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Ghosts and Ancestors in a Gender Perspective

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Abstract
Through an analysis of the letters to the dead, the paper focuses on the role played by women in Egyptian ancestor worship. Special attention is given to the missives addressed to the female spirits: the so-called misplaced stele of Merityfy, the Berlin bowl 22573, Papyrus Leiden I 371, and Ostracon Louvre 698. The investigation has highlighted the existence of a ritual to appease wrathful female ghosts. The malevolent attitude of these spirits is explained in the light of their premature death, perhaps during childbirth. Another trigger is identified as the fear of being replaced in their social role of "mistress of the house" by another woman (for example, because the husband was planning to remarry). Remarkably, the documents taken into consideration did not turn out to be a mere exorcism to ward off a malignant spirit; rather, the aim was to establish, or restore, the positive role of the ancestress as a protector of the household.

Power, Gender Roles, and Death

The present paper aims to highlight some specific features concerning the position of women within Egyptian ancestor worship. In Egypt, the veneration of the dead was strongly linked to elite self-presentation, the inheritance system, and the maintenance of family power.[1] And, in the present paper, particular attention will be given to the modes through which gender roles were normed by the power relationships in the economical and the juridical spheres and under influence of religious beliefs.

At this point, some clarifications about the limits of the research are needed. First, the social context. Adopting a Third Wave feminist approach, in the present paper "women" are not labeled as uniform category; rather, the main aim is to investigate gender roles in relation to a particular ancient Egyptian social group.[2] The data taken into consideration here—Coffin Texts, Old Kingdom "Appeals to the Living," the documents from Deir el-Medina, and, above all, the letters to the dead—were indeed expressions of elite culture. A second restriction concerns the effective nature of the investigated phenomena. Especially the letters to the dead have for a long time been considered as intimate prayers and expressions of piety towards the divine.[3] However, in the light of several recent studies, we should interpret them as evidence of complex rituals that involved whole social groups, rather than individuals.[4] Therefore, we are not facing personal intimate feelings, but stereotyped norms concerning how social relationships were created and maintained on an ideal level. In other words, the documents analyzed here highlight some social expectations internalized by the elite:[5] how relationships based on gender roles should be realized and—if something went wrong—how to

restore the normative interactions between family members, as well between the living and the dead.

Although the position of Egyptian women, especially when compared with other ancient Mediterranean cultures,[6] was relatively emancipated, their role in ancestor worship was quite ambivalent. From a purely quantitative approach, the main documents would seem to outline a cult predominantly focused on adult men. Most of the Appeals to the Living are requests made by deceased men.[7] The letters to the dead were mainly addressed to the male heads of the household[8] and, as regards the data from Deir el-Medina, among the fifty-five *ꜣḫ ỉḳr n rˁ* stelae collected by R. Demarée, in only eight a woman is designated as an "excellent spirit."[9]

In addition, both funerary and mortuary texts[10] paid great attention to the bond linking the deceased father and his firstborn. For example, if one adopts as a starting point the reading given by Willems,[11] CT spells 30–41 could be interpreted as a double rite of passage. These spells are structured as a recitation made by the heir of the deceased, through which he profiles himself as the legitimate successor of his father and, thus, as the new head of the family; but, at the same time, this liturgy also aims to emphasize the new status of benevolent ancestor achieved by the dead householder.

Significantly, although mothers or wives play an important role in the *post mortem* existence of the deceased,[12] nothing like this is attested for the mother-daughter relationship. An explanation might be found in the fact that these texts were expressions of a specific elite ideology aimed at the maintenance of the family social status over generations. In the light of such aspects, women's secondary role is understandable, since they were not officially involved in this kind of transmission of powers.

The special attention given to the bond between dead father and living son in funerary and mortuary texts is also strongly connected with the rules for inheritance.[13] As stressed by several documents, the eldest son was considered the main heir, but in order to acquire the legacy, he had to take care of both the burial of the deceased and his mortuary rituals.[14] Furthermore, the Egyptian concept of real estate included building, lands, and also the servants related to them.[15] Thus, to inherit the house of the father meant to take on the management of the household and the responsibility for all the persons involved in it.[16]

Through a comparison with the wisdom literature, this aspect appears increasingly clear. These texts focused on advice to better manage the relationships with both superiors and subordinates in order to achieve a good social position and, thus, maintain the wealth of the households. It is of course remarkable that these texts were structured as a series of teachings given by a father to his son; and, as stressed by A. Depla, "there is not a single extant example of an *Instruction* written by a father for his daughter, nor by a mother for her son, or a mother for her daughter."[17]

In this regard, CT spells 131–146 are relevant, since their aim is to re-join the deceased with his *ꜣb.t* in the afterlife. Although it is quite common to translate *ꜣb.t* as "family" or "household," according to Willems, the meaning of the word is actually more complex. The term refers to "a property-owning group of which the members are primarily kin who share rights in an inheritance";[18] and, remarkably, in the long lists of individuals reported in such spells there is no reference to the deceased's wife. It is a characteristic also confirmed by other data, such as a legal statement attested in an Old Kingdom private tomb, or a royal decree dating to the Eighth Dynasty, where undeniably the wife is not considered as a part of the *ꜣb.t*.[19]

Paradoxically it could be argued that this kind of social organization may have contributed to a certain economic independence and emancipation of Egyptian women. Given that a woman belonged to a different *ꜣb.t* from her husband, she could inherit from her own family and was relatively free to manage her goods.[20] Although a woman as "wife" did not belong to the same *ꜣb.t* as her husband, as "mother" she belonged to the same *ꜣb.t* of her offspring, and as daughter to the same *ꜣb.t* of her father.[21] It meant that both men and women could own their own possessions—even though, with regard to the management of the household, there was a strong preference for the "father to son" transmission—and both were able to pass them on to their children.[22]

Actually, although drastically fewer in number, most of the known documents related to female ancestors do not show significant qualitative differences from the ones concerning men. Of course only few examples of Appeals to the Living belonging to women are known. But these texts show the same formulaic repertoires attested for men, describing the deceased woman as a preternatural being, capable of punishing the transgressor of her tomb or of protecting the living ones who praise her.[23] Likewise, there are no

significant stylistic differences between the *ꜣḫ iḳr n Rˁ* stelae dedicated to women and men.[24]

Finally, regarding the so-called anthropoid busts from Deir el-Medina, it has been argued that the majority of them might portray women, representing thus the female counterpart of the *ꜣḫ iḳr n Rˁ* stelae in ancestor cults.[25] However, this theory was recently rejected, and, in addition, it was argued that the busts should not necessarily represent ancestors, but also gods and even living individuals.[26]

Analysis of the Letters to the Dead Addressed to Female Spirits

Some letters to the dead seem partially to contrast with this general picture. Of course most of them were sent to adult men, but the requests addressed exclusively to women undoubtedly show some peculiar features[27] that deserve to be investigated.

Doc. 1:
Letter on a Stela Perhaps from Naga ed-Deir (Tenth or Eleventh Dynasty)[28]

The history of this document is rather complicated. In 1958 a stela preserved at the Cairo Museum attracted the attention of E. Wente. The object was about to be sold to a private collector, so Wente was just able to copy the hieratic text written on its back.[29] As a consequence, for a long time the only available data were the aforementioned sketch of the hieratic inscription and a brief description of the scene on the front of the stela made by Wente himself:

> […] a limestone stela, or tablet about a foot high, as I recollect, on the front of which was a painted scene of a man making an offering.[30]

In recent times, however, the object has been rediscovered by E. Meltzer in a private collection in the USA,[31] and it has been finally possible to check the interpretations presented by Wente. Although his transcription of the hieratic text was correct, it appears that he misunderstood the scene on the front face: the person portrayed is without any doubt a woman and not a man.[32] This is not a secondary aspect, since in light of this element some interpretations concerning the letter written have to be reconsidered, first of all, the gender of the persons involved.

Notably, the present document is the only case of a letter to the dead written on a stela. As mentioned earlier, on the front a standing woman is portrayed. This figure is identified by the inscriptions as Nebetitef, who is also the deceased addressee of the two letters written with black ink on the back.[33]

The first message is sent by a person called Merityfy. At first, E. Wente identified this sender with the person portrayed on the front (in his opinion a man) and consequently with the husband of the deceased woman invoked:

> Although the two other examples of this name known to me [Merityfy] are feminine […] the representation on the face of the stela is that of man offering, and I am inclined to believe that the writer of the letter was a widower.[34]

On the contrary, as stressed by S. Donnat, we have no reasons to doubt that the writer is a woman:[35] first because the name Merityfy is attested only as feminine; second, because the assumption that Merityfy was a woman clarifies several aspects of the second letter.

In her message, Merityfy claims to be sick and invokes the help of the dead woman in order to be healed (column 3: *ḏr mr.t n.t ḥˁ.w<=i>)*. It is interesting to stress that she asks to see the *ꜣḫ* of the deceased during a dream, with the hope that the dead woman will want to fight for her:

> Columns 3–4:
>
> *ỉ ỉḫ ꜣḫ=t n<=i> ḫft-ḥr=i mꜣ=i ˁḥꜣ=t ḥr=i m rsw.t*
>
> May you appear as an *ꜣḫ* in front of me! May I see you fight for me in a dream!

In the second letter, a man called Khuau asks the spirit to fight for him, for his woman, and for his offspring (column 7: *ˁḥꜣ ḥr=i ˁḥꜣ ḥr ḥm.t<=i> ḥr ḫrd.w<=i>*).

Notably, in the incipit Khuau claims that the deceased is his *sn.t* – literally "sister" but also "wife":

> *r-ḏd ỉn ḫw-ꜣw n sn.t=f*
>
> A message by Khuau to his sister.

According to S. Donnat, the identification of the first sender—Merityfy—with a woman allows one to argue that she would be no other than Khuau's

wife and the *ḥm.t=i* cited at column 7.[36] In effect, assuming this perspective, the second missive appears as a brief recapitulation of the first one made by a second writer, an element attested also in other letters to the dead.[37] Moreover, given the ambiguity of the expression *sn.t=f*, the addressee, Nebetitef, could be identified as Khuau's former dead wife. Although the term *sn.t* is used as synonymous of *ḥm.t* with the meaning of "spouse" mainly from the New Kingdom,[38] remarkably the use of the word *sn.t* as "wife" is attested in another letter to the dead datable to the end of the Old Kingdom. [39]

Such a factor could place the document in a different perspective. The role of Nebetitef appears to be rather ambiguous. At first sight, she would seem a positive figure, since she is invoked in order to fight on Merityfy's behalf against an external enemy. On the other hand, such a heartfelt appeal could hide the attempt to appease a potential malevolent spirit. It would be possible to hypothesize that Nebetitef herself was causing the illness of Merityfy because she was upset by her living husband's remarriage.[40]

This is indeed an important element, since a similar ambiguity appears to be a recurrent theme of the letters addressed to deceased women analyzed here.

Doc. 2:
The Berlin Bowl Inv. 22573 (Twelfth Dynasty)[41]
The Berlin Bowl is the only letter to the dead that has an image alongside the text. Between the two concentric circles of hieratic inscriptions, one observes the upper part of a human figure, probably intended as a portrait of the receiver (Fig. 1). While some writers have seen in this image a two-dimensional representation of a bust,[42] in actual fact it seems more likely to be a variant of the hieroglyph B1 mutilated for apotropaic reasons[43].

The brief content of the hieratic inscription is rather ambiguous. In the incipit the male sender stresses that, before her departure, the woman had never shown any resentment towards him (first circle: *ỉn=ṯ ꜥ r niw.t n.t nḥḥ nn špt=ṯ nb r=ỉ).* Subsequently, the man asks what kind of problem could have caused her conduct, claiming that if the deceased has some recriminations against her relatives, she should forget them, for the good of her offspring (second circle: *ỉr wn srḫ m ḫ.t=ṯ; smḫ sw n ỉb n ḫrd.w=ṯ*).

Figure 1: The Berlin bowl (Gardiner and Sethe 1928, pl. V).

Given this premise, it seems clear that the dead woman is not invoked to solve an external problem; rather, she seems to be perceived as a potentially malevolent spirit who is causing troubles in the family.[44]

Although the degree of kinship is not mentioned in the document, the woman is explicitly asked to be benevolent for the sake of her offspring (*n ỉb ḥrd.w=ṯ*), so it could be argued that both the sender and the recipient belonged to the same family. In this regard, it has been suggested that the anger of the dead woman was triggered by the remarriage of her husband, who can probably be identified with the writer.[45]

Doc. 3:
Papyrus Leiden I 371 (Nineteenth Dynasty)[46]
A letter undoubtedly written by a man to placate the spirit of his dead wife is P. Leiden I 371. Here the writer begs his wife to stop persecuting him, since—in his opinion—the malevolent attitude showed by the deceased is totally unjustified (lines 1–2 recto):

> *ỉrỉ=t ỉḫ r=ỉ m bt3* |2| *p3=ỉ ḫpr m p3y sḫr.w bỉn n.ty tw<=ỉ> ỉm=f*
>
> What evil thing have you done against me, |2| for which I come in this miserable state in which I am?[47]

The man stresses how he always looked after her, respecting her both alive and dead. However, the brief reference to the "sisters in the house" sheds an intriguing light on the causes of the anger of the deceased (line 21 verso):

> |21|…*ḫr ptr n3 sn.w(t) m p3 pr bw-pw=ỉ ḫ n wḥ ỉm=sn*
>
> |21|… And behold, as for the sisters in the house: I have not gone in to (any) one of them![48]

We will hardly know if the sender is sincere. However, the fact that the man needs to emphasize that he has not had relations with other women is itself a significant element. It undeniably testifies that, for the Egyptians, it was common to believe that the spirit of a deceased wife could have a malevolent influence, if the living husband gave a certain kind of attention to other women.

Doc. 4:
Ostracon Louvre 698 (Twentieth–Twenty-first Dynasty)[49]
O. Louvre 698 is the only letter to the dead written on a piece of limestone and the only case in which red ink is used for the inscription. The ostracon comes from the New Kingdom settlement of Deir el-Medina, and the sender is a man called Butehamun. Interestingly, rather than writing directly to the spirit, he addresses a long message to the *ḥfd.t* of his dead wife, Ikhtay.

The word *ḥfd.t* is a variation of the term *ḥfḏ.t*. It literally means "box,"[50] but it is sometimes used to indicate containers utilized to store letters;[51] furthermore, in specific contexts it can also have the meaning of "coffin."[52] This ambiguity is maybe used on purpose by Butehamun to poeticize the text making a sophisticated link between an object used in everyday life for private correspondence and the will to communicate with his deceased wife.

In effect, the document in question is far more artistically skillful than the other letters to the dead: it is written in meter, with the addition of the "verse points," and it shows not only various figures of speech, but also a number of educated quotes from the main Ancient Egyptian literary genres.[53]

On the basis of these features, S. Donnat has argued that O. Louvre 698 cannot be considered a letter to the dead, showing, rather, more analogies with funerary lamentations.[54] She points out that an ostracon would not be the most appropriate object for a ritualistic purpose. And although red was traditionally associated with malevolent beings, here the use of red ink could indicate that the ostracon was used to outline a preliminary sketch of the text. In her opinion, either the final version had to be copied onto the coffin of Ikhtay or it had been written to be recited. Donnat, moreover, stressed that in this text the deceased is not invoked to solve a specific crisis, but for a generic intercession. In addition, Ikhtay is not called *3ḫ*, as attested in several letters to the dead, but "Osiris," as in funerary texts.[55]

However, the term *3ḫ* occurs once in O. Louvre 698, not as a noun to indicate a blessed spirit, but as a verb. In this regard, according to the interpretation given by P. J. Frandsen,[56] the deceased is not invoked for a generic mediation to the gods, but for a more specific request:

> |6| *nn ky.t m-ḳd=st […] bw gmỉ<=ỉ> zp bw.t […] gmỉ st n=t […]* |7| *ḥš=ỉ m ỉ3d.t nb ḥḥ=t […] wšb.t*

ꜣḫ |8| *n=i mw.t<=i> ỉt=i sn=i ḥnʿ sn.t<=i> st jwỉ tʿy.tw*

|6|No instance of wrong has been found […]. |7| I have appealed to you directly all the time that you might respond […]. My mother and my father, my brother and my sister |8|are beneficial (*ꜣḫ*) for me: they come; you are taken away.[57]

In Frandsen's opinion, the relatives here mentioned could be understood as other deceased persons. Thus, this sentence could reveal the existence of some troubles between the sender and the recipient. The suggestion could be that the writer is complaining that his dead wife is no longer supporting him from the Netherworld, since Ikhtay is the only one among his dead relatives to ignore him.[58] However this interpretation is problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, the text is seriously damaged due several lacunas. Moreover, as stressed by D. Sweeney, because of standard Ramesside malpractice, it is rather difficult to understand whether the verbs have a first person suffix (Butehamun as subject), or a second person suffix (Ikhtay as subject). Also, with regards to the participles, it is hard to recognize if they are active or passive: the first option renders Ikhtay as a potentially malevolent entity, the second interpretation could depict her more as a victim.[59]

Finally, the prosopography relating to the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina is well known. Butehamun was a "scribe of the necropolis" and maintained a regular correspondence with his father, Tuthmose. The letters by Butehamun clearly show the same calligraphy as O. Louvre 698.[60] Moreover, from several documents a relationship with a woman called Shedemdua emerges, but the elder sons of Butehamun are often cited as Ikhtay's offspring. In light of such evidence, Davies hypothesized that Butehamun remarried Shedemdua after the death of Ikhtay.[61] Given this last assumption, at first sight, one could posit that the aim of the present text does not differ much from the other letters here analyzed: to placate a dead woman angry for the remarriage of her husband. However, the aforementioned correspondence between Butehamun and his father clearly shows that Tuthmose survived Ikhtay, since, unlike Shedemdua, she is never mentioned in this corpus of letters, and it is an element that could partially invalidate Frandsen's rendering of the passage reported here.[62] Furthermore, we do not have any firm evidence regarding the remarriage of Butehamun with Shedemdua, and it was also argued that the woman might have been a sister or female relative of Butehamun who was hosted in his house since she was a widow with dependent children.[63]

Given all these elements further evaluations are needed. First, O. Louvre 698 undeniably implies the same religious milieu of the letters to the dead, since it clearly shows a core belief in which a living person is searching for contact with a departed relative. In addition, although we do not have other examples of letters to the dead from the village, ancestor worship is surely well attested at Deir el-Medina.[64] Secondly, the connection with the genre of funerary lamentations stressed by Donnat is also a valid hypothesis, especially taking into consideration the elaborated style of the text and the fact that the missive is addressed to the coffin of the deceased woman..[65]

Nevertheless, the connection between funerary or mortuary texts and letters to the dead is not a surprising fact. As stressed by several scholars, the aforementioned CT spells 38–41 (but also 30–37, following Willems' interpretation) show an undeniable affinity with the letters to the dead,[66] and it was also suggested that these spells could constitute the liturgy utilized for the deposition of the letters into the tombs on the occasion of the festivals to commemorate the deceased.[67] So, nothing precludes that, in very extraordinary cases—such as a death occurred at young age, probably caused by childbirth or other violent causes—a rather similar liturgy connected to an apotropaic action could have been performed during the funerals.

In this regard, it is suggestive that in a letter sent to Butehamun by his father Thutmose (BM EA 75021) both a "great black *ʿfd.t*" and an evil eye caused by a malevolent dead are mentioned. Unfortunately, due the lacunas the connection between these two elements is not clear.[68] However, it could be argued that this passage refers to the troubles with the spirit of Ikhtay and the ritual to placate her.

Conclusions: How to Appease an Angry Dead Woman

In the light of the foregoing observations, it seems that the letters sent exclusively to a female spirit were written in order to solve certain kinds of troubles caused by a deceased spouse. Why were these dead women so angry?

The average life expectancy for women was notably lower than for men.[69] Moreover, one of the main causes of death was childbirth, a moment that contains a strong symbolic and liminal character itself. Thus, we are not very far from the idea that an abrupt ending to life would be capable of transforming a dead person into a malevolent entity.[70]

Notably, we have two examples of spells against female ghosts from magical and medical texts.[71] A rubric from a spell in the Brooklyn magical papyrus is directed against several kinds of preternatural beings listed in male/female couples, including the group *mwt*/*mwt.t*; but remarkably a dead female (*mwt.t-ḥm.t*) is cited separately, without any male counterpart[72]. A quite similar case is attested in the Leiden Magical Papyrus I 348. Here in a spell to heal headaches (spell 12; rt.6,4) it is stressed that such a text has to be recited against "a dead female who robs as a wailing woman."[73]

In this regard, it is interesting that all the letters analyzed here were in different ways always associated with an effigy of the deceased. The letter addressed to Nebetitef is the only example attested on the back of a stele, and, notably, on the face the female receiver of the missive is portrayed. A stylized image of the deceased possibly mutilated for apotropaic reason is depicted exactly in the center of the Berlin bowl. P. Leiden I 371 was attached to a statuette of the dead addressee.[74] Clearly, sculptures and images of the deceased played an important role in Egyptian ancestor worship.[75] On the other hand, based on the actual data, we have no similar examples for the letters addressed to men.[76] Such a constant element could be connected with a performative and apotropaic practice (well attested to in several magical texts), with the specific aim of dominating a potentially dangerous entity by controlling a (two-dimensional or three-dimensional) representation of her.[77] Furthermore, also the fact that O. Louvre 698 was addressed to the coffin (*ʿfd.t*) of the deceased could be understood by interpreting the coffin as a mediator, through which the sender could exercise a certain control over his dead wife.[78]

However, other factors must also be considered: in all these letters we may infer that the anger of the deceased was triggered by the second marriage of the husband, or by a certain kind of envy towards women that can potentially replace her social role inside the family (as stressed in Doc. 3). This element cannot be interpreted exclusively by the projection of typically worldly sentiments onto the afterlife.

In this regard, a comparison with the CT spells 30-41 may be illuminating. As mentioned earlier, these texts ratify the new status acquired not only by the deceased as ancestor but also by the firstborn as new head of the family.[79] Significantly, this transition was not perceived as peaceful. In several passages the deceased father shows a certain anger, especially towards his eldest son who has to replace him.[80] In CT I 158 a–159 b[38] it is clearly stated that the deceased has hostile feelings towards his son and it is stressed that the deceased father wants to bring his son into the Netherworld causing his premature death.

Given this premise, one could posit that for the Egyptians also the dead spouse could develop hostile feelings about the second marriage of the living husband. And, when another woman replaced her as wife, such a transmission had of course to be perceived as potentially dangerous.

In this regard, also accepting Donnat's hypothesis, which interprets O. Louvre 698 as a funerary lamentation rather than as letter to the dead, this kind of interpretation could be plausible. Since—in our reconstruction—the writer is not facing a crisis caused by a specific problem (for example, an illness caused by a malevolent entity), but an existential crisis connected with a biological phase and changes of social roles (the premature dead of a young beloved spouse and, thus, the fear that she could became a vengeful spirit, especially if another woman replaced her), it is reasonable to posit that this kind of apotropaic ritual could be performed already on the occasion of the funeral. In several cultural contexts, in Akkadian and Egyptian sources, a tragic, sudden death is considered the main cause in transforming a deceased into a vengeful ghost.[81] Therefore, it is plausible that in these cases special measurements were already taken at the time of burial.

This kind of religious idea seems actually well rooted in Egyptian beliefs. A number of archeological data testify to the existence of special apotropaic actions connected to the inhumation of pregnant women. A so-called votive bed found in TT 14 seems to have been deposited in connection with the body of a young woman who surely died during her pregnancy, probably with the intention to facilitate "the rebirth of mother and child after a happy completion of delivery in their second, eternal life."[82] Furthermore, M. Betrò has collected a restricted amount of evidence concerning the special attention paid by

the Egyptians to the embalming procedure of pregnant women. [83]

Significantly, something rather similar is attested in connection with an oracular decree of Amonrasonther for Neskhons, the wife of Pinedjem II.[84] This document shows strong links with the religious milieu of the letters to the dead: the utterance was written on a wooden board and deposited inside the tomb of Neskhons,[85] as was done with the letters; moreover, from the text it is evident that the female spirit is perceived as a potentially angry entity, capable of persecuting her husband. In addition, according to Smith, the analysis of Neskhons' mummy shows that the woman was young and pregnant at the time of her death.[86] Thus, it could be argued that some complications occurred during the childbirth causing her demise.

On the other hand, it is interesting that in in order to protect Pinedjem and his family, the main aim of the texts is to deify Neskhons in order to placate her negative attitude towards the husband.

From others sources it is well known that the Egyptians had few scruples when faced with neutralizing an evil dead person. In a Saitic apotropaic spell, for exorcizing a woman possessed by a ghost the threat to burn down the tomb of the malevolent spirit is clearly expressed.[87] Notably, nothing like this is attested in the decree for Neskhons or in the letters to the dead analyzed here. In these documents the deceased are clearly treated with a certain respect: the senders stress quite often their correct behavior toward the women and always highlight how the angry attitude of the spirits appears unjustified. Moreover, with the only exception of P. Leiden I 371, the writers always invoke the female spirits to intercede for the writer with the gods or another ancestor.[88]

If the CT spells 30–41 were focused on the crucial moment of transmission in which the main heir replaces his dead father as householder, in the specific context of the Middle Kingdom elite's extended family,[89] the core of beliefs here highlighted focused on something quite similar, concerning not only the vengeful ghost of a woman angry because of her untimely death; but also a passage of social status between the living and the dead: a deceased wife and a living woman who took over (or could potentially take over, as in P. Leiden I 371) her social role. Thus, given these elements, it is possible to posit that the documents here analyzed not just show a ritual to ward off an angry spirit, but the will to restore the positive role of an ancestress, healing the pact of mutual aid between the living and the dead for the prosperity of the household.

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Abbreviation

Wb A. Erman and W. Grapow. 1926–1931. *Wörterbuch der ägyptische Sprache*, 7 vols. Berlin.

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Notes

1 Holaubek 1975; Assmann 1976; Schiavo 2013b.

2 Regarding the use of Third Wave feminist approach in archaeology and Egyptology, cf. Saleh 2007, 10–11.

3 Guilmot 1966, 27.

4 Donnat Beauquier 2014, 173 ff.

5 "Social expectations" could be defined as "an internalized social norm for society, which guides individuals and organizations to what they should do." Cf. Hasegawa et al. 2007, 180–181 and 195. Furthermore, the concept of "social expectation" is strictly connected with the concept of "habitus" elaborated by Bourdieu. Cf. Bourdieau 1980.

6 Roth 2010, 200; Szpakowska 2008, 102–112; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 135–138 and 187–192.

7 Shubert 2007, 16–61.

8 Verhoeven 2003, 31–51. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 173 ff.

9 Demarée 1983, stelae A6, A39, A40, A41, A44, A45, A51, A52.

10 For the difference between mortuary and funerary texts see Willems 2001, 254.

11 Willems 2011, 360–361.

12 Roth 2010, 198–199.

13 Holaubek 1975; Willems 2011, 369.

14 Lippert 2013.

15 Lippert 2013.

16 Schiavo 2013b, 125–145.

17 Depla 1994, 29.

18 Willems 2015, 448.

19 Willems 2015, 454–461.

20 Willems 2015, 463.

21 Willems 2015, 463.

22 Lippert 2013, 3; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 96–138.

23 Shubert 2007, 51–52 (O.K. 25).

24 The inscriptions attested on the stelae are quite stereotyped. Moreover, no significant differences based on gender were noted. Cf. Demarée 1983, 178–179.

25 Harrington 2005, 71–88.

26 Keith et al. 2011, 91–100.

27 Baines 1987, 87.

28 Wente 1975–1976; Demarée 1983, 216–217; Wente and Meltzer 1990, 215 n. 349; Szpakowska 2003, 23, 143, 185; Donnat Beauquier 2014, 53–57; Meltzer 2008.

29 Wente 1975–1976, 595.

30 Wente 1975–1976, 595.

31 Meltzer 2008, 1.

32 Meltzer 2008, 3.

33 Meltzer 2008, 3–4.

34 Wente 1975–1976, 597 and note b.

35 Remarkably, S. Donnat (2014, 55 and note b doesn't seem to know about the rediscovery of the stela by E. Meltzer:

> Mérityfy est un nom recensé comme féminin […] et, comme signale Wente, attesté à Naga ed-Deir pendant le la Première Période Intermédiaire. Wente est malgré tout enclin à considérer que L'auteur de la lettre est un homme, notamment en raison de la scène sur l'autre face de la stèle qui représente un homme faisant offrande. Ce pourrait toutefois être l'auteur de la seconde lettre qui est ici représenté.

36 Donnat Beauquier 2014, 57.

37 See, for example, the so-called Cairo linen, column 13 (Donnat Beauquier 2014, 30–31).

38 *Wb* 4, 151.9.

39 It is the so-called Cairo linen, column 1 Donnat Beauquier 2014, 30–31).

40 Donnat Beauquier 2014, 57.

41 Gardiner and Sethe 1928, 5–7 and 21–22, plates V and Va; Fecht 1969. 114–115; Wente and Meltzer 1990, 214 number 346; Schiavo 2013a; Donnat Beauquier 2014, 61–63.

42 Lines, 2001, 43–54.

43 Schiavo 2013a, 36.

44 Schiavo 2013a, 36.

45 Gardiner and Sethe 1928, 7; Fecht 1969, 115 and note 1.

46 Gardiner and Sethe 1928, 23-25 and plates VIII–VIII; Guilmot 1973; Donnat Beauquier 2014: 74–76; Troy 2015, 403–418.

47 Here I mainly follow the interpretation by L. Troy. Cf. Troy 2015, 405.

48 I follow the interpretation by L. Troy. Cf. Troy 2015, 413.

49 Černý and Gardiner 1975, 82 and plates 80–80a; Černý 1973, 360–370; Frandsen 1992, 31–50; Goldwasser 1995, 191–205; Wente 1990, 217–218; Donnat Beauquier 2014, 77–83 and 158–163.

50 *Wb* I, 183.15–18.

51 The use of *ʿfd.t* with the meaning of "letter-box" is well attested at Deir el-Medina. Remarkably the same sender of O. Louvre 698, Butehamun, uses the word *ʿfd.t* with this specific meaning in some private letters. Cf. Demarée, 2006, 11 Recto 3.

52 Cooney 2007, 276.

53 Goldwasser 1995, 191–205.

54 Donnat Beauquier 2014, 160–161.

55 Donnat Beauquier 2014, 158–163.

[56] Frandsen 1992, 37–38.

[57] I basically follow Frandsen's translation with the exception of *ṯ3y.tw*, here considered as a stative. Cf. Frandsen 1992.

[58] Frandsen 1992, 37–38.

[59] Sweeney 1994, 206–207.

[60] Frandsen 1992, 38 and note 31.

[61] Davies 1997, 56.

[62] Davies 1997, 56–57.

[63] Davies 1997, 56–57.

[64] Demareé 1983.

[65] Donnat Beaunquier 2014, 158–163.

[66] Willems 2011, 344–355.

[67] Willems 2011, 357–358.

[68] Demarée 2006, 21–24. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. R. J. Demarée for having brought this document to my attention.

[69] Harrington 2012, 138–141.

[70] Harrington 2012, 22-27.

[71] Lucarelli 2010, 6–7.

[72] Sauneron 1970, 7 and 23.

[73] Borghouts 1971, 97 and note 168.

[74] Gardiner and Sethe 1928, 9.

[75] Schulman 1986, 302–348.

[76] A partial exception is the Oxford bowl. As already stressed by Gardiner and Sethe (1928, 26–27) it cannot be considered a proper letter to the dead. On the other hand, Donnat (2014, 71) stressed:

> Griffith, l'éditeur premier du texte, signale que le dessin au trait d'un sarcophage était discernable sur le fond du bol. Il n'est tout à fait clair si le signe était à l'intérieur ou, plus probablement, à l'extérieur, mais l'encerclement potentiel par le discours de ce signe n'est pas sans rappeler celui de la figure féminine du Bol de Berlin.

[77] Ritner 1993, 112.

[78] For the use of coffins as "communicative tools," see: Cooney 2007, 273–299.

[79] Willems 2001, 368–369.

[80] Willems 2001, 342–344.

[81] Harrington 2012, 22.

[82] Betrò 2017, 70.

[83] Betrò 2017, 68–70.

[84] Gunn 1955, 83–105.

[85] Dodson and Hilton 2004, 200–210.

[86] "The skin of the abdomen is loose and pendulous; and the mammillae are large and prominent. These two signs make it certain that Nsikhonsu was parous." Cf. Smith 1912, 107–109.

[87] Koenig 1979, 103–119.

[88] See Berlin Bowl, second circle: *ỉr-wn ỉrr-t(w) m msḏḏ.t=ṯ ꜥ3 ỉt=ṯ <m> ḥr.t-nṯr* "If it happened against your will: your father is powerful in the necropolis." Here, the sender is asking the female dead to invoke the help of her deceased father to protect the family from malevolent influences. Cf. Schiavo 2013a, 34–35 and note b. In O. Louvre 698 an intercession to the Lords of the Eternity is explicitly asked between vs 16 and vs 18. Cf Frandsen 1992, 3334.

[89] Willems 2001, 368–370.