

ENiM

Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne

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Citer cet article :

N. Lazaridis, « Physical Characterization in Ancient Egyptian Narrative Literature », *ENiM* 6, 2013, p. 123-137.

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Physical Characterization in Ancient Egyptian Narrative Literature

Nikolaos Lazaridis

Department of History, California State University Sacramento

IN THIS ESSAY I explore the ways in which the authors of ancient Egyptian literary narratives chose to describe the physical appearance of their characters, and attempt to analyze and explain the relevant characterization techniques employed (a) as factors influencing character presentation and plot development¹ and (b) as integral elements of a literary genre that was governed by historically evolving sets of rules and conventions.

The literary works comprising the corpus for this study constitute a fair representative of the narrative genre in Egyptian literature and its historical development from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman era.² These works are: (1) *Tales of Wonder*,³ (2) *Sinuhe*,⁴ (3)

I would like to thank Jacco Dieleman, who read an early draft of this article and sent me his helpful comments and constructive criticism.

¹ The term *plot* is used throughout this essay to denote the relationship between narrated events, and especially the way in which these events are logically arranged following the rules of causality. This may be contrasted to the *story* of a narrative, which consists strictly of a series of events presented in a temporal order. For this, see E.M. FORSTER, "Story and plot," in B. Richardson (ed.), *Narrative dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, Columbus, 2002, p. 71. By considering here the aspect of literary characterization as contributor to plot development, one should be aware of running the risk of arbitrarily assuming that the process of characterization consisted wholly of conscious and intentional choices made by the ancient authors and because of that, they can now be fully rationalized and explained by the modern critic (compare recent works on statistical analysis of literary styles that are primarily based upon this principle; cf. R.G. POTTER, "Statistical Analysis of Literature: A Retrospective on 'Computers and Humanities'," *Computers and the Humanities* 25, 1991, p. 401-429). Although one must admit that not all the observed features of these literary works would have been placed there to serve plot development and narrative function, there is no way of telling which ones were meant to do so and which ones were simple exercises in literary style, or even products of spontaneous, unintentional writing. Hence, one is left with only one option: to treat such features as potential factors that may affect positively the reading experience of these works and whose very potential depends on the diachronic reader's understanding, rather than the original author's intentions and writing skill (compare the discussion on the choice of descriptive details in the modern novel in Th.F. PETRUSO, *Life Made Real. Characterization in the Novel Since Proust and Joyce*, Ann Arbor, 1991, p. 23-24).

² For Egyptian narrative literature as one genre, or a network of genres, see St. QUIRKE, "Narrative Literature," in A. Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*, *Problema* 10, Leiden, New York, 1996, p. 263-276; St. VINSON, "The Accent's on Evil: Ancient Egyptian 'Melodrama' and the Problem of Genre," *JARCE* 41, 2004, p. 33-54; the essays on Egyptian literature in A.B. Lloyd (ed.), *A companion to ancient Egypt II, Part V, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World* 36, Malden MA, Oxford, Chichester, 2010, p. 663-731. For historical fiction's offshoot of narrative literature, see the recent study by C. MANASSA, "Defining historical fiction in New Kingdom Egypt", in S.C. Melville, A.L. Slotsky (ed.), *Opening the Tablet Box: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Benjamin R. Foster, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East* 42, Leiden, 2010, p. 245-269. By bringing together such a diverse corpus of literary narratives, I do not intend to disregard any important differences that surface when one compares these works to one another, as, for instance, would be the case of differences in size (compare, for example, the short *Doomed Prince* to the much longer *Wenamun*) or in popularity (compare, for instance, *Sinuhe*, whose narrative has survived in multiple copies of

Shipwrecked Sailor,⁵ (4) *Eloquent Peasant*,⁶ (5) *Horus and Seth*,⁷ (6) *Wenamun*,⁸ (7) *Doomed Prince*,⁹ (8) *Two Brothers*,¹⁰ (9) *Apophis and Seqenenre*,¹¹ (10) *Capture of Joppa*,¹² (11) *Setne I*,¹³ (12) *Setne II*,¹⁴ and (13) *Amasis*.¹⁵ The non-fragmentary condition of these works (as opposed to fragmentary narratives, such as *Truth and Falsehood* or *Astarte and the Sea*), which was the main criterion for their selection, allows for analyzing, in most cases, uninterrupted running text with no significant gaps in the sequence of episodes that make up the story's plot. The identification of literary characters in these works is based upon the working definition that a "character" is an entity, individual or collective, with human or human-like traits, participating in the work's storyworld.¹⁶

In general, the significance of the role of characterization (including physical characterization) in the making and understanding of a (ancient or modern) literary narrative is manifold. To list some of its functions in a narrative, one may mention that characterization: explains and justifies actions driving the plot forward; anthropomorphizes non-human characters; helps readers identify with, or relate to, one or more characters and hence experience fully every aspects of the unfolding story; enables author/narrator to communicate personal experiences to his readers; provides narrative with realistic social information, contributing in this way to its mimetic and pragmatic qualities, as well as situating the story in an identifiable historical and social context; and grants narrative an ethical ground that is shared by the author, narrator(s), character(s), and audience.¹⁷

multiple material; for a list of these copies, see R. KOCH, *Die Erzählung des Sinuhes*, *BiAeg* 17, Brussels, 1990, p. VI, to *Apophis and Seqenenre*, whose narrative is known only from Pap. Sallier I). Such differences will be acknowledged in the course of the analysis and will be considered as factors influencing the uses of characterization.

³ A.M. BLACKMAN, *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians: Transcribed from Papyrus Westcar (Papyrus Berlin 3033)*, ed. W.V. Davies, Reading, 1988.

⁴ R. KOCH, *Die Erzählung des Sinuhes*.

⁵ A.M. BLACKMAN, *Middle Egyptian Stories*, *BiAeg* 2, Brussels, 1932, p. 41-48.

⁶ R.B. PARKINSON, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, Oxford, 1991.

⁷ A.H. GARDINER, *Late Egyptian Stories*, *BiAeg* 1, Brussels, 1932, p. 37-60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61-76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85-89.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 82-85.

¹³ Fr.Ll. GRIFFITH, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis: The Sethon of Herodotus and the Demotic Tales of Khamuas*, Oxford, 1900.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ W. SPIEGELBERG, *Die sogenannte demotische Chronik des Pap. 215 der Bibliothèque Nationale zu Paris*, Leipzig, 1914, p. 26-28.

¹⁶ For the definition of "character," see U. MARGOLIN, "The What, the When, and the How of Being a Character in Literary Narrative," *Style* 24/3, 1990, p. 453-468; *id.*, "Character," in D. Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 66-79; E. FOWLER, *Literary Characters: The Human Figure in Early English Literature*, Ithaca NY, 2003, p. 16-17. There is a considerable number of important scholarly works on the role and formation of characters in literature; for this study I have consulted: S. CHATMAN, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, NY, London, 1978; Fr. Fladenmuller, *Caractérisation et les modes de la narration dans le roman moderne: théorie de narratologie caractérologique*, New York, 1994; F. JANNIDIS, *Figur und Person: Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie*, Berlin, New York, 2004; J.V. Knapp (ed.), *Literary Character*, Lanham, 1990. For storyworlds and the way in which they can be perceived and understood, see R.J. GERRIG, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, New Haven CT, 1993.

¹⁷ Hence Mieke Bal, in her classic work *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, confidently exclaims that "character is intuitively the most crucial category of narrative, and also most subject to projections and fallacies" (2nd edition, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1997, p. 115).

Although the literary characters' pivotal role in the making of Egyptian narratives has been acknowledged in Egyptological scholarship,¹⁸ there are no studies dedicated to characterization in one or a corpus of works of Egyptian literature. A primary reason for this could probably be the lack of a substantial corpus of extant literary texts, which discourages scholars from reaching beyond studies on specific works and from bringing together common aspects of multiple Egyptian literary texts.¹⁹ Another possible factor for influencing the scholars' attitude towards the study of Egyptian literary style could be the strong disciplinary preference for studies on the literature's language structure, grammar, and historical interpretation, in all of which cases Egyptian literary works are mostly treated as functional texts, as sources for linguistic or historical, rather than literary information.²⁰ Regardless of which of these two explanations, and to what extent, is accurate, the fact remains that the study of stylistics in ancient Egyptian literature is certainly open to improvement.

General strategies of physical characterization

Returning to the selected corpus of Egyptian narratives, the identified types of literary character vary from anthropomorphic deities and animals to historically known or unknown human characters. All such characters, whether human or not, are gendered, either explicitly, by mentioning, for instance, that a character is a boy or a girl, or implicitly by using gendered vocabulary and grammatical forms to refer to them. Some of these characters are named, while others remain anonymous. Some bear recognizable titles or status markers, while others not. More importantly, however, for this study the authors chose to reveal more than the name and social status about some of their literary characters, listing traits and/or describing their state of mind, as opposed to other characters that remain utterly characterless.²¹

In this essay I first identify and discuss some examples of such explicit reference to physical appearance made either within the narrative proper (i.e. the *narrator-text*) or in the course of verbal interactions between different characters (i.e. the *character-text*).²² Then I attempt to

¹⁸ See, for example, Helmut Satzinger's study of the character of the prince of Byblos in "How Good Was Tjeker-Ba'1's Egyptian? Mockery at Foreign Diction in the Report of Wenamun," *Lingua Aegyptia* 5, 1997, p. 171-176; or Sc. Morschauser's work on Sinuhe's character in "What Made Sinuhe Run: Sinuhe's Reasoned Flight," *JARCE* 37, 2000, p. 187-198.

¹⁹ The limited number of Egyptian literary narratives can be observed, for instance, in the account of narrative literature given in Quirke, "Narrative Literature."

²⁰ This preference is clearly visible, for instance, in the relevant articles included in G. Moers (ed.), *Definitely: Egyptian Literature. Proceedings of the Symposium "Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms"*. Los Angeles, March 24-26, 1995, *LingAeg. Studia Monografica* 2, Göttingen, 1999; and in Fr. Hagen et al. (ed.), *Narratives of Egypt and the Ancient Near East. Literary and Linguistic Approaches*, OLA 189, 2011. Another example of this attitude is the short article by A. ALMÁSY, "A Greek Amazon in an Egyptian Story. The Character of Queen Serpot in the Cycle of Petubastis," in K. Endreffy, A. Gulyás (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fourth Central European Conference of Young Egyptologists. 31 August – 2 September 2006, Budapest*, *StudAeg* 18, Budapest, 2007, p. 31-37, where although the author focuses on a specific character in the Amazon story of the Inaros/Petubastis cycle, he examines it only as a piece of historical evidence rather than an aspect of literary writing. The prominence of this "functionality" in the study of Egyptian literature is evident, for example, in Jan Assmann's oft-quoted arguments in his "Cultural and Literary Texts," in G. Moers (ed.), *Definitely: Egyptian Literature*, p. 1-15.

²¹ This is, otherwise, known as *individuation* of characters, defined as "...the ascription of properties to an individual picked out by a referring expression..." (U. MARGOLIN, "Character," 72).

²² In this study the focus lies only on explicit references to such traits, because implicit clues that would be attained by analyzing, for instance, certain actions or reactions by characters as manifestations of permanent

explain the function of such references as narrative techniques, as well as to utilize the unique insight it grants into the making of Egyptian narrative literature.

The examined explicit references to physical aspects of characters are made in a variety of ways, depending on how much text space the author wanted to reserve for this task. In terms of their form, the most common types of such references involve the use of: (1) static attributive components that range from nouns and adjectives to longer relative clauses qualifying a literary character; and (2) active verbal clauses describing actions that explicitly depict changes in character aspects.²³ Here are two instances that illustrate and contrast these two types:²⁴

(1) *jwz f hr dd n s tw z j dj m- [z k] šrjt n frt.*

He said to her: “I am here with [you], *beautiful maiden*” (*Horus and Seth* 6, 7-8).

(2) *hr jr m-ht n z hrww hr nn jw p z hrd hr tnw m h'wt z f nbt jw z f hr h z b n p z y z f jt.*

Now after days had elapsed and the boy *grew in all his body*, he sent word to his father... (*Doomed Prince* 4, 11-12).

In the first instance Seth is speaking to Isis and calls her “beautiful maiden,” indirectly describing to the audience her current physical appearance (as Isis changed her form several times in the course of this story) through the use of a static attributive unit consisting of a noun and an adjective. Seth’s characterization of Isis indicates further his infatuation with her that eventually makes him slip into her trap.

In the case of the second instance, the author of the *Doomed Prince* described an active transformation that happens to the prince who has grown older after an undefined period of time is passed. The Egyptian author did so through the use of a verbal unit that shares a number of common features with the narrated events that make up the story: it is an action that has a designated beginning and an end and it partakes temporally and logically in the developing sequence of events that move forward the plot.²⁵ In other words, this second technique is more organically embedded in the narrative, while the first technique functions as one of the many qualifiers of characters in a narrative. In both cases the references to physical

personality traits are extremely subjective and are solely based on a modern reader’s interpretation of the ancient work, with no guarantee, that is, that such clues were originally meant to be there by the authors.

²³ This distinction is essentially linked to the popular, yet difficult to apply, distinction between *description* and *narration*, terms whose very definitions are still debated especially in the circles of Linguistics and Literary Studies. For some useful discussions of these two terms and their relationship, see Ph. HAMON, “What is description?,” in Tzv. Todorov (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, Cambridge, Paris, 1982, p. 147-178; M. BAL, *On Story-Telling. Essays in Narratology*, Sonoma CA, 1991, p. 109-145. For crossovers between the two modes of literary style, see H.F. Mosher Jr., “Towards a Poetics of ‘Descriptized’ Narration,” *Poetics Today* 12, 1991, p. 425-445; R. RONEN, “Description, Narrative and Representation,” *Narrative* 5, 1997, p. 274-286.

²⁴ Note that all translations of ancient text are the author’s.

²⁵ The notion of the plot as an entity moving forwards presupposes that narrative is a dynamic event, moving in both its telling and its reception, as its author introduces, complicates, resolves or leaves unresolved the various crises developing in the course of the interaction between characters or between one or more characters and the circumstances governing the context of their lives and actions (cf. J. PHELAN, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*, Chicago, London, 1989, p. 15).

appearance are kept brief, and they neither interrupt significantly the narrative flow nor slow down its pace.²⁶

Apart from illustrating the two most common formal types of physical characterization in Egyptian narrative literature, the aforementioned two instances also illustrate two of the most common difficulties one may encounter in such a study. The first relates to semantic ambiguities that a modern reader is bound to face, given his spatiotemporal and cultural distance from the ancient writings. In other words, one cannot be certain in some cases whether the descriptive vocabulary in use refers to physical traits, and if so, whether at the same time it also, directly or indirectly, refers to other aspects, such as a character's personality, social profile, or emotional state. Thus in example (1) the adjective *nfrt* can be translated and understood in multiple ways. It can mean "beautiful" in physical terms as well as "good" in terms of personality or moral integrity.²⁷ It might also have been meant here in both ways at the same time. The context in such cases, in its various layers ranging from the immediate textual one to the wider cultural one, is the priceless key one holds to open up the chain of interpretive connections. In this case, in a few lines before the quoted passage the author described the magical transformation of Isis's appearance into "a maiden whose body was beautiful and whose like did not exist in the entire land."²⁸ And he added that consequently Seth, after he saw her from distance, "desired her most lecherously."²⁹ Both statements confirm that the transformation of Isis is probably purely (and seriously) physical, since Seth has not had the chance from afar to examine her behavior and personality before desiring her sexually!

The second difficulty is cognitive, as well as semantic, and is based upon the premise that "...characters are invented or stipulated by a human mind, and generated in particular cultural and historical circumstances through the use of language, following certain literary-artistic conventions."³⁰ Accordingly, an ancient reader of these narratives was probably able to grasp connotations intended by the ancient author (especially in the case when the two shared the same cultural and spatiotemporal context) that a modern reader is unable to detect. In the case of the examined material this means that although one may be certain that descriptions of different physical traits can potentially cross-reference each other (a process necessary in many cases for leading to the satisfactory understanding of a text), one cannot be sure whether a cross-reference was intended by the author, or if so, whether it was perceived as such by an ancient reader. Thus one may assume that the reference to a *beautiful maiden* in the first of the two aforementioned examples invoked a specific image in the mind of the originally intended reader (an image shaped by the reader's personal experience and/or cultural context) that possibly involved a combination of multiple (physical or non-physical) traits.³¹ Such a visualized maiden would, for instance, be dressed in a specific way, would behave in a specific way, and so on. As modern readers, however, we have only limited access to the

²⁶ The term *narrative flow* can interestingly be connected to the way the audience of these stories experience and understand the narrative structure and progress; for a comparable link of narrative flow to human experience and perception, see Ch. BLOCH, "Beyond Fluidity and Rigidity: A Phenomenological Investigation," *Human Studies* 23/1, 2000, p. 43-61.

²⁷ For the various meanings of *nfr* in different textual contexts, *Wb* II, 253-256.

²⁸ Line 6, 5: *w' šrj* (sic) *nfrt n h'wt-s jw nn wn mj qd-s m p3 t3 r dr=f*.

²⁹ Lines 6, 5-6: *'h'.n n-fmrtj st r dw '3 n wr*.

³⁰ U. MARGOLIN, "Character," 67.

³¹ According to U. MARGOLIN, "the analysis of character is regulated by cultural and interliterary rules" (quoted in M. Bortolussi, P. Dixon, *Psychonarratology: foundations for the empirical study of literary response*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 138).

ancient readers' potential typical images of a beautiful maiden, provided by the available stock of such cultural images.

Bearing in mind these difficulties in interpreting the ancient texts, I now proceed to look at two types of physical description included in the Egyptian literary narratives: references to physical features and references to personal attire and adornments.

Physical features

One occasionally finds explicit references to characters' physical features, such as their body type or the state of specific body parts, in most of the selected narratives, except for *Wenamun* and *Apophis and Seqenenre*. These references include mainly descriptions of positive features or of features of an undeterminable quality (at least to a modern reader who is mostly using intra-textual information), while negative references are sparse. Thus such references are present only when the physical traits described influence the plot development, and even then, they are brief and to the point.

To begin with some examples of positive features, in the *Tales of Wonder* Pharaoh Snefru orders girls to be assembled for him in order to entertain him by rowing in the lake:

(3) *jmj jn.tw n=j zt-Hmwt 20 m nfrwt nt h'w=sn m bntwt hnsktjt ntj n wpt=sn m ms[t].*

Let there be brought to me twenty women, the most beautiful in form, with firm breasts, (with) hair well-braided, not yet having opened up to give birth (5, 9-11).

The author here offered a description of what type of woman would aesthetically appeal to the Old Kingdom Pharaoh as especially beautiful, focusing on three points: firm breasts, presentable hair, and youthful, unspoiled bodies. This detailed description, which is followed by more orders about the way these girls should be dressed (or better, *not* dressed), is given in reported direct speech and has multiple functions at this point in the narrative: (a) it shows that the Pharaoh is powerful and authoritative enough to ask for anything he desires and immediately get it;³² (b) it explains why the Pharaoh is pleased after his orders have been followed to the letter and when he sees the beautiful girls rowing before him;³³ and (c) it places emphasis on the scene, which according to some scholars, might have born mythological connotations associating Pharaoh with the sun god and his beautiful Hathors.³⁴ This emphasis seems intentional and it partially serves the author's strategy, complying at the same time with socio-cultural standards and literary pragmatics. In other words, it allows the author to elaborate on an image, creating the right setting for the impending miracle by Djadjaemankh, although the author had the option to be more economical in his description of the girls, using a similar reference to that included in the earlier unelaborated suggestion by Djadjaemankh to equip a boat with "beauties."³⁵

³² It is impossible to tell here whether the author describes the scene humorously by portraying the absurd waste of the Pharaoh's unquestionable authority over petty details about the type of women who should be invited to the boats and how they should be dressed.

³³ *Wn.jn jb n hm=f nfr n m33 hnn=sn*, "The heart of His Majesty was pleased at the sight of their rowing" (5, 15).

³⁴ See W.K. SIMPSON *et al*, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, Cairo, 2003, p. 17, n. 6, and the literature cited.

³⁵ Line 5, 4.

Similar positive references to physical beauty are also found in the *Two Brothers*, *Horus and Seth*, and the *Doomed Prince*; here are two examples from these works:

(4) *wn jn Hnmw hr jrt n=f jry hms sw jw=s nfr[tj] m h'wt=s r zt-hmt nbt ntj m p3 t3 dr[=f].*

Thereupon Khnum made for him a marriage companion who was more beautiful in her body than any woman in the entire land (*Two Brothers* 9, 7-8).

(5) *jw=sn hr dd n=f m shrw n sdd jj=k tnw p3 šrj nfr.*

They said to him by way of conversation, “Where have you come from, handsome young man?” (*Doomed Prince* 5, 11).

In the first example Khnum follows the request by the divine Ennead and creates a beautiful woman to keep company to lonely Bata in the Valley of the Cedars. The exaggerated statement that she is the most beautiful woman in the world occurs in several narratives (as seen, for instance, in the discussion of example (1) above), stretching the spectrum of logical possibilities for the storyworlds created in these narratives and leaving behind it a scent of myth and folktale. In other words, such exaggerations suggest to the audience that, among other things, they should not try to explain everything that happens in these narratives in logical, mundane ways, but rather be ready to accept characters and events that would exist only in an expanded version of their everyday reality. Here the storyworld created by the narrative involves gods, like Khnum, as semi-gods, like Bata, and when such characters interact with each other, anything is possible.

In addition, the extreme beauty of this woman, who, although she plays a significant role, remains anonymous throughout the narrative, explains why, later in the story, the Pharaoh is enchanted with her scent, which is carried miles away from the Valley of the Cedars by her hair lock, and decides to send out people to find her for him and bring her back to the Palace to make her his queen. This woman is created by the gods themselves, is of rare beauty, and eventually becomes a worthy opponent to Bata, their challenge being a series of suspenseful episodes making up the last part of the narrative.

Finally, one must note here that this example illustrates the Egyptian authors' frequent choice (also found in the immediate context of example (1) and in example (3) above) to specify the physical aspect of the word *nfr* (by explaining that it refers to her body), when this word partakes significantly in characterization, since they were probably aware of its potential polysemy mentioned above.

In the example from the *Doomed Prince* the young suitors for the Syrian princess welcome the prince in their midst and before asking him about his background, they give him and his travelling team food, and they help relax from the long trip by taking care of his tired feet. All these activities seem to follow some kind of protocol of hospitality and it is within this framework of polite, socially expected conduct that they address him as “handsome young man.” Accordingly, this physical (and possibly also carrying positive connotations about the overall conduct) characterization is probably not meant literally here, but is another display of courtly manners.

As noted above, such explicit references to physical appearance are not, however, always positive, as one finds also some scarce references to negative physical features, as well as a considerable number of references to features whose aesthetic value cannot be determined

from the immediate textual context. A sample of references to physical features of negative or undetermined quality includes:

(6) *nn ʒyt hr n mʒʒ hr=k.*

There is no one whose face turns white at the sight of your face. (*Sinuhe* B 278).

(7) *mt ʒʒ-nhʒt jw m ʿʒm qmʒ n styw.*

Behold Sinuhe who came like a Bedouin, changed by the Asiatics. (*Sinuhe* B 264-5).

(8) *ʿhʿ.n ʒst hr jrt hpr=ʒ m wʿ [n] drj jw=ʒ pwyt jw=ʒ hms[t] hr dʒdʒ n wʿ n snmt.*

And so Isis transformed herself into a kite, flew up, and perched on top of an acacia tree. (*Horus and Seth* 6, 13-4).

In the corpus examined there are only few examples of straightforward, explicit references to a physical deformity or to what the Egyptian authors and their audience would probably have deemed as physically ugly. All such references to negative physical features either describe a temporary only feature or are vague and provide no concrete details.³⁶ Examples (6) and (7) illustrate well this type of references.

Example (6) comes from a poetic speech (or song) by the royal children and the queen before the Pharaoh, whose intention is to appease the Pharaoh, who is provoked by the culturally inappropriate state of Sinuhe (see example [7]), and to invite him to be kind towards Sinuhe, who has just returned back to Egypt from abroad and has been acting and speaking erratically in an obvious state of fear and shock.³⁷ The passage in question refers to the temporary feature of a pale face, commonly considered in Egyptian writing culture as a sign for fear.³⁸ Thus the author here did not dwell too much on the facial distortions caused by the emotion of fear, but used the expression in passing, as a well-known idiom. Such idioms involving physical features were common with specific body members, such as the face, the heart, the belly, or the arm.³⁹ Thus the Egyptian audience was probably trained to expect this kind of polysemy when encountered such physical terms in a text, and was probably able to discern whether they were meant literally or idiomatically in each case, by considering the immediate textual context.

In example (7) the negative description of Sinuhe looking like a Bedouin possibly constitutes a vague, unexplained reference to a mixture of features, including the state of his hair and face, as well as his clothing and odor; in other words, the reference here is explicitly physical and negative,⁴⁰ but it does not provide the audience with any concrete details. Instead, the details of Sinuhe's current appearance can be deduced by reading later in the text about the

³⁶ Another interesting example of an explicitly negative description of a character's physical state is the passage in the *Two Brothers* relating the trick Anubis's wife played to her husband by pretending to be sick (lines 4, 6-5, 4). If, indeed, the Egyptian audience was not used to encounter such negative physical descriptions in their narratives, this passage stands as a striking exception that would have shocked them and hence it would have made them immediately perceive the tragic irony of Anubis's furious reaction, along with stressing the negative characterization of Anubis's wife.

³⁷ For this, see lines B 252-63.

³⁸ The same physical expression is used in the *Shipwrecked Sailor*, line 113.

³⁹ See, for example, the numerous idiomatic expressions formed with *hr* or *ʿ* recorded in *Wb* III, 128-130, *Wb* I, 156-157, respectively.

⁴⁰ Accordingly the queen and the royal children cry out in shock when they see Sinuhe in this un-Egyptian appearance (lines B 265-266).

stages of his “physical restoration” back to his Egyptian looks.⁴¹ Once again, as is the case with all references to negative physical features in the corpus, the Egyptian author shied away from diving into the details of an aesthetically unappealing look. In terms of narrative strategy, this negative reference to Sinuhe’s non-Egyptian appearance preserves the same tone and attitude characterizing what the Pharaoh told Sinuhe earlier in the text, when he first met him in the palace, hence elaborating on Pharaoh’s reaction to Sinuhe’s long-awaited return.⁴²

In addition to these negative references, there are a considerable number of descriptive passages that do not explicitly help the reader decide whether their contents are meant in a positive or a negative way. This may be the case for the modern readers only, due to the lack of a common cultural background with the originally intended Egyptian audience, who probably would have caught the clues consciously implanted in the text and would have been able to identify the positive or negative connotations in each case. Thus in example (8) Isis’s transformation into a kite appears to be an active description of a physical feature whose aesthetic, and/or moral, evaluation (if any was intended) depended on the Egyptian audience’s preconception of the image of a kite and a kite’s character and role in Egyptian culture.⁴³ If one compares this reference to the following example from the *Shipwrecked Sailor*,

(9) *ns sw mh 30 hbstꜣf wrꜣs r mh 2 hꜣwꜣf shrw m nbw jnhwjꜣffj m hꜣsbd mꜣꜣ.*

He was 30 cubits long. His beard was larger than 2 cubits. His body was made out of gold, while his eyebrows were of real lapis lazuli (63-6).

one will find that, indeed, knowledge of the Egyptian audience’s cultural background helps the modern reader consider this superficially neutral description of the snake’s physical features as most probably bearing positive connotations due to its similarities to the standardized way of depicting the bodies of Egyptian gods.⁴⁴ This implication that the snake is an equal to the Egyptian gods anticipates the fear and awe the shipwrecked sailor expresses by, for example, being on his belly before it or by revealing to his audience that he feels lost and speechless when the snake addresses him.⁴⁵

Personal attire and adornments

With regard to descriptions of clothing and other objects adorning the bodies of characters who feature in the literary works under study, one may quickly observe the striking absence of such descriptions in these works, as opposed to other types of description. Characters’ attire and adornments are mentioned only in *Sinuhe*, *Tales of Wonder*, *Capture of Joppa*, and *Setna I* and *II*. In some cases such references are made hastily, contributing more to the narrative plot than to characterization. In other cases, although references to attire and

⁴¹ Lines B 290-295.

⁴² Lines B 257-260.

⁴³ The emphasis here seems to be placed on the magical act of self-transformation than on its physical outcome. The easiness with which Isis changes forms to trick Seth offers clear insight into her personality and intentions, along with justifying Seth’s later complain to Pre-Harakhti about her (lines 7, 2-3). Also, her metamorphosis bears a more practical function here, since Isis probably intended to get away as fast as possible from Seth, expecting that he would get furious with her trick.

⁴⁴ Compare, for instance, the description of Re’s body in the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, line 2, published in E. HORNUNG, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh: Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen*, OBO 46, 1982 and translated in W.K. SIMPSON *et al*, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 290-298.

⁴⁵ See lines 67 and 75-76 respectively.

adornment seem to contribute to characterization, they are not combined with description of physical appearance, thus resulting in incomplete physical descriptions. Finally, there are also cases where attire and adornments are referred to, described, or alluded to, side by side with descriptions of characters' physical features. All these difference cases can be illustrated in the following examples:

(10) *jwz f hr jrt m mjtt jwz f hr jnt t3 'wnt n nswt Mn-hpr-r' 'nh [wd3 snb jwz f hr mh m] p3y z f d3y.*

So he (i.e. Djehuty) acted accordingly, brought the baton of King Menkheperre, l.[p.h., and hid (it) in] his kilt (*Capture of Joppa*, 1, 10-11).

(11) *Pr-'3 jw r hry r t3 h3t n t3 shret Pr-'3 jwz f hr pket jw p3 mš' n Mn-nfr t3i pket drzw jrm n3 w'bw n Pth p3 mr-šn n Pth jrm n3 sr(w) na pr Pr-'3 drzw.*

The Pharaoh came down before the royal yacht wearing mourning linen, while the whole population of Memphis wore mourning linen together with the priests of Ptah, the chief inspector of Ptah together with the councillors, and Pharaoh's whole court (*Setna I* 4,21-22).

(12) *spr pw jr.n=sn r pr R'-wsr gm.n=sn sw 'h' d3jw shdw.*

When they (i.e. Khnum and the goddesses) reached the house of Rewosre, they found him standing with his kilt upside down (*Tales of Wonder* 10, 2).

(13) *jjr z f nwe r w't [zj-hmt] jw n3-'n3s m-šs jw bn-pw zj-hmt hpr n p3y z s nw n3-'n3s jw hynw wpwt nb 'š3y n-īm3s jw hynw hm-hlw-zj-hmwt mš' m-s33s jw wn rmt ht na pr s 2 ip r-r3s.*

He (i.e. Setna) beheld a woman who was exceedingly beautiful, no woman have ever existed with her look. She was beautiful, with some works of gold in great quantity upon her, some female servants walking behind her, and two men of the household assigned to her (*Setna I* 4, 38-39).

(14) *rdj sw3 nnpwt hr h'w3j t3.kwj 'b šnw jw rdi sbt n h3st hbsw nmjw-š' sd.kwj m p3kt.*

Years were caused to pass from my body. I (i.e. Sinuhe) was depilated, and my hair was combed out. A load was given to the desert and clothes to the sand-dwellers. I was outfitted with fine linen (*Sinuhe* B 290-293).

Example (10) illustrates the first type of cases where brief references to attire and adornments directly contribute not so much to characterization but more to narrative plot. Djehuty, the Egyptian general and protagonist of the story, after hearing the request of the Rebel of Joppa to see the great baton of King Menkheperre, hides the baton under his kilt in order to later surprise his opponent by bringing it swiftly out from its hiding place and smiting him with it.⁴⁶ The reference to Djehuty wearing a kilt here is made in passing, surely not with any intention to offer the audience more enlightening information about the attire of the story's protagonist. After all, the fact that Djehuty was wearing a cloth around his waist was a visual feature that was commonly expected for an Egyptian man of Djehuty's status (see also Rewosre in example [12]).⁴⁷ Thus, the reference to the kilt seems to be mainly serving here the plot, since the kilt functions as a surprising (and possibly also comically absurd) hiding place for the famous royal baton, hence contributing to the comical effect this scene was probably meant to have on its Egyptian audience.

⁴⁶ Line 1,13.

⁴⁷ For Egyptian men's kilts, see G. VOGELSANG-EASTWOOD, *Pharaonic Egyptian Clothing*, Leiden, 1993, p. 53-54.

In example (11) the author mentioned that the Pharaoh, the Memphite population, as well as members of the local temple of Ptah and the royal court, put on their mourning linen as a formal expression of grief over the death of Naneferkaptah, who had jumped into the river, hence becoming a “praised one,” as was earlier in the text also the case for his wife Ihweret and their son Merib. As opposed to these two earlier deaths, in the case of the drowning of Naneferkaptah the author expanded the repeated brief format of his description of the manner in which the people on board react to these deaths, by reporting what the people on board actually shouted when they found out about Naneferkaptah’s death.⁴⁸ This already expanded description of the people’s reaction to the protagonist’s drowning is further elaborated through the description in example (11), where the author emphasized the high social status of Naneferkaptah, which is acknowledged not only by the important people of Memphis but also by everyone else in the city.

By contrast to an earlier spontaneous reaction of the shocked people on board, whose emotional weight is marked by the repetition of the exclamatory word *wy*, “woe,” as well as the exaggerated observation that Naneferkaptah was the best scribe and wise man who ever lived,⁴⁹ the expression of grief by the Pharaoh and the other members of the Memphite community is indicated only by the fact that they wear their mourning linen. This striking contrast might have been due to the expected quiet formality of such a social event, which, however, is interrupted by the discovery of Naneferkaptah’s body on the boat and of the scroll that has been wrapped around him, and ends with the officials of Ptah’s temple exclaiming their formal praises of Naneferkaptah before the Pharaoh,⁵⁰ and initiating the funerary preparations.

In other words, the minimal reference to personal attire here is not combined with a description of physical features, because first it seems to carry cultural connotations for a proper communal reaction to the death of an important public person; and second, it probably intends to place the emphasis on the subsequent plot developments. By itself, this brief reference does not appear to express strong emotions, but instead adds to the description of a formal public occasion, where people, including officials as well as commoners, were expected to wear the proper clothes to publicly show their grief, the officials to acknowledge the social importance of the dead person not only through their mere presence in the event but also through saying some eulogist words before the Pharaoh, while the Pharaoh to be the one who finally gives the orders for the proper funerary preparations of the body.

A similar case to example (11), when a minimal reference to personal attire is not combined with other types of physical description and probably carries cultural connotations and contributes to characterization by describing one or more characters’ emotional states, is example (12) from the *Tales of Wonder*. Here the distress that Rewosre feels, due to the impending delivery of his pregnant wife, is denoted by the mention of his kilt being in a

⁴⁸ Thus compare lines 4, 18-19 for Naneferkaptah to line 4, 9 for Merib and line 4, 14 for Ihweret.

⁴⁹ Lines 4, 20-21 read: *š rmt nb r-wn-nsw hr mrt sgpe dr-w dd wy ʿ3 wy g3 jn [stzʿf] p3 zh nfr p3 rmt rh ntj jw bn-pw kj hpr m-qtyʿf*, “Absolutely every man who was on board uttered a loud cry, saying: ‘Great woe! Vile woe! Has he withdrawn himself, the good scribe, the wise man, whose like has never existed?’”

⁵⁰ Note that the author repeated in these praises (lines 4, 14-25) that Naneferkaptah was a good scribe and a wise man, omitting, however, the earlier emotion-ridden exaggeration that his like had never existed before, and hence probably making this short speech sound more formal, pragmatically agreeing with the fact that it was delivered by temple officials in the midst of a rather formal occasion.

disordered state.⁵¹ In other words, this brief reference here seems to signify an emotional state, by distorting the common cultural image of an Egyptian man wearing a cloth tied around his waist (as was the case with example (10) above), its function here resembling, that is, that of the mourning linen in the previous example. In both cases these cultural images appear to communicate sufficiently by themselves the emotional states in which the characters are, since the authors did not provide their audience with further explanation about these feelings.

By contrast to the previous two examples, in examples (13) and (14) the references to personal attire and adornments are combined with descriptions of physical features and hence, due to this combination that makes the physical description of a character more elaborate, contribute significantly to characterization. In example (13) Setne, while strolling around Ptah's temple at Memphis, sees for the first time Tabubu, whose beauty, described in this passage, is bound to lure him into her trap. The significance Tabubu's beauty holds for the narrative development is emphasized by the rather elaborate (if compared to other such passages describing characters) description of the whole scene, which includes references to Tabubu's looks, her personal adornments, as well as her escort. The description here, although long and multifaceted, is also characterized by exaggeration and vagueness. Hence the author, on the one hand, exaggerated about the degree of Tabubu's beauty by exclaiming that "no woman have ever existed with her look," while, at the same time, he remained vague when referring to specific elements pertaining to Tabubu's appearance by mentioning "...some works of gold in great quantity" and "some female servants" without describing them at all to his audience.

One may consider both stylistic features at work here (that is, exaggeration and vagueness) as reliable mimetic techniques, attempting perhaps to represent Setne's focal point, and especially his momentary state of emotional bewilderment that overcomes his senses: "The moment Setne saw her, he did not know where on earth he was."⁵² However, these features seem to characterize the whole narrative of *Setne I* (if not most of Egyptian literary narratives, in general), as evident, for instance, in the passage relating Naneferkaptah's habit of reading monumental texts, or in the passage relating Pharaoh's reaction to the news of Ihweret's pregnancy.⁵³ Thus it is safer to assume that the use of exaggeration and vagueness in the descriptive language of example (13) is not an exceptional case, representing a unique mimetic technique, but is rather a consistent element of this narrative's style of writing.

As is the case with example (13), in example (14) the author of *Sinuhe* referred to pieces of Sinuhe's attire side by side with physical features. By contrast to example (13), however, here the physical description is active (as opposed to the previous example's static one) and is hence well interwoven with the narrative plot, since all the mentioned physical features are part of a series of actions taken by servants to transform the current Bedouin-like look of Sinuhe back into his proper Egyptian one. The physical features in this example are not described in detail but are rather insinuated, while the narrative sequence remains complete without any informational gaps. More specifically, although the process of change through which Sinuhe's body, hair, and clothing have gone is fully narrated, the way in which these features look like before and after the process is not described. Hence the narrative flow is

⁵¹ For this interpretation, see E. STAEHELIN, "Bindung und Entbindung: Erwägungen zu Papyrus Westcar 10, 2," ZÄS 96, 1970, p. 125-139; W.K. SIMPSON *et al*, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 21, n. 18.

⁵² Line 5, 1: *t3 wnw't n nwe r-ir Stne r-r-s bn-pwz'f gm m3' n p3 t3 jwz'f n-jmz'f*.

⁵³ For the former, see lines 3, 9-10, and for the latter, lines 3, 7-8.

running steady in this passage, while the characterizing description of physical appearance is hopelessly trying to keep up with it.

Summation and interpretation of results

To sum up, one may note that references to physical features or to personal attire and adornments can be brief (as in [1], [2], or [10]) or longer and more elaborate (as in [9] and [13]). They can also be used literally (as in [4], [8], or [13]) or metaphorically/idiomatically (as in [6] or [7]). Finally, they can be vague (as in [2]), precise (as in [9] or [12]), exaggerated (as in [4] or [13]), or realistic (as in [3] or [11]).

As narrative devices, these instances of physical description may move the plot forward, by becoming directly part of a sequence of narrated events (as is the case with all active verbal descriptions), by logically anticipating and justifying later actions by one or more characters (as in [3], [6], or [13]), or by elaborating on, or explaining, concurrent actions (as in [1], [5], or [14]).

In all the literary works under study the usage of descriptive passages conforms to the overall narrative pace, which is determined by the speed at which narrated events succeed each other and the manner and frequency in which these events are interrupted by descriptive passages or narratorial comments. Thus long descriptive interruptions are included only in narratives that show flexibility in their pace, alternating passages of slowly moving, detailed narrative with fast narration of a summarized sequence of events.⁵⁴

The same correlation can be drawn between the degrees of vagueness and exaggeration characterizing the identified instances of physical description and those characterizing the overall style of writing in the narratives that include them. Accordingly, it appears that the Egyptian narratives that, in general, allow space for vague language and exaggerated expressions are those which include physical descriptions with such features. In this way, vague or exaggerated physical descriptions actively partake in the display of somewhat consistent style of writing, carrying out possible authorial intentions, such as to produce a conspicuously fictional storyworld whose vagueness and exaggeration resembles fairy tales and popular folklore, as is probably the case with the *Two Brothers* illustrated with example (4).⁵⁵ Alternatively, the consistent use of such descriptions might have been intended to indicate an underlying emotional tension in, or a particular personality trait of, the narrator who is relating the vague or exaggerated descriptions, as is the case, for instance, with Ihweret in *Setne I*, who often uses vague and exaggerated phrases, such as that “everything that was beautiful” (*ntj nb ntj n3-‘n3w*) was offered to her as a gift or that in one instance Pharaoh’s heart was “exceedingly happy” (*n3-nfr h3tj3f m-šs*) and in another instance she was taken to a house that was “exceedingly beautiful” (*w‘ 3.wj iw n3-‘n m-šs*).⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Fast-pace and slow-pace narrative are often also coined as *scenic narration* and *summary narration* respectively; for the definition and contrast of these terms, see K. GRIFFITH, *Writing Papers about Literature: A Guide and Style Sheet* (7th edition), Boston, 2006, p. 50-1; Fr.K. STANZEL, *A Theory of Narrative* (2nd edition), Cambridge, 1984, p. 47.

It must be noted, however, that in texts with the potential of being orally performed (as was probably the case with some, if not all, of the Egyptian works selected) the narrative pace definitely also depended on the storyteller’s style as well as the performance’s circumstances.

⁵⁵ For the consideration of the *Two Brothers* as a fairy tale, see S. TOWER HOLLIS, *The Ancient Egyptian “Tale of the Two Brothers”*: *The Oldest Fairy Tale in the World*, London, 1990.

⁵⁶ Lines 3, 5, 3, 7, and 3, 26 respectively.

In addition, the style of physical characterization conforms not only to the rules of each of the literary works examined, but also to general rules governing Egyptian narrative writing. Hence, as mentioned before, one may observe that the frequency of literary usage of characters' physical description in these works ranges from being totally absent to being merely economical (especially if compared to the proportions of the narratives that are covered by their characters' verbal exchanges or actions). Thus one may conclude that the Egyptian authors of these narrative works did not seem to have been keen on describing the physical appearance of their characters, a general practice that became a defining feature of the whole corpus of Egyptian narrative literature, as it developed from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman era.⁵⁷

In an attempt to explain this common practice of the producers of Egyptian narrative writing, one must first point out the most immediate result of this economical physical description of literary characters, namely that it decreases the chances of fully visualizing narrated events and scenes, and as a consequence makes the audience's task to understand, and engage with, the story more difficult.⁵⁸ In other words, this stylistic attitude curtails the mimetic effect of literary writing,⁵⁹ as it omits an important aspect of characterization that is one of the main prerequisites for forming round, rather than flat, literary characters.⁶⁰

It is interesting to note that this attitude much resembles the literary style of genres of "performative literature," such as theatrical plays or orally circulating fables and folktales.⁶¹ If one compares the Egyptian narratives to ancient Greek tragedies, for instance, one will see that both avoid describing not only their characters' physical appearance but also their scenes' surroundings and landscape. After all, as Aristotle put it, Greek "...tragedy [was] a depiction not of people but of actions and life,"⁶² and thus Greek playwrights placed an emphasis not on static descriptions of characters, but on the description of their actions and on the way in which they influenced the plot progression.⁶³ This applies to a great extent to Egyptian narratives, too. Being thus strictly functional elements, literary characters in Egyptian narratives, as in Greek tragedies, were stripped of any details that were deemed redundant in terms of their immediate effect on the plot and the conveyance of its messages. The gap left in the story (and as a direct result in the audience's process of visualizing the fictional storyworld) due to this attitude would have probably been expected to be filled by the oral performance of the work or, in the absence of such a performance, the imaginative skills of the audience who would have to visualize the appearance of the characters in terms of the

⁵⁷ This becomes evident especially when it is contrasted to other styles of Egyptian literary writing, such as that of love poetry (I thank Jacco Dialeman for pointing this out to me).

⁵⁸ Useful discussions on the general ways (visualization being one of the many) in which readers understand narrative can be found in C. EMMOTT, *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective*, Oxford, 1997; M. ROLLINS, *Mental Imagery: On the Limits of Cognitive Science*, New Haven, London, 1989.

⁵⁹ Or, what Roland Barthes called the "reality effect" in his article "The reality effect," in Tzv. Todorov (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, Cambridge, Paris, 1982, p. 11-17.

⁶⁰ For the differences between round and flat characters in literature, see K. BECKSON, A. GANZ, *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* (3rd edition revised and enlarged), New York, 1989, p. 91.

⁶¹ On the making of character in theater, see, for instance, W.E. GRUBER, *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama*, Athens, London, 1994, p. 2-8.

⁶² ἡ γὰρ τραγῳδία μίμησις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεων καὶ βίου (*Poetics* 1450a, 15-17).

⁶³ For an interpretation of Aristotelian "plot" as "character in action," see W. GINGSBERG, *The Cast of Character: The Representation of Personality in Ancient and Medieval Literature*, Toronto, London, 1983, p. 16. For the importance of characterization in Greek tragedy, see also B. SEIDENSTICKER, "Character and Characterization in Greek Tragedy," in M. Revermann, P. Wilson (ed.), *Performance, Iconography, Reception: Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin*, Oxford, 2008, p. 333-346.

images stored in their memory, through the acquisition and processing of their personal and cultural experiences.⁶⁴ In either way, the Egyptian authors, like the Greek playwrights, relied in this case on extra-textual factors for successfully producing and communicating their narratives.

Thus if these narratives were orally performed, the characters whose physical appearance is not described in the text could have been “acted out” by the performer(s), in which case the performer’s looks and appearance would have filled in the visual gap. In ancient Egypt such theatrical performances were recorded only within a religious and ritualistic context, where priests performed and re-enacted episodes from cultic story cycles.⁶⁵ Instead, the available historical evidence for performing ancient Egyptian literature described in most cases one storyteller vividly narrating the stories, rather than more than one performer wearing multiple costumes and playing different characters.⁶⁶ Hence the gap left by the absence of physical description would not have been completely filled, leaving the audience to imagine in their own terms the physical traits of the characters.

This assumed freedom of visualization and interpretation, born by the economical management of details about the characters’ physical appearance, not only creates flexibility in terms of the way in which one could tell, perform, and perceive these stories, but also loosens the grip of specific historical realities on their storyworlds (in each case to a different degree, ranging from the concrete historical circumstances of the story of *Wenamun* to the vague, ahistorical context of the story of the *Shipwrecked Sailor*). With such loose grip on reality, the storyworlds created and represented in the Egyptian narratives would have remained undefined enough to make sense under a multitude of different circumstances, “surviving” different circulation settings, audiences with different backgrounds, as well as “readings” with different agendas.⁶⁷

Certainly, the addition of physical details about their literary characters would have increased the dramatization of narrated events, and in some cases would have explained better some of the characters’ actions. However, although most of the authors of Egyptian narratives were aware of the option to (and some even did) include physical descriptions in the presentation of their characters, they chose to be economical when providing such details. In this way, they connected their works to similar earlier or contemporary styles of writing and preserved through History a strong literary signature that left its imprint onto the development of ancient Egyptian written culture.

⁶⁴ Cognitive theory teaches us that in order to understand a narrative the human brain internally reconstructs it and associates it with its own memories and experiences of the world. The degree of this “personalization” seems to be analogous to the type and amount of information provided by the narrator. For such cognitive approaches to the perception and understanding of narrative literature, see the essays in Fr.L. Aldama (ed.), *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*, Austin, 2010, and especially Ellen Spolsky’s “Narrative as nourishment”, on pages 37-60. A similar literary approach to this is the discussion of the function of *intertext* in M. RIFFATERRE, “Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse,” *Critical Inquiry* 11/1, 1984, p. 141-162.

⁶⁵ For such cultic performable texts, see for example, J.-Cl. GOYON, *Rituels funéraires de l’Ancienne Égypte*, *LAPO* 4, Paris, 1972; R. GILLAM, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, London, 2005.

⁶⁶ For an intriguing discussion of storytelling in Egyptian literature, see R.B. PARKINSON, *Poetry and Culture*, p. 55-60; *id.*, *Reading Egyptian Poetry: Among Other Histories*, Malden, Oxford, Chichester, 2009, p. 30-68.

⁶⁷ See a relevant discussion about modern reception of ancient texts and their “circumstantial value” in R.B. PARKINSON, *Reading Egyptian Poetry*, p. 3-10.

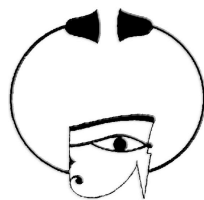
Résumé :

Les descriptions de l'apparence physique des personnages sont partie intégrante de la « caractérisation » dans l'écriture littéraire. Les auteurs de l'Ancienne Égypte étaient très économes dans l'utilisation de telles descriptions. Quand de tels passages étaient insérés dans leurs histoires, ils fonctionnaient comme des dispositifs littéraires contribuant à la « caractérisation », aussi bien qu'au déploiement de la trame narrative et aidait le public à mieux comprendre les actions des personnages. Dans cet essai sont identifiées les références au physique des personnages littéraires dans un corpus de récits égyptiens choisis, comme les contes du P. Westcar ou l'histoire de Sinouhé, et elles sont examinées comme des éléments stylistiques de l'écriture narrative égyptienne dans le cadre de la théorie littéraire. Par cette étude, on essaye d'éclairer quelque peu la manière dont ces récits furent composés et rendus séduisants à leur public.

Abstract :

Descriptions of characters' physical appearance are an integral part of characterization in literary writing. Ancient Egyptian authors were highly economical in the use of such descriptions. When such passages were inserted in their stories, they functioned as literary devices contributing to characterization, as well as moving the narrative plot forward and helping the audience understand better the characters' actions. In this essay I identify references to literary characters' physical appearance and attire in a corpus of selected Egyptian narratives, such as the *Tales of Wonder* and the story of *Sinuhe*, and I examine them as stylistic elements of Egyptian narrative writing, against the background of Literary Theory. Through this study I attempt to shed some light onto the ways in which Egyptian narratives were composed and appealed to their ancient audiences.

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ISSN 2102-6629