

# Hathor's Mirror: Reflections on Female Identity in Ancient Egypt

by Rachel Kelley, Cabrillo College

Mentor: Brian Legakis

Many women in Ancient Egypt owned brass mirrors, polished to a shine, called "Hathor's Mirror," named after the goddess of love and beauty (Fig 1). When these mysterious women from the past looked into these mirrors, what did they see? We know relatively little about how these women in history actually saw themselves, as they have had little voice recorded for posterity. By looking at the ways the Ancient Egyptian women creatively expressed themselves through art, writing, music, and methods of self-beautification, we will look over their shoulders as they look in Hathor's Mirror to share their perspectives and to learn more about our own as we seek to understand them today.



Figure 1: Hathor's Mirror: Brooklyn Museum

First it is important to understand the context in which these women lived. Women of Ancient Egypt had a surprising amount of power compared to women in other cultures in the ancient world. They could marry, divorce, own property, and run businesses on their own, as Joyce Tyldesley describes in her book, *Daughters of Isis* (17). This was so radical for the time that the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC historian Herodotus remarked upon his visit that "the women piss standing up, and the men piss sitting down," which may have been literal, but more likely a comment on the unusual social power of women

(Tyldesley 149).

In Ancient Egyptian culture, women ideally worked inside the home, or at least indoors. Motherhood was the most important duty of a woman, and was an integral part of Egyptian culture and religion; many women, however, had other occupations that brought in an income (Tyldesley 45). Bread baking and selling was a common job, also cloth weaving, and hand-making other products that could be sold or traded in the

marketplace. Women also could have offer services to be employed by wealthier classes, such as a maid service, dressmaking, professional dancing or singing (Tyldesley 120-30).

If we first examine women in art, which primarily survives through painting and sculpting, we find little to no evidence of women actually creating these objects themselves. This presents the dilemma of interpreting art as a form of female self-expression when the actual creators likely were male. Furthermore, the artistic style of Ancient Egyptian art was so formalized that there seems little room for individual creativity. Indeed, from the earliest dynasties up until the Ptolemaic era, art styles show almost no perceptible change.

The stylization of artistic expression enforced a particular idealization of women in art. Most images of women are shown with the women in the context of a male, with often a wife or mother standing supportively beside a man. Usually the woman is shown much smaller, and often either extending an arm around the man, or serving or waiting upon a man (Tyldesley 18, 23). This art piece from Tutankhamen's tomb (Fig. 2) is a perfect example. Tutankhamen is seated comfortably on a throne while his wife bows and fauns over him.



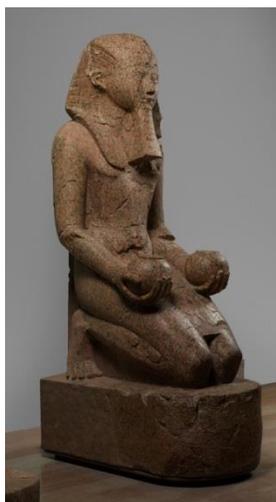
*Figure 2: Tutankhamen and Wife: Cairo Museum (Harris 69)*

The women are depicted as lithe, fair skinned (in comparison with darker men, which reflects the idealization of women working indoors), and very beautiful regardless of age. In contrast, images of middle-aged men are often fat, a signifier of wealth (Tyldesley 24-25).

Images of Royal women and the tomb art from female burials allow us to avoid the problematic nature of male-created art, or art of unknown intent. These two areas provide representations of women that are markedly different from other depictions of women, and well worth a close observation (Tyldesley 20-21, 195).

Firstly, the woman-Pharaoh Hatshepsut provides us with an interesting case. She was a controversial figure before and after her reign, and many of her images have been defaced; fortunately for us, however, some survive to this day (Tyldesley 229).

Hatshepsut is one of the only known female Pharaohs, and is best known for having art showing her as both a man and a woman (Tyldesley 224) (Fig. 3 and 4). The reason for this has been interpreted as a way of validating her power, showing she had equal power to any male-Pharaoh. Yet she still had images showing her as a woman with breasts, unapologetic for her gender.



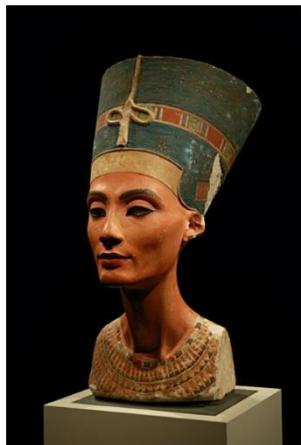
*Figure 3: Hatshepsut as a Man:  
Metropolitan Museum of Art*



*Figure 4: Hatshepsut as a Woman:  
Metropolitan Museum of Art*

Queen Nefertiti is another famous woman who left behind many representations worthy of study. While not a Pharaoh, she was just as controversial a figure as Hatshepsut, and perhaps had as much power. Nefertiti was married to the radical Pharaoh Akhenaten, a monotheist who imposed his religion on all of Egypt and closed down temples to all the other gods. Together, Akhenaten and Nefertiti built the city of Armana, dedicated to their one god. After their rule ended, the city was abandoned, and the old religions reinstated. The two rulers led a revolution in religion and culture that was never forgotten. How much of the monotheistic revolution was fueled by Nefertiti is unknown, but from the prolific number of images of her left behind in Armana, and images which show her as practically equal to Akhenaten, we believe she was a very influential woman (Tyldesley 232-233).

The most recognizable image of Nefertiti is an unfinished bust in which she wears a beautiful and remarkable crown (Fig. 5). The bust was most likely sculpted by their official royal sculptor, Thutmose, but the unique design of her headgear is so unlike any other queen's crown, it is proposed that Nefertiti may be the mastermind behind the piece (Society for the Promotion of the Egyptian Museum Berlin).



*Figure 5: Nefertiti: Egyptian Museum of Berlin*

Nefertiti's name translates to "the beautiful woman has come," and she is indeed stunning in the many statues of her throughout Armana (Tyldesley 231). She is a stark contrast to her husband, Akhenaten, who is shown with a pot-belly and effeminate features. Scholars have questioned if Akhenaten suffered from a disease, or if he was trying to make a political point through these sculptures, but that it is still in debate (Tyldesley 233). Nefertiti is not shown as the submissive, supportive wife in these sculptures, but as a cohort and ruler. It is also very interesting to note that Nefertiti was not the only wife of Akhenaten, and was not even the mother of his heir. Somehow she created a name and power for herself usually only reserved for Pharaohs (Tyldesley 235).

If we now turn to the more common women of Ancient Egypt, we can examine the art in various female tombs. The art in these tombs are different from men's in that they depict women as the primary subjects, rather than in conjunction with men. There are scenes of mothers and daughters, and daily life and tasks of women. The art from these tombs shows a kinship between women working together (Tyldesley 20,273). As there was usually a gender divide in the workplace, these relationships were no doubt very close, and very important.

Contrary to the idealized women of art, scientific examination of human remains suggests that women of ancient Egypt were short, and dark in complexion instead of the fair skinned women in paintings. There is also strong evidence that women worked out of doors far more often than art suggests, out in fields and in the marketplace (Tyldesley 31). With this image in mind, we can consider the Egyptian pre-occupation with bodily grooming and beautification.

Egyptians of both sexes bathed religiously, and meticulously plucked out all of their body hair. Women would coil their hair into elaborate creations, and one could often distinguish between social classes by the hair arrangements (Tyldesley 146-147). Cones of oil and incense were worn on their heads to coat the hair and emit a sweet smelling odor (Tyldesley 153). Women would line their eyes with kohl and other pigments that both protected their eyes from the sun and for beautification (Tyldesley 159). Egyptians were noted by Herodotus for wearing sparkling-white clothing, and from archaeological evidence we find elaborate jewelry and amulets worn for religious and aesthetic purposes (Tyldesley 165). All of these factors point to a very image-oriented society, perhaps not so unlike our own.

In fact, a surviving love song from a woman beckons her lover to, "Come and look at me" as she emerges scantily clad from bathing (Tyldesley 162). Perhaps all this concern with beauty and image was more about vanity than self-expression. Looking at today's celebrities you can see that they craft their own image for marketing purposes rather than for true self-expression. However, these rituals of grooming and beautifying appear to be so widespread among ancient Egyptians, that I would suggest the Egyptians were just very appreciative of beauty. This makes even more sense when the Egyptian religion is considered in which the body survives death and is mummified for re-use (Tyldesley 267). This is all the more reason to carefully treat the body while still living so it would still look good in the afterlife.

Perhaps the best example of this pre-occupation is the most famous woman in all of Egyptian history was Queen Cleopatra, the last Pharaoh and link to the ancient world. Cleopatra was not actually of Egyptian blood, but a Macedonian and descendant of General Ptolemy who served under Alexander the Great. The Ptolemy families ruled Egypt for 300 years, and were the last to rule before Egypt was taken over by the Roman Empire (Schiff 8, 23). One might argue that since Cleopatra is not an Egyptian by blood, she should not be a subject of this paper. However, I would point out that she was born and raised into generations of a family living in Egypt, and was in fact the first of the Ptolemaic line to speak the Egyptian language (Shiff 33). She worshipped the same gods, considered herself an incarnation of Isis, and tried her most desperate to

keep Egypt away from Roman conquest. She was a true Egyptian in all but blood (Schiff 87).

Cleopatra was clever, well-spoken, and notoriously extravagant. Her extravagant clothes, palaces and barges flew in the faces of the stoic, conservative Romans (Tyldesley 17). She embodied the luxury and sensuality that Ancient Egypt is associated with. She seemed to enjoy flaunting this wealth to the Romans and the world, and history has not forgotten it (Schiff 71).

Music is another creative outlet that was available to women. There are many paintings and hieroglyphs depicting dancers, singers and musicians. These musical options were available to women as career choices, along with professional mourning, in which they would follow funerary processions with loud wailing and dramatics. The sistrum (Fig. 6) was a special instrument played only by women (Tyldesley 126, 129)



*Figure 6: Sistrum: British Museum*

The shape, like the mirror we looked at earlier, was associated with Hathor, goddess of beauty and music who often took the form of a cow. You can see from the image the shape of horns (Tyldesley 129). Although we cannot see the ancient Egyptian women sing and dance, this instrument tells us a little about how closely women identified with Hathor and ideals of beauty and aesthetic pleasure.

The last area of creative expression I would like to discuss is the written word. It is important to note that few women of the time were literate. Royal children would be taught by a scribe and some wealthier families would likely have their daughters learn to read and write. However, it was not a priority for most families (Bangall 48). This leaves us with very little written by women in ancient Egypt at all. So I would like to focus on two specific areas, lyrical poetry, and a collection of letters from the Ptolemaic era.

If we start by looking at lyrical poetry, we are first confronted with the question of authorship. We have no way of knowing if these poems were written by women, or written by men speaking FOR women. In this particular collection of poems translated by Ezra Pound, the women seem far less idealized than is seen in other writings, so I suggest we interpret it as written by women for our purposes here.

In this collection, titled *Come Swiftly to Your Love*, the first line that jumps out at me is a woman in love with a man her mother disapproves of. Her mother says her crush is a “kid with no brains.” And the love-struck young woman says,

So am I, I am just like him

And he don't know I want to put my arms round him.

THAT would make mama talk.... (Pound 7)

This is so astoundingly modern: a rebellious young woman with a crush on a bad boy. How timeless! She continues with laments that she is confused and so twitterpated that,

It won't let me choose a dress

Or hide back of my fan.

I can't put on my eye make-up

Or pick a perfume. (Pound 9)

Another, less happy poem, is a woman heart-broken over her lover's indiscretions. The lover reassures her that he will never leave her and she is comforted. But no sooner are the words out of his mouth than he is out the door again, and she hears he has another girlfriend. She writes,

I writhe so for lost love

Half my hair is fallen in grief.

I am having my hair re-curled and set,

Ready, just in case... (Pound 28)

The collection continues with obsession and heartache, spurned lovers, bitterness, and worship. Romantic love has been around since the first civilizations, and these poems

tell us little has changed in human nature and matters of the heart. The women of ancient Egypt were just as susceptible to the perils and joys of love as we are today.

Finally, if we look at a collection of letters written by women in the Ptolemaic era, assembled by Bagnall and Cribiore In a masterful scholarly work, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC-AD 800*, we can learn more about the less-romantic side of women's lives. These letters are mostly written by wealthier, privileged women who would have had the luxury of learning to read. They were written in Greek and Demotic, which is the "cursive" version of hieroglyphics (Bagnall 15).

We start with a letter of family matters, a mother writing to an official regarding her son in 257 BC. She brings her grievance to this man, Zenon, that her son was badly beaten by his employer and she found him "in a hardly laughable state and seeing him was enough for me to grieve." She goes on to ask Zenon to intervene and make sure her son's wages are paid to him by the cruel employer (Bagnall 100). This letter sounds just like any mother going to bat for her child, whether or not that child was in the wrong, she wants to see him treated well. This mother, named Simale, was a real mamma bear.

Another mother writes to this Zenon in petition to help her get her daughter back. Apparently some man has tricked and taken her daughter away and won't let her go. The mother says she is old and needs her daughter's help to get around (Bagnall 102). And so the collection continues with more letters from other poor women, mothers and widows continue in petition to Zenon for his aid.

A letter from wife Isias to Hephaistion in 168 BC is a far cry from the love poem we looked at previously. Hephaistion has been long absent from home and she is exhausted with running the household and taking care of their children. She is "thoroughly ill-pleased" and upset that he hasn't sent them money to take care of family business. However, she cordially closes the letter with a wish for him to make sure he is taking care of himself and staying healthy (Bagnall 111).

Later on in 28 BC another wife, Isidora, writes to her husband with an ancient "honey-do" list, mostly regarding their business. In a series of four letters it appears there was some business misunderstanding of selling lentils.irate, she writes,

“It’s nice of you to try to make me responsible for the lentils and the peas. For you are not even consistent with yourself, since you have written to Paniskos that we sold (them). For we have not sold them; but do as you wish.”

But despite her annoyance, she ends each letter with an admonition to take good care of himself and his health (Bagnall 116).

These letters are not the writings of some idealized submissive housewives, but of competent, strong-willed business women. Myths and tales tell the same story as the mainstream art, women always in context of the man and serving him in some way. Letters, reports and other non-fictional accounts tell another tale.

So we are confronted with this issue of the idealized and the actual woman of ancient Egypt. The submissive mother-figure on the one hand, and a tough business woman, a lovesick rebellious girl, or perhaps a rowdy party-goer such as one woman that declared, “Give me eighteen cups of wine, I want to drink to drunkenness; my throat is as dry as straw.” (Tyldesley 111).



Figure 7: Woman Vomiting at Banquet (Tyldesley 111)

In some ways perhaps we are not so different today. If all that survived 3,000 years later of 21<sup>st</sup> century America was a collection of *Playboy* magazines, we might give the same impression to future generations.

When we let the women of ancient Egypt speak for themselves we see capable, passionate, and strong women emerge. We see creative and expressive queens through art, jealous, rebellious lovers in poetry, and sarcastic businesswomen in letters. With this knowledge, the image of a wife with a supportive arm around her husband is no longer a subservient housewife, but an influential and guiding figure of her family’s life. Quiet power behind the scenes, they were a force to be reckoned with in this most ancient civilization. This has broader implications for women throughout history; Ancient Egypt is not alone in that its history was written by men. Women around the world have been traditionally less literate and less prominently powerful, and so we hear very little about them. But, if we take the time to carefully search for women’s voices from the past, they tell a much different, and if you ask me, a much more interesting story.

## Works Cited

Bagnall, Roger S., and Raffaella Cribiore. *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC - AD 800*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2006. Print.

*Bronze Rattle (sistrum)*. n.d. British Museum, London. Web. 14 June 2014.

Harris, Geraldine. *Ancient Egypt*. New York: Facts on File, 1990. Print.

*Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut*. n.d. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Web. 14 June 2014.

*Mirror with Papyrus Column Handle Ending in Hathor Capital*. n.d. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn. *Brooklyn Museum*. Web. 14 June 2014.

*Nefertiti*. n.d. Egyptian Museum of Berlin, Berlin. *Nefertiti*. Web. 14 June 2014.

Pound, Ezra, and Noel Stock. *Come Swiftly to Your Love; Love Poems of Ancient Egypt*. Kansas City, MO: Hallmark Cards, 1971. Print.

Schiff, Stacy. *Cleopatra: A Life*. New York: Little, Brown and, 2010. Print.

"Society for the Promotion of the Egyptian Museum Berlin." *Nefertiti*: N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Dec. 2013.

*The Female Pharaoh Hatshepsut*. n.d. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Web. 14 June 2014.

Tyldesley, Joyce A. *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*. London: Penguin, 1995. Print