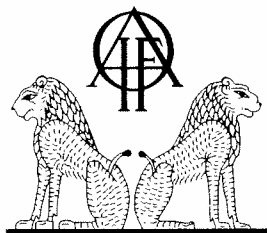


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Sex and Marriage in Ancient Egypt

IT IS A PRIVILEGE to help honor Fayza Haikal, who has made so many direct and indirect contributions to the study of ancient Egypt and to the discipline of Egyptology. One of the most interesting lectures which I heard her give was the plenary lecture at an annual meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, at which she spoke about women, women in ancient Egypt and women in modern Egypt. Given her interest in that topic, it is hoped that the following brief comments and lexicographic notes will interest her.

The "Instructions of Any" include the advice, "Take a wife while you are young that she may bear a son for you; she should bear for you while you are youthful"¹ and the later "Instructions of Onchsheshonqy" specify, "Take a wife when you are twenty years old, that you may have a son while you are young!"² The earlier "Instructions of Ptahhotep" advise, "When you prosper and found your house, love your wife with ardor, fill her belly, clothe her back; ointment soothes her body. Gladden her heart as long as you live; she is a fertile field for her lord."³ Sex for the sake of procreation was thus encouraged in Egyptian literary texts.⁴ And some texts, perhaps most obviously the New Kingdom love songs,⁵

¹ "Instructions of Any", 3, 1; translation adapted from M. LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II*, Berkeley, 1976, p. 136 (= AEL).

² "Instructions of Onchsheshonqy", II, 7; translation from M. LICHTHEIM, AEL III, 1980, p. 168; similarly, "He who is ashamed to sleep with his wife will not have children" ("Instructions of Onchsheshonqy", 21, 14; translation by M. Lichtheim *ibid.*, p. 175).

³ "Instructions of Ptahhotep", chapter 21, l. 325-330; translation adapted from M. LICHTHEIM, AEL I, 1973, p. 69.

⁴ The importance of procreation appears in documentary texts, also. For example, in O. Berlin 1062, a 20th Dynasty private letter, one man chides another "You are not a man since you are unable to make your wives pregnant like your fellowmen"; translation by F.F. WISSE, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta, 1990, p. 149-206). But although procreation was important,

lack of procreation should be accepted as an occasional "fact of life," without attaching blame, "Do not abandon a woman of your household when she has not conceived a child" ("Instructions of Onchsheshonqy", 14, 16; translation from Lichtheim [AEL 3, 1980, p. 170]). As pointed out by the writer of Ostrakon Berlin 1062, "As for him who has no children, he adopts an orphan instead [to] bring him up. It is his responsibility to pour water onto your hands as one's own eldest son."

⁵ Of which several collections exist and which have been translated and studied frequently; for different approaches, see, e.g., J.L. FOSTER, *Love Songs of the New Kingdom*, New York, 1974; M.V. FOX, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, Madison, London, 1985; and P. VERNUS, *Chants d'amour de l'Égypte antique*, Paris, 1992.

which are celebrations of sensual, erotic love,⁶ requited or unrequited,⁷ seem to reveal an ancient Egyptian "joy of sex."⁸

But some women were "off limits": One of the claims to upright behavior which a deceased man had to make in the so-called "Negative Confessions" in chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead was, "I have not copulated with a married woman."⁹ Ankhsheshonq warns, "Do not take to yourself a woman whose husband is alive, lest he become your enemy!"¹⁰ and provides very practical reasons for the condemnation of such improper sexual relations, "Do not violate a married woman; he who violates a married woman on the bed will have his wife violated on the ground" and "Do not make love to a married woman; he who makes love to a married woman is killed on her doorstep."¹¹

These practical considerations aside, literary texts advised general discretion in relations between men and women. Ptahotep warned his upper-class, male readers to stay away from the women in the families of their friends and associates, "If you want friendship to endure in the house you enter as master, brother, or friend, in whatever place you enter, beware of approaching the women! Unhappy is the place where it is done (...) A thousand men are turned away from their good; a short moment like a dream, then death comes for having known them (...) He who fails through lust of them, no affair of his can prosper."¹² But it is not only the female relatives of ones friends and associates whom one should respect and avoid. The XVIIIth Dynasty high priest Amenemhat prided himself, "I did not know the servant girl in my father's house; I did not copulate with his maid-servant."¹³ The same claim, not to have taken advantage of one's subordinates, is also found in earlier laudatory biographical inscriptions, such as that of the Middle Kingdom nomarch Amenemhat, "There was no citizen's daughter whom I shamed, no widow whom I oppressed, no farmer whom I drove away, no herdsman whom I turned back."¹⁴ Several such inscriptions

⁶ E.g., "How skilled is she at casting the lasso yet she'll <draw in> no cattle! With her hair she lassos me, with her eye she pulls (me) in, with her thighs she binds, with her seal she sets the brand" (P. Chester Beatty I, 43), translation by Fox (*op. cit.*, p. 73).

⁷ E.g., "The mansion of (my) beloved: Her entry is in the middle of her house, her double-doors are open, her latch-bolt (?) drawn back, and (my) beloved incensed! If only I were appointed doorkeeper, I'd get her angry at me! Then I'd hear her voice when she was incensed (as) a child in fear of her!" (P. Harris 500, 7), translation by Fox (*op. cit.*, p. 14), who refers to the "hidden meaning that tells just what the boy wants to do when he gets inside the house". For another example of "double doors" for labia or woman's thighs, see the passage in the Book of the Night quoted by P.E. Dorman ("Creation on the Potter's Wheel at the Eastern Horizon of Heaven", in E. TEETER, J.A. LARSON (ed.), *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente*, SAOC 58, Chicago, 1999, p. 86; my thanks to Emily Teeter for bringing this

example to my attention): *hpr m Hpry hfd r jh.t 'q m r pr<t> m k&t wbn m r'j.wy jh.t* (coming into being as Khepri, rising toward the horizon, entering the (birth) opening, emerging from the vulva, appearing in the double-leaved door of the horizon).

⁸ See also the erotic papyrus in Turin published by J.A. Omlin (*Der Papyrus 55001 und sein Satirisch-erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften, Catalogo del Museo Egizio di Torino I*, Torino, 1968).

⁹ Confession 19, so translated by C.J. Eyre ("Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt", *JEA* 70, 1984, p. 95).

¹⁰ "Instructions of Onchsheshonqy", 8, 12, translation by M. Lichtheim (*AEL* 3, 1980, p. 166).

¹¹ "Instructions of Onchsheshonqy", 21, 18-19 and 23, 6-7; translations by M. Lichtheim (*ibid.*, *AEL*, p. 176 and p. 177).

¹² "Instructions of Ptahhotep", chapter 18, translation by M. Lichtheim (*AEL* 1, 1973, p. 68).

¹³ A.H. GARDINER, "The Tomb of Amenemhet, high-priest of Amon", *ZÄS* 47, 1910, p. 92, and Tafel I, l. 5.

¹⁴ Tomb 2 at Beni Hasan, biographical inscription, l. 18.

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stress that the wealthy and powerful man who commissioned the inscription used his position to help his district and its inhabitants, not to take advantage of them. "I was a worthy citizen who acted with his arm. I was a great pillar in the Theban nome, a man of standing in the Southland. I nourished [my capital city] in years of misery. Though 400 men were in desperation as a result of [the years of misery], I did not seize a man's daughter, nor did I seize his field."¹⁵

The literary texts also indicate that married people were expected to refrain from sex outside of marriage. For instance, in one of the magical tales told in Papyrus Westcar, the wife of a priest "was enamored of a townsman,"¹⁶ whom she entertained in the garden pavilion on her estate. But the caretaker of that pavilion told her husband, who made a magic wax crocodile which he threw into the pool where the townsman normally bathed. The crocodile came to life, caught the townsman after his tryst with the wife, and carried him off to the depths of the lake. The woman was later executed for her behavior. The New Kingdom story of the Two Brothers begins with the wife of the older brother trying to seduce the younger, unmarried brother. Retribution for her behavior comes finally after several incarnations of brothers and wife and several intrigues by the wife against the life of her husband later, when the younger brother had become king of Egypt and the older brother's wife had become his wife the queen. "The king said: 'Let my great royal officials be brought to me, that I may let them know all that has happened to me.' Then his wife was brought to him. He judged her in their presence, and they gave their assent. His elder brother was brought to him, and he made him crown prince of the whole land."¹⁷ And in a story preserved in a demotic text in Copenhagen,¹⁸ a married man who had had an adulterous affair with his next-door neighbor's wife was told that, as a result, he would die in 40 days; he spent 8 days preparing for his funeral and burial and then sent out messengers (fabricated of wax, just as in the story in Papyrus Westcar) to collect stories by which he would be entertained for the last 32 evenings of his life. Not surprisingly, each of the stories (to the extent that they are preserved) involves extramarital sexual activity.

Documentary texts reflect the same value system. That marital fidelity included sexual fidelity is clear from a Ramesside "letter to the dead" in which a man tried to persuade his deceased wife that he had always treated her properly. Among the claims he made were the fact that he hadn't divorced her as he advanced professionally (and, perhaps, could have married a younger or better connected woman) and hadn't even taken a new woman since her death; but in addition he called attention to the fact that that he hadn't cheated on or mistreated her: "I did not let you suffer discomfort [in] anything I did with you after

¹⁵ First Intermediate Period inscription of Iti quoted from M. Lichtheim (AEL 1, 1973, p. 89).

¹⁶ Translation by W.K. Simpson ("King Cheops and the Magicians", in R.O. FAULKNER, E.F. WENTE, Jr., W.K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, London, 1972, p. 16).

¹⁷ Translation from Lichtheim (AEL 2, 1976, p. 210).

¹⁸ Published by K. Ryholt (*The Carlsberg Papyrus IV: The Story of Petese Son of Petetum and Seventy other Good and Bad Stories*, CNI Publications 23, Copenhagen, 1999).

the manner of a lord, nor did you find me cheating on you after the manner of a field hand, entering a strange house."¹⁹ But these very claims suggest that such marital fidelity was not universal. Certainly the Middle Kingdom gentleman farmer Heqanakht worried that someone might take liberties with his new (?) wife.²⁰ Likewise, the collection of demotic temple oaths in which an individual, usually a woman but occasionally a man, has to swear that she or he has not slept with someone other than their spouse presumably reflects the fact that such behavior did occur.

One demotic text in which a woman swears that she did not commit adultery also reflects the differential use of status designators and personal names to identify someone. That is, when the relationship between two individuals is what determines proper behavior to or by one (or both) of them, then a status designator (whether this is a biological relationship such as mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter; or a legal relationship such as husband, wife) will be used; in other situations involving the same individuals, personal names may be used. Thus, in the demotic text the woman writes that she "came out of the place of my husband"²¹ and later refers to a particular individual named *Pꜣ-šr-Wsjr*, who seems to be this (ex-)husband; when they were married, she used the relationship between them to identify him, but once they were no longer married, she simply referred to him by name.²²

¹⁹ P. Leiden I 371, "What have I done against you? I took you for a wife when I was a youth so that I was with [you] while I was functioning in every office and you were with me. I did not divorce [you], nor did I cause you to be vexed. Now, I took you (for a wife) when I was a youth, and I functioned in every important office for Pharaoh, I.p.h., without my divorcing [you], saying, 'She has got to be with [me],' so I would say. (...) I did not let you suffer discomfort [in] anything I did with you after the manner of a lord, nor did you find me cheating on you after the manner of a field hand, entering a strange house. (...) Now look, I've spent these last three years <since you died> without entering (another) house although it is not proper that one who is in the same situation as I be made to do this. ..."; translation by E.F. Wente (*Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta, 1990, p. 216-217, # 352).

²⁰ For discussion of *hbswt*, literally "covered or clothed female", see W. WARD, *Essays on Feminine Titles of the Middle Kingdom and Related Subjects*, Beirut, 1986, p. 65-69. For a revised identification of this individual, see n. 22.

²¹ I.e., presumably, she divorced him.

²² The text, P. Cairo 95205, was published by El-HUSSEIN ZAGHLOUL, "Demotica From Qasr Ibrim, Marital Problems and Love-Affair in Two Messages Written in

a Single Letter from Ptolemaic Egypt (Papyrus Cairo JE 95205)", *BCPS* 10, 1994, p. 25-45; the interpretation given here is based on discussions among Thomas Dousa, François Gaudard, and myself. This differential use of status designators and personal names to identify someone may also be used to suggest a revised identification of Heqanakht's *hbswt* (see n. 20, above). In the Heqanakht letters one can note that a woman named *Htpt* is of some importance within the family although her position is never spelled out specifically. She is mentioned second only to Heqanakht's mother Ipi as recipient of letter two; she appears after Ipi in greetings of letter one; she appears immediately below Ipi in the ration-list in letter 2; and she and Ipi both have servants. Thus, it is suggested here that she was Heqanakht's *hbswt*, everyone who would have read or heard the letters read knew who she was, and only in those sections where her relationship to Heqanakht was the crucial element was the status designator used. This identification seems preferable to James's original suggestion (T.G.H. JAMES, *The Hekanakhte Papers and Other Early Middle Kingdom Documents*, PMMA 19, New York, 1962, p. 12) that Iutenhab, who is never mentioned in the greetings and for whom there are no rations included in the ration-list, was Heqanakht's *hbswt*.

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It's not always clear whether claims of improper sexual activity reflect examples of adultery (consensual behavior) or rape (non-consensual behavior).²³ In one fairly clear Ramesside example, an unmarried²⁴ woman was having an ongoing affair with a married man. People (perhaps relatives of the man's wife) came to beat up the woman and her relatives but were chased off; the writer of the ostrakon which tells us about the incident²⁵ warns the woman that she won't be so lucky next time and advises, "As for Nesamenemope, why did you accept him as your sexual partner [and so] gain for yourself adversaries? (...) If this man yearns for you, let [him] enter the court together with his wife and let him swear off [her (his wife)] and come to your house." That is, the problem is that he's married and thus should not be carrying on in this fashion; he must be forced to choose between his wife and his lover. But if he refuses to choose, then the woman is warned that she must modify her behavior and not accept him openly in her home, "But if not, he will be the one who has to find the way for you to put your lips in touch with his lips." An example of a man who refused to break off an affair, despite swearing an oath to do so, is preserved in another Ramesside document;²⁶ in this case, the man even got his married lover pregnant. And if we accept the suggestion of William Ward²⁷ that the Middle Kingdom notable Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan had children by the estate's "sealbearer" and later, perhaps after the death of his wife, married her, we have an example from the higher levels of society.

By contrast, the sexual activities of unmarried persons, whether they had never been married or were divorced or widowed, were not the subject of ethical or moral literature.²⁸

²³ Thus, it is unclear whether the claims being made in P. Turin 1887 (A.H. GARDINER, *Ramesseide Administrative Documents*, Oxford, 1948, p. 74, l. 11) and P. Salt (Sch. ALLAM, *Hieratische Ostaka und Papyri aus der Ramessidenzeit*, URAÄ 1, Tübingen, 1973, #266) is that the accused men seduced and slept with a series of married women or that they raped them. Since it is claimed in Papyrus Salt that Pshy slept with one of these women twice, at two different times (while she was with two different husbands), it is possible that all were examples of adultery. For a good discussion of the criminal aspects of adultery, see C.J. EYRE, "Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt", *JEA* 70, 1984, p. 92-105. Biographical inscriptions such as those discussed above in which men claim, virtuously, that they did not seize or shame a peasant's daughter or sleep with a maidservant in their (father's) home are not talking about adultery or "illegal" sexual activity between "consenting unmarried adults" but rather about rape—the abuse of power.

²⁴ Perhaps widowed or divorced, if the editor's (J.J. JANSEN, "Marriage Problems and Public Reactions", in J. BAINES, I.G.H. JAMES, A. LEAHY, A.F. SHORE [ed.], *Pyramid Studies and other Essays presented to I. E. S. Edwards*, London, 1988, p. 137) suggestion that the writer of the ostrakon was her daughter is correct.

²⁵ P. British Museum 10416; translation from E.F. Wente (*Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta, 1990, #331, p. 203).

²⁶ P. Deir el-Medina 27 (Sh. ALLAM, *op. cit.*, 272). In this case, a workman was found by a simple laborer sleeping with the laborer's wife. The workman was eventually forced to swear an oath to stay away from her, but soon got her pregnant, instead. Whether his second oath, demanded this time by his own father, had any greater effect is unknown.

²⁷ W. WARD, *GöttMisz* 71, 1984, p. 51-59

²⁸ The "Instruction of Any" advises, "Beware of a woman who is a stranger, one not known in her town; don't stare at her when she goes by. Do not know her carnally. A deep water whose course is unknown, such is a woman away from her husband. 'I am pretty,' she tells you daily, when she has no witnesses; she is ready to ensnare you, a great deadly crime when it is heard. ..."; translation from M. Lichtheim (*AEL* 2, 1976, p. 137). But here the advice is not "don't stare at pretty girls and don't sleep with them" but, rather, "beware of the stranger" and, especially, "beware of the woman stranger who can be assumed to be married and, far from her family and her husband, trying to lead you into an immoral act".

not the turning point of literary tales, and did not figure directly in documentary texts. Indeed, the one class of Egyptian literature which seems to focus on the sexual behavior of young, "unattached" individuals is the New Kingdom love songs, mentioned above, which sing the praises of non-marital, evidently premarital sex.²⁹ They were composed as monologues, spoken by either a young man or a young woman. In several cases it is clear that the speaker and the object of his or her desire are still living in their parental homes and in at least one case the young lover dreams the final outcome of the romance to be marriage.³⁰ One of the societal concerns with sexual activity outside of marriage would be the birth of children "out of wedlock." Egyptian women knew, and used, fairly effective methods for contraception and abortion,³¹ which would have helped limit unwanted offspring. Whether there was any custom in ancient Egypt comparable to the "shotgun marriage," in which a woman first proved her fertility and then her man "did right" by her, cannot be completely excluded.

The status of children born "out of wedlock" is interesting. Since the state did not concern itself with the family and family matters ("social" documents, and specifically those involving economic arrangements within a marriage, were not registered; whom a person married, or even whether a person was married, was irrelevant to that person's interactions with the state), there was no concept of official "illegitimacy" which would preclude a person from holding a specific job or serving in a specific position (status was, at least theoretically, achieved, not ascribed). Acknowledgement, and therefore support, of children born to a man by a woman other than his wife would appear to have been an individual decision, influenced certainly by family and society, but not by the state. To the extent that such children were acknowledged by their father, they might participate fully in society, as did Khnumhotep II's son Khnumhotep IV.

Another case which has frequently been interpreted as a man acknowledging his "out of wedlock" children is preserved in the New Kingdom text known as the Adoption Papyrus.³² The husband in a childless couple adopted his wife as his daughter (making her eligible to inherit his personal, non-joint, property, which otherwise would have reverted to his siblings at his death); she subsequently adopted three children born to a serving woman who had worked for the family, stressing that they had always treated her, and continued to treat her, with all proper love and respect. The oldest of these three children, a girl, married her younger brother. Since the name of the father of these children is never given, it has been suggested that the husband was the father and that, whether or not he had sired children by the serving woman with his wife's prior approval, the children had come to be considered children of the entire family.

²⁹ References to apparently premarital sex, without guilt, also occur in biographical inscriptions, e.g., in Hekaib, "I passed my childhood (*hꜛd*) and my youth (*nꜛs*), I lived at my ease, I enjoyed myself (*iꜛ'ib*), I spent pleasant moments with women ..." (A.H. GARDINER, "Inscriptions

from the tomb of Si-renpowet I, prince of Elephantine", ZÄS 45, 1908, p. 130).

³⁰ See M.V. FOX, *Love Songs*, 1992, p. 22-23.

³¹ J.M. RIDDLE, *Contraception & Abortion*, Cambridge, 1992.

³² Published by A.H. GARDINER, "Adoption Extraordinary", JEA 26, 1940, p. 23-29.

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Perhaps worth considering here are the First Intermediate Period individuals from Naga-ed-Deir who claim that they were raised up "from the back of the house."³³ It is not clear what this terminology actually means, but one, of several, possible scenarios would have them born "out of wedlock," raised by their mother, whether or not they were acknowledged by their fathers and whether or not their father ever later married their mother.

Children not acknowledged by their fathers would probably have had a harder time advancing in life (despite the situation portrayed in the New Kingdom literary tale of Truth and Falsehood, where a boy born "out of wedlock" who did not know who his father was was sent to the best of schools and, despite teasing, became an accepted member of the coming generation of elite males who would run the country). In the Late Period a number of children who were somehow "given" to the temple are identified by their name, their mother's name, and, in place of their father's name, the statement "I don't know his name." One may suggest that, without a father who had acknowledged them, they did not have an advocate who could ensure that they got schooling and moved ahead in the world. Thus, they were "given" to the temple, which, in return for their service in the temple, would act "in lieu" of their father, supporting them, training them, and getting them into the workforce.

One of the things which may seem most surprising from the modern European or Judaeo-Christian perspective is that, despite the claim³⁴ that "concern for the virginity of unmarried girls is ubiquitous in the ancient world," there is no evidence in Egyptian documentary or literary materials of any concern with virginity. It is not even easy to find a word in Egyptian which means "virgin."³⁵ Most of the words which have been so translated (*'ddt*, *rmt*, and *ḥwnt* are translated "Jungfrau" in the *Wörterbuch*) are actually simply feminine nouns derived from relatively common masculine nouns which indicate young person, youth. The exact age-nuance of neither the masculine nor the feminine nouns is certain. In the Golenischeff onomasticon there is a list of words which, as Gardiner noted,³⁶ "refer to differences of age, sex and status among human beings (...)". The first three entries in this list (295-297) identify three ages of males: *s* "man", *mnḥ* "youth, stripling," and *jw* "old

³³ Published by D. DUNHAM, *Naga-ed-Deir Stelae of the First Intermediate Period*, London, 1937), stela #69 & 78, the latter translated in M. LICHTHEIM, *AEL* 1, 1973, p. 84-85.

³⁴ J. COLLINS, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism", in L.G. PERDUE *et al.* (ed.), *Families in Ancient Israel*, Louisville, 1997, p. 143.

³⁵ It should be noted, as Robert Ritner reminded me, that in the lamp divinations preserved in the late Roman magical spells, when the magician used an assistant he used a "pure young boy before he has gone who has not yet gone with a woman" (*ḥm-ḥl* or *j w'b iw bw-ir-tw-sj sin irm s-hm.t*) (Papyrus Magical, 3, 11, published by E.L. GRIFFITH, H. THOMPSON, *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*, London,

1904. P. Salt (Sh. ALLAM, *Hiégyptische Ostraka und Papyrus aus der Ramessidenzeit*, URAÄ 1, Tübingen, 1973, #266) records the claim not only that *Pz-nby* slept with various married women, but that he and his son both also slept with the daughter of one of them. Whether the implied extra criticism of this act was tied to the fact that the daughter was quite young (nothing is said about the ages of the men or the women involved) or merely that it was "weird" to sleep with both mother and daughter or for father and son to sleep with the same woman, is not specified. Certainly, no term is used which can be understood as a claim that the girl's virginity was compromised.

³⁶ *AEO* 1, *214.

man." For the first two the list then provides (298-299) the corresponding terms for women: *st* "woman" and *nfr(t)* "young woman, lit., beautiful one". Following an entry (300) *tp šbnw* "various person(s)," come *ʿdd* "boy", *nḥn* "child, from infancy upwards," *rn* "lad" and *mw(t)* "maiden." Gardiner's translations, quoted here, show that he considered both *nḥn* and *ʿdd* could refer to quite young children, a conclusion supported by the phrases *ʿdd šrj* and *ʿddt šrjt*³⁷ "little boy" and "little girl." However, the term *ʿdd* could also be used to refer to people who had reached maturity; it is the term translated "young" in the passage from the "Instructions of Any" quoted at the beginning of this paper, "Take a wife while you are young." And it is the corresponding feminine form *ʿddt* which is used in P. d'Orbigny 10, 5, to refer to the "wife" and "companion" made for Bata, of whom it was said that she was, "more beautiful in body than any woman in the whole land" and that "he desired her very much."³⁸ Although she was made specifically for Bata, and therefore would have been a virgin, the description given stresses her attractiveness and desirability, not her virginity.

The third term from the onomasticon, *mnt/mwt*, is used as the equivalent of Greek *παρθένως* in the Ptolemaic trilingual Decree of Canopus in reference to a deceased, deified daughter of Ptolemy III, but to the extent that *παρθένως* means "virgin" rather than "young" or "unmarried woman," this may reflect a Greek concern with virginity and hardly proves that the (original) meaning of the Egyptian word was anything more than young, unmarried girl, girl of marriageable age.³⁹ Both the abnormal hieratic and demotic examples of the term have been translated "Jungfrau" or "virgin," based on comparison with the Greek. However, the contexts do not require such a meaning. For example, the term is used by Apollonios, son of Glaukias, brother of Ptolemaios, the catechos at Saqqara, to describe one of the twin sisters living at the Serapeum whom Ptolemaios had taken under his wing. Apollonios recorded a dream of having sex with this girl and then asking if she were upset. Although the meaning virgin would give sense to the dream, a more general meaning such as "young woman," or even "(attractive) young woman who has reached sexual maturity, who has reached the age of marriage" would also fit.⁴⁰ In P. Louvre 7846, a "marriage-related property settlement" from the reign of Amasis, the standard phrase *šp n šhm.t* "gift of a woman" (the list of the property given to a woman as a gift at her marriage) is replaced by the phrase *šp mw.t šhm.t*. The editor, Donker van Heel, interpreted the phrase as the "gift received by the bride on account of her virginity". But because the text which contains this phrase "was drawn up to replace a similar document written seven years previously, probably because children had been born in the meantime (...), this virginity

³⁷ *Wb* 1, 242, 14-16, 19; the examples of *ʿddt šri(t)* occur in addresses of Late Ramesside Letters (#3, vo. 9; #8, l. 14; for reference, see L.H. LESKO, *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian* 1, Berkeley, 1982, p. 97, where a woman and her "little girl" are mentioned.

³⁸ Translation from M. Lichtheim (*AEL* 2, 1976, p. 207).

³⁹ That the Coptic descendant *ποογυε* is given in W.E. CRUM, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford, 1939, p. 306b, as n.m. "virgin, virginity," again corresponding to Greek *παρθένως*, also does not provide evidence for the original Egyptian meaning of the term.

⁴⁰ P. Bologna 3171, published by G. Bortti (*Testi Demotici* 1, Florence, 1941).

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was a thing of the past. In my view the 'virginity-gift' also featured in the original document from which this passage was taken over (...).⁴¹ A simpler explanation is to take the phrase to mean "gift of/to/for a marriageable woman."

Indeed, other Ptolemaic and Roman examples of the term *mnwt* place such women in contexts with sexual implications where a meaning such as "(attractive, available, unmarried) young woman" would appear to fit better than "virgin." They appear, for instance, in hymns to Hathor, goddess of love and sex.⁴² One of the hymns to Hathor at Philae from the Roman period includes the passage, "Men and women beg you to give them love, and *mnwt* open the ceremonies for you, giving you their *šj*."⁴³ You are mistress of praise, mistress of the dance, great of love, mistress of women (*hmwt*) and beautiful ones (*nfrwt*). You are mistress of drunkenness at numerous festivals." Drunken revelry and dancing also appear in the hymn from Medamud addressed to Hathor as the returning eye of the sun, "When the royal children pacify you with what is desired, the officials consecrate offerings to you. When the lector exalts you in intoning a hymn, the magician reads the rituals. When the organizer praises you with his lotus blooms, the percussionists take up the tamborine. The *mnwt* rejoice for you with garlands, the *hwnwt*⁴⁴ with the wreath-crown. The drunken celebrants drum for you during the cool of the night, with the result that those who awaken bless you."⁴⁵ The autobiographical text found on the Ptolemaic sarcophagus lid of Wennefer includes what appears to be reference to a Hathor festival, "I fulfilled my life on earth in heart's content, by the grace of the gods; no worry entered the room I was in. No sorrow arose in my dwelling. Singers and *mnwt* gathered together, made acclaim like that of Meret, braided, beautiful, tressed, high-bosomed, priestesses richly adorned. Anointed with myrrh, perfumed with lotus, their heads garlanded with wreaths, all together drunk with wine. Fragrant with the plants of Punt, they danced in beauty, doing my heart's wish, their rewards were on their limbs. I followed my heart inside the garden, I roamed the marshes as I wished."⁴⁶ The imagery here certainly corresponds with that of the Hathor hymns, but much of it (beautiful ones, those with braided hair⁴⁷ and firm breasts) is the same vocabulary found in P. Westcar in the passage describing the attributes of the young women chosen to dress in fish-nets and take the bored king rowing

⁴¹ *Abnormal Hieratic and Early Demotic Texts collected by the Theban Choachytes in the Reign of Amasis I*, Leiden, 1995, p. 129, n. V, and n. 7. For the function of the gift, guaranteeing the woman wherewithal in case of divorce, see Donker van Heel and the references cited by him.

⁴² These examples were called to my attention by Pascale Teyssie, who wrote her dissertation entitled *The Portrayal of Women in the Ancient Egyptian Tale*, for Yale University (1998).

⁴³ Translated "esprit protecteur" by Fr. Daumas ("Les Propylées du temple d'Hathor à Philae et le culte de

la déesse", ZÄS 95, 1968, p. 11), from whose translation this translation is taken.

⁴⁴ See below.

⁴⁵ Translated, with commentary, by J.C. Darnell ("Hathor Returns to Medamūd", SAK 22, 1995, p. 47-94; quotation from p. 54).

⁴⁶ Translation from M. Lichtheim (AEL 3, 1980, p. 56).

⁴⁷ On the sexual implications of hair, see S.-A. NAGUIB, "Hair in Ancient Egypt", *Acta Orientalia* 51, 1990, p. 7-26, and extensive literature quoted there.

on the lake.⁴⁸ And it was the term *nfrt* "beautiful, young, unmarried, and potentially available" which was used in the Golenischeff onomasticon as the contrast with *st* "grown woman, married, unavailable." Are *mnwt/nfrwt* young and sexually alluring?, yes; are they virginal?, it remains unspecified.

The last term translated "Jungfrau" in the *Wörterbuch*, *hwnt*, occurs in the Medamūd Hathor hymn quoted above in distinction to the *mnwt*. *Hwnt* was used as an epithet of the goddesses Hathor, Nephthys, and Isis. It was used in a Ptolemaic stela to describe Taimhotep, wife of Psherenptah, the high priest of Ptah at Memphis; it was used in the New Kingdom inscription of Queen Hatshepsut to refer to her mother, who was already the wife of Hatshepsut's father.⁴⁹ And already in the Pyramid Texts, *hwnt* seems to refer not to an "unmarried woman" or "virgin" but, quite the opposite, to a sexually mature and fertile woman, "I will make it for you, this shout of acclaim, O my father, because you have no human fathers and you have no human mothers; your father is the Great Wild Bull, your mother is the Maiden."⁵⁰

Another description which has been taken to refer to virginity is found in Late Period mythological and cult texts where two women who are *w' b h' nn wp=sn* "pure of body, without having been opened" are brought to fill the roles of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys.⁵¹ But the goddesses Isis and Nephthys were both married women (married to Osiris and Seth, respectively) and the "opening" of a woman could, in theory, refer not only to sexual intercourse but menstruation and childbirth. Indeed, the expression *wp h.t* "to open the body/belly/womb" is found as a designation of a first-born child.⁵² The same usage is found in Papyrus Westcar in the story of Snefru and the beautiful lady rowers,⁵³ "Let there be brought to me twenty women, the most beautiful in form, with hair well braided, with firm breasts, not yet having opened up to give birth." Thus, a "woman who has not been opened" could be a woman who has never given birth,⁵⁴ not a woman who is a virgin.⁵⁵

Although it has been claimed that a category of Late Period priestesses entitled "chantresses of the interior of Amun"⁵⁶ remained unmarried virgins ("married to the god"),

⁴⁸ "Let there be brought to me twenty women, with the shapeliest bodies, breasts, and braids, who have not yet given birth. Also let there be brought to me twenty nets and give these nets to these women in place of their clothes!", translation by M. Lichtheim (AEL 1, 1973, p. 216).

⁴⁹ *Urk.* IV, 218, 16-219, 3.

⁵⁰ *Pyr.* 809; similarly *Pyr.* 728; translation from R.O. FAULKNER, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Oxford, 1969, p. 145.

⁵¹ P. Bremner-Rhind, 1, 2-3; translated "pure of body and virgin" by id., "The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus-I", *JEA* 22, 1936, p. 122.

⁵² *Wb* I, 300.

⁵³ 5, 11; translation by W.K. SIMPSON, "King Cheops and the Magician", in R.O. FAULKNER, E.F. WENTE,

Jr. W.K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, London, 1972, p. 20.

⁵⁴ As already R.K. RITNER, "A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection", *JNES* 43, 1984, p. 214, although he unnecessarily added that the women brought to row for Snefru were virgins; he includes a general discussion of "opening" and "closing" of the uterus.

⁵⁵ Although using *wp* to refer to the sexual "opening" of a virgin is also attested; see R.K. RITNER, "The Wives of Horus and the Philinna Papyrus (PGM XX)", in W. CLARYSSE, A. SCHOORS, H. WILLEMS (ed.), *Egyptian Religion. The Last Thousand Years, Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, OLA 85, Leuven, 1998, p. 1027-1041, especially p. 1032.

⁵⁶ *hsywt nt hwn n 'lmn*.

this claim is not borne out by the data. Rather, there is clear evidence that at least some of these women married and had children. It has also been assumed that Egyptian ritual purity (*w'ḥ* "cleanliness") must include chastity, at least for women, but again there is no evidence to support this assumption. The Late Period Divine Votaries and God's Wives of Amun, who were daughters and sisters of the ruling king appointed by their fathers to act as "ruler" of the Thebaid on behalf of the king himself, have been cited as examples of ritual virginity. But there is some evidence that at least one of the God's Wives, Amunirdis II, daughter of Taharka, was married and had at least one son, and New Kingdom women who served as Divine Votaries and God's Wives were the (great royal) wives of the ruling king.⁵⁷

Egyptian texts make it clear that the Egyptians shared values based on achieved status, respect for superiors, equals, subordinates, and for people outside the power structure, including women; the state, as such, did not intervene to enforce morality. Morality defined acceptable behavior, rights and responsibilities, based on position. Many Egyptian tombs, statues, and stelae stress the importance of family, the closeness of husband and wife. People were expected to make a personal commitment (and make it early so that there would be children) and, once they had made that commitment, they were expected to stick by it.⁵⁸ There does not seem to have been a great deal of concern with what happened before that commitment had been made, and suggesting the kinds of concern with virginity, chastity, and sex as guilt stressed in the modern European Judaeo-Christian world may have influenced the way Egyptologists have read and understood Egyptian texts.

For fuller discussion of the supposed virginity and chastity of the chantresses and God's Wives, see now F. FLEHIC, "Celibacy and Adoption among God's Wives of Amun and Singers in the Temple of Amun: A Re-examination of the Evidence", in E. TEETER, J.A. LARSON

(ed.), *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente*, SAOC 58, Chicago, 2000, p. 405-414, and the many references cited there.

⁵⁸ Or, formally break that commitment and release others involved in it.