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Reversal of Gender in Ancient Egyptian Mythology: Discovering the Secrets of Androgyny

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Unraveling the dusty linens of Egyptian religion releases hidden themes of gender reversal and internal androgyny. These secrets lie dormant in the core of every moldering Egyptian corpse, waiting patiently to be unearthed and deciphered. However, in order to become fully enlightened by these buried concepts, one must delve further into the deceased's history than merely their death; by carefully studying the various tiers of ancient Egyptian society, a broader and more satisfactory explanation of the relationship between gender and religion can be excavated.

Beneath the surface of Egyptian paganism and ritualistic worship, there sleeps the idea of the reversal of sexuality as the root of all spiritual power; the uniting of male creation and female stimulation¹ holds a sacred religious bond that releases overwhelming spiritual and mythological catharsis in ancient Egyptian culture. This bond is further strengthened by the momentary reversal of creative gender roles, proceeded by the merging of phallic and uterine mythological symbols. Coinciding relationships between religion and androgyny are interwoven into the fabric of Egyptian culture, and are imbedded in Egyptian theories of mythological creation, geographical location, and transition into the afterlife. Therefore, the transfiguration of sexuality essentially acts as a vital source of spiritual balance in all realms of Egyptian existence, ushering the soul into a state of androgyny in order to completely embody the power of both phallic creation and the maternal womb.²

This notion of the internal marriage between dual genders was seen as necessary for the creation of life, as is depicted by its recurring presence in Egyptian mythology. Egyptian creation myth portrays the beginning of time as a vast ocean of primordial waters belonging to the "female creator" goddess Nun³. Some scholars view these waters as a womblike entity, and essentially the embodiment of the vesicular power of femininity⁴. Being the source of all human life, both male and female, the androgynous state of Nun's uterine liquid suggests that aspects of both genders reside in all creative powers. Consequently, this idea is further expanded as the male god Atum rises from Nun's feminine waters, and the first division of the sexes occurs under his phallic creation⁵; through sexual stimulation, Atum gives birth to the first beings of separate gender, Shu and Tefnut. His stimulation is symbolic of the original sexual division, and is representative of the coming together and breaking apart of gender, both of which occur simultaneously in Nun's waters through Atum's act of phallic birth. It is interesting to note that Atum's childbirth was prompted by masturbation, his hand acting as the feminine stimulant in his masculine procreative process⁶. This combination of seminal birth and feminine stimulation portrays the Egyptian belief of sexually ambiguous creative power; Atum, a male god, assumes the role of a mother by mating with his own hand, a feminine entity. Therefore, both male creation and female stimulation are necessary in order to produce the beginnings of life and the gods.

¹ Kathlyn Cooney, M. "Gender Transformation in Death: A Case Study of Coffins from Ramesside Period Egypt." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 73, no. 4, (accessed November 5, 2012). 226-227.

² *Ibid.*, 226-227.

³ Lana Troy. 2002. "The Ancient Egyptian Queenship as an Icon of the State." *NIN: Journal Of Gender Studies In Antiquity* 3, (accessed November 5, 2012). 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Furthermore, Egyptian mythical explanation of naturally occurring processes adds to the concept of the male need for feminine stimulation. The female body was interpreted as a vessel for male regeneration⁷, and as such was an empty and transformative container for all life⁸. This empty receptacle was purely feminine because it housed and transfigured the seed of male creation, symbolizing the generative importance of both the paternal "spark of life"⁹ and "maternal nurturing". This relationship between creation and vesicular power is mirrored in the mythological interactions between the sun god Re and the sky goddess Nut.¹⁰ According to Egyptian myth, Re traversed the sky each morning in his wooden barque, lifting the sun as he rode and giving light to the Earth. Consequently, each evening he plunged his ship into the mouth of Nut, often depicted as his mother, and as she swallowed him the world was covered in darkness. It was believed that, in order to once again bring light to the sky, Re was required to pass through the body of Nut, where she contained him and transformed him back into the controller of the sun; thus, the feminine goddess acted as the vessel for his "powerful and daily regeneration,"¹¹ imbibing of her exhausted son and revitalizing him as the ruler of the world's energy source. Therefore, the passage of the masculine creator Re through the female vessel Nut was a crucial action in the process of the sun's daily rising; his transformative rebirth from the body of the sky goddess reinforced the Egyptian theme of natural sexual ambiguity, requiring both male and female characteristics to merge in order for worldly harmony to occur.

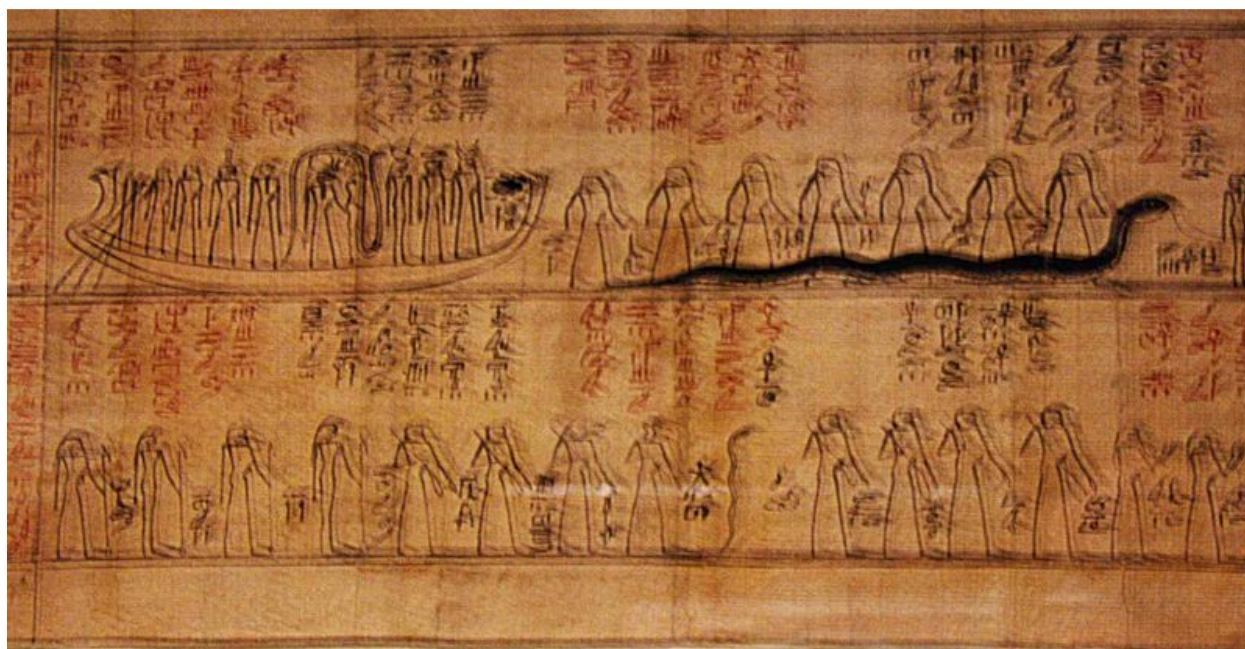


Fig. 1. Re's Journey from Night to Day. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.*

Moreover, this thematic idea of rebirth depending on the converging of genders is deeply entrenched in the mythological story of Osiris and his consort Isis. After Osiris' brutal murder at the hands of his brother Seth, Isis recovers his corpse and, "uses her magic powers to revive

⁷ Kathlyn Cooney. "Gender Transformation in Death: A Case Study of Coffins from Ramesside Period Egypt." 227.

⁸ Lana Troy. "The Ancient Egyptian Queenship As an Icon of the State." 5.

⁹ Kathlyn Cooney. "Gender Transformation in Death: A Case Study of Coffins from Ramesside Period Egypt." 228.

¹⁰ Ibid.,

¹¹ Ibid.,

[him] for just long enough to conceive a son"¹². This act of the goddess reviving her lover demonstrates the need for feminine intervention in the process of male regeneration, and the necessity of the reversal of gender roles in rebirth. In this instance, Isis momentarily takes on the role of the male creator in order to give life to the dead Osiris, then switches to her feminine self in order to conceive their son. Therefore, because Isis is impregnated, she is not only Osiris' regenerator but the uterine container for his offspring as well; she acts as both a male creator and a feminine vessel for Osiris' masculine seed of creation, stimulating him back to life and receiving his creative potential in the same act. In other words, this temporary paradox of sexuality supplies Isis with the necessary male and female characteristics required for creation, and for one crucial moment she embodies both the male creator and the female stimulator, each sex depending on the other inside of her singular frame.

This codependency of sexes within a singular body riddles not only ancient Egyptian myth, but the land's geography and astronomy as well. Ambiguous genders roles permeate Egyptian topography, dividing the land into two feminine halves which are dominated by an androgynous life source. The ancient lands of upper and lower Egypt were deemed the "Vulture Goddess Nekhbet" and the "Cobra Goddess Wadjet," respectively¹³, and in this way Egypt herself was considered a female entity; she acted as a vessel which housed and protected the Egyptian people. Accordingly, this female vessel was bisected by the Nile River, its sexually ambiguous source of nourishment.

Extending the comparison between male seminal birth and female primordial waters¹⁴, the river acts as a waxing and waning harbinger of fertility. In fertile seasons, the Nile would flood, forcing a surge of gushing water onto dry crops and fields, filling the land with vitality. This seasonal flooding was inherently masculine, mirroring the masturbation of the god Atum and bringing life to the ancient Egyptian people through seminal procreation. However, contrary to masculine flooding, the river suffered periods of drought during dry seasons as well.

These periods of desiccation and starvation can be interpreted as essentially female; the male seminal fluids drained from the Nile, creating an empty riverbed in dire need of refilling. In order to become a vessel for the flooding of male creation, the Nile needed to purge itself of all life and start afresh with a vacant container. Hence, the Nile River embodied both male and female genders as it created life through the seminal flooding of Atum, and emptied itself into a feminine vessel in order to receive consequent masculine inundations.

In addition to the very life source of ancient Egypt embodying androgyny, the complementary wet and dry seasons of the river were predetermined by sexually ambiguous constellations. Sirius, a southern star, was the astrological depiction of the female goddess Isis¹⁵, and as such was considered feminine. However, the female star held considerable control over male processes, and was believed to predict the annual seminal floods of Egypt's vital waterway. In this case, Sirius acts as a vessel that contains seasonal messages which it conveys to the male

¹² Roy Willis, *World Mythologies* (New York: Metro Books) 2012, 232-233.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴ Lana Troy. "The Ancient Egyptian Queenship as an Icon of the State." 8.

¹⁵ Joan Relke and Earnest Allan. "Ancient Egyptian Astronomy: Ursa Major--Symbol of Rejuvenation," *Archaeoastronomy*, (accessed November 19, 2012), 67.

Earth, who as a result translates the message into masculine action. This sexual conversation between the astrological and physical aspects of Egypt reflects the mythological story of the sky goddess Nut and her consort, Geb; the two were passionately inseparably, and by the forced division of their lustful bodies the earth and sky were created¹⁶



Fig. 2. Nut arching over Geb. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain*

Like the two divinities, the star and the river represent the male and female facets of the soul, and their internal conversation with one another; male action is dependent on the female message, just as male creation is dependent on the female vessel. Therefore, the relationship between the masculine and the feminine, the divinities Nut and Geb, and the Sirius and the Nile are all one in the same: rebirth and regeneration is not possible if one half of the coherent whole is missing.

Similar to these relationships, the constellation of Ursa Major was a prime contributor to the ancient Egyptian theme of sexual versatility. The Northern constellation personified the power of both masculine virility and feminine birth in one singular shape; the foreleg of a sacrificial bull¹⁷. The bloody foreleg of a slaughtered bull was used as the primary source of religious sacrifice to the god Osiris in ancient Egypt, due to its internal marriage of both male and female elements. Above all else, the spirit of the bull was representative of male "virility, fertility, and strength"¹⁸, which is swiftly juxtaposed to its feminine relationship to birth. Strikingly, the ancient Egyptian

¹⁶ Lana Troy. "The Ancient Egyptian Queenship As an Icon of the State," 5-6.

¹⁷ Joan Relke and Ernest Allan. "Ancient Egyptian Astronomy: Ursa Major--Symbol of Rejuvenation." 67-68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

term for a masculine bull was "Ka," which was the root of numerous feminine words such as, "kat" (vaginal) and "bkat: (pregnant woman)"¹⁹.

Linguistically, the Egyptian name for a fertile bull took on a female identity of vaginal birth and rebirth, encompassing both genders simultaneously. This sexual relationship between ritual sacrifice and gender portrays the significance of androgyny in ancient Egyptian religion; in essence, the spiritual androgyny of the sacrificed animal was manifested in its leg, and because the leg was presented as a gift to Osiris, he ingested the flesh of both sexes and became an androgynous being. Furthermore, the significance of the embodiment of dual sexes in the bull is heightened when contemplating the position of the animal as it is tethered to the sacrificial pole. In ancient Egyptian astrology, the constellation of Ursa Major was said to resemble the foreleg of the bull²⁰, and was accordingly the guiding point of earthly sacrifice; the sacrifice was tethered to a pole much like the constellation was tethered to the earth. In other words, just as the animal was the physical embodiment of Ursa Major, the pole was representative of the center of the Egyptian universe, which was, indeed, the bull's spiritual androgyny.

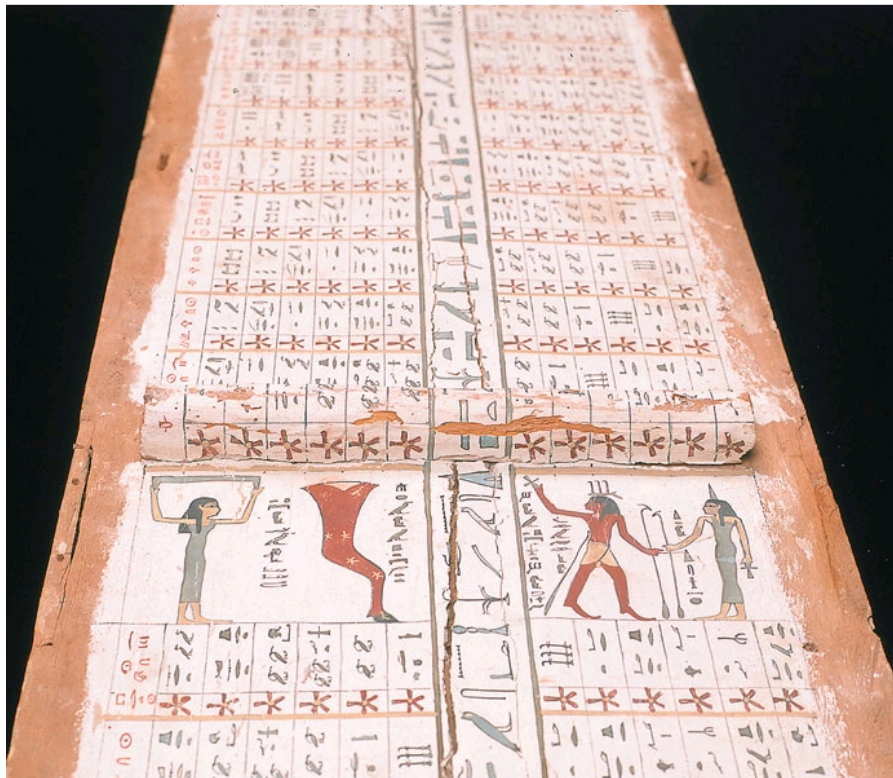


Fig. 3. Egyptian Hieroglyph of sacrificial bull foreleg. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.*

Perhaps the most effective example of this centripetal force of androgyny is that of the body's transfiguration between genders within the Egyptian burial tomb. The spiritual transition between the living world and the afterlife was a crucial moment in the soul's journey, and was believed to be possible only by the male sex. In order to fully traverse the line between the earth

¹⁹ Ibid., 69.

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

and the "field of reeds"²¹, the deceased person must take on a masculine form when placed inside of the sarcophagus, regardless of the original gender of the body. This idea of an essentially masculine corpse was tied into the Egyptian notion of rebirth made possible by a feminine object; the coffin held the body in death, and was considered a wooden vessel for the soul's spiritual journey. In other words, a male creative body must be paired with an empty female coffin in order to successfully regenerate a dead soul. Examples of this idea of the coffin as a protective feminine entity can be seen in wooden funerary carvings. For example, detailed images of the sky goddess Nut were etched into the lids of burial sarcophagi, the goddess arching her body protectively over the dead corpse²². This appearance of Nut on the inside of the coffin therefore suggests that the internal space of the wood was a shielding womb for the dead soul. This aspect of femininity is similar to Egyptian creation myth, where the sky goddess curled her body above the earth god Geb; like Geb, the male body is being covered by the female coffin lid. Therefore, a male corpse which resembled Nut's lover was necessary in order to unite both masculine and feminine aspects together in the afterlife; the fact that this marriage of gender takes place within the womblike space of the female vessel²³, enables the internal marriage of gender in death, hence encouraging the rebirth of the soul.

For that reason, if a female corpse was laid inside of a feminine coffin, the rebirth of the soul into the realm of the dead was not possible. The combination of two female entities would not allow for spiritual regeneration, hence numerous burial rituals were practiced in order to preserve this sacred and complementary marriage. For example, the designs of female sarcophagi were intended to hide the true gender of the enclosed body. These "anthropoid coffins"²⁴ were ambiguously created to convert a female into a male, varying the portrayal of the corpse's true sex. Common attempts at gender reversal included the use of male pronouns in feminine coffin text, the masculine posture of the coffin shape, and carving male dress onto the wooden body of the vessel²⁵.

In addition, by adding the male suffix of "Osiris" to the end of a woman's name, Egyptian burials further recognized the deceased female as a temporary masculine being. In essence, an interim reversal of sex was critical for the joining of genders in death. Furthermore, a deeper interpretation of the Egyptian burial process could depict the wooden sarcophagus as a reincarnation of the sky goddess Nut, and as she transforms night into day through the devouring of her son Re, she also converts female into male. This maternal conversion by the coffin further adds to the ancient Egyptian theme of the necessity of female stimulation, the wood acting as a feminine stimulant to the creative male body in its womb.

²¹ Roy Willis, *World Mythologies* (New York: Metro Books, 2012, 232-233).

²² Kathlyn Cooney. "Gender Transformation in Death: A Case Study of Coffins from Ramesside Period Egypt." 234.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 234-235.

²⁵ Ibid., 228-230.



Fig. 4. Female Burial Sarcophagus. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.*

Fundamentally, this recurring theme of a womblike transformation in death refers back to the Egyptian idea of spiritual androgyny. In order for Egyptian spiritual order to be preserved, each soul must marry their two ambiguous genders inside of the empty feminine space of the coffin, and make a complete sexual transition into the afterlife. By taking on the role of multiple genders and giving life to both male and female characteristics within the same soul, the ancient

Egyptians lived vicariously through their sacred deities; Nut and Geb, Re and Atum, Osiris and Isis. Therefore, through the combination of the creator and the vessel, the ancient Egyptian message of the dual fluidity of the spirit was born.

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