵ Ryholt, *ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*. Columbia, 1999.

⁵⁵⁷ According to Jay (346) "The wall between the temple and the outside world was probably not that high to prevent popular motifs being absorbed into the literate traditions: "stories told at the village level must also have played a major role in the formation of individual and collective understandings of identity..."

it had some deeper political implications, if we take a “trickle-down” sort of reading and imagine the audience was in-the-know about big recent political events around Egypt. The ‘one about pharaoh’s daughter’ may tell us a little about how locals felt about politics around Herodotus’ time.

There is a stela that was created only a few generations before Herodotus dedicated to one Henutsen, the actual daughter of Cheops, and it celebrates that her father built her a pyramid.⁵⁵⁸ Nothing about a prostitute there. Rather, it makes Cheops out to be beloved patron of Isis and the builder of a glorious new temple, though Cheops had been dead for thousands of years. So this version was state propaganda, hardly any more credible than the ‘brothel’ version.⁵⁵⁹ What this tells us that there was some form of ‘Cheops propaganda’ around Egyptian sites when Herodotus visited. Cheops had become a symbol of power and state control taken up by later pharaohs to advertise and promise their



Figure 59: Stela of Henutsen, daughter of Cheops. *Stèle de la Fille*. Cairo Museum JE 2091. Photograph Grdseloff MSS 1.191, Griffith Institute. Zivie-Coche, plate 39.

⁵⁵⁸ “[Cheops] rebuilt his pyramid next to the temple of the goddess and he rebuilt the pyramid of the royal daughter, Henutsen next to this temple. He renewed for her the divine offerings and rebuilt his temple in stone, renewed what he had disturbed, with the gods being in their place.” (“Il a (re)construit sa pyramide à côté du temple de cette déesse et il a (re)construit la pyramide de la fille royale, Henoutsen à côté de ce temple, Il a fait pour sa mère, Isis, la mère divine, hathor, dame du ciel, un inventaire gravé sur une stèle. Il a renouvelé pour elle les offrandes divines et a (re)construit son temple en pierre, ce qu’il avait troué en ruine étant renouvelé, les dieux étant à leur place.” Zivie-Coche: 219-220).

⁵⁵⁹ For full bibliography, see Zivie-Coche and Konstantakos (95). The stela is likely an archaism of the classicizing 26th dynasty, but there are arguments (rejected by Zivie-Coche) that it was in fact from the 4th dynasty.

own achievements – and that narrative competed with the old folk humor tradition making Cheops out to be a fool.

Elite Egyptian families presiding over the Nile loved nothing more than to archaize historical figures to imagine themselves as part of a cosmic tradition of rulers. The stela above tells us that ‘Cheops’ and ‘Henutsen’ were historical figures manipulated and propped up to celebrate the reign of the much later pharaoh Psammetichus (664-610 BCE) as he promoted himself as a great builder.⁵⁶⁰ In government propaganda, Henutsen was intended to imply Psammetichus’ actual daughter, Nitocris, a female political figure of great power who had donned the prestigious office of God’s Wife of Amun. In that sense, the feat of ‘building her own pyramid’ makes more sense, since the office of God’s Wife was immensely powerful and controversial. She had her own temples and domain of authority as the New ‘Daughter of Cheops’.

What the court of Psammetichus may have desired was to employ Cheops and the pyramids as a beacon of rejuvenation in a changing international and maritime world – one full of Greeks. The prestige of the pyramid builders may have seemed like a mark of elder cultural superiority the king could display to tourists and foreigners. There’s enormous cultural capital in the pyramids that Big Men have always fawned over – all the way up to the autocrat Sisi in 2022, who parades himself around invoking mummies and pyramids as if they have anything to do with his regime all the time; see above.⁵⁶¹ That sort of pharaonic posturing and invocation of ancient history has been going on a long time in Egypt, and populist propaganda was happening in the Classical era just as well.

⁵⁶⁰ From here I draw on Forshaw (2019), 52-76; though all historical narrative written about this period leaves out all the folktales whatsoever.

⁵⁶¹ Recently, Sisi situated himself like a pharaoh presiding over an Egyptological Parade of the Mummies through povertized streets of Cairo.

In hectic boomtowns along the northern Canopic mouths, Greek merchants, poets, scholars, statesmen and mercenaries could find work or professional business or intrigue.⁵⁶² The new royal family was banking on a flux of foreign silver and military power, so they made an attempt to rejuvenate monuments and retool ‘Ancient History’ to create a sheen of elder exoticism to hordes of international traders and colonists. Psammetichus built up an army and portrayed himself as New Cheops, with a vision of a new national Egypt that welcomed all sorts of foreigners to flood into ethnic enclaves, such as Naucratis. The drift of migrants from all around the Mediterranean probably bothered more than a few conservative natives, particularly members of the southern Amun priesthood, who may have resisted unification. Humor is often the only weapon people have against those with power enough to build giant monuments to themselves or for wealthy intruders from distant empires. So there’s one way to read our little prostitute joke. Oral graffiti, as it were, slandering the *Stèle de la Fille*.

The New Cheops and Henutsen (that is, Psammetichus and Nitocris pretending to be Cheops and his daughter in propaganda) made their way into Herodotus’ folklore-loving ears thanks to priests who thought they were being clever a century or so after the stela was created.⁵⁶³ The narrative was probably not told by a duty-bound official, if that’s the sort of person Herodotus spoke with, who may never keep the dirty version floating around.⁵⁶⁴ Rather, ‘the one about pharaoh’s daughter’ sounds like a bit of political satire besmirching the king’s official narrative about welcoming Greeks to Egypt that was once pro-

⁵⁶² See Boardman, 131.

⁵⁶³ A “scabrous novelistic variation” as Konstantakos describes it (95).

⁵⁶⁴ Udjahorresne has been connected with the preservation of popular literature (see below).

Hellenic.⁵⁶⁵ Telling such a thing to Herodotus has a weird sense of edged bitterness when it comes to the nature of Greek inquiry and involvement in Egyptian politics.

Giza experienced a late revival in tourism and popularity because foreigners and colonists were being welcomed with open arms to Egypt to settle and – among many other interactions – to join the military.⁵⁶⁶ Psammetichus' family realized they could open Egypt up to foreign interaction and encourage Greeks and other internationals from abroad to play roles in the Nile economy. What the king's political allies were probably most interested in was building mercenary armies for great sacking tours all the way to Babylon and back. So Psammetichus created a heterogenous new breed of multicultural Greco-Egyptian military families, and many of them were likely bilingual.⁵⁶⁷ Herodotus suggests that Psammetichus had young Egyptians taught the Greek language, which would not be a surprise. Egyptians had 'language-learning education programs' for other societies for hundreds of years, particularly those they conquered.⁵⁶⁸

Propaganda about Cheops and the Great Pyramid in the late Saite period worked like an open invitation about the generosity of the new international military government. Pyramids mean money. There were probably ethnic tensions that arose between the groups and some of it had to do with the authority of 'ancient history' and the 'elder status' of Egypt. The Great Pyramid was a distant and appealing mirage of wealth

⁵⁶⁵ The tale is a form of bodily inversion: "shitting in the Pope's tiara," as it were. The common medieval image of feces in the papal tiara is considered anthropologically also by Kunzle (62).

⁵⁶⁶ Likely Psammetichus (see second chapter), whose. Selim Hassan, *The Great Sphinx and its Secrets*, Cairo Government Press, 1953, 103.

⁵⁶⁷ "Usually, Herodotus had to rely on hired guides, Greek or bilingual, such as the interpreter whose translation of the hieroglyphics on Cheops' pyramid he could not verify." LAC, 17.

⁵⁶⁸ Cf., the Rhetorical Stela from Deir el-Medina: "He made their speech disappear, changing their tongues..." Forshaw, 12.

to Greeks who wanted to flee Hellas to find jobs, property, or escape to settle down somewhere new. The official message (not the dirty funny one) that glamorized Cheops and Henutsen was meant to show off Psammetichus' central military power and industry through ancient monuments. By invoking the ancient name of Cheops and Henutsen, Psammetichus drew upon ancient history to give his expansion and diversification of the military an air of respectability.⁵⁶⁹ Or attempted to give, at any rate.

Not everyone loved Psammetichus' effort to make himself out as the New Cheops. In the realities of local village life, resentful folk among the lower populations mocked the pyramid builder for 'whoring out Egypt' with humorous storytelling about selling out his own daughter. These are the traditions priests passed on to Herodotus. What we can detect from the absence of any appreciative material about Henutsen, and instead a prostitute joke, is that significant pushback to Greek-loving imperialism was coming from local storytellers in their private traditions. Jokes like these were cleverly invoking traditional comic stories from deep *Cheops and the Magicians* oral traditions, which doomed the king as a fool, and now in the new world of the 5th century the humor shows bitterness about the 'whoring of Egypt' to one and all. Currently during the visit of Herodotus, Egypt was at its nadir as it had been conquered and was now controlled by foreigners from Persia. Although a time of peace, it would have been a time of cultural catastrophe and disappointment for native nationalists. The Greek presence nearby was angsty indeed: at one moment allies in war, at the next shedding Egyptian blood alongside the invaders.

⁵⁶⁹ Zivie-Coche (224) questions whether this was actually Cheops' wife rather than his daughter, which is uncertain. She could easily have been a total invention by the 26th dynasty. Graffiti by the priests of Isis who attended to the cult of Cheops is preserved on the east wall of the temple of Isis at Giza. Hassan (110).

So in Herodotus, we do not find anything at all about Psammetichus' official narrative (the one on the stela), but rather the lighthearted response of locals taking umbrage at the arrogance of the multinational government.⁵⁷⁰ The notion of 'New Cheops' would have been an easy target for humor if rural locals resented Psammetichus as failed military autocrat of the same variety as the Cheops we find in *Magicians*. Egyptian storytellers who encountered Herodotus probably grew up learning all sorts of oral traditions and fictions that had been floating around the Mediterranean in complex ways from all the way back to the Middle Kingdom. Popular folktales of Cheops' greed, cruelty, and ineptitude were remarkably still alive even in Herodotus' time in the underlore of the folk and in the private literary sphere of scribes.

It's no wonder if some spiteful humor arose in Egyptian households if powerful families were welcoming in all sorts of people from around the Mediterranean to intermingle in the king's imperial armies while workers and farmers along the Nile were going hungry. Several generations after Egypt opened up to Greeks, Herodotus heard narratives of poverty, government failure, and resentment about Greeks and their influence. Psammetichus probably did resemble Cheops in one way: he drained temple economies in order to fund his massive new international Hellenic army and its crusades to expand Egypt as a new empire. Egyptians of the lower classes hated Cheops for similar reasons, if we trust what their descendants told Herodotus, and they had long

⁵⁷⁰ According to Lloyd et al. (LAC 225), "Relations between these Greek visitors and the Egyptians were certainly strained at times and could break out into open and violent hostility. The Saite military policy of preferring Greek mercenaries to native troops naturally offended the native Egyptian warrior class or *Machimoi*, and we hear that in the reign of Psammetichus I a large contingent emigrated to Ethiopia (i.e., Nubia) where, no doubt, they felt they would be treated with greater respect. This resentment reached a disastrous proportions in the reign of the pharaoh Apries (589-570 BCE) and led to a great revolt of native troops which cost the king at first his crown and ultimately his life (161, 3-4-163; 169).

thought about him as a ‘defunder’ of the temples, stealing away their prosperity for building projects.⁵⁷¹

Like modern Egyptian big men, Psammetichus may not have actually known a thing about the ancient past, but still employed the Great Pyramid as a form of cultural capital. People who had some knowledge of old comic traditions about the pyramids (as we find in Herodotus) responded with spiteful bodily humor. So Herodotus was listening in to some hot political banter among the Egyptians themselves, as they thought about their recent past and the presence of Greeks in their world.

There is another stela that goes some distance to corroborate our point here: the *Adoption Stela of Nitocris*, written first-person in the voice of Psammetichus himself. He proclaims that he sent his young daughter (perhaps around thirteen or fourteen years) down the river from Sais to Thebes, where she would be adopted into the cult of Amun as the ‘God’s Wife’ alongside the current Libyan priestess. In other words, he was smoothly projecting himself as a great

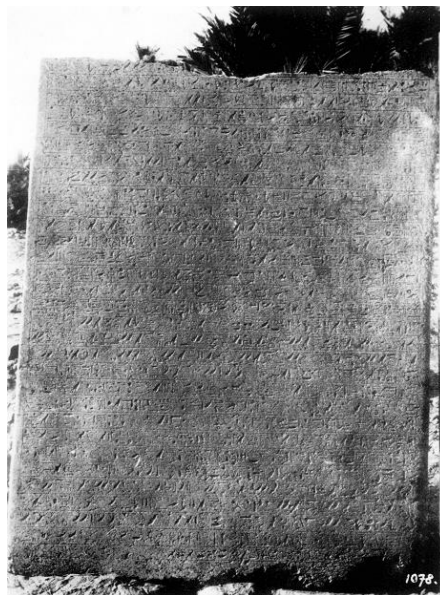


Figure 60: The Nitocris stela. Richard Caminos, Plate VII.

unifier of a new nationalist state between North and South. The point of this gesture was to control the two halves of Egypt as an empire under his single rich, monarchical family, with military power drawn from Greece and close bonds to Athens and to the rest of the Hellenic world.

⁵⁷¹ Incidentally, today as of writing, most Egyptians, a third of whom are living in poverty, feel the same way about the enormous building projects of Sisi, so they make fun of him in similar ways as a sort of inept pimp of the state, as we’ve related above.

Psammetichus – a in his own glorious golden voice – illustrates the parade in all its details, all the way up the nostrils of the boat captain:

I have given to [Amun] my daughter to be God's Wife and have endowed her better than those who were before her. Surely he will be gratified with her worship and protect the land of him who gave her to him...

...Departure from the king's private apartments by his eldest daughter clad in fine linen and adorned with new turquoise. Her attendants about her were many in number, while marshals cleared her way. They set forth happily to the quay in order to head southwards...The ships about her were in great numbers, the crews consisted of mighty men, all (the ships) being laden up to their gunwales with every good thing of the palace... The sail of the mast was hoisted and the rising wind pricked [the commander's] nostrils.

Nitocris gained unheard-of levels of power as one of the most prominent celebrity figures in the world, the symbol of a united Upper and Lower Egypt. She even celebrated a *sed*-festival, the ultimate expression of a king's power, reserved only for men in years past.⁵⁷² In her journey down the Nile, Nitocris apparently took heaps of 'offerings' from every village. She received (or was compelled by her father to receive) 'gifts' from all the highest clergy and nomarchs from over a dozen temples, at least seven nomes in Upper Egypt and four in Lower Egypt. Her immense annexations of agricultural land ostensibly revealed the people's support for the unification of the North and South (Sais and Thebes).

We do not know what the farmers and craftsmen living in those areas thought about giving their land away to a new Northern dynasty, but we do have some dirty jokes at her expense in Herodotus. The vast amount of food was, in part, intended to feed her flotilla as it went down the river, but it had been sourced from villages, farms, and brewers on

⁵⁷² Miriam F. Ayad, "Gender Ritual and Manipulation of Power," in Mieke Becker, Anke Ilona Blöbaum, and Angelika Lohwasser, *Prayer and Power: Proceedings of the Conference on the God's Wives of Amun in Egypt during the First Millennium BC*. Ugarit-Verlag Münster (2016), 96.

the outskirts of the Nile. In rural places, people may well have been unfamiliar or even antagonistic to political events in the North. They gave what they had whether they wanted to contribute or not.

Her supplies were obtained from each nomarch who was in charge of his (own share of) provisions and was furnished with every good thing, namely bread, beer, oxen, fowl, vegetables, dates, herbs...she found Thebes with throngs of men and crowds of women standing and jubilating to meet her, surrounded by oxen, fowl, and abundant provisions, many in number. Then they said: 'Let Nitocris, daughter of the King of Upper Egypt, come to the House of Amūn, that he may receive her and be pleased with her...' Firm and abiding is every monument of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Psammetichus, may he live forever unto eternity.⁵⁷³

Locals did not mention the official narrative to Herodotus years later and instead told little prostitute jokes to cover what knowledge they almost certainly had about the infamous Nitocris.

The small chapels of the God's Wives were constructed from few enough stones that she could have gathered them (if we stretch our imagination) by having sex with enough prominent men, theoretically speaking.



Figure 61: Small temples to pharaoh's daughters. Wikimedia Creative Commons.

That may go some

distance to illustrate some of the context of the joke, if these little chapels

⁵⁷³ Image and trans. by Ricardo A. Caminos, "The Nitocris Adoption Stela." *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 50. Dec. 1964 70-101.

that the priestess sat in upon her throne looked anything like little Greek brothels, such as Nitocris' temple at Medinet Habu. The Egyptian word for 'stone' is similar to the word for 'silver', and silver was a Greek import often traded in bullion lumps referred to as bricks or stones.⁵⁷⁴ The pharaoh's daughters were publicly depicted playing the sistrum for the god Min, a god who happened to have had a large and erect penis directly in front of them. It's not a stretch to imagine that some jokes about Psammetichus 'whoring out Egypt' grew immediate context, from a local sense of irreverence for powerful new Hellenophile queens floating by sucking up livelihoods to enrich their family's Greek armies up North.

We saw above in *Magicians* that a boat parade with all of Sneferu's 'big-breasted virgins' was already a topic of folk satire in the Middle Kingdom. The elite sexualized display of exorbitant pharaonic wealth resonates with the Nitocris stela in some minor details, such as the presence of her 'turquoise jewelry' as she boats around soaking up people's tribute. Egyptians would have known about 'boat parades' as stereotypes in traditional humor. They were possibly drawing on very old and well-known folk humor traditions about the boat parades as commentary on 6th and 5th century events: they were *archaizing resistance humor*, just as any new government was attempting to archaize old monuments. The joke about Cheops-Psammetichus may have arisen from someone's local resentment living in a temple community along the river, a person who never approved of faraway governments taxing farmers with shiny boat parades.

Egyptian storytellers had long known how to mock the old monuments, and had grown tired and even bored with celebrity government posturing for centuries. Nor did they appreciate her royal

⁵⁷⁴ Boardman, 130; Muhs, 189.

family's engagement with foreigners, or their military unification of the empire, nor their self-depictions as Cheops and Henutsen. Over time, a bundle of bitter oral narratives from the Cheops tradition began floating around mocking Psammetichus' attempt to show himself off as 'New Cheops', instead making him out to be illegitimate or even silly, someone who failed steering the state. Psammetichus' inheritance of the throne was just a matter of blind luck.

Hellenizing mercenary forces, made up of a mix of ethnicities including Greeks, might have been enforcing Nitocris as she sailed along snatching up the goods of local communities far from the urban Northern government at Sais or the multicultural ports like Naucratis on the mouths of the Nile. In the minds of some of the priests, Egypt was becoming an international 'brothel' for colonists from all over the Mediterranean (or it was literally becoming full of brothels) thanks to what the Hellenophile pharaohs started. Humor of prostitution would have had less to do with sex or gender, but rather been politically motivated and directed outward at the foreigners and even some of the Greeks to whom Egypt was being 'whored' (incidentally, famous for their sex trade). The priests of the 6th and 5th centuries resisted the intrusive power of the pharaonic government using humor: just as Psammetichus archaized and renewed old Cheops on monuments and stelae, the priests archaized him in their storytelling traditions, mocking him as a nationalist pimp for outsiders.

Final Remarks

'Pharaoh's daughter' is not that good. The sheer uselessness of what Herodotus recorded here, its lack of any high literary quality, is what provides the most interesting information: *it's not something meant to be noticed* – and certainly not by 'classicists'. Like spraypaint below a monument, it's sly and messy, intentional damage done to an archive,

and it's a surprise that Herodotus kept it at all, if only out of confusion of having missed its meanings. Thousands of years of hard study has failed to notice or appreciate that little joke, either due to their prudishness, or because of its paltry content when it comes to 'real' history. It's offhand, quick, vague, and perhaps not especially clever. Funny in a handy sort of way, the narrative was delivered as if prepared in short time. Someone was traveling without much time to spare. His source was not a revealer, some open-mouthed, naive font of local information, not some talkative and friendly source with a loud tongue and professional equipment to tell stories, or even someone with much talent at telling stories. Rather, a joker, someone rude, with a brutish sort of political banter, a quick dirty thing off to the side, even a little underlying bitterness or flippancy toward the Greek tourists asking questions. We begin to get a sense for the personality of our anonymous informant.

Prostitution humor has been around a long time as a form of resistance against the higher-ups and their tendency to sell out to capitalists or imperialists and use public taxes for selfish means. (Today's Egyptians do a similar sort of thing with the hashtag *#VoteforthePimp*, implying the way Sisi sells Egypt off to rich international capitalists while the people starve.) If Greeks had brought with them a reputation for selling prostitutes at Naucratis, a city famous for its brothels, then Egyptian priests may have seen them as something like parasites on their economy. The joke about the pharaoh's daughter was a barbed sort of thing to say to Herodotus, something grown from a mood of resistance, bitterness, competition, or at least ambiguity to Greeks. One reading of the mood underlying the joke just as it was told to Herodotus is something really nasty, such as this: "Cheops whored his daughter, just as Egypt is being whored to *you*, foreigners. Why would I tell you about our history, when I can deliver this little joke to you instead, without saying anything about those old kings our families despised?" In

that case, Herodotus was the target of a cheap shot or a swipe of the tongue.

The mood on the part of a storyteller along the Nile in regard to an inquisitive foreign patron may tell us as much about Egyptians at the time than any official 'record' we find on stelae fabricated by a wealthy king and plopped down in some faraway sector in the sand. A whispered dirty joke is far more personal, more potent, more intimate. Nobody was in Memphis waiting for a rich Greek tourist in order to give 'good information' or anything official about Cheops or anyone else from a library or an archive. There was no apparent history archive, no tourist program, no interception of travelers by the government. Street lore, on the other hand, is short and obscene: priests preyed on his ears, giving him another version more suitable to their local purposes. Whispered secrets and low stories from the street, right out of people's homes, people who were very much alive in an almost festive way to the act of history, to the improvisation and enactment of history rather than its shallow political dimensions. Herodotus found his way into a backalley and gambled on what he heard. Other storytellers were more generous along the Nile and far better at telling the same joke. For instance, the same motif about the king's daughter appears later in Herodotus in the much more famous short story of the treasure-chamber of *Rhampsinitus and the Thief*.

Of all the heaps of records or archives to which priests might have had access, they offered almost nothing, and much of what they delivered were little tales of manure and prostitutes. They were either intentionally disguising information, or bored with or disgusted by the propaganda narratives, and instead made up their own in wonderful ways. Storytellers of Herodotus' time were diverse: they may not have cared to tell him anything about figures like Nitocris, or even wanted to distract from what they did know. Or they wanted some entertainment

for themselves and their guests. If they were professional raconteurs, there may have been a bigger bag of silver to be gained by performing a good short story, something saucy a particular visiting group of Greek sophists would enjoy.

Nitocris was one of the most well-known, if not infamous, Egyptian political figures of all time. The *Adoption Stela* is a work of seriousness and magnificence. Surely the priests knew plenty of details about her. But what little we know about her today was popular material performed and perfected to entertain. For instance, there's the famous horror story about how she took vengeance on Egyptians who had killed her brother by trapping them in an underground chamber and flooding it with the Nile's water, then threw herself in a chamber of hot ashes to avoid punishment.⁵⁷⁵ Surely this tale emerged from underlore, not from any official monument, and could have been attached to any female figure a performer wanted. The *Vengeance of Nitocris* speaks to a relaxed and warm environment of telling and listening. In that sense, the tale carries the sense of a rich aspect of the lives of Nile folk in the ancient world. It left out any serious political message or official narrative to be chiseled in stone and left in the sand for a thousand years.

Ellipsis is a form of presence. What we do not find in Herodotus is remarkable for what it can tell us about the priests' feelings about things. They did not expose everything but drew the line so that their narratives were just believable enough. So much in Herodotus is silly humor, because it was a powerful method to erase official monumental narratives and bring some life and joy into hard histories of domination and subordination. (For instance, they mention a full 330 of their early kings, but pass over them in a curt way, saying that only one of them did anything worthy of note, and that was Moeris, who built some pyramids

⁵⁷⁵ This little yarn later made a great tale for a young Tennessee Williams.

in a lake.)⁵⁷⁶ Priests refused to share good information about all the hundreds of their kings and instead provided a scattered peppering of humorous and bawdy narratives. In their humorous deflections, lorekeepers were not fools to outsiders.

Egyptian storytellers had brains and hearts and a sense of humor. They were not cardboard cutouts or brainwashed slaves or balding mystics or fawning subalterns for Aristotle to farm for scientific information, but people crafting their own past using old patterns of folk humor when they engaged with Greek tourists. Pharaoh comedy could be a form of personal resistance to a national past, archaizing old folk narratives just as the powerful families archaized all the monuments like the pyramids. Humor is one way people keep a feeling of control over their destinies and pasts from below, when confronted with autocracy, domination, and suffering – whether an illusory dream or not. Folk narratives desecrated the monuments and messages of autocrats, such as the Great Pyramid, and replaced them with imaginary worlds where the weak will triumph and become the strong.

Unimpressed by inquisitive intruders or high narratives of pharaonic glory, diverse Egyptian priests of Herodotus' time engaged, entertained, and manipulated tourists with humorous tales. They had no interest in sharing information about the kings, no desire to celebrate the big accomplishments of their own tyrants. Rather, they were saucy and brilliantly clever satirists in some cases deeply familiar with Greek philosophy, sophistry, and culture, and of course they were: the Nile had been flooded with Greeks for hundreds of years. Priestly storytellers ignored the monuments and high narratives and let the foreigners go around marveling at them. We can detect, if we take their perspective, in the tales a shared mood of irony and irreverence or even disgust and

⁵⁷⁶ ...τῶν δὲ ἄλλων βασιλέων οὐ γὰρ ἔλεγον οὐδεμίαν ἔργων ἀπόδεξιν καὶ οὐδὲν εἶναι λαμπρότητος, πλὴν ἑνὸς τοῦ ἐσχάτου αὐτῶν Μοίριος: (Hdt. 2.101).

horror toward corrupted governments and celebrity families. In that sense, what we read in Greek conveys that there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with outsiders, inquirers, colonialists – elite receptors of high register seeking to create history out of high material. Rather, storytellers were meeting and relishing in humor and silence, in the removal of official narratives, in the ellipses left behind as jokes, *damnationes memoriae*.⁵⁷⁷

Not a prude or an authoritarian over international narratives, Herodotus created a canon that included “everything just I heard it.” He sees the value in historiographical resistance from below, oral history, and creative expression, even if it took deceptively silly forms. There is a shared humor of festive democracy and resistance, a shared folk humor of Demeter/Hathor. In her underlore, low tricksters are the real history-makers, possessors of power over knowledge, over their own pasts and futures. I suggest we read Herodotus as an outsider and critic of developing Greek imperialism and something of a trickster himself, carrying on thoughtful reflections with Egyptians with cross-cultural comic historiography that was symbiotic if not warmly allied.

⁵⁷⁷ On Psammetichus’ use of *damnatio* against the memory of his father Necho, see Forshaw 91.

Reference: Oral Folk Humor Patterns (Mirrthemes) in Cheops and the Magicians (P.Westcar/P.Berlin 3033)

Frame Tale: Bored King Cheops summons his three princes to tell him entertaining stories.

Boxed Tales:

(a) **[Missing from papyrus]** *A lost tale. Set in the time of Djoser (3rd Dynasty)...*

A. **Nebka and the Wax Crocodile.** *Set in the time of Cheops' grandfather, Nebka.*

The wife of the high priest Ubainer seduces an attractive male peasant with a gift. They have drunken sex in the priest's own garden. They even bathe in Ubainer's own pool afterward. In vengeance, Ubainer enchants a wax crocodile and throws it in the pool. After their next liaison, it grows huge and eats the peasant. After seven days, Ubainer commands the crocodile to spit him out and brings him back to life, in order to force a confession to the pharaoh. Nebka sentences the peasant to death by crocodile, [burns his wife alive, and has her ashes thrown in the river].

B. **Sneferu and the Lost Pendant.** *Set in the time of Cheops' father, Sneferu.*

Sneferu is bored, so Djadjaemankh recommends he go on a rowing trip. Sneferu demands twenty big-breasted virgins wearing nothing but fishnets row back and forth along the river so he can watch. One of them loses a turquoise pendant in the river, so they all stop rowing. Sneferu is annoyed, but the girl talks back, refusing to continue until she recovers her own pendant. So the high priest Djadjaemankh magically folds the water in two and retrieves the pendant, solving the dilemma.

C. **Cheops and the Chambers of Thoth.** *Set in the current time. Told to Cheops by his own son.*

C1: The Peasant Sage Djedi. There is a peasant magician named Djedi, a superhuman with magical powers who can rejoin a severed head, tame a lion, and has secret knowledge of the measurements of the Chambers of Thoth (which humorously may not actually exist). Cheops is obsessed with finding out the measurements. He sends his son to bring back this peasant magician, who accompanies him back with his scrolls and students. Cheops wants to decapitate a prisoner so that Djedi can display his magic powers. Djedi refuses on moral grounds and instead rejoins the head of a goose. Then also a bigger goose, and a bull. He finally tames a lion. However,

Djedi does not know the measurements of the Chambers, he only knows where the knowledge is kept: in a casket, in a room in Heliopolis. But only one person may retrieve the knowledge: the oldest of the three unborn children of a woman Ruddjedet. Those three divine children are prophesied to lay claim to the throne in the place of Cheops' three sons and give proper due to temples and sacrifices.

C2: The Three Divine Babies. The five female goddesses visit Ruddjedet disguised as dancing-girl musicians and help her deliver three golden babies. As payment, she offers them a sack of barley. The goddesses sneak three golden crowns into the sack and leave it in a room in her house. Fourteen days after the births, a handmaid complains that there is not enough barley to make beer. When the handmaid goes to fetch the sack, she hears little musicians and sounds of the celebration of kings' inauguration inside. She hides the sack, puts it in a box, inside a chest, in a room. One day, the handmaid quarrels with Ruddjedet and gets a beating. Disgruntled, she tells her older brother that she intends to tattle-tell that she discovered the three kings that will replace Cheops' family. The brother whips her, and she runs to the river and is eaten by a crocodile. The brother goes to Ruddjedet, regretful about having beaten the handmaid...
[...missing from papyrus]

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