



GENDER TRANSFORMATION IN DEATH:

A Case Study of Coffins from Ramesside Period Egypt

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According to ancient texts, literate and educated Egyptians believed that creation and regeneration specifically belonged to the male gender. Men were thought to be responsible for offspring from a sexual union, not women (Roth 2000). Egyptian mythologies dealing with rebirth after death were also highly masculinized (Zandee 1992). In the ancient Egyptian mindset, only male divine beings such as Atum, Osiris, or Re had access to the powers of creation or resurrection (Bryan 1996; Roth 2000). Goddesses were believed to be protective vessels.

Atum, who dwelled at Heliopolis, was thought by the ancient Egyptians to have created himself, and the entire world, through an act of sex with himself. Once this act was complete, he sneezed out a void, separating himself from the primeval matter of chaos. The most ancient colossal statuary from all of Egypt depicts a god in this act of masturbation, which for the ancient Egyptians represented the most sacred moment of the first creation. These statues come from a pre-Dynastic cult center, over five thousand years old, in the Egyptian city of Coptos (fig. 1). This male sexual act was thought to be so potent in generating new life that the Egyptians made it a practice to remove the hands and phalluses from their enemy dead,

lest they resurrect themselves to wreak havoc on their killers (fig. 2).

Death and Masculine Regeneration

The ancient Egyptians went another step and brought notions of masculine potency into their own funerary beliefs. They thought that their dead needed to actually transform into manifestations of the gods of creation and regeneration—Atum, Osiris, and Re—in order to harness the powers of masculine sexuality and be reborn into the next world. This solution worked well for the men of ancient Egypt, whose bodies naturally contained such regenerative power, but such a physical notion of rebirth was obviously problematic for Egyptian women. The Egyptians were very much aware of these gender problems, and they developed a number of solutions to address them.

Although one might assume today that an Egyptian woman could have associated herself with a powerful goddess such as Isis, mistress of magic, or Hathor, goddess of the western necropolis, the Egyptians did not make a connection between a dead woman and a goddess until the Greco-Roman period (Smith 1987, 130; Riggs and Stadler 2003). During Dynastic times, the Egyptians believed that a dead woman needed to

become a god of masculine virility, since a goddess lacked the creative spark needed to be reborn. Because of this, ancient Egyptian women had to contend with a variety of innovative and nuanced adaptations to their gender when preparing for death.

Essentially, Egyptian women had to shift their gender and “masculinize” themselves to enter the Fields of Peace and other realms of the afterlife (Roth 2000). These gender alterations therefore had to be included in an elite Egyptian woman’s funerary equipment, particularly her coffin. The Egyptian coffin was an excellent vehicle to transform the woman (or the man, for that matter) into versions of Osiris, Re, and Atum

Fig. 1 (right). A colossal statue from the ancient Egyptian city of Coptos showing the god Min engendering his own creation, ca. 3200 B.C.E. Now in Oxford, England, Ashmolean Museum. Accession number 1894.105e. Photo courtesy of Katherine Wodehouse of the Ashmolean Museum.

Fig. 2 (below). Piles of phalluses of enemy dead presented to the god Amen-Re by King Ramesses III, represented in a relief from the first court of the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, Luxor Egypt. Photo by Art Muir.



(Taylor 2001, 214–17). The coffin was believed to modify the very essence of the dead person. The deceased was called Osiris in the sacred hieroglyphs. Artisans also inscribed the coffin with a variety of underworld texts, particularly the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 B.C.E.) or the Book of the Dead of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.E.), both of which explicitly likened the dead to masculine gods of creation and helped them find their way on their perilous journey.

The coffin permitted the female individual a kind of impermanent gender shift that allowed her to become temporarily like the gods Osiris, Atum, and Re, in order to use their powers of transformation to become an eternal, pure being—an *akh* soul. The *akh* was believed to be one of the “blessed dead,” an individual who had successfully passed the tribunal and moved as an effective and protected spirit into the afterlife (Taylor 2001, 31–32). When the woman finally reached this blessed state, funerary images suggest that she returned to her feminine self, her true form for all eternity. Essentially, the same was true for men, who joined with Osiris temporarily, in order to become an *akh* spirit, only to return to a transcendent human-like form.

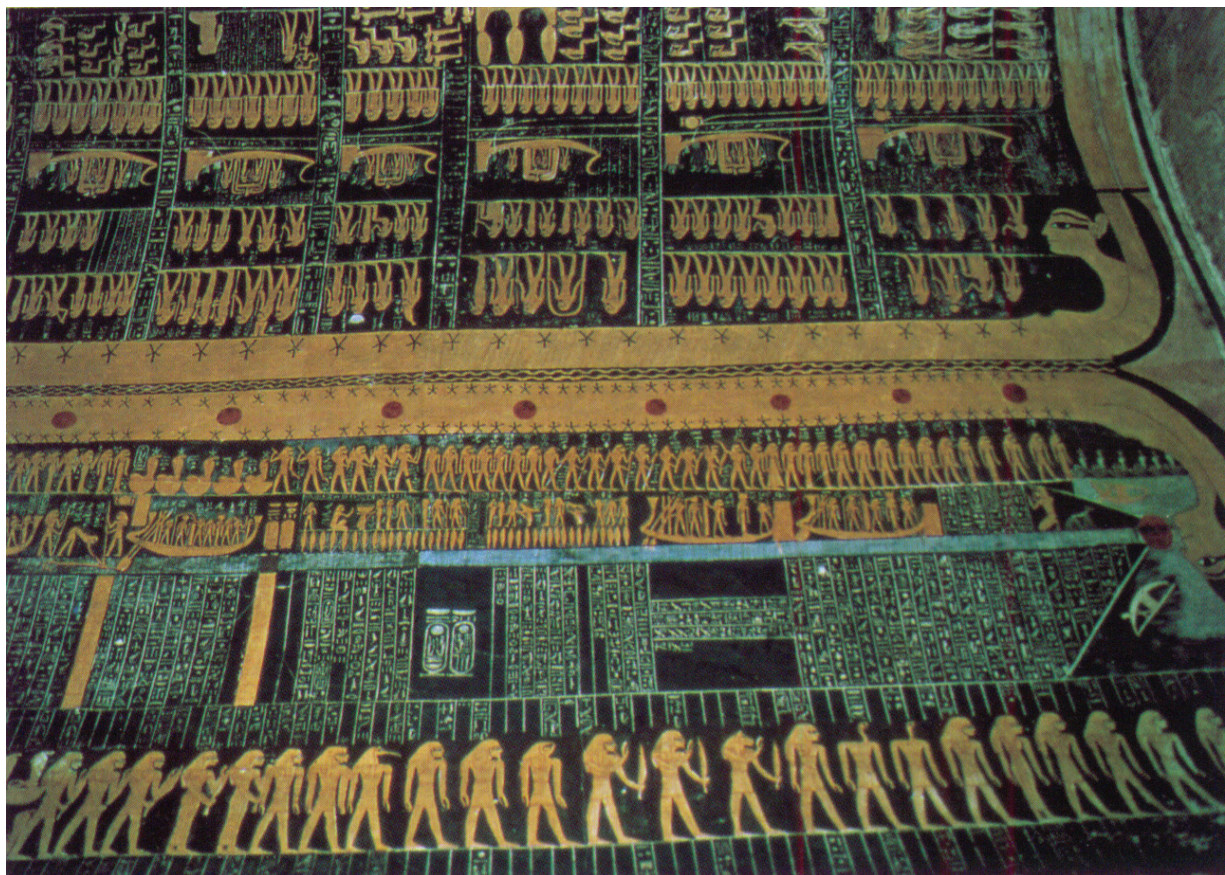
With this as background, in this article I will examine the

profound link between gender and rebirth in the Egyptian mindset and how funerary objects, particularly body containers, expressed this belief system for the ancient Egyptians. Ramesside period (1295–1069 B.C.E.) coffins will serve as the main examples (for a catalogue of Ramesside coffins, see Cooney 2007, 397–484).

The Solar and Osirian Cycles

So why did the ancient Egyptians connect masculinity so intimately to creation and resurrection? Further, why did the goddesses lack these powers? From the very beginnings of Egyptian civilization, divine creation and rebirth had a sexual subtext. As early as 3,000 B.C.E., an ithyphallic (i.e., with an erect penis) creator-god was depicted in statue form in the ancient cult site of Coptos (see fig. 1). As early as the Old Kingdom (2686–2125 B.C.E.), the god Atum was described in funerary literature as “self-created” through an explicit act of masturbation, and he was said to create the next generation of gods through acts of ejaculation, sneezing, and spitting (Allen 1988; Zandee 1992). A female entity—his hand, *djeret* in Egyptian and a feminine word—helped Atum create himself by acting as stimulant and vessel.

Fig. 3. A depiction of the sun-god as a red disc setting into the western horizon and entering into the mouth of his mother Nut (in the lower right of the photograph) in the tomb of Ramesses VI in the Valley of the Kings, Luxor, Egypt, Twentieth Dynasty. Photo by the author.



Atum was the first known creator-god in the Egyptian pantheon, but he was also a solar deity, and the daily cycle of the sun can be seen as a sexualized male creation through union with the sky-goddess Nut (Allen 1988, 5–6; Assmann 2005, 172–74). Atum was considered a manifestation of the evening sun, which would die but remained full of potentiality for rebirth. When the sun set in the west, Atum entered the mouth of the sky-goddess Nut, whose body was thought to contain the *duat*, or “netherworld.” This essentially planted the seed of conception and Atum’s reborn self within his own mother (fig. 3).

The ancient Egyptians understood these gods as models for their dead. The deceased needed to actually become Atum or the sun-god, Re, and this sacred transformation was thought to grant the dead the ability to create their own rebirth from death. This divine claim is made very clear in chapter 79 of the Book of the Dead, in which the deceased states:

I am Atum who made the sky and created what exists, who came forth from the earth, who created seed, Lord of All, who fashioned the gods, the Great God, the self-created, the Lord of Life, who made the Ennead to flourish. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 109)

Another creator-god, Osiris, was thought to have the same potentiality for resurrection. After his murder and dismemberment by his brother Seth, his consort and sister Isis reassembled him. Osiris was then able to re-create himself through a sexual act with himself, the same act of masturbation used by Atum at the first moment of creation. Isis provided sexual excitement, but it was Osiris who essentially raised himself from the dead (fig. 4). Isis created the enclosure for Osiris’s rebirth—his mummy wrappings—and she acted as the vessel for the conception of their son, Horus. But Isis was *not* thought to bring Osiris back to life; instead, she manifested a situation in which he could bring *himself* back to life. Because of Osiris’s potentiality for life from death, the ancient Egyptians also linked the rebirth of the human dead to the Osirian cycle.

Gender, Power, and Resurrection

The solar and Osirian versions of regeneration did not compete with one another but were complementary. In chapter 69 of the Book of the Dead, the deceased links his rejuvenation directly to divine masculine sexuality by claiming to be a number of creator-gods, both Osirian and solar:

I am Osiris, Lord of Persons, alive of breast, strong of hinder-parts, stiff of phallus, who is within the bound-

Fig. 4. A so-called “corn mummy” placed in a Late Period tomb, representing Osiris ready to bring about his own resurrection. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo by Art Muir with permission from Yasmin el-Shazly of the Egyptian Museum Cairo.



ary of the common folk. I am Orion who treads his land, who precedes the stars of the sky which are on the body of my mother Nut, who conceived me at her desire and bore me at her will. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 107)

Both Atum and Osiris used their masculine potency to manifest new life. The Book of the Dead (ch. 82) actually links power in the afterlife specifically to masculine sexuality, particularly by providing a connection to Atum of Heliopolis:

Those who are in Heliopolis bow their heads to me, for I am their lord, I am their bull. I am mightier than the Lord of Terror; I copulate and I have power over myriads. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, pl. 27)

These texts make it quite clear that the ancient Egyptians understood the male sexual act as *the* process that allowed rebirth. Essentially, it reunited the disparate parts of a person, or a god, into a complete whole after death (or before creation). That is why we see these sexual acts represented in funerary literature and art. Atum’s sexual act occurred just at that moment of bare self-awareness, before he understood his entire being and before he had fully created his own body. The sun-god’s sexual act with his mother, Nut, happened at the very moment of his death in the western horizon, when he was dissolving and fading. The sexual act of Osiris with Isis happened after his death, after his body was dismembered, physically fragmented, and then magically reunited. The sexual act was believed to reconstitute and reawaken the god.

In the same Osirian-solar mythologies of rebirth and creation, the female element took on the role of aggressive protector, helper, and empty vessel. Although the goddesses Isis, Nut, and Hathor excited the male with feminine presence, provided sustenance, protected him from harm, reconstituted his shape, and contained him in a womb, they were not believed to be responsible for the spark of creation that gave new life (Bryan 1996; Roth 2000). In Egyptian funerary literature, nourishment usually came from a female source (Assmann 2005, 223–24), suggesting an intimate connection between the consumption of food and subsequent masculine sexual activity. In the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 B.C.E.), this female source of sustenance was often fashioned into a small statuette of a young, partially naked woman carrying beer, bread, and fowl, which was placed into the tomb. In the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.E.), artisans sometimes painted the tree-goddess onto the anthropoid coffin lid, particularly during the Ramesside Period, and she was thought to nourish the deceased with bread and water (fig. 5). Female divine power was therefore believed to be a necessary, active, and dynamic component of the resurrection process—albeit as an enclosure, a nurturer, not as the seed.

Interestingly, ancient Egypt was not the only ancient culture to connect transformation with masculinity. Creation and rebirth were male prerogatives in other ancient belief systems as well. For example, in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, a version of which was found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene that she must be masculine to become reborn: “For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Hopkins 2000, 322). Wholly disconnected from Egypt, according to the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, a woman must become a man briefly, just so that she can attain her enlightenment and reach nirvana (Peach 2002).

Adaptations for the Rebirth of the Ancient Egyptian Woman

Egyptian mythologies of rebirth focused on masculine creator-gods, and the deceased female essentially required a male divine identity to be reborn. This created problems for elite Egyptian women and encouraged a great deal of ingenious and innovative adaptation in their funerary art. Elite artisans, priests, and patrons (male and female) were aware of the problem of female rebirth, and they offered many possible solutions. First, they associated the female deceased with Osiris by combining her name with the god’s in coffin inscriptions. As early as the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2181 B.C.E.), the names of the dead, whether they were male or female, were combined with the name of Osiris, as Osiris + the personal name (Assmann 2005, 74). In other words, the name of a Ramesside woman named Henut-mehyt would be inscribed on her coffin and other funerary objects as “Osiris-Henut-mehyt” (see fig.

6 below). She was not called Isis-Henut-mehyt, because Isis was not thought to have the necessary regenerative powers. The renaming of the deceased as Osiris + the personal name suggests a kind of metamorphosis. In other words, the human being had to undergo a transformation by joining with a god

who was capable of creating existence from nothing, or life after death. Artisans depicted Osiris’s consorts and protectors Isis and Nephthys at the foot and head of the coffin—as if the dead person inside were the god Osiris himself. Artisans and scribes also equated the female individual to the sun-god through invocations, by providing her with solarizing skin colors (gold or dark red), or by naming Nut

as the mother of the deceased in the central text panel. Scribes also used the masculine pronouns “he” and “him” instead of the feminine “she” and “her” in transformative funerary inscriptions written onto the coffin.

The form of the coffin was also important. During the Old and Middle Kingdoms (2686–1650 B.C.E.), when rectangular coffins were in vogue, the shape of the coffin did not contribute to a gender identification. However, by the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.E.) people were using anthropoid coffins, which pictured the deceased in his or her bodily form. This posed a particular problem for the female dead because their gender was now more obvious. What was the solution? The female’s burial had to follow the patterns of her male counterparts in inscription, form, and style, with only a few decorative markers that gave notice to her female gender. Artisans provided elite women of the New Kingdom and thereafter with an androgynous but still human-shaped mummy case that provided the dead female with a new and fully bound Osirian body for her transformation.

The Egyptian Coffin as a Means of Divinizing the Deceased

There were no clear rules for the artisans who made funerary objects, but some adaptations were standard on coffins made for Egyptian women, in particular the association of the dead female with Osiris after her death, as Osiris + personal name (e.g., Osiris Henut-mehyt). This connection with Osiris allowed the dead woman to become not only masculine but also divine, providing her with regenerative powers like a creator-god. The coffin offered the ideal means of divinizing the deceased—at least for those elites who could afford one. This wooden container surrounded the dead individual with texts and scenes that remade him or her into the image of a god (Taylor 2001, 214–17; Cooney 2007, 18–21). The coffin can be understood as the chief material manifestation, for the elite people who could buy them, of a kind of assimilation into Osiris.

The main purpose of the coffin was to identify the deceased with a god of creation. The high-value coffin set of Henut-mehyt of the Nineteenth Dynasty (fig. 6), for example, pro-

“Egyptian mythologies of rebirth focused on masculine creator-gods.”

Fig. 5 (below). A detail on feet of the New Kingdom coffin of Sennedjem, a Theban artisan, showing the tree-goddess providing bread and water to the deceased. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Accession number JE 27308. Photo by author with permission from Yasmin el-Shazly of the Egyptian Museum Cairo. (The coffin is pictured upside down.)



Fig. 6 (above). The coffin set of Henut-mehyt, a wealthy Theban woman. Now in London at the British Museum. Accession number EA 48001. Photo by author with permission from John H. Taylor of the British Museum.



vided the deceased female owner with a set of nesting Osirian bound bodies that, unlike human flesh, would not decay because they were made of wood and gold. The inner coffin and mummy board in this set were fully gilded, providing Henut-mehyt with flesh like the sun-god himself. On the coffin lid text panel, she is identified as “the Osiris, Chantress of Amen in Ipet-Sut, Mistress of the House, Henut-mehyt” (Taylor 1999). The coffin thus transformed the woman into a divinized masculine being, mingling her essence with that of Osiris. Interestingly, only a few decorative elements hinted that the dead individual inside the coffin was female: modeled breasts underneath her *wesekh* collar, her feminine wig, her feminine name and titles, and the feminine pronoun “she” in the central text column on the lid. Most of the other Book of the Dead texts on this coffin use the masculine pronoun, which can be understood as a purposeful negotiation of gender used by educated commissioners and highly literate artisans. This Nineteenth Dynasty coffin indicates that gender flexibility, not a complete gender change, was useful in helping

the female attain her desired goal of rebirth as a transformed *akh*, while still retaining her feminine self.

The Egyptian Coffin and Gender Flexibility

Anthropoid coffins came into vogue during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasties (1580–1295 B.C.E.), replacing the rectangular coffins of the Old and Middle Kingdoms (2686–1650 B.C.E.). For the female dead, these first anthropoid cases were quite masculinizing. However, with the Ramesside Period (1295–1069 B.C.E.), coffins started to become illustrative of gender flexibility in forms and styles more inclusive of the feminine than ever seen before. For example, the coffin set of Iy-neferty, once belonging to a Nineteenth Dynasty Theban woman and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Hayes 1959, 14–16), includes some creative adaptations for the female gender (fig. 7). In this coffin set, the female body is actually depicted, but only on the inner mummy board. The mummy board shows the lady wearing a pleated and fringed white dress, with the feminine arm posture of one arm folded



Fig. 7. Coffin set of Iy-neferty, a Theban lady of the New Kingdom, showing the deceased in pure white dress on the interior mummy board but in Osirian style on the coffin lid. Now in New York, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession number 86.1.5a–c, purchased with funds from various donors. Photo by author with permission from Marsha Hill of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

below the breast and the other flat on the thigh. Interestingly, this feminized depiction of the deceased was only placed *inside* her coffin. It was her *outer* coffin that transformed her more clearly into a masculinized manifestation of Osiris. In fact, the coffin betrayed her gender only with abbreviated and unnaturalistic breasts and a feminine wig. Like Henut-mehyt's coffins, this coffin set relied on *flexibility* of gender. Both the anthropoid coffin and the mummy board depicted the woman with dark red skin, a color typically reserved for men but often used for females during the reign of Ramesses II, including Queen Nefertari in her tomb in the Valley of the Queens (McCarthy 2002; Harrington 2005). The placement of the feminized mummy board *inside* an androgynous anthropoid coffin suggests that the masculine and Osirian transformation Iy-neferty had to undergo was somehow partial or temporary and would not affect her final, intended nature.

In short, it seems that the outer coffin piece of a woman masculinized her, while her inner mummy board feminized,

or perhaps better, individualized her; even Ramesside period men used a depiction of themselves in white, pleated, and fringed garments for their mummy board (Cooney 2007, 195–97). Representing the deceased in pure white seems to have allowed for a different conception of the human personality than the anthropoid coffin. Women could display their femininity in a fringed, white gown, wearing jewelry and holding flowers, while men could represent themselves unbound and clothed in the white kilt of the afterlife (fig. 8). Such depictions of the deceased in pure white can be linked to many allusions to dress in the Book of the Dead, including the opening rubric to chapter 125:

The correct procedure in the Hall of Justice. One shall utter this chapter pure and clean and clad in white garments and sandals, painted with black eye-paint and anointed with myrrh. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, pl. 32)

This white garment is explicitly linked with the purity of successfully passing through the Hall of Justice as a blessed soul, an *akh*. In the Book of the Dead, spell 75, the deceased travels to Heliopolis to take his rightful place, and his garments are specifically described as given to him *after* his transformation into a pure *akh* soul, free from wrongdoing:

I have gone forth from the limits of the earth that I may receive my fringed cloak for the heart of the Baboon.... I have appeared in glory, I have been initiated, I have been ennobled as a god. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 108)

This depiction of the deceased in pure white on a coffin is a Ramesside innovation, and it is *not* gender-flexible; when the deceased is wearing white, the dead individual appears according to his or her inherent sexuality as a woman or a man, not as an androgynous being associated with Osiris. This is an important point. It could even be said that the mummy board of the Ramesside period actually takes the creative step of displaying, in three-dimensional form, the deceased as an effective *akh* soul—as a whole, pure being after a successful entry into the afterlife. The white garment represents the purity of a soul whose heart has passed the scales of truth. Most intriguing, this particular image of the deceased is almost always found *inside* the anthropoid coffin, which depicts the deceased in an androgynous and divinized manner. It is therefore possible to view the anthropoid coffin as a depiction of the *ka* spirit of the deceased (i.e., the part most associated with divinity).

The ancient Egyptians believed that the human individual was splintered at death into a number of different parts, spirits, or manifestations, each of which contributed to the whole. Egyptologists still have a difficult time understanding and defining many of these elements, but the *ka* may be best explained as the divine essence of a person. The *ba* seemed to represent the soul of mobility, depicted as a human-headed bird that can fly away from the tomb to see the sunrise. The *shut* was the shadow, a being able to dwell in sunlight. The

ren was the name, the chief means of identification and thus essential to inscribe on the coffin. All of these parts of the human were united in one vessel: the *khat*, or the corpse (Taylor 2001, 14–24). The coffin contained that corpse, and it could be argued that the coffin was representative of many of these human elements. Externally, the coffin represented the *ka*, the spirit that acted in concert with the divine as the vehicle for the immortal human personality, or *akh*, to appear and manifest. The Egyptians manipulated body containers to represent these funerary beliefs. Some inner-coffin pieces depict the deceased wearing pure white, in his or her *akh* form, which was really the intended outcome and final step of an individual's rebirth after death.

Ramesside women, usually given fewer funerary goods in comparison to male members of the same family (Meskell 1999), could include this creative depiction of the pure and effective *akh* soul, even when they could afford only one anthropoid coffin but not an additional mummy board. Lady Iset, for example, was buried with only a coffin, and she had no board to go with it. The lid of her coffin displays her in a pure white garment with her femininity clearly represented in

her modeled body contours and jewelry (Desroches Noblecourt 1976, 170–71; Tiradritti 1999, 272; see fig. 9). This coffin combines a feminizing depiction in pure white on the coffin's lid with masculinizing outer case sides. The coffin sides have a solarizing yellow background color and Book of the Dead texts that liken the deceased to male creator-gods in both text and image. This one coffin was therefore a creative adaptation. The artisans who made it were able to represent Lady Iset's multiple manifestations for her journey into the netherworld on a single funerary object. The lid depicted her as an *akh* being, while the case sides showed her transformation into a creative masculine god through Book of the Dead texts.

These correlations between particular funerary objects and human manifestations cannot and should not be understood as exact. Nonetheless, it is possible that such innovative and multilayered depictions of the deceased represented the fragmentation of the individual at death and his or her subsequent reconstitution into a whole being—within the material matter of the coffin set itself. In fact, it is possible to see the coffin of Iset as representing two stages of her afterlife journey simultaneously on one funerary object: the masculine transformative



Fig. 8. One of the painted vignettes on the sarcophagus of Sennedjem, a New Kingdom artisan, showing him and his wife wearing pure white. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Accession number JE 27301. Photo by author with the permission from Yasmin el-Shazly of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Fig. 9. The coffin of Iset, a New Kingdom lady depicting the deceased dressed in pure white on the lid and with transformative Book of the Dead texts on the case sides. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Accession number JE 27309a. Photo by author with permission from Yasmin el-Shazly of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.



moment of rebirth; and the end result—a peaceful afterlife in the *duat* netherworld, which for her would have been spent as a pure feminine being. We should not forget that all Egyptian art, especially funerary art, was performative, with every image and hieroglyph functioning to bring about a desired reality.

Still, not all Ramesside women's coffin sets included the mummy board of the *akh* soul dressed in pure white. This makes it clear that there were no straightforward rules about how to represent gendered manifestations in Egyptian funerary etiquette. Solutions to the problem of female rebirth were solved in many different ways, sometimes with the depiction of the feminine within another masculinized form, as with the coffin sets of Iset and Iy-*neferty*, and sometimes with overt masculinization at the expense of the feminine. For example, a Ramesside coffin set of a woman named Ta-*kayt* now in Frankfurt lacks a representation of the female in a white, fringed garment on the inner piece (Polz 1993, 302–23; Beck and Bol 1981, 25–27; see fig. 10). In fact, all of this individual's coffin pieces are masculinized. Her arm posture and body shape are Osirian, and the mythological texts inscribed on the front and sides of this woman's coffin use masculine pronouns exclusively. On the front of the coffin in the central text strip, the Book of the Dead invocation is written *djed.f*, "He says," and addresses *his* mother Nut, not *her* mother. The inclusion of these male pronouns on female coffin inscriptions is best understood as a purposeful and powerful association with the male gender and its regenerative powers (Robins 1993; McCarthy 2002). Nonetheless, this woman Ta-*kayt* still maintained gender flexibility by retaining some of her femininity within her coffin set: she wears a stylish woman's wig and prominent earrings and jewelry, and her inner mummy mask shows abbreviated breasts. Interestingly, this woman was also depicted in the white female dress of an *akh* in small

two-dimensional representations painted onto the lids of the anthropoid coffins, and it could be argued that this feminine two-dimensional depiction of the deceased on a masculinizing three-dimensional coffin granted the female individual gender flexibility on one and the same coffin, just like Iset. Multiple manifestations of the individual and the inclusion of both genders seem to have been necessary for the deceased female's rebirth in the next realm.

A man's coffins could also depict him in multiple manifestations (if not multiple genders) in the same coffin set, and again it is possible to see each funerary piece as representing a different adaptation that the deceased could use on the journey to the afterlife. For example, the Ramesside Deir el-Medina craftsman Khonsu owned two coffins, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Hayes 1959, 417; see fig. 11). In both coffins, he is shown in Osirian form, bound with mummy bands, but the outer coffin represents the man in a more godly manifestation, because he wears the long curled divine mummy beard. His inner coffin, on the other hand, shows him wearing the short beard of a man. It seems that, even though he owned no mummy board showing him in pure white, artisans could use details as small as the human beard on various coffin pieces within a set to depict the adaptability of a person's manifestations.

The Coffin as Vehicle to the Afterlife

Ancient Egyptian funerary equipment expressed and adapted to the fragmentation of the human being at death (Assmann 2005, 23–28), as well as the re-creation of a whole and effective eternal being. Mummification itself was a form of fragmentation and reintegration. It was a method of preservation that grappled with the temporary separation of the soul from the body. In Egypt, when the body was no lon-

ger alive, it was thought of as a preserved corpse: the *khat* (corpse) or the *wet* (the embalmed body; both of these words are feminine and describe the corpse acting as a vessel for the manifestations of the deceased). The anthropoid coffin is also called *wet* in the Egyptian language, and the word is followed by a hieroglyph for wood, indicating that it represented a kind of wooden vehicle for multiple manifestations of the deceased.

The coffin is understood by many Egyptologists as the female power that conveys and protects the deceased, as the body of the sky-goddess Nut, the womb, the egg, and the *duat* (Assmann 2005, 165–66). Indeed, the word most often used for the anthropoid coffin in the Ramesside period is *wet*. Many Egyptian words for coffin were feminine, including the more

archaic *afdet*, meaning “chest”; the *sukhet*, referencing an inner body cover; the *ytit*, also a smaller body cover; and the *djebat*, a rectangular sarcophagus. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the coffin represents both male and female gendered power in one three-dimensional object.

In fact, not all Ramesside words referencing the anthropoid coffin are feminine. The older compound *neb-ankh* “lord of life,” often used in formal funerary texts, and the word *men-ankh*, perhaps “one enduring of life,” often used in socioeconomic documents (Cooney 2007, 20–21), were both masculine words and seemed to refer to the Osirian deceased contained by the coffin, not to the container itself. If we understand Egyptian funerary texts and lexicography correctly, the coffin as a feminine container referenced only

“ Ancient Egyptian funerary equipment expressed and adapted to the fragmentation of the human being at death. ”

Fig. 10. The four-piece coffin set of Ta-kayt, a Theban lady of the New Kingdom. Now in Frankfurt, in the Städtische Galerie Liebieghaus. Accession numbers 1651a–f. Photo by author with permission from P. C. Bol of the Liebieghaus.



Fig. 11. The outer and inner coffins of Khonsu, a New Kingdom artisan from ancient Thebes. Now in New York, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession numbers 86.1.1a–b, purchased with funds from various donors. Photo by author with permission from Marsha Hill of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the *internal space* as an enclosure for the deceased. By placing the mummy *inside* a coffin, ritual participants seem to have believed that they were placing an image of Osiris into a protected conveyance from which rebirth was possible (Taylor 2001, 215). The feminine principle of the coffin was therefore the empty space of the enclosure. The masculine was what was placed inside, and when a human body was put into a coffin, even if it belonged to a dead woman, it was thought to be inside the feminine. Interestingly, almost all Ramesside coffin interiors are painted with a thick black pitch resin (fig. 12), probably representative of the darkness of a womb-like *duat* netherworld and of the space of enclosure that the feminine principle represents. Later in the Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 B.C.E.), text and iconography were painted on the interior surface of the coffin to represent features and beings thought to exist in the *duat* afterlife space. By the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (747 B.C.E.), the goddess of the west or the sky-mother Nut was often depicted on the coffin lid's underside, stretched out over the mummy of the deceased like the canopy of the sky (Taylor 2001, 229–33).

The mummy itself was meant to represent Osiris—whether the individual was male or female. The external decoration on an anthropoid coffin usually remade the deceased into the image of masculine gods Osiris and Re, with crossed arms, golden skin, and stylized mummy bandages. The external decoration of the Ramesside coffin included representations of divine protectors, both masculine and feminine—whether the coffin belonged to a man or woman. Isis and Nephthys were depicted at the head and foot of the case, protecting the body of the dead as they had for Osiris in funerary mythology. On the case sides were the four sons of Horus—Imsety, Hapy, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuf—in the company of Anubis and Thoth, who protected the mummy from dying a second death on his journey to the desired parts of the *duat* netherworld (fig. 9). The tree-goddess was often shown at the feet of the coffin lid providing the deceased with cool waters and sustenance (fig. 5). Nut was shown spreading her wings over the deceased at mid-body on the lid, and the deceased's invocation was drawn between the bound legs on the lid exterior: “Oh my mother Nut, stretch yourself over me that (I) may be placed among the Imperishable Stars” (fig. 7). This invocation tells us that the feminine principle of the coffin was thought to be *inside* the coffin, as interior space.

To put it another way, every anthropoid Egyptian coffin was representative of the enclosure (the feminine sky-goddess Nut, the *duat* underworld, and the womb) as well as the enclosed Osirian mummy, who was also represented on the coffin lid. For ancient Egyptian elites, the coffin represented the container and the contained, the transformation and the outcome. It was made up of the exterior surface area, the interior space, and the contained mummy. The ancient Egyptian coffin therefore represented both human sexes in one multi-layered substitute wooden body. The representational logic follows biological reality: the masculine is represented outside, just as the male sex organs are outside the human body; the



Fig. 12. The interior of the coffin of Iy-neferty, a Theban lady of the New Kingdom. Now in New York, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession numbers 86.1.5a–c, purchased with funds from various donors. Photo by author with permission from Marsha Hill of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

feminine is represented hidden inside, just as the female sex organs are hidden inside the human body (Kampen 1996). One could take this thought further. The feminine acts as the vessel for masculine regenerative power, a power that is only viable when it is enclosed, contained, and protected within this feminine element. The *duat* afterlife space was thought to be an enclosure or a bodily interior from which birth was possible in the manner of the sun-god. For example, in chapter 180 of the Book of the Dead, the deceased addresses the dead in the *duat* and tells them how his rebirth as the “heir of Osiris” involves coming forth from the underworld:

I am the heir of Osiris, I have received his Nemes head-dress in the *duat*; look at me, for I have appeared in glory in coming forth from your body, I have become his father, and he applauds. Look at me, rejoice over me, for behold, I am on high, I have come into being, one who provides his own shape. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 132)

The transformation of the ancient Egyptian deceased, whether of a man or woman, could only occur *inside* hidden space—either inside the coffin or the burial chamber—functioning as analogies for the *duat* afterlife realm inside of the sky-goddess Nut.

The coffin was thought to be the vehicle that conveyed the deceased to destinations in the afterlife, particularly to the stars known as the Imperishable Ones usually mentioned on the coffin-lid invocation. The coffin could therefore be compared to the ferry that the deceased had to summon to bring him or her to the heavens. This ferry boat also had a feminine identity and was likened to the dead body before rebirth—inert and in pieces. As stated in the Book of the Dead, chapter 99 (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 110–12), the deceased had to find a way to make the *mekhnet* “ferry boat”—a feminine word—whole again. The means to this rebirth was also sexual in nature. When the mast of the ferry boat was missing, the deceased had to say, “Bring this phallus of Babai that creates children and begets calves.” The dead person then had to attach the mast to “the thighs that open out the shanks” of the feminine ferry boat.

Once the ferry boat had been reconstructed out of the requisite members and limbs, the boat itself spoke and demanded that the deceased name each and every part before he or she was allowed to come aboard. The deceased then equated every body part of the ferry boat with a different divinity, a classic treatment of the fragmentation of the body in Egyptian funerary texts. The mooring post was identified as “Lady of the Two Lands in the shrine.” The mast was “He who brought back the Great Goddess after she had been far way,” and the sail was fittingly called “Nut,” the sky-goddess. The wooden ribs along the sides of the boat were called “Imsety, Hapy, Duamutef and Qebehsenuf,” the four sons of Horus (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 110–11). This description of the ferry boat is very similar to a dual-gendered understanding of the Egyptian coffin as the imperishable body of the deceased with interior and exterior meanings. The combination of the mast and hull was understood as a union of masculine and feminine. The sail of the ferry boat was Nut, who covered and enclosed the deceased as the vault of the sky, exactly as she was thought to do on the lid of a New Kingdom coffin at mid-body in her form of a human bird with wings outstretched. The four sons of Horus took a position on the case sides of a coffin (Lüscher 1998, 73), like the ribs of the ferry boat. Just like the ferry, the ancient Egyptians understood the coffin to be a multigendered vehicle launching the deceased into the afterlife.

Masculine and Feminine Powers Combined

The process of fragmentation was a powerful and creative mechanism (Assmann 2005). By breaking the person, the coffin, or even the ferry boat into various conceptual parts, it is possible to make adaptations that the whole being cannot sustain. This fragmentation explains how the Egyptians were able to apply a masculine sexualized creation mythology to an individual female’s rebirth into the next world. It was also how they applied a divine identity to a human being. Fragmentation allowed the *wet* coffin, which was thought to be a feminine object, to include masculine powers of rebirth. Death caused the separation of a person’s elements; rebirth reconstituted that which had been fragmented into a more powerful and eternal form, like the reconstituting of Osiris’s body parts or the refitting of the ferry that conveyed the deceased to the heavens. In general, only when a person was vulnerable and fragmented were transformations into a god or into another gender possible. When the rebirth transformation was achieved, wholeness was achieved, and the deceased is shown whole as a gendered *akh* in the act of worshiping Osiris and Re (fig. 8).

Some Egyptologists have explained resurrection in ancient Egypt as a need for masculine power that the feminine principle lacks (Roth 2000). Other specialists of Egyptian funerary religion have left gender largely untreated (Assmann 2005); however, at least by the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.E.), it appears that the Egyptians believed that the deceased needed to become associated with *both* genders to be reborn. For example, in chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead, the deceased likens himself not only to male gods of creation, Osiris and Re, but to the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, who incorporate the powers of protection, sustenance, and gestation:

I have come into this land, I have made use of my feet, for I am Atum, I am in my city. Get back, O Lion, bright of mouth and shining of head; retreat because of my strength, take care, O you who are invisible, do not await me, for I am Isis. You found me when I had disarranged the hair of my face and my scalp was disordered. I have become pregnant as Isis, I have conceived as Nephthys. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, 10)

Chapter 42 of the Book of the Dead goes even further in its nuanced explanation and likens each body part to a different divinity. The deceased is described with parts that are both male and female; the body possesses both breasts and phallus:

My hair is Nun; my face is Re; my eyes are Hathor; my ears are Wepwawet; my nose is She who presides over her lotus-leaf; my lips are Anubis; my molars are Selket; my incisors are Isis the goddess; my arms are the Ram, the Lord of Mendes; my breast is Neith, Lady of Sais; my back is Seth; my phallus is Osiris; my muscles are the Lords of Kheraha; my chest is He who is greatly majestic;

my belly and my spine are Sekhmet; my buttocks are the Eye of Horus; my thighs and my calves are Nut; my feet are Ptah; my fingers are Orion; my toes are living uraei; there is no member of mine devoid of a god, and Thoth is the protection of all my flesh. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994, pl. 32)

Egyptian funerary equipment, particularly the anthropoid coffin, was the materialization of the abstract notion of Egyptian fragmentation and recombination of powers associated with gender and divinity. The dead had to become a masculine divinity to create new life after death, but he or she also had to incorporate female divine powers, essentially to give birth to one's own resurrected self. The Egyptian coffin did not simply reassign gender to the female dead; it provided deceased men and women with nuanced powers associated with both genders. Composers of the Book of the Dead adapted to this flexibility more and more, allowing for an increasingly dual-gendered understanding of creation. For example, chapter 164 includes a spell meant to be spoken over a bisexual divinity:

To be said over (a figurine of) Mut having three heads: one being the head of Pakhet wearing plumes, a second being a human head wearing the Double Crown, the third being the head of a vulture wearing plumes. She also has a phallus, wings, and the claws of a lion. Drawn in dried myrrh with fresh incense, repeated in ink upon a red bandage. A dwarf stands before her, another behind her, each facing her and wearing plumes. Each has a raised arm and two heads, one is the head of a falcon, the other a human head. (Faulkner and Goelet 1994: 125)

In the guidelines of this spell, the masculine phallus and feminine form are combined; the masculine creator and the feminine enclosure are found in one and the same body. The spell thus grants the deceased the creative powers of both genders. Interestingly, this Book of the Dead spell is recent in comparison to most other chapters; it probably dates to the Ramesside or Third Intermediate Periods. The creation of such a spell may signal a trend in which creation and rebirth was becoming more and more associated with the masculine in combination with the feminine, not to its exclusion (McCarthy 2002, 193; Cooney 2008).



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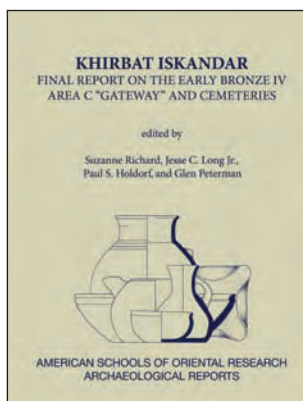
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