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Gillam, Robyn

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*Robyn Gillam*

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## DRAMA

## الدراما

Robyn Gillam

Drama

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*Drama is to be understood as a subset of performance involving verbal and physical interaction between two or more persons. Finding evidence for this activity in ancient Egyptian sources is challenging, but not without results. Dramatic texts appear to cluster between the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and the Roman Period up to the second century CE and may point to the influence of Hellenic culture.*

يمكن تعريف الدراما كنوع من التمثيل يتطلب تبادل صوتي وحركي بين شخصين أو أكثر. إن العثور على دلائل عن الدراما بالمصادر المصرية يعتبر تحدي ولكن بالفعل توجد بعض الأدلة، وقد بدأت النصوص الدرامية في الظهور بكثافة ما بين الأسرة السادسة والعشرين والعصر الروماني وحتى القرن الثاني الميلادي، ويمكن أن يشير هذا إلى احتمال التأثير بالثقافة الهيلينية (اليونانية).



Textual materials, as well as some archaeological remains, provide evidence for the existence of a full range of different types of performance throughout Egyptian Pharaonic culture. Performance may be defined as any activity acted out by embodied subjects before witnesses and is a form of behavior found in all human societies. It can range from a simple social interaction to a highly structured routine and encompass everything from playful or entertaining activities to highly portentous, effective ritual programs (Schechner 1988: 91 - 124).

From our own culturally specific perspective, drama, a subset of performance, may be defined in a number of ways. A standard definition is that of a situation in which there is a conflict or interaction between two or more characters, which is resolved; and, by extension, any pre-structured or scripted situation where role-playing individuals take up these agonistic

positions. Early Greek theater, the only such form in the ancient Mediterranean world that is well documented and present for some of the same time period as Egyptian culture, made use of a protagonist (joined later by a deuteragonist and a tritagonist) and chorus (Hartnoll and Found 1992: 130). It involved the development of an argument (both in the sense of propositions and subject matter) relating to gods and heroes (Wiles 1997: 23 - 113). Ethnographic evidence shows that similar forms have existed in other cultures (Schechner 1988: 153 - 184), although there is almost no direct evidence for this kind of activity in Pharaonic Egypt. As demonstrated below, Egyptian documents that show the best evidence for performances of dramatic characters are almost all connected with or part of ritual routines. Some of these routines appear not to involve interaction between two actors but between one actor and a statue or between one actor or actors and a dead body. From a modern perspective, these do not qualify as dramas (Willems 2001: 253 - 254),

but it must be remembered that to the Egyptians, both statues and mummies could possess full subjectivity. It may also be argued that singers, readers, and storytellers “performed” literary, religious, and poetic texts for their listeners (as argued by Drioton 1957); but in the almost total absence of any direct evidence as to how this was achieved, they must be omitted from this discussion of dramatic material (see Gillam 2005: 66). The best evidence for drama in the Egyptian record should demonstrate the presence of dialogue between living persons role-playing various characters in a situation deploying a narrative that is advanced by their interactions. Ideally, some kind of audience would be involved, but direct evidence for this is seldom forthcoming, except in the case of some processional festivals or public royal ceremonies. Unfortunately, the detection of drama in Egyptian sources relies on the discernment of some or (rarely) all of these criteria as well as the judgment of the individual researcher about the nature and purpose of the source.

Poor rates of preservation for written documents in all but the later periods, as well as the restriction of writing to a minority literate class (Baines and Eyre 1983), mean that evidence for the more social, casual types of performance is extremely limited. Papyri originating from the New Kingdom workmen’s village at Deir el-Medina suggest the existence of staged political demonstrations (McDowell 1999: 235ff.; Peet 1930: 28 - 45), and assorted monumental and documentary sources point to the existence of work related performances such as those connected with the moving of large statues and blocks of stone (Baines 2006). More indications can be found in the songs of laborers recorded in Old and Middle Kingdom tombs (Guglielmi 1973).

Most evidence for Egyptian performance relates to highly structured ritual routines performed by and for the elite in connection with the installation and appearance of the king and the cult of the gods in formal temples. Such routines include the Sed (or

Renewal) Festival (Martin 1984), the appearance or coronation of the king (Barta 1977a; Derchain-Urtel 1985), a variety of execration rites performed for the king and the gods (Ritner 1993: 111 - 190), as well as the daily cult of the gods in their temples (Barta 1977b), the elaborate rites performed at royal and elite funerals such as the “Butite Burial” (Settgast 1963: 27 - 28, 49 - 51), the mummification ritual (Sauneron 1952; Vos 1993), and the Rite of Opening of the Mouth, which is aimed at ensouling cult and funerary images (Otto 1960). While all such routines contain mythological allusions and often indicate that participants are to role-play various gods, any mythological narrative remains peripheral to their ritual or magically effective character, and the actions performed are mechanical rather than interactive. Furthermore, many of these ritual routines were performed in secret by highly trained, initiated practitioners (Kruchten 1989; Ritner 1993: 199 - 233).

There is, however, extremely limited evidence that dramatic performance, as defined above, may have existed in Egyptian culture. The Late Middle Kingdom Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus preserves in tabular form a record of a divine narrative pertaining to the conflict of Horus and Seth, divided up into a series of sections in which protagonists are given dialogue. There are also sporadic indications of settings and props. Schematic drawings and labels seem to show that high ranking court officials role-play these characters (Sethe 1928: 89 - 92). Very similar, but somewhat simpler in layout and design, is the much later text on the left side of the Shabaqo Stone (Junker 1941; Sethe 1928: 2 - 18). Eleven tableaux found on the inside of the outer wall of the temple of Horus at Edfu also present the same myth, combining pictures of the gods, dialogue, and narrative as in the Ramesseum Papyrus (Blackman and Fairman 1942, 1944; Chassinat 1934: pls. 494 - 514; Fairman 1935, 1974). They also indicate the role of the king, royal children, and various priests in this routine. Although the dramatic character of this document has been questioned (Alliot 1954:

677 - 686, 807 - 822; Drioton 1948: 1 - 14; Leprohon 2007: 283ff.), the recent identification of a Demotic text presenting dialogue and action for characters from the same myth (Gaudard 1999) makes it likely that narrative-based performances with interaction between characters existed.

Evidence for the selection of persons to play roles involving some kind of action and speech is indicated by the practice of selecting pre-pubescent girls to play the roles of the *djeryt* or “kites”, Isis and Nephthys, in mourning over their brother Osiris at state funerals and at the vigil for Osiris in the month of *Khoiak*, as celebrated in the later periods. While the role fulfilled by these young women is arguably of a ritual nature, it does have some dramatic aspects. The speeches and actions of these actors are recorded in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus from the c. fourth century BCE (Faulkner 1936) and are also indicated in the texts and representations in the Osirian chapels at Dendara of the mid first century BCE (Cauville 1997: 49, 75). The Greek Serapeum Papyri of the second century BCE indicate the high prestige and remuneration attached to the position of twin sisters who played this role at the funeral of the Apis bull (Wilcken 1927: 177 - 296).

While almost all of this material relates to the myth of Horus and Seth, an inherently agonistic narrative, a Roman Period text from Esna relates to the birth of the divine king, as recorded in earlier texts and representations found in New Kingdom temples and Ptolemaic birth houses. This work does not include any pictures or explicit stage directions and has been put together from texts found in different parts of the temple by

Serge Sauneron to include long, poetic speeches by the divine child and the gods who have created him and bestowed upon him divine attributes (Sauneron 1962: 185 - 231). Their speeches are interspersed with equally poetic hymns, which not only exalt the gods but comment on their actions. Sauneron’s reconstruction has been criticized (Derchain 1977: col. 857), but the clear interactivity of the speeches of the characters makes its dramatic character hard to deny, even if there is no evidence for its application. The existence of utterances in the first person plural in the Edfu text (Fairman 1974: 37ff.) as well as the reflexive character of the Esna hymns suggest the presence of a chorus and raise issues about the relationship of Egyptian dramatic performances to Greek theater, which can be attested in Egypt from the early Ptolemaic Period (Gillam 2005: 127 - 131).

Another significant element in this conclusion can be drawn from a comparison of the speeches of the characters in the Edfu and Esna texts with those in the Ramesseum Papyrus and on the Shabaqo Stone. The latter are so short and pithy as to not always be easily distinguishable from stage directions, while the former, especially the Esna texts, feature long, poetic passages that both apostrophize the gods and describe their actions and significance with vivid images and elaborate figures of speech. Although the content and imagery remain purely Egyptian, the stylistic features of these speeches may recall the works of Euripides, ever popular among the Greek-speaking community of Egypt (Bowman 1986: 144 - 145), and even, especially in the case of Esna, the dense imagistic and rhetorical style of Silver Age Latin verse.

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The fundamental work on drama is Sethe (1928) in which the author lays out and tests the basic formal criteria for recognizing Egyptian performance scripts and provides a complete publication of the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus. This emphasis on formal analysis allows a closer focus on the status of performance and drama in such texts rather than attempting to identify content. Alliot (1954) examines and discusses in great detail the texts and representations in the temple at

Edfu in order to reconstruct the daily cult and other festivals and ceremonies. The author does not accept that the vignettes and texts relating to the conflict of Horus and Seth are a dramatic presentation; he provides a valuable discussion that contextualizes this ensemble in terms of an overview of all the temple activities. Although more recent scholarship has concentrated on collation and translation of the texts (Cauville and Devauchelle's 1984 revision of Chassinat and de Rochemonteix 1897; Kurth 2004), this work remains an indispensable resource. Blackman and Fairman's *JEA* articles (1942, 1944) provide a scholarly edition of the text detailing the conflict of Horus and Seth at Edfu. Fairman's more popular work (1974) expands his interpretation of it as a drama. It describes two performances of his script based on the text to draw conclusions about the setting and nature of the original performances. Gillam's work (2005) surveys evidence for performances in Egyptian culture. It argues that drama cannot meaningfully be considered in isolation from the broader category of performance. Leprohon's essay (2007), which concludes that Egyptian texts, such as the *Triumph of Horus*, do not meet modern western criteria as scripts for dramatic performances, illustrates problems with Eurocentric readings of different performance traditions. Gaudard (1999) reports on a fragmentary Demotic text in Berlin closely resembling the *Triumph of Horus*, which is laid out in a fashion that suggests a performance script. It will be published in the author's dissertation. Sauneron's publication (1962) of the texts in the temple of Esna provides translations and commentary on liturgical texts used in major festivals. Sauneron reconstructs the *Mystery of the Divine Birth* as a dramatic text. Derchain (1977) has questioned this interpretation, but no detailed reevaluation has to date emerged.

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