

# Yellow, Red, and Blue: A Symbolic and Linguistic Analysis of Gendered Colors in XIX Dynasty Egyptian Mortuary Art

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A study of artistic representations of people in funerary images concentrating on irregularities in skin color can be critical in supporting ancient Egyptian notions of personhood and gender. Egyptian artworks, governed by a canon that included skin color specifications, should be understood as cultural expressions that allow specific productions to communicate broader concepts. Therefore, I have selected two works of the XIX Dynasty Egyptian royalty's mortuary art from the Valley of the Queens to craft an argument for an androgynous (*i.e.* gender-fluid) conception of personhood that existed in ancient Egypt. The first image, a yellow monochrome image of the sky goddess, Nut, will be used to establish the symbolic nature of skin color and correct the assumption that gender was absolutely divisive in Egyptian society (Fig. 1). The analysis of the second image, a red-skinned portrait of Queen Nefertari, will utilize an understanding of color symbolism and explore the application of the masculine skin tone to a female (Fig. 2). Specifically, the discussion of Queen Nefertari will be revelatory in understanding the sexual regeneration of a person through the impregnation of the sky goddess, an important concept in Egyptian thanatopsis. A more nuanced understanding of gender's relation to personhood will be proposed and applied to a third image of a blue faience *shabti* sculpture to investigate further possibilities in disassociating gender and personhood (Fig. 3).

Fluid metaphysical concepts were prominent in the ancient

Egyptian world. Life revolved around a cyclical understanding of the day with the rebirth of the Sun as well as of the year with the predictable flood patterns of the Nile River. Gods had multiple forms and could change easily from one form to another. The prevalence of ritualistic artwork proves that Egyptians accepted a premise of their own magical transformative powers. Perhaps the most fluid concept was that of the Osiris: in order to reach a state of eternal existence as an Osiris, a person had to undergo many complex transformations—visual depictions and literary works attest to this.

In a love poem from the *Papyrus Chester Beatty I*, this idea of fluidity from one form to another is described. Specifically, the color of skin tone is used symbolically:

*Unique is my beloved, with no equal,  
more perfect than all women.  
Seeing her is like the star  
that rises at the start of a fresh year,  
perfectly dazzling, light of color.  
Beautiful her eyes when looking;  
sweet her lips when speaking:  
not for her phrases in excess.  
High of neck, light of breast,  
true lapis-lazuli her hair.  
Her arms become gold,  
her fingers are like water-lilies.<sup>1</sup>*

The physicality of the described woman is transitory (“Her arms become gold”) and particular attention is paid to her color. Her attributive colors (“lapis-lazuli” and “gold”) are crucial to her “unique” identity. This literary example of transformation can serve as a good introduction to the fluid concept of identity and gender in artistic skin color symbolism as it serves as a textual example of unnatural skin colors being applied symbolically.

That the colors are associations of identity correlates to the fact that color as identity is recognized quite easily in visual depictions—according to the ancient Egyptian color canon, red was used to delineate a man and yellow to demarcate a woman (Fig. 4). Green

<sup>1</sup> Translation from James P. Allen, “Love Poem.” Message to author. 13 November 2012. Email

or black was the skin color of the regenerated Osiris. While the disparity in skin color between males and females may seem “unnatural” in that it does not fit observations from nature, in artistic language it communicates identity and is therefore “natural” in the sense that it relates the *nature* of the person depicted. Canonical skin colors seem to be associated with group identity: thousands of images of yellow-skinned women, for example, are identified according to gender through their skin color.

If it seems fairly obvious *what* the regular skin colors imply, it is not equally obvious *why* they carry those implications: that Egyptian women are yellow neither explains what about yellow makes it appropriate for women nor what it is about women that makes them yellow. To further complicate the issue, irregularities occur in Egyptian skin portrayal. The three notable examples from the New Kingdom under discussion of purposeful deviations from the canon indicate that skin color was imbued with complex notions of gender and personhood.

These images must first be placed within a historical context. They were likely produced by the master craftsmen of Deir el-Medina, the XVIII-XX Dynasty village, in which the workers of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens lived. These workers, employed by Egyptian royalty, were presumably the most skilled in their craft—but they were “craftsmen” not “artists.” This distinction is significant because it determines how to approach Egyptian “art” interpretively—these three images were not individual manifestations of personal values but culturally prescribed productions. The workers were from the middle class, and, while some aspects of Egyptian culture were fluid, the social structure was not; agricultural workers could not hope to become viziers, and funerary craftsmen probably had no ambitions outside of completing their tasks.<sup>2</sup> Because of the stratification of society, the concepts expressed by the Deir el-Medina craftsmen should not

be viewed as a reflection of their own values but of the values of the Egyptian royalty.

The gender concepts of Egyptian royalty are particularly interesting to study in the XIX Dynasty as it followed the reign of King Hatshepsut (1508-1458 BCE, XVIII Dynasty) and itself witnessed at least one female king, Tawrosret (r. 1191-1189 BCE).<sup>3</sup> The XIX Dynasty also followed the revisionist Amarna Period (1353-1336 BCE), so change and some artistic experimentation were not completely alien to Egyptian culture at this time. Amarna art is stylistically distinct from traditional Egyptian art, showing figures with elongated, willowy limbs and pot-bellied bodies supporting large, oval heads. Nonetheless, the aforementioned skin color deviations are not from the Amarna Period—they are in the same school as traditional, canonical ancient Egyptian art. Their irregularities or canonical deviations are important because they were purposeful—the artisans of Deir el-Medina were the most skilled in their craft and any such “accidents” seem highly unlikely.

Just as the following interpretations of gender and identity cannot be applied to all strata of the highly hierarchical ancient Egyptian society, so, too, modern understanding of color cannot be used. It is necessary to interpret skin color symbolism within the context of Egyptian artistic theory. Ancient Egyptian color theory is strange to a modern English-speaking audience—as John Baines writes in his article “Color Terminology and Color Classification: Ancient Egyptian Color Terminology and Polychromy”: “Color is more easily painted than talked about.”<sup>4</sup>

One approach to Egyptian color theory is Baines’ application of the Berlin-Kay hypothesis, a linguistic approach. Berlin and Kay look at language as an approach to understanding color, plotting the identification of color words through seven stages of development with the final stage (of the most advanced societies) recognizing eleven basic color foci. These are what the English

2 Carolyn Graves-Brown, *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Continuum, 2010. 8

3 The concept of “pharaoh” was masculine—the king was associated with both Horus and Osiris, male gods. When females assumed the role of pharaoh, they were assuming a masculine identity.

4 John Baines, “Color Terminology and Color Classification: Ancient Egyptian Color Terminology and Polychromy.” *American Anthropologist*. 87.2 (1985): 289

language uses: black, white, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, pink, brown, and gray. In ancient Egypt, the color foci were more general: red and yellow were characterized as the same color, classified as “warm color” with a focus in red, and blue and green were classified as “cool color” with a focus in green. Middle Egyptian, therefore, had four basic color words: black, white, “warm color,” and “cool color.” The initial color categories were white (*hd*), black (*km*), red (*dšr*), and green (*wšd*). Later, blue and green were possibly differentiated in language; thus, Egyptian society moved from Stage III to Stage V while skipping Stage IV.<sup>5</sup>

For such a developmentally “unsophisticated” society, according to the Berlin and Kay theory on color vocabulary, the Egyptians displayed a remarkable skill in color application. While other color words may not have existed, this does not mean that Egyptians only painted with the colors that English recognizes as red, green, black, and white. Egyptians painted with the other colors (with the exception of purple, and in rare instances orange)—they simply referred to them with terms comprising a more general focus.<sup>6</sup> So while a modern observer would describe males as “red” and females as “yellow” in Egyptian art, an ancient Egyptian would look at the different skin colors and describe them both as “*dšr*” (“warm color”).<sup>7</sup>

This approach to color understanding generates complicated societal conclusions in an artistic exploration of gendered skin color symbolism. In Middle Egyptian, *inm* means “color,” “skin,” or “character,” implying, linguistically, a symbolic nature of skin coloration.<sup>8</sup> A linguistic approach suggests that while ancient Egyptians

did distinguish between genders, they did not consider women fundamentally different than men—both genders’ *inm* (color, skin, and character) was of *dšr*.<sup>9</sup> This theory thus translates Egyptian women’s “yellow” skin tone as “paler *dšr*” or “a different shade of *dšr*.” It distinguishes two categories of color identities (*dšr* and *wšd*) instead of three (red, yellow, and green). These two linguistic color categories are characterized as the living (*dšr*) and the regenerated (*wšd*). Through this nominal categorization, men and women are not differentiated; rather, women and men are like two sides of the same coin. It is therefore unsurprising that there were instances when only one color was used with no gender statement made. It was acceptable, and often the case, to show both men and women with red skin—if one color was to be used, it was red (Fig. 5). This leads to the question: why, then, were there also gendered shades of *dšr*?

The leading theory on why women were typically painted yellow and men were painted red hypothesizes that women were shown as yellow or a paler red because of gender spheres: “painted representations of Egyptian men and women typically show the women lighter-skinned than the men, a convention which suggests that women ideally spent more time indoors.”<sup>10</sup> According to Carolyn Graves-Brown in her book *Dancing for Hathor*, this theory is generally accepted, almost for lack of a better one:

However, there were times, such as during the Amarna Period, when the colour convention was less rigorously applied. Perhaps these were periods when women were more outwardly active, or when colour

5 The term for blue was *hsbd*, if it is to be understood as a color word independent of its meaning “lapis lazuli.” (Baines, 284); in Stage III, languages include four color words: “black,” “white,” “red,” and either “grue” (green/blue) or “yellow.” In Stage IV, whichever term the language did not include, “yellow” or “grue” is added. In Stage V, “blue” and “green” are differentiated from “grue.”

6 Baines discusses the lack of purple and orange paint: 287-288

7 A modern English equivalent would be the classification of an emerald and a granny smith apple—two objects of clearly different color characters—both as the same color, “green.”

8 Baines, 284

9 This is comparable to modern gender theory (though not accepted everywhere), which argues that men and women are not fundamentally different, only biologically different—that gender is socially constructed. It contradicts a large body of accepted gender conceptions spanning many cultures, religions, and time periods. It differs from gender theory in Catholicism, for example, which notes a fundamental difference between men and women that makes women ineligible for priesthood.

10 Betty L. Schlossman and Hildreth J. York. “Women in Ancient Art.” *Art Journal*. 35.4 (1976): 349

symbolism was differently understood, but it is difficult to see a reason—other than the ideal indoor nature of women’s work—for the general correlation of women with pale skin colour. Male figures might have been shown darker to draw attention to them; however, one might then expect kings to be shown darker than their subjects, which is not the case.<sup>11</sup>

This observational explanation for the justification of skin color differences oversimplifies gender divisions in Egyptian art and society and, even more importantly, may be incorrect.<sup>12</sup> There is ample evidence that gender distinction was not as black and white (or as red and yellow) as modern attitudes on ancient societies often assume. This theory implies a distinction of spheres, but the relegation of women and men to domestic spheres and public spheres, respectively, probably divides Egyptian society more clearly than was actually the case and contradicts a fluid gender existence. Women were not necessarily a “subjugated sex” shackled by their reproductive role and their inherent obligation to care for children. In fact, men were understood to have the active role in reproduction in ancient Egypt. Infertility was the fault of the man because conception was believed to take place within the man and not the woman; a woman received the child—she did not create it.<sup>13</sup> Women could inherit property, had access to the courts and could sue for divorce, and held occu-

pational positions including king and vizier.<sup>14</sup> Examples of female leaders meant that women could and did exercise power outside the home. There are images of women outdoors as well, partaking in fowling rituals and demonstrating that women performed important tasks outdoors.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, domestic excavations at Deir el-Medina indicate that in the New Kingdom from the XIV to XX Dynasties (1540-1070 BCE) the home was not *clearly* a female sphere and most likely did not gender space according to room types; women and men performed activities in cohabitation.<sup>16</sup>

However, the subcategorization of *dšr* cannot be ignored; in Egyptian society, there were gender distinctions. That women could inherit property does not mean that they inherited as much as men did.<sup>17</sup> Men more frequently sued for divorce, and the fact that adultery was considered offensive to the adulteress’ husband and not the adulterer’s wife suggests that men were the dominant partners in marriages.<sup>18</sup> That women were generally depicted in art smaller than their husbands serves as further evidence of gender hierarchy (Fig. 6).<sup>19</sup> The only known instances of women serving as judges are questionable, indicating that the legal system certainly was male-dominated and consequently male-biased.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, because women could hold positions of power does not mean that they were as powerful as men, who held administrative positions *far* more often than women. There was

11 Graves-Brown, 45

12 The study of gender in ancient Egypt is a relatively new focus in Egyptology and, while research has been prolific in recent years, it is still an underdeveloped field with many unanswered questions. Graves-Brown’s book and plenty of other scholars’ work are full of admissions of the limitations of their findings.

13 Graves-Brown, 2

14 Graves-Brown, 33; Berenice II, Cleopatra I, and Lady Nebet, wife of Huy, all served as viziers (Graves-Brown, 84); Hatshepsut is the best-known Egyptian female king, but she is one of probably only six female rulers during a 3,000 year period. (Graves-Brown, 4)

15 Graves-Brown, 36

16 For a discussion on this subject, see: Aikaterini Koltisida, “Domestic Space and Gender Roles in Ancient Egyptian Village Households: A View from Amarna Workmen’s Village and Deir el-Medina.” *British School at Athens*. Vol. 15 (2007): 121-127

17 Graves-Brown, 41

18 Graves-Brown, 43; 42

19 This proportion difference was more than purely observational. True, women are generally shorter than men. However, it was not uncommon to depict wives as children compared to their male counterparts. Thus, the extreme differences in size are symbolic and not simply observational. Egyptian art consistently utilizes a canon of proportion according to importance. (Graves-Brown, 34)

20 Women retained their dowries after a divorce, but the property that the couple accumulated, regardless of fault, was divided so that the woman received a third—if innocent. (Graves-Brown, 41)

something perceived about masculinity in ancient Egyptian culture that made it more compatible with leadership, suggested superiority in a marital relationship, administered justice more effectively, and was conducive to material ownership. The point is that while these four significant examples were more often associated with males, they were not *necessarily* associated with males, and while women were often distinguished from males by their skin color, they were not *always* distinguished from males by their skin color. The only thing that seems to be exclusively male is the ability to confer life—but even that, as will be demonstrated, is not as “exclusive” as it initially appears.

These gender conclusions can be evidenced through analysis of instances of deviation from canonical skin coloration. First, it must be established through art—and not just through language—that skin color is symbolic. The symbolism of skin tone is apparent in the image of the yellow monochrome Nut from the Valley of the Queens in tomb 38 (Fig. 1). QV 38 housed the body of Satre, a royal woman from the XIX Dynasty. Her tomb is decorated with the monochrome style, in which figures and objects are painted the same color: yellow with a red outline.

The primary question supported by this image/style is: why use one color, when all the paints could be afforded and all the workers could be secured to contribute to a polychrome tomb scheme? Also, if one color was selected, why yellow? A pragmatic answer to the “why yellow” question is that yellow was the easiest color to produce because of the availability of the minerals from which it was made.<sup>21</sup> But while this explains the monochrome style elsewhere (in tombs of the less noble and less wealthy), it hardly explains its presence in the tombs of the most royal and most wealthy. Blue was the “most prestigious” color in Egypt according to Baines; though a blue monochrome Nut might be anticipated, Deir el-Medina artisans worked in yellow monochrome instead.<sup>22</sup> To explain

this phenomenon, this paper takes a more nuanced approach to interpreting color.

If only one skin color was used, it was red. Thus, because the color yellow was neither financially impressive nor in keeping with Egyptian aesthetics, the *yellow* monochrome here is still unexplained. However, it is *gold*, not yellow, that is indicated by the yellow fill color and red outline of the Nut figure. It should thus be understood that Satre’s tomb was not decorated in yellow monochrome—it was decorated in gold monochrome. Like the woman in the poem, the Nut figure in Satre’s tomb *becomes* gold. Interpreted by the Egyptian artistic canon, QV 38’s Nut was an image from a golden horde, a goddess that “glittered” on the tomb’s walls—a powerful aesthetic statement. This makes a powerful symbolic statement. Gold carried significant symbolic connotations in ancient Egyptian culture, as it did in most cultures that had access to it.<sup>23</sup> Because gold does not tarnish, it has an eternal quality to it. Thus, Satre’s “golden” images are eternally durable. Because gold has such evocative symbolism, each image is endowed with greater meaning with the application of “gold” paint. The color compliments the idea of the tomb as a place of passage to eternity, and its presence in a tomb makes the monochrome style more aptly described as “gold” monochrome.

The “gold” monochrome Nut, as the sky goddess, has even more complex symbolism. As Susan Tower Hollis points out in her article “Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut,” while most cultures have a male sky-god and a female mother-earth, the ancient Egyptians had the opposite.<sup>24</sup> Hollis concludes that it cannot ultimately be determined whether the sky goddess was female and therefore the Sun (and stars) became associated with a rebirth cycle or if the rebirth cycle of the Sun necessitated a female goddess.<sup>25</sup> Either way, this causes another deviation from almost universal mythology: the ruler of time (the one who governs the

21 Baines, 286

22 Ibid

23 Manfred Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Dictionary*. Trans. Barbara Cummins. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980

24 Susan Hollis Towers, “Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 100.398 (1987): 496-499

25 There is a linguistic element to this debate as well, as the word for sky, *pt*, is feminine and the word for land, *t3*, is masculine.





Figure 1: Deir el-Medina, *Monochrome Nut from QV 38*, Valley of the Queens, Egypt, XIX Dynasty (ca. 1292-1290 BCE)



Figure 2: detail *The 'Great Royal Wife' and 'Mistress of the Two Lands', Nefertari presents a libation to the goddesses Hathor, Serket, and Maat*, Valley of the Queens, Thebes, Egypt, XIX Dynasty (1295-1255 BCE)

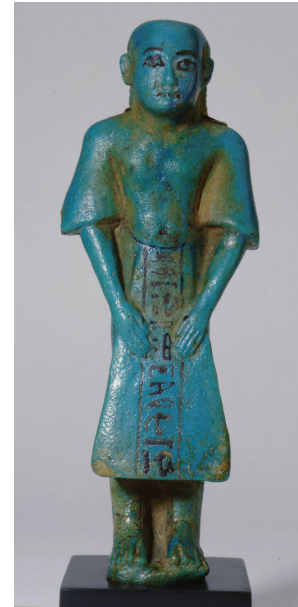


Figure 3: *Shabti*, XIX Dynasty (1292-1190 BC), Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri



Figure 4: *Hathor in the guise of 'Mistress of the West,' and with the headdress-symbol of Imentet, embraces the king in the afterlife, XVIII Dynasty (ca. 1319-1292), Tomb of Horemheb, Valley of the Kings, Western Thebes, Egypt*



Figure 5: *The couple Sennedjem and Tyneferti and those whom comprise their direct attendants receiving each funerary veneration on behalf of the official, Ancient Thebes, Egypt, Tomb of Sennedjem, XIX Dynasty (ca. 1268 BCE)*



Figure 7: *The great god Amun-Re depicted in his normal form, Temple of Sethos I, Abydos, Egypt, XIX Dynasty (ca. 1290-1279 BCE)*



Figure 6: *Nebamun hunting in the marshes, fragment of a scene from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, Late XVIII Dynasty (ca. 1350 BC), British Museum, London*



Figure 8: *Faience shabtis for Maat-ka-Re showing breasts just below the lappets of the wig, XXI Dynasty (ca. 1069-945 BCE), Henry Wallis RWS collection*

rising and setting of the Sun) in ancient Egypt was female.<sup>26</sup> The eternal *inm* of this Nut image is a further emphasis on her control of time and her role in post-mortem rebirth.

This example does not prove that women and men were regarded as inherently equal or that gender was not absolutely and simply divisive in Egyptian society; rather, it supports the argument that color, in general, and skin color, specifically, carried highly significant symbolism. In Satre's tomb, eternity and the goal of rebirth are expressed through color in a way that excludes strictly gender-color classifications—conveying “eternal” was of greater symbolic importance in Satre's tomb than conveying “male or female.” The nature of art took precedence over division of gender. Having established skin color symbolism in an ungendered context, it is now necessary to examine skin color symbolism in a gendered example.

Gender symbolism—not just gender differentiation—becomes apparent in the color analysis of the famous tomb of Nefertari in the Valley of the Queens, tomb 66 (Fig. 2). Nefertari was a prominent leader alongside her husband, Ramses the Great—a letter to the Hittite queen, Padukhepa, encouraging the signing of a peace treaty is evidence of her political involvement and clout.<sup>27</sup> In her tomb, instead of adhering to the men-red and women-yellow color specification, an irregularity occurs so contradictory to the canon that it is a violation of it: Nefertari is painted with the masculine red. She is the *only* female figure in this tomb's decorative system painted red, so the fact that women were not always painted yellow does not explain her particular coloration. Traditionally, when gender-distinct skin colors were used, they were applied to all figures of the work and not just some. In QV 66, *all* other women besides the owner are depicted with yellow skin.<sup>28</sup>

Nefertari is boldly distinguished by her skin, but for what reason? Again, a symbolic interpretation is necessary because other explanations prove unsatisfactory. This time, a gender statement is being made, for the queen is singularly affiliated with the color of masculinity.

As was previously mentioned, the XIX Dynasty is an interesting period of Egyptian history to study for gender concepts, as it witnessed at least one female king and had evidence of individual identity.<sup>29</sup> Nefertari's tomb is also not unique in its coloration, so Nefertari's masculine skin color should not be applied to her personality or political involvement but, instead, to a trend in Egyptian royal thinking (*e.g.* the owner of QV 40 is distinguished in the same way, but she is an anonymous woman). Thus, the red queen uses a distinction of group identity—the masculine red—but applies it to herself in a way that makes it a marker of an altered identity. The anonymous queen of QV 40 and Nefertari do not belong in the same category as the other women in their tombs. They do not belong to a category of men, either.

Instead, Nefertari and the anonymous queen have placed themselves in a new category with women like Hatshepsut: androgynous women.<sup>30</sup> While Hatshepsut utilized gendered symbols such as a beard in her commissions to strengthen her pharaonic claim, Nefertari did not rule as pharaoh. This queen does not possess kingly attributes; she possesses manly ones. This suggests that kingship was not the only androgynous or gender-complex identification in Egyptian culture.

Personhood may have been androgynous as well. Dental analyses have concluded that parents fed girls as well as they did their brothers—a factor contributing to a theory that the life of a daughter was not valued less than the life of a son.<sup>31</sup> Daughters and

26 Hollis, 498-499

27 John K McDonald, *House of Eternity: The Tomb of Nefertari*. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1996. 15-16

28 The description of the tomb comes from: Heather Lee McCarthy, “Rules of Decorum and Expressions of Gender Fluidity in Tawosret's Tomb.” *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: 'don your wig for a joyful hour'*, Ed. Carolyn Graves-Brown. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008. 83-113

29 Willeke Wendrich, “Identity and Personhood” *Egyptian Archaeology*. Ed. Willeke Wendrich. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008. 201

30 Any parallels to Hatshepsut were probably not executed consciously since her son destroyed many of Hatshepsut's images after her death in the previous dynasty.

31 Graves-Brown, 51



sons grew up to contribute to society in different ways, and it might be through task performance abilities that gender was understood instead of as a facet of personhood. For example, while women were not excluded from kingship, they did not regularly hold this position—something about their gender made them seem less eligible for the task but not incapable of performing it. Gender and performance ability seem to be linked in the same way that gender and color seem to be linked in that neither performance ability nor color is absolutely governed by sex. Perhaps the next logical step is to link color and task performance ability in Egyptian art, as Heather Lee McCarthy does in her article, “Rules of Decorum and Expressions of Gender Fluidity in Tawrosset’s Tomb.”<sup>32</sup>

In a mortuary context, task performance ability relates to the deceased’s ability to achieve regeneration. In ancient Egypt, the regeneration of a person was sexual: the sky goddess, Nut, was impregnated by the deceased and then gave birth to the regenerated Osiris. A sexual regeneration of this sort has obvious biological limitations for women, who would be unable to impregnate Nut. But if a woman were able to regender herself and become a man, she could achieve regeneration through an extra, transformative step.<sup>33</sup>

Nefertari is expressing that transformative process in her gender identification. She is the only woman in the tomb undergoing regeneration, and if regeneration and sexual abilities are related, than she is also the only woman in the tomb art who needs to display a complex gender identity. Her red coloration is expressive of her male virility in bringing about her sexual regeneration. Women in the Egyptian culture (unlike in other, later civilizations in general) were understood to have powerful sexualities.<sup>34</sup> Their sexual impulses may have fluidly transferred into male virility in their post-mortem existence. Reflective of her new sexual abilities,

the queen is red; nevertheless, she still maintains her female identity (in her dress and form) despite her transformation. The fact that the red queen can maintain her femininity in life, become male, and then revert to a female implies that the identity of the queen is not grounded in her sex.<sup>35</sup> Like the woman in the poem, she can become stars, gold, or male or undergo some other substantive transformation and still maintain her personhood and identity.

These conclusions can be drawn from a symbolic and linguistic analysis of *dšr*: for ancient Egyptians, it was not essential to differentiate between genders; furthermore, gender as a societal construction is not indicative of the sexual capabilities that a dimorphic biological existence indicates.

However, the symbolic interpretation of skin color can easily be explained with more mundane suggestions: Sate and her fellow royals decided to be frugal in paint purchases (though not in anything else), or they just liked the color yellow; Nefertari and the anonymous red queen were hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, or just manly women. While Ockham’s Razor is a handy tool of simplification in scientific and philosophical theory, its application to art and culture is usually degrading to the integrity of the work and the development of the society. That gender and its bearing on personhood were *more* complicated than is expressed in this paper is more likely than that gender and its bearing on personhood were *less* complicated in a society that had been developing for at least four thousand years. While contemporary prejudices tending to simplify the past cannot be imposed on ancient Egypt, neither can ideals: gender equality and egalitarian existence were no more realities in ancient Egyptian society than absolute gender spheres.

When linguistically and symbolically analyzed, the blue color of a small, male *shabti* sculpture also yields interesting results

32 McCarthy, 83-113

33 This point is proved by McCarthy in “Rules of Decorum and Expressions of Gender Fluidity in Tawrosset’s Tomb.”

34 Graves-Brown, 49

35 This gender fluidity is not inconsistent with what is known about gender or identity constructions in ancient Egypt. Utilizing linguistics, names and nouns can be analyzed to shed further light on the issue: when a person became pharaoh, he or she adopted a new name and a new identity with his or her new role, while still maintaining the old name and identity. Likewise, a noun does not change meaning when gendered: the *nfrw* and the *nfrwt* are just as ideal, though the *nfrw* are male and the *nfrwt* are female.

(Fig. 3).<sup>36</sup> The *shabti* sculpture is made of faience, which, through the most common Egyptian process, takes a blue color. The material and/or color, presumably, had some importance in the *shabti*'s purpose, as this sculpture serves as a forerunner to an important trend in later *shabti* production. *Shabtis* (in the New Kingdom) were small figures buried in tombs that could be animated by the deceased as servants. They were not representations of specific people but people in general (*e.g.* agricultural workers, handmaids, *etc.*).<sup>37</sup> Though the later artisan village of Deir el-Bahari was more prolific in *shabti* production, the XIX Dynasty blue faience *shabti* serves as a precursor to the later standardization of *shabti* sculptures in the Third Intermediate Period (1070-664 BCE). By the time of the Third Intermediate Period, 365 small *shabtis* became the burial norm—one for each day of the year. In the early XIX Dynasty, no more than ten *shabtis* were necessary, and visually, they ranged from polychrome to all shades of monochrome statuary.<sup>38</sup>

The conception behind the *shabti* evolved and changed throughout Egyptian history, as did *shabti* iconography. In the New Kingdom, *shabtis* were understood to be task-performers for the deceased that could be evoked with a Book of the Dead spell, often inscribed on their bodies. They generally had agricultural tools in their hands and baskets on their backs, identifying some as agricultural workers and others as agricultural-worker overseers. They could be either mummiform in shape or dressed in the clothes of daily life (as is Fig. 3).<sup>39</sup> Through their association with vegetation (as agricultural workers) and regeneration (as people animated when needed), it seems as if the natural skin color of *shabtis* should be green. The fact that blue becomes the standard color instead, like all

irregularities in Egyptian artistic representation, raises questions.

As skin color in the previous examples was justifiably symbolic, it is securely within the realm of possibility that the color of this *shabti* and later *shabtis* was also symbolic. Certainly, there can be no observational explanations. The only other consistent application of the blue skin tone in ancient Egyptian art is to the god, Amun (Fig. 7). As green skin color is an attribute of the regenerating Osiris, perhaps blue skin tone relates to some quality of Amun.

One attribute of Amun seems to have a particular relation to the *shabti*: his connection with the wind. A feature of the *shabti* is its mode of animation by an incantation—the breath of life quite literally applied through the articulation of speech.<sup>40</sup> This association with Amun is probably not a direct connection but a shared attribute: just as Amun may have been painted blue because of his association with the wind, so, too, the *shabti* may have been painted blue because of its speech-reliant animation. It is a proposition suggested by the symbolic application of color in other instances based on plausibility but, unfortunately, unsupported by ancient or scholarly explanations. If this conjecture is entertained, it creates a peculiar category of *shabti* existence. As the ability to speak is shared by both sexes, a *shabti* is animated in a completely genderless manner. Thus, a biological differentiation between male and female *shabti* is superfluous. However, as Hans Schneider's classification system demonstrates, some *shabtis* did seem to associate with a certain sex: for the *shabtis* dressed in the clothes of daily life, affiliation with one sex was inevitable (Fig. 8).<sup>41</sup> Yet, because sex could have been superfluous to the *shabti*'s creation, this affiliation also seems insignificant. The *shabti*'s creation and lack of gendered skin tone

36 This statue can be found in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art or online, as part of the project "Echoes of Eternity" at this web address: <http://echoesofeternity.umkc.edu/index.htm>

37 Glenn Janes. "Introduction." *Shabtis: A Private View: Ancient Egyptian funerary statuettes in European private collections*. Paris: Cybele, 2002. xv-xxiii

38 See the appendix to Janes' *Shabtis: A Private View*, 233-238

39 Janes, xvi-xvii

40 "O, this/these ushebti(s)/ if one counts, if one recons/ the Osiris [Name of Deceased]/ to do all the works which are wont to be done/ there in the God's land—/ now indeed obstacles are implanted therewith—/ as a man at his duties,/ 'here I am,' you shall say when/ you are counted off /at any time to serve there,/ to cultivate the fields, to irrigate the riparian lands,/ to transport by boat the sand of the east to the west/ and vise-versa;/ 'here I am,' you shall say." Janes, xix

41 Hans D. Schneider, *Shabtis: An Introduction to the History of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes, with a Catalogue of the Collection of Shabtis in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden*. Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudeden te Leiden, 1977

could be evidentiary support of an existence completely disassociated from gender.

Although a sexless existence is intriguing and possible, in a culture so gender-oriented (even if gender-fluid), another androgynous explanation is more likely. According to Robert Steven Bianchi in his essay “Symbols and Meanings,” blue faience, *thnt*, is related to words referring to “luminosity” and “scintillation” and, accordingly, carried symbolic associations with the Sun. Specifically in the case of *shabtis*, Bianchi connects the shiny blue color with the resurrection of the deceased Osiris as the solar deity. The correlation of the blue color of the *shabti* to the Sun and to Osiris is appropriate to the *shabti*’s purpose as agricultural worker for the deceased and to the relation of the colors blue and green. Similarly to *dšr*, *wšd* could have encompassed both blue and green—differentiating the *shabti* from the Osiris by a shade of a color definitely associated with the deity also allows for a temporal gender association similar to the one of the red queen. In discussing other blue statuary in mortuary contexts, Bianchi asserts blue faience’s ability to arouse both men and women: “Following his murder and dismemberment, Osiris had his sexual prowess restored by Isis, enabling him to father his posthumous heir, Horus; revived, Osiris became lord of Westerners. The presence of such [blue concubine] figurines in tombs imparts Osirian qualities to the deceased—including women—who are identified with Osiris.”<sup>42</sup> Likened to Isis’ eroticism, the Sun’s brilliance, and Osirian regeneration, blue faience’s material/color is feminine and masculine. Thus, the skin color again takes on a sexual dimension, although it is not at all gender discriminative.

The color irregularities analyzed above suggest that interpretation of skin color can carry significant symbolic weight and can make complex arguments on gender and the possible androgynous nature of personhood. Furthermore, they may be applied to explore other forms of existence completely disassociated from gender. The evidence that color was highly symbolic and that a symbolic understanding of skin color did not need a basis in observable phenome-

non is demonstrated in the “gold” monochrome Nut of QV 38. This style also suggests that there are *inmw* more important than those of gender distinctions. When gender distinctions in skin coloration did occur, they did not necessarily differentiate the men and women fundamentally; instead, as the red Nefertari of QV 66 demonstrates, there was fluidity between genders that enabled sexual regeneration. Thus, gender was a temporary classification and the essence of personhood should be considered androgynous, as deduced from XIX Dynasty mortuary art and understood as one strain in royal understanding. Belief in the ability to transition between sexes indicates a remarkable gender sophistication. This belief may be supported by one interpretation of the symbolism of blue faience *shabti* sculptures. Though less likely, a different interpretation of blue faience’s symbolism applied to other existing beings (*e.g.* blue *shabtis*) can suggest extraordinary modes of existence in which gender is completely arbitrary.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Steven Bianchi, “Symbols and Meanings” *Gifts of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Faience*. Ed. Florence Dunn Friedman. Providence, Rhode Island School of Design: Thames and Hudson, 1998. 24-25

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