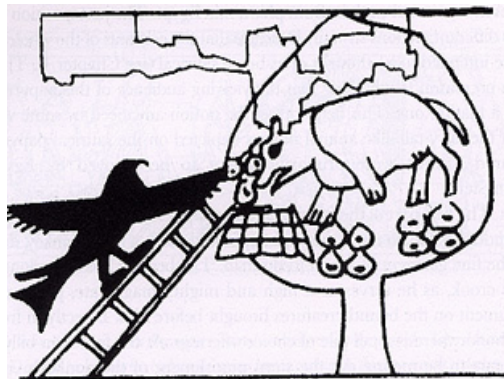


Ancient Egyptian Humor



I. Introduction.

Humor is everywhere in the ancient world, not only in comedies proper, but in almost every type of art and literary genre as well. Laughter is often considered the response to humor, but can result from many different stimuli, as is demonstrated by the irony caricature and the animal stories.

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted more than three thousand years, but confrontations with increasingly hostile and powerful foreign powers began taking their toll as the Ramesside period came to an end. Eventually these outside forces eclipsed Egypt in the ancient world, and what was once a great power became a region incorporated into other great civilizations. Despite its demise, ancient Egypt left a rich legacy for the following generations of humankind, and its arts and letters have provided access to and insight into one of the earliest advanced societies in history. From this valuable source, modern humankind has learned many details about the ancient Egyptians, including the inner workings of their society, government, religion, history, art and architecture, and literature. Not immediately apparent in this material, and therefore more difficult to discern, are the feelings and the emotions that the people expressed. What instilled fear in their hearts? What made them feel safe? What induced them to anger and rage? Why did they laugh, and why did they cry?

II. Human feelings

Statuary, reliefs, and texts can provide some insight into these questions, but, since much of the material at our disposal derives from official or religious sources, it tends to reflect the eternal and infinite rather than the immediate and the finite. Still, one can identify certain gestures among mourners in a funerary scene that clearly depict sadness and despair, even though such representations may be formulaic. Some of the attendees, such as those depicted in the tomb of Ramose, even have tears falling from their eyes. In religious texts, false etymologies use plays on words, and in one the word for humankind (*rmJ*) is derived from the tears (*rmwt*) of the god. The young widow of Tutankhamun, Ankhesenamun, in a letter to the Hittites requests the foreign king to send a prince for her to marry. By so doing, she expresses fear and anxiety for her own welfare as well as concern for her country. Interplay among the characters in literary works also provides insight into human emotions. The *Story of Horus and Seth* relates that the god Amun-Re

retired to his tent feeling exceedingly sad over the continuing battles between Horus and Seth, who were vying for the throne of Osiris. Although the setting of the story is the realm of the divine, the traits of the gods and goddesses are clearly human, since the Egyptians anthropomorphized their deities to a great extent.

III. Literary sense of Humor

One of the divine characteristics that also reflected human personality was humor, and the same text contains several illustrative interactions. Many of the confrontations between Horus and Seth seem to border on burlesque. In one, the two contenders agree to a naval battle, and Seth is tricked into constructing his ship out of stone, which of course sinks, causing him to lose that round. In the *Destruction of Mankind*, the goddess Hathor takes on a very undignified role when she becomes drunk and then can be easily fooled by Re. The Demotic tale of Setna Khaemwase also contains passages with comedic touches. In one, characters playing a game quickly lapse into a slapstick incident, and one keeps hitting the other over the head with the game box, pounding him into the ground. Such episodes must have amused readers. It is likely that some of these texts, whether popular or religious, had humor as one of the intended layers of interpretation. The number of copies available for many of them, as well as their longevity, suggest their wide and lasting appeal. A strong oral tradition ensured that the stories reached a large segment of the population.

IV. Laughing and comics

It is possible to search for references to humor in written work, and to track down specific instances of the word "laugh" and its derivatives, (*sbi*, *sb sbbjt*). They occur in a wide range of genres, including religious, literary, monumental and nonliterary texts. The Pyramid Texts inform us that laughter and shouting accompany the king's ascension to heaven and that when sorrow ends, laughter begins. The divine snake in the *Shipwrecked Sailor* laughs at the little man who promises to do and provide things this demigod already controls. Likewise, in the later *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, Horus laughs at the gathering of gods who think they know more than he does. Laughter occurs in other stories, a temple inscription, and a eulogy, but another passage in the *Contendings* is extremely informative and supplies the reason for the laughter. Here the author records that the god Amun-Re was amused when his daughter Hathor came before him behaving in a rude manner.

V. Humor of Temples and tomb-chapels.

This instance is further evidence that low buffoonery may have been one of the staples of Egyptian humor, and other examples can be found among graffiti, papyri, and statuettes. However, one must always be cautious in regard to interpreting material from another culture. Cross-cultural studies of contemporaneous societies are difficult enough, but they become much more complex when dealing with an early culture such as Egypt, where the language ceased to be used and the civilization died out almost two millennia ago. Today we may think that we see obvious attempts at humor, but perhaps our observation is influenced by personal or cultural bias, and we see something the ancient artisan never intended. For example, a sculptural group from a larger assemblage of servant statuettes from the sixth dynasty, now in the Oriental Institute Museum, depicts two individuals. At first glance, the figures appear to be frolicking, but perhaps they are engaging in activity (fighting, or exhibiting dominant-over-submissive behavior. A small

New Kingdom sculpture from Amarna that portrays monkeys grooming each other maybe a simple genre scene or a thinly disguised parody of the royal family. Some scholars, however have pointed out that the focus of the activity is procreation and fertility, and that the number of related illustrations appears to be similar to the number of vignettes certain mythological papyri and so-called religious books. Thus, this papyrus may be susceptible to more than one explanation.

In fact, the ancient Egyptians in all likelihood created these works with multiple layers of interpretation. Researchers of art and architecture have attempted to demonstrate that much of the creative output of the ancient Egyptians clearly exhibits multi-valence, and recent investigations of literature show several simultaneous "registers." So, while the last example under discussion may illustrate ancient Egyptian humor, that interpretation may be only one of many and may not represent the major focus. The private individuals expressed such feeling regard to the reigning monarch is perhaps also indicated in the statuette of the monkeys mentioned above, as well as in a later New Kingdom letter. In the latter, the writer refers apparently to the reigning pharaoh Ramesses II "the old general."

VI. Funny image of non-Egyptian.

Satire or irony seems to have been an effective tool the Egyptians, and it is particularly evident in portrayals of foreigners. The tomb of Tutankhamun contains several, items that incorporate traditional enemies in a compromising fashion. They appear on the king's footstool and on the bottom of his sandals and his walking stick, where they will be trod on by him or pushed into the ground. Four of their heads project out from beneath the base of an unguent jar, trapped for eternity. A similarly unpleasant fate awaits those enemies depicted on the bottom of the footboard of coffins of the later periods; there, they are eternally trampled by the deceased. The heads of enemies are sculpted below the windows in the high gate of the outer wall surrounding the mortuary complex of Ramesses III. These foreigners then would be subject symbolically to the dominance of the Egyptian ruler and members of the royal family and entourage, who would be standing at the window above the sculptures. That this tradition had longevity in Egypt is evident from the bound prisoners from the Archaic period at Hierakonpolis. Carved on the side of the door socket, they were under the feet of those who passed as well as being constantly covered by the door as they were opened and closed. The eighteenth dynasty temple of Hatshepsut may also present a satirical portrayal and comment on the wife of the ruler of Punt. While he stands lean and dignified, she appears grossly overweight. A small donkey waits patiently nearby with the label designating it as the transportation of the queen.

VII. Political humor

Foreigners and enemies, however, are not the only ones subject to satire or irony. A popular text that focused on the positive aspects of the scribal profession portrayed all the jobs available to Egyptians below the elite class as extremely undesirable; today it is often referred to as the *Satire on the Trades*." In the *Story of the Eloquent Peasant*, the title character frequently resorts to satirical comments and retorts in his communications with his upper-class opponent. One may also see satire, parody, and irony in several

sketches on ostraca, as well as illustrations on papyri. Most such scenes depict animals in roles not characteristic for them. In one of these reversals, a hippopotamus stands in a tree, while a bird climbs a ladder set between the branches. Sometimes the reversals are compounded with anthropomorphized activities. Scholars have seen in some of these drawings elements in later fables. In one vignette on the Papyrus, cats and mice battle one another in a scene reminiscent of those found on the walls of temples and tombs. Here, however, the participants are animals, and the apparent victors are the traditionally weaker species, the mice. An apparent satire on class distinction may well have been the motive for another scene on papyrus in which an elite mouse mistress sits, while her lower-class beautician adjusts her coiffure. An unrelated reversal that occurs in a Middle Kingdom letter may also contain some satirical wit, for here the writer replaces the traditional epistolary ending that wishes the addressee it with one that conveys evil.

VIII. Egyptian Jokes.

As noted above, the Egyptians did not always explain their texts what caused them to laugh. They did, however, occasionally tell a joke. In recorded correspondence the Ramesside period, one can find an example. In it, a man named Thutmose writes to another whom he feels had slandered him because of a joke Thutmose had told high tax official. Fortunately for us, Thutmose repeats his apparently offensive joke, which can be paraphrased thus. "You are like the wife blind in one eye who had been tied for twenty years, and then her husband decided to leave her for another woman. However, when he confronted her, he told her the reason for his defection was she was blind in one eye. She responded to him: 'Is this what you've learned in our twenty years together?' "

IX. Eternal Humor

Detecting such situations in art is much more difficult for the modern viewer, since the bulk of the material available to us is more formal and/or official, and any intention of humor would undoubtedly be of much less importance than the major focus and might violate decorum. Despite this problem, it is sometimes possible to discern humor in what may first appear to be a typical scene of everyday on the wall of a tomb. We are especially fortunate when a text accompanies a scene. The specifying nature of the inscription can sometimes help determine the more generic nature of the illustration. On a wall of the eighteenth dynasty tomb of the official Paheri, the artisans illustrated a banquet scene, not uncommon in the repertoire of funerary vignettes. In addition to the figures at the affair, the painter also provided texts near some of participants that represented their speech. The resulting banter among the people reveals that the women at the apparently dignified gathering are in fact drinking rather heavily, and that one humorously notes that she is parched and her throat is like straw. Apparently Paheri not only wanted his tomb to have the traditional illustrations that were necessary for the afterlife; he also intended that he would be entertained by lively and humorous interactions. An Old Kingdom tomb supplies another example of a fairly typical scene. Here, two men sculpt statues, ostensibly for the tomb owner. What distinguishes this portrayal is the text that records the dialogue between the figures. One of the craftsmen complains about how long his work has been taking, while the other retorts, perhaps rather derisively, that his coworker is carving stone (a hard and therefore time-consuming material), not wood (a softer medium). Both these scenes represent ancient Egyptian

jokes embedded into traditional forms of art whose primary purpose was within the realm of the funerary religion. They reaffirm the notion that even though the ancient Egyptians may have focused on humor in their artistic and literary creations, it was an important aspect of their culture.

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