

Chapter 1

Balancing Eros and Logos

Every story has two sides.

--Alexander McCall Smith, *Morality
for Beautiful Girls*

The tendency to separate the opposites as much as possible and to strive for singleness of meaning is absolutely necessary for clarity of consciousness, since discrimination is of its essence. But when the separation is carried so far that the complementary opposite is lost sight of, and the blackness of the whiteness, the evil of the good, the depth of the heights, and so on, is no longer seen, the result is one-sidedness, which is then compensated from the unconscious without our help. The counterbalancing is even done against our will, which in consequence must become more and more fanatical until it brings about a catastrophic enantiodromia. Wisdom never forgets that all things have two sides....

--C.G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*

The Canny Feminine

The “canny feminine” is my term for the style of problem solving that preserves human relatedness and dignity. It uses “logos” thinking to solve the problem, but maintains “eros” connections between people. (More about these terms below.) Not a new phenomenon by any means, it existed in ancient Egypt and in the Hebrew scriptures and continues to exist, but it seems to have gone somewhat into eclipse in recent years, particularly in western societies, where logos has come to overshadow it. When logos is dominant, solving the problem by any means is the paramount goal. The answer will be black or white, yes or no, true or false. Winning is all-important. In contrast, the canny feminine solution may be gray and a little paradoxical, or may be arrived at in a “tricky” or unusual way. Compromise may take place. And the least amount of harm will be done to the people involved. Two well-known examples are the judgment of Solomon and the stories of Shahrazad.

In the famous Biblical story, two prostitutes came before King Solomon, both claiming to be the mother of the same child. They had each borne a child within days of each other, but one of them accidentally rolled onto her baby in the night as she slept and smothered him. She

exchanged the corpse for the live baby sleeping with the other woman, but in the morning, that woman realized that the dead baby was not hers. Solomon listened to them each insisting that the child was hers, then called for a sword to be brought. He ordered the living child to be cut in two, so that each woman could have half. The false mother agreed, while the true mother said, Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!” So Solomon knew which was the true mother—the one who would rather give him up than see him killed—and awarded the child to her (1 Kings 3:16-28). This story marks the beginning of Solomon’s new wisdom following his encounter with God in a dream. Rather than riches or long life, Solomon had asked God for “an understanding mind” (1 Kings 3:9). Previously, he would have used his sword for possibly unjust executions (an excess of logos), but now its threat brings justice (Hebrew Bible 495, n. 16-18). He used a splendidly clever method to determine who was lying and to preserve the relationship between the baby and its real mother (eros).

In *The Arabian Nights*, Princess Shahrazad uses her logos knowledge: the poetry, history, medicine, philosophy, and literature that she had studied (Haddawy 1990:11), in the service of eros: saving her own life and the lives of the countless other young women who would have been killed by the king. She also cures his rage and madness over time and teaches him to love. The story goes like this. There were two kings who were brothers. The older, Shahrayar, invites his brother, Shazaman, to visit. The younger brother sets out, then returns to bid his wife farewell—only to find her in the arms of the cook. He kills them both and goes to visit his brother. One day, Shahrayar goes hunting, but the depressed Shazaman stays behind. He witnesses his brother’s wife and a group of servants in an orgy, realizes that his brother’s situation is worse than his, and throws off his depression. The two brothers disguise themselves so that Shahrayar can see for himself what happens in his absence. Extremely shaken, they decide to travel to see if anyone has greater misfortune than this. Indeed, they find someone: a woman who was captured on her wedding night by a huge sea demon who keeps her in a glass chest. While the monster sleeps, she demands sex with the two kings or she will wake the demon who will kill them. Even though the demon’s plan was to keep her chaste, she collects rings from the men she has slept with, and now has one hundred rings. Her plight is much worse than theirs, they decide, and return home, where Shahrayar has his wife and the orgiastic servants put to death. This is when he concocts his plan of marrying for one night only, killing the bride in the morning “in order to save himself from the wickedness and cunning of women, saying, ‘There is not a single chaste woman

anywhere on the entire face of the earth” (10). His vizier’s job is now to find him a supply of women. Many girls die and their parents mourn. The vizier has two daughters; Shahrazad is the elder and Dinarzad the younger. As noted above, Shahrazad is “intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined” (11). She asks her father to marry her to the king, thinking that she may be able to save the other girls. After the wedding, she sends for her sister, who is instructed to ask for a story before they sleep. On her wedding night, Shahrazad begins the story of the Merchant and the Demon, but becomes tired before finishing it and goes to sleep, leaving the king “burning with curiosity” (18) to hear the rest of the story. He decides to spare her until he hears the end of the story, and she goes on, night after night, weaving a wonderful web of stories about life, love, magic—about human nature—that he cannot resist hearing more about. At the end we are told that she bore him three children and he kept her as his queen, learning to love and trust her (428).

When the brothers met the woman who tricked the sea demon and slept with one hundred men in spite of his plan for her celibacy, they say, “Great is women’s cunning” (10), and this enrages them. But Shahrazad is canny, not cunning, in my reading. The words are similar, but the nuances of canny are broader and contain more eros. The first meaning listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for canny is “knowing, sagacious, judicious, prudent, wary, cautious” (OED 837). Second is “cunning, artful, wily.” Highly symbolic is the third definition, “skillful, clever”: a canny wife was a “wise woman” or midwife; a canny moment was the moment of childbirth. Even if this meaning is no longer current, the canny feminine does bring things to birth—often the unsuspected “third” thing that solves the problem. Additional meanings of canny are supernaturally wise, lucky, cautious, comfortable, and agreeable to the eyes. In the Scottish context it means “careful, frugal, thrifty” and can refer also to Scots humor, “quiet, sly, dry” (Funk and Wagnals 195). The main definition of cunning is “crafty or shrewd, artful, guileful” (F&W 315), so we can see that the nuance of cunning is more about tricking, while that of canny is more about wisdom and thoughtful, careful action. In my usage, then, cunning refers more to logos tricks that benefit the doer, while canny refers to a wisdom that solves but also “loves.”

Eros and Logos in Jungian Theory

In Jung’s general usage, logos refers to discrimination: objective interest, clarifying light,

differentiating knowledge; it sunders, cuts and pierces.¹ In contrast, eros refers to psychic relatedness, uniting, receiving, and containing.² It is important to note that in contrast to the general usage of “erotic” today, this Jungian usage does not usually refer to the sexual, but rather, to being humanly related in a genuine way. He described the positive aspects of logos as follows:

[Logos]...can appear positively as bold and resolute manliness; ambitious striving after the highest goals; opposition to all stupidity, narrow-mindedness, injustice, and laziness; willingness to make sacrifices for what is regarded as right, sometimes bordering on heroism; perseverance, inflexibility and toughness of will; a curiosity that does not shrink even from the riddles of the universe; and finally, a revolutionary spirit which strives to put a new face upon the world (Jung CW 9i: ¶165).

In contrast, eros can hold disparate elements together. He gives the example of a family, but this could extend to managing any diverse or difficult group of people:

It needs a very moon-like consciousness indeed to hold a large family together regardless of all the differences, and to talk and act in such a way that the harmonious relation of the parts to the whole is not only not disturbed but is actually enhanced. And where the ditch is too deep, a ray of moonlight smoothes it over (Jung CW 13: ¶227).

Additionally, eros can provide capacity for friendship, good taste, ability to teach, tact, and a spiritual receptivity (Jung CW 9i: ¶164). It “brings everything into relationship, in an almost perfect way” (CW 14: ¶322).

In a move that complicates (but does not invalidate) this simple but basic duality, Jung associates eros with the feminine and logos with the masculine. If we think of masculine and feminine as something like yang and yin (a set of non-essentialist, culturally constructed attributes) it is still a workable theory. But when Jung goes on to unequivocally describe eros as the psychology of women and logos as the psychology of men, this presents big problems. And not all of these result from contemporary gender politics or hypersensitive political correctness. Even in his own writing, Jung stumbled over the logical and empirical flaws in his argument, which, to my mind, he did not resolve satisfactorily. For example, in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, after equating eros and logos with feminine and masculine psychology, he muses about the

¹ In Jung’s earlier writings, he wrestles with Freud’s usage of eros as sexual libido, but soon rejects this narrow usage. For Freud, the opposite of eros is *thanatos*, death. For these references, see Volume 7 of the Collected Works, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*.

² These definitions are found in CW 10: ¶255; CW 13: ¶60, CW 18: ¶265.

people who do not fit this categorization:

As we can hardly ever make a psychological proposition without immediately having to reverse it, instances to the contrary leap to the eye at once: men who care nothing for discrimination, judgment, and insight, and women who display an almost excessively masculine proficiency in this respect. *I would like to describe such cases as the regular exceptions.* They demonstrate, to my mind, the common occurrence of a psychically predominant contrasexuality. Wherever this exists we find a forcible intrusion of the unconscious, a corresponding exclusion of the consciousness specific to either sex, predominance of the shadow and of contrasexuality, and to a certain extent even the presence of symptoms of possession (such as compulsions, phobias, obsessions, automatisms, exaggerated affects, etc.). This inversion of roles is probably the chief psychological source for the alchemical concept of the hermaphrodite. In a man it is the lunar anima, in a woman the solar animus, that influences consciousness in the highest degree. Even if a man is often unaware of his own anima-possession, he has, understandably enough, all the more vivid an impression of the animus-possession of his wife, and vice versa (CW 14: ¶225, italics mine).

This argument of a kind of contrasexual psychopathology and blithe “exceptions prove the rule” is in decided contrast to Jung’s usual position that the exceptions are where the interest lies, as with synchronistic events that are not statistically significant. He assumes that the way of individuation for a woman, for example in alchemy, is “reversed” from that of the male artifex (CW 14: ¶536 n.428), but when it comes to what this would be, another logical contradiction arises. He admits that if in alchemy, Sol³ represents the masculine and consciousness, and Luna represents the feminine and the unconscious, this works from a masculine point of view. However, when reversed it implies that “consciousness would be an exclusively masculine affair, which is obviously not the case since woman possesses consciousness too” (CW 14: ¶222). He has to remedy this by saying that the consciousness of woman is lunar rather than lacking, for the moon gives a kind of light also, the gentle light of eros, described above. In contrast to what I consider Jung’s usually clear and elegant concepts that do not tend to require exceptions, the areas in which he conflates eros and logos with gender become extremely convoluted. Of course, at the time that he was formulating these theories, gender roles for men and women were more fixed than they are today. But the problem goes deeper than that and shows a blind spot in his theory.

A number of feminist Jungian thinkers have grappled with this issue and have clarified

³ Sol and Luna, sun and moon, are more poetic, archetypal names for logos and eros. (Jung CW 14: ¶226).

the problem from several angles. In contrast to other claims about the psyche that were based more empirically on his own or his patients' experiences, the ones about women's psychology did not come from women's own experience but from a theoretical inversion of how things work for men (Wehr 1987:65). I have the feeling that he got the male part intuitively correct.⁴ But, for example, infant research does not show the contrasexual bonding that he posits; a baby girl's first projections are not directed at the father but toward the mother, just like the baby boy (Wehr 118). So there may be important parallels between males and females at a deeper human level, not always oppositions.

What is particularly confusing is that often when Jung says he is going to speak about the anima (the internal feminine in men), he often shifts into speaking about women's psychology, and vice versa (Wehr 104; Rowland 2002:vii). This makes sense from within his theory, because he argues that a man "sees" women through his own anima—and of course Jung was as bound by this as any man.

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* we are shown Jung's anima as devious, erotic, artful and connective. Jung makes assumptions about the feminine from the evidence of his own anima, and uses them to colour and even at times to take over his thinking about women's psychology. Here we see personal myth very precisely at work in the collapsing of 'anima' into 'women'. It is an aspect of his myth that finds a very forceful realization in his writings. This 'women-into-animas' drive cannot be wholly separated from his grand theory because Jung's anima is, in his own conceptual terms, the most immediately 'real' form of the feminine available to him. After all, if all reality and mental experience is in the first place psychic, then his own archetypal psyche is most intimate to his writing consciousness (Rowland 41).

It is perfectly understandable from within Jung's own theory that a man, even such an intuitive man as himself, could not possibly be perfectly objective about women.⁵ And so rather than fit women's psychology into the procrustean bed of Jung's necessarily distorted ideas (with his

⁴ He admits that men always understand what he means by the anima, but that women do not understand his idea of animus, and "I have never met any woman who could tell me anything definite about his personality" (CW 10:¶81). Rather than conclude that he might have got this bit wrong, Jung decides that the animus is plural and does not have a personality. The reasoning is biological: men are attracted to multiple partners, so their anima is compensatorily singular; women want to keep one partner and hence, they have a polymorphic animus (Ibid).

⁵ His internal personifications of Logos and Eros were the figures of Elijah and Salome. Tellingly, Salome was blind (Jung 1963:182).

anima laughing uproariously somewhere), it is the task of other Jungians to continue the work.⁶ This task is a tribute to Jung, who never claimed to have the whole truth, but only his truth, and wanted each person to find his or her own way to the soul. And it is important to note that Jung did value the feminine and the irrational (not necessarily the same thing!) at a time when both were devalued. Rowland summarizes it well:

C.G. Jung loved the feminine all his life. The feminine is the pivotal fulcrum of both his work and his psyche. Yet Jung was certainly not a feminist in the sense of promoting women's participation in the world (Rowland vi).

My position then, is that eros and logos, two important orientations to the world, are not essentially linked to gender. Anima and animus, also, I prefer to see as internal soul figures that are radically other to the ego, without assigning definite and opposing qualities to males and females. But Jung's dynamics of complementarity and compensation still hold. For example, if a female happens to function mostly in the logos mode, then her inner figure will try to teach her about eros.⁷ I do believe that men and women are different in some key ways, but there are so many individual differences in how each person is constituted that I prefer not to assign a bundle of fixed characteristics to each gender.

The Canny Feminine: An Alternative Paradigm of Individuation?

To explain the canny feminine, the concomitant use of logos and eros, the traditional Jungian approach would be that it is a fairly individuated position. The person started with either logos or eros as her conscious position, and over time and through some kind of dialogue with the unconscious, the opposite position became more conscious and integrated into the whole personality. This way of achieving this balance is entirely possible and possibly the dominant way that the canny feminine comes to birth. But what if logos and eros are not the only lines along which conscious and unconscious divide? After considering all the canny stories in this

⁶ Many have been involved in this task of both revealing the problems in the theory and contributing new ideas about how a woman's psyche works. See Roland for an excellent summary of the different approaches of major Jungian thinkers.

⁷ I believe this is often the case in the cultural and historical setting of patriarchy, where power and prestige lie in the logos orientation. If women wanted to be "successful," they were forced to function like males. See Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey*, for a schema of women's individuation that includes "identification with the masculine," "the illusory boon of success," "yearning to reconnect with the feminine," "healing the mother/daughter split," and finally, "beyond duality" as some of the stages on this path that is much more complicated than merely the "opposite" of masculine individuation.

thesis, it struck me that in some cases, logos *and* eros might together be available to consciousness, with other oppositions in the unconscious. Granted, most of my examples are fictional, and so may represent a longing for this balance in our world; they may present characters that are not psychologically possible. But the characters do not seem farfetched, and some seem too young to have done the inner work required to balance eros and logos. And interestingly, three of the characters agree to marry a man *after* they establish themselves through their use of the canny feminine.⁸ This may indicate a very different model of individuation than the one that parallels the alchemical transformation that takes place through contrasexual imagery, the union of the King and Queen or Sol and Luna. It may be that there is more than one possibility for the division between conscious and unconscious orientations. Perhaps for certain individuals, logos and eros are both relatively conscious, while other aspects of human functioning are relatively unconscious. In this case, individuals who have conscious access to eros and logos may need to balance such things as awareness of the body and things in the world, a developed spiritual life, introverted self-care, healthy selfishness, and so on. I ask the reader to consider this possibility as he gets to know these canny characters in the following chapters. We will return to this question at the conclusion of this thesis.

Eros and Logos: Transformation and Redemption

Jung gives a practical example in an informal statement from one of his seminars of how these principles “need” each other and the feel of an excess of either (again, he links them to males and females, but this need not be):

One could say that both principles play a tremendous role in the history of the thought of redemption, which is really a psychological affair. For instance, in Christianity it is not only Logos that plays the role of redeemer, it is also Eros in the form of the principle of love. There again one sees the incorporation of the two principles. I may add there that the ideal Logos can only be when it *contains* the Eros; otherwise the Logos is not dynamic at all. A man with only Logos may have a very sharp intellect, but it is nothing but dry rationalism. And Eros without the Logos inside never understands, there is nothing but blind relatedness. Such people can be related to God knows what—like certain women who are dissolved completely in little happy families—cousins, relations—and there is nothing in the whole damned thing, it is all perfectly empty. Exactly like the low sort of

⁸ Jasmin receives a proposal after she brings harmony to Bagdad Café, but says she must discuss it with Brenda, her shadow figure. Precious Ramotswe agrees to marry Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni after rejecting numerous proposals from him after she establishes her detective agency and cannily solves a number of cases. And Flora Poste cleans up Cold Comfort Farm and then flies off to marry Charles. Details below.

Logos people, those classifying fellows with a low understanding (Jung 1984:701).

Redemption—or individuation—needs both love and understanding. He notes that both are present in Christianity, but for many today formal religions no longer serve as a model for what humans might become. But we do find these images of inspiration and balance in remarkable human beings, and I would argue, also in fictional and cinematic characters. Murray Stein calls them “transformative images” (Stein 1998:40). They can take over consciousness and sometimes change it dramatically, as when William Larimar Mellon, Jr. learned of Albert Schweitzer, and subsequently modeled his life on the doctor’s, studying medicine and setting up a clinic in Haiti (Ibid). Of course, the “imago,” the final stage of who one is supposed to become, is already rooted in the psyche as an oak is in the acorn. But the transformative image gives us a conscious image of its final form, and helps to channel our psychic energy to this end (Stein 63). It may be that the canny feminine is a transformative image for me and that it will not have this resonance for others. But because one of my key sources for the image is a series of books that are terrifically popular at the moment,⁹ I wonder if this image might not be emerging also in the collective conscious as a compensation to the disastrous splitting and overemphasis on logos in the world today (see Chapter 5).

Describing the Canny Feminine: Cold Comfort Farm

Defining the canny feminine in logos terms does not convey its fullness; it needs the eros connection of “real” characters to bring it to life. Like Shahrazad, I will tell many stories in this thesis,¹⁰ which I hope will not just entertain, but will also inspire or even transform. At the least, I hope they give a clear example of what this term means. Perhaps I also feel compelled to present so many examples to counterbalance the dominant image we tend to have of “success,” a more heroic model of winning with little attention paid to the human consequences. In the typical western hero story, the hero must slay the dragon, often a symbol for mother, maternal containment, and eros. In contrast, stories where the goal is attained *and* the dragon herself is

⁹ The books by Alexander McCall Smith (see especially Chapters 3 and 4) by 2004 had sold over 5 million copies in over 30 languages. The first printing was 2500 copies from a small Scottish press, Polygon, but their reputation spread by word of mouth (Clayton 2004).

¹⁰ Although I will present key episodes from a number of novels, I have not exhausted all their stories, so there is still great worth in reading the original text.

liberated provide a much-needed balance.

The film that opened my eyes to the canny feminine was *Cold Comfort Farm*, based on a novel of the same name by Stella Gibbons.¹¹ Although the novel is a parody of the elegiac novels of rural life popular in England at the time, it can also be read on other levels. It works as a story of transformation of a group of people under the domination of a powerful grandmother as well as a symbolic depiction of the liberation of the psyche of one person who is in the throes of a massive mother complex.

The heroine, Flora Poste, is orphaned at age 20, when her parents suddenly die of influenza. She stays with her friend, Mrs. Smiling, a frivolous woman who collects women's underwear and tries to avoid problems. Flora writes to her various relatives to see if she might stay with them, and decides to go to the place that sounds the most "interesting and appalling" (27) after she receives a mysterious letter from her cousin Judith. Flora likes to "tidy things up" and thinks that Cold Comfort Farm might prove a worthy challenge.

The farm is held under the iron fist of Flora's Aunt Ada Doom, who seems to be an invalid, but micromanages every aspect of the farm's business from her room, from which she only emerges once or twice a year. Ada's daughter Judith and her husband Amos, their three children Elfine, Seth, and Reuben, and various other relatives and hired hands live there and are terrified of Aunt Ada. Her power over them stems from a childhood trauma: she "saw something nasty in the woodshed" when she was a little girl, and this phrase always brings the family into submission when one or another of them tries to get free of the farm and Ada's domination. Flora arrives and begins to try to understand the nature of the mess. She names things almost archetypally (Ada "was the Dominant Grandmother Theme" (57)) but is herself immune to the power of the old lady. When told by Adam, the hired man that there is a curse on Cold Comfort, she replies, "But, look here, couldn't something be done about it? I mean, surely Cousin Amos could get a man down from London or something... Or perhaps Cousin Amos could sell the farm and buy another one, without any curse on it, in Berkshire or Devonshire?" (56). But nothing so practical can happen here, as they are all afraid to change or grow in any way.¹² Rather than follow the narrative of the book, complexly interwoven, I will describe how Flora

¹¹ The movie closely follows the text until the very end, and so they can be used interchangeably. It is easier to see my points about the canny feminine in the film, however, as the novel can distract with hilarious turns of phrase and its rather arch style.

¹² At the psychological level, it is as if all the libido is channeled into the mother complex and none is available to the rest of the personality.

helps each character to solve his problems.

Amos is the son of Ada Doom Starkadder. He is a kind of religious fanatic who preaches a hell and brimstone sermon twice a week at the Church of the Quivering Brethren (85). Flora realizes he is a kind of artist who loves this work and gently suggests the unthinkable, realizing that if she gets him out of the way, other changes will be easier at the farm.

‘You ought to preach to a larger congregation than the Brethren,’ suggested Flora, suddenly struck by a very good idea. ‘You mustn’t waste yourself on a few miserable sinners in Beershorn, you know. Why don’t you go round the country with a Ford van, preaching on market days?’ (90).

He is worried that this might be a form of religious inflation, but she inverts this concern, insisting that he may need to sin to save others (90-91). She plants the seed of this idea, and it begins to take root in Amos (108). Some weeks later, when the grandmother senses that she is losing control, she comes out of her room and calls all the family together, manipulating them with another of her “fits.” Now Amos announces that he is leaving to preach, “like the Apostles of old” (174). She tries her usual strategies, but he is firm. “Mother, I’ve broken yer chain at last, wi’ th’ help of th’ angels and the Lord’s word. Wheer’s my hat?” (175). In this case, Flora understood what Amos wanted to do in his soul, and planted the idea that it was possible. She listened, understood, and with insight, used the right timing to talk with him about it.

Seth is one of the two sons of Judith and Amos. Full of animal sexuality with the “lounging grace of panther” (81), he spends most of his time getting the hired girl pregnant; she delivers their fourth child soon after Flora arrives. But he is also afraid that women devour men and thus tries to disparage them. Flora does not fall for his half-seductive game, but does learn that he is passionate about “the talkies,” movies (83), and this gives her a plan. The day after the departure of Amos, Flora invited her friend Mr. Neck, an American movie producer, to visit the farm. He was discouraged because he was looking for the next Clark Gable and was having no luck. When Seth walks in, Mr. Neck is overwhelmed and immediately asks Seth if he wants to become a movie star in America.

All eyes were on Seth. A glory lit his face. Slowly, lingeringly, the words broke from him:

‘More than anything else in the world.’

‘Well ain’t that dandy?’ said Mr. Neck, looking round proudly for agreement and support. ‘He wants to be a movie star and I want to make him one’ (185-86).

Again, Ada, now echoed by Judith, his mother, tries to stop him from leaving with her usual tricks, but he must follow his destiny, and goes. In addition to helping Seth to his liberation, Flora instructed the hired girl in “the precautionary arts” (84) “carefully, in detail, in cool phrases” (69) so that she would have some control over her reproductive destiny. With Seth, Flora arranges an introduction and lets fate do its work. With the hired girl, she provides useful information.

Elfine is the flighty sister of Seth and Reuben who dresses like a wood sprite and is in love with Richard Hawk-Monitor, the son of the local gentry. Her grandmother plans that she will marry Urk, a somewhat creepy older man who spends time trying to peek into her bedroom window. Flora knows that Elfine will never be acceptable to Richard’s family in her current bohemian, poetry-writing phase, so she takes her to London for a makeover, generously spending 80 of her total yearly income of 100 pounds on Elfine’s transformation. She teaches Elfine how to behave with these people: to eschew poetry and express interest in dogs and horses, for example. Flora wrangles invitations to a ball that the Hawk-Monitors give, and that night, Richard proposes to Elfine. Flora was appalled at Elfine’s state, but was never directly critical—she instilled new habits rather than attacking the old ones.

Now that these three family members have escaped the clutches of Aunt Ada, others begin to realize that the old lady “is only human” (198) and begin behaving more normally. More feminine energy comes to the farm as the wives of the Starkadder men come to live there (they had been forbidden before because it would upset Ada). Now Flora decides it is time to tackle Judith.

Judith is obsessed with her son Seth, and has 200 pictures of him in her room (62). After he flees the farm, she drapes all 200 pictures in black crepe (194). She considers herself a dead woman and stays in her room. Flora again arranges an introduction, this time with a psychiatrist from Vienna. He takes on the job of the transference: “to remove the affections of his patients from the embarrassing objects onto which they were concentrated, and focus them, instead, upon himself” (201). Then after six months at his clinic, he will help her to transfer this energy onto a hobby like old churches and that will be the cure. Judith seems content as she drives off with Dr. Müdel. Again, the transformation is effected through an introduction and is quite painless. It is a rechanneling of the person’s energy into the direction it needs to go.

Reuben, the other son, truly loves Cold Comfort, and greatly resents Flora’s arrival, for

he assumes that she is planning to take the farm away from them. His father, Amos, will not give him any responsibility for the farm, so Reuben is sullenly waiting for Amos to die (41). She tells Reuben that she has been encouraging Amos to go off and preach to a wider audience, which would give Reuben the chance that he longs for to run the farm (117). When he finally believes her, he shakes her hand, to Flora's great surprise (120). And when they receive a postcard from Amos that he is going to preach among the "heathen Americans" and that Reuben can have the old place (196), Reuben too gets his heart's desire. He proposes marriage to Flora, but she very kindly tells him she would not make a good farmer's wife, but hints that Nancy Dolour would (197), and this proves a good idea.

The hardest task comes last: dealing with Aunt Ada. During the fraught night when Amos announced his departure, Flora had clearly seen "Aunt Ada's firm chin, clear eyes, tight little mouth..." (172) and realizes that Ada is not mad in the least. Finally, Flora has a flash of intuition about what to do. She sends for some *Vogue* magazines and a brochure from the Hotel Miramar in Paris. Then she enters the forbidden chamber and talks to Ada for nine hours. When she emerges, Aunt Ada has agreed to have Elfine's wedding at Cold Comfort Farm. On the day of the wedding, everyone is astounded to see Ada, usually hidden in her room, in a new persona: "And a handsome old lady, dressed from head to foot in the smartest flying kit of black leather, advanced to meet the astonished party" (220). During the long conversation, Flora had impressed upon her "what a pleasant life could be had in this world by a handsome, sensible old lady of good fortune, blessed with a sound constitution and a firm will" (222). She flies off to Paris to begin her new life—the old dragon had become the benevolent matriarch. It is as if Flora showed her the positive side of the archetype and she agreed to give that side a try.

Flora Poste is a wonderful example of the canny feminine. Even her name, "flower" and "post," suggest the balance of eros and logos. She never criticizes openly, but hints, plants the seeds of ideas, introduces people, educates—all in the service of helping people realize their true vocation or soul's desire. She solves these problems for the sake of other's happiness, not her own. She offers transformative images to the various members of the family that enable them to focus their energy and begin their own journeys, literally or psychologically. She is related and sensitive, but incisive and analytical also. Near the end of her task, she surveys the changes she has helped others to achieve and thinks, "'I...did all that with my little hatchet.' And a feeling of joy and content opened inside her like a flower" (204). The canny feminine needs the hatchet just

as much as the loving regard for the happiness of the other.¹³ It is only after she solves all these problems that Flora sends a telegram to Charles and asks him to come and get her. He arrives in his airplane, and they fly off together. Her own coniunctio comes after the work—it is not the vehicle of the work.

The Canny Feminine Is Not Just for Females

I have chosen to use the term “canny feminine” to describe problem solving that honors eros. But I must emphasize that it is not limited to women: remember that the first example I used to illustrate it was the wisdom of Solomon. Although most of my canny feminine examples are female characters, the popular books about Mma Ramotswe, the lady detective, were written by a Scottish man.¹⁴ In the term “canny feminine” I use “feminine” in a non-essentialist way, referring to the characteristics that Jungians and others associate with it (relatedness, eros, containment), but do not associate these characteristics necessarily with women. Men also have (or can develop) “feminine” aspects, just as women can with the “masculine.” I continue to use “masculine” and “feminine” in Jungian ways, but detach these bundles of culturally constructed qualities from gender essentialism. Perhaps, given the confusion that the terms still create, I should have found a way to express logos/eros balance without using the word feminine. But I deliberately chose to use it in spite of the possible confusion that it might cause. It is a style that has been culturally devalued because the feminine has been devalued in patriarchy. For a long time in western culture, the value has been on masculine values, logos, and often very unrelated ways of doing things. The heroic triumphed, and even when the hero was tricky or cunning like Odysseus, the point was not to make genuine connections but to win (or escape). It may be that women traditionally used the canny feminine more than men, as they did not have access to other means of getting things done. And it may be that when great men used this technique (Solomon, Mandela, possibly Gandhi, the Dali Lama), it was noted. But because it is usually about small, quiet victories, it does not often come to the attention of the heroic gaze. But again, I must emphasize that it is available to anyone, males or females.

And it would seem to be even more necessary at the present time for all of us to learn to

¹³ A good analyst will use some of these same strategies to help her clients. See Chapter 3 for a description of these techniques and parallels in analysis.

¹⁴ He says he has “always lived in all-female environments—three sisters, one wife, two daughters—maybe that helps me understand how women talk and think. Or is that presumptuous?” (Clayton 2004).

work in the mode of the canny feminine. The world is increasingly split into black and white fundamentalisms, which the heroic mode only deepens and proliferates. We will consider the example of Nelson Mandela's use of the canny feminine in Chapter 5; it is not only a fanciful way of behaving in novels but can have real and profound effects in the world.

In the next chapter we will hear the story of Isis, the Egyptian goddess who was adept in the canny feminine mode five thousand years ago.

Chapter 2:

The Canny Goddess

...I am Isis the goddess, and I am the lady of words of power, and I know how to work with words of power, and most mighty are [my] words!
--from the Metternich stele¹⁵

If you have the spirit or attitude which gives the best welcome to a deity, then he might appear, he might bestow his blessing upon you.

--C.G. Jung, *Dream Analysis Seminar*

Stories of the Egyptian goddess Isis show how she served the eros of maternal and conjugal love with the logos of clever and effective action. Unlike the more undifferentiated great goddesses who preceded and followed her, and indeed into which she changed by the Graeco-Roman period, Isis was not only the prototypical wife and mother, but a great instigator of action, tackling and succeeding at seemingly impossible tasks.

The key story, already well known by the time of the Old Kingdom (c. 2686 – 2181 BCE)¹⁶ concerns her double rescue of Osiris from death.

The Story of Isis and Osiris: The Divine Marriage

Isis and Osiris were brother and sister, born of the union of Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky. They were so deeply attracted to one another that they copulated *in*

¹⁵ Cited in Budge 2004:207.

¹⁶ See Appendix A for a chronology of Egyptian history.

utero. Their brother and sister, Seth and Nephthys also married. But Seth became deeply jealous of his brother and plotted to kill him. He secretly took the measure of Osiris and had a magnificent chest made to these specifications, then threw a lavish banquet. When the guests marveled at the chest, he said he would give it to whomever it fit. Like Cinderella's slipper, it was too large or too small for everyone there, until Osiris lay in it. For him it was a perfect fit. But at this moment, Seth and his conspirators slammed down the lid and sealed the casket with nails and lead, suffocating the god within. Then they cast it adrift at the Nile Delta, from where it drifted out to sea.

Isis had not been present at the banquet, but had a deep soul-level connection to Osiris and sensed immediately when he died. She immediately cut her hair, donned mourning, and began her long search for the chest. She spoke with many, wandering the country, but no one had seen anything. Finally, some children told her that they had seen the men throw the

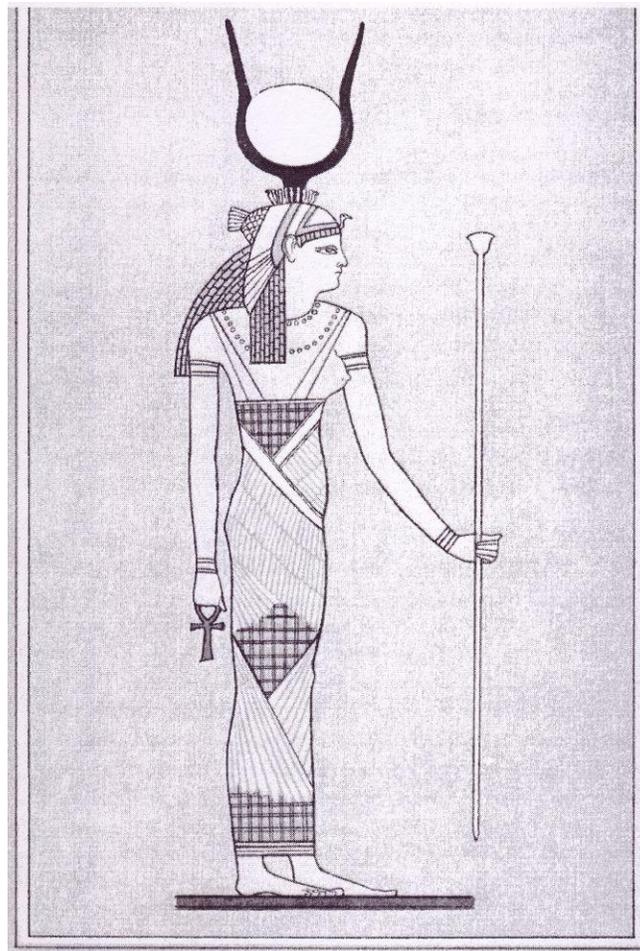


Figure 1: Isis with the horns and sun disk of Hathor

casket into the water. She eventually located it in Byblos,¹⁷ but a giant tamarisk¹⁸ tree had grown around it, so impressive that the local king had had it cut down and used it as a pillar in his palace. Isis befriended the serving women of the queen, then the queen herself, and eventually revealed her identity and quest. They opened the pillar and found the coffin, which Isis transported back to Egypt. Her grief and lamenting were so terrible that the king's two sons both died of terror when they witnessed it.

Still distrusting Seth's intentions, Isis hid the body of Osiris in the swamps at Buto. But Seth found it by chance one night while hunting by moonlight, and cut the body into fourteen pieces,¹⁹ which he then scattered all over Egypt. Still undeterred, Isis patiently walked the country, collecting all the pieces. She buried wax replicas of each piece where it was found, hence the many tombs of Osiris throughout Egypt. The only missing bit was the penis, which Seth had tossed into the Nile where it was promptly devoured by fish. So Isis had to create an artificial penis as she reconstituted the body of her husband. With the assistance of Nephthys and Anubis, Isis embalmed the body, then in the form of a kite, hovered above his body fanning the breath of life back into his body with her wings (see Figures 2 and 3). Through her magic, the artificial penis came to life and she was able to conceive their son Horus. A New Kingdom hymn describes it thus:

She revived the weariness of the Listless One and took his seed into her body,
[thus] giving him an heir.
She suckled the child in secret, the place where he was being unknown (Clark
106).

Osiris returned to life, albeit to eternal life in the Underworld.²⁰

¹⁷ This was most likely not the Phoenician city, but somewhere in the papyrus swamps of the Egyptian delta (Armour 2001:57; Budge 124).

¹⁸ Plutarch calls the tree heather (Plutarch 1957:39).

¹⁹ The number differs in different versions of the story from 14 to 42 (Pinch 2002:179).

²⁰ Story summarized from Plutarch 31-47; Armour 54-60; Guirand 1965:57-58; Mojssov 2005:xix-xx.



Figure 2: Isis as kite over the body of Osiris

Presumably their marriage continued, as she was often present in the Hall of Judgment in the Underworld with Osiris. But later writers, concerned with the human details or the paradox of the situation, wondered if Isis married again after the death of Osiris. Diodorus, the Greek historian (ca. 80-20 BCE) wrote that she vowed never to marry again, and spent her time serving her people as queen and developing her skills in medicine and magic, returning to the side of Osiris only after her death (Armour 64-5). But a late tradition at Philae gave her a “companion” named Arensnuphis, an obscure god also worshipped on the same island (Lesko: 1999:185).

Initial Reflections on the Story

Unlike parallel myths in which the wife dies and the husband seeks to restore her to life, such as the Greek “Orpheus and Eurydice” and the Japanese “Izanagi and Izanami,” here the gender roles are reversed. The male is killed and the female searches for and restores him. (Also note that perhaps because of the belief in the possibility of eternal life in Egypt, Isis is successful; the Greek and Japanese attempts fail as death is more or less irreversible there.) Isis is deeply moved by the loss of her husband—her grief is so terrible that ordinary mortals, especially children, cannot withstand it. But she is not helpless or passive: she searches, questions, discovers, reconstitutes, fashions the missing part, and reanimates her mate. Osiris, by contrast, is tricked, trapped, suffocated, exiled, dismembered, scattered. He does nothing actively to help himself, although later he can assist in providing others with eternal life. The origins of both deities are much disputed, but suggestions about Osiris include a deified king, primitive vegetation spirit, jackal god, and most intriguingly, a mother goddess (Pinch 178). This latter possibility resonates with his main role as the cycles of nature: the death and growth of vegetation, the rise and fall of the Nile, and the rising and setting of the sun (Guirand 56). Although he is a victim who suffers passively, “at the same time he is all the power of revival

and fertility in the world.... He is both dead and the source of all living” (Clark 1959:97). We don’t feel that he has much of a human personality or much agency and it would be difficult to link him very directly with eros or logos as a main orientation. He is, like many great goddess figures, powerfully related to the cycles of life and death, but in a natural, almost automatic way.

Isis, on the other hand, displays many human qualities in this story. The eros connection to her beloved husband causes her deep distress, but she does not simply mourn like Demeter after losing Persephone. She uses logos to locate her spouse. She refuses to give up, even when no one has news of Osiris. She travels to a foreign land and spends time befriending the royal family there to recover the precious coffin. She enlists the help of Nephthys and Anubis to restore the body and life of Osiris. Later, we shall see that these actions and also protecting her son include many canny details—she employs magic, tricks, disguise, cunning and the like to achieve her ends. In my reading, therefore, she is a divine prototype of the canny feminine.

Plutarch’s comments after relating this story describe Isis as “receptive” and Osiris as employing “Intelligence and Reason” (Plutarch 121;129), and Harding, following this version of the story, calls Isis “Mother Nature” and Osiris “Logos” (Harding 1971:170). In all fairness, Plutarch does also attribute to Isis “the force of Reason,” but it is through this Reason that she “turns herself to this thing or that and is receptive of all manner of shapes and forms” (Plutarch 129). But he emphasizes her receptivity, and this to me is a distortion of Isis’ unique role, which balances logos and eros more than any other goddess of whom I am aware. How is it that her active, even “masculine” role becomes reduced to that of mostly passive mother nature, and how does inert Osiris suddenly become the arbiter of reason and logos?

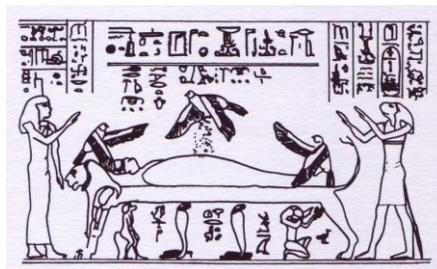


Figure 3: Isis conceiving Horus

Textual Sources

The problem comes at least partially from the difficulties of the textual record. There is no native compendium of Egyptian myth; Plutarch (c. 46-126 CE) was the first to do this with

some key stories. The first extant mentions of the story are from three millennia earlier, the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom (c. 2686-2181 BCE). These do not provide a proper narrative, but rather allude to the story that was presumably well known to everyone as an oral tradition throughout the culture. The story comes up in this way in later texts as well, and the details change somewhat over time. Additionally, as time goes on, especially in the Graeco-Roman period, Isis becomes identified with so many other goddesses that she contains everything—and thereby loses the particular character that makes her so pertinent for my examination of the canny feminine. Plutarch was writing through a Greek mentality and assumptions; he did not speak or read Egyptian and it is not clear how long he was in Egypt although he did visit once and his mistress was a priestess of Isis (Pinch 41; Plutarch 3). He left out key episodes in the story that offended him, such as the decapitation of Isis (see below) (Witt: 1971:41). He calls the worship of animals, so crucial to Egyptian religion, “silly” (Plutarch 165), and he anachronistically provides Greek etymologies for Egyptian words and names (Plutarch 9). His translator, Frank Cole Babbitt, begins his introduction with, “Plutarch’s knowledge of Egyptology was not profound (3). But he does conclude that Plutarch “has many things right and some wrong” (4). So for the purposes of this study, I will concentrate on the Isis described from the Old Kingdom through New Kingdom (c. 1550-1069 BCE) texts, but of course will use Plutarch when his text concurs with these earlier records. In contrast to Plutarch’s assumption of active reason, Clark explains the overall image of Osiris in the older texts:

For the native Egyptian, Osiris was always helpless. He is never represented in movement, but as a swathed figure with black or green face—for he is both a mummy and the life-spirit of the earth and vegetation. He is, above all, passive, and only in the texts of the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties is he allowed to speak for himself. These texts assume that the murder has already taken place. Osiris is the spirit of the past; as Chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead explicitly declares, “Osiris is yesterday and Re is today” (Clark 106).

Another complication to note in passing is that the different ritual centers worshipped different gods, hence they told the same basic myths with different emphases. For example, in temples to Horus, images and inscriptions have him completely triumphing over Seth although the story has different outcomes at other ritual centers and in other texts (Pinch 193). There were even periods of Egyptian history in which the pharaoh took the name of Seth (19th and 20th Dynasties) because they “respected his ferocity” (Armour 36).



Figure 4: Isis with throne crown standing behind seat of Osiris

The Origins and Name of Isis

Like Osiris, the early Isis is “shrouded in obscurity” (Wilkinson 2003:146), but was probably an Upper Egyptian goddess (Hornung & Bryan 2002:216). She existed independently before becoming associated with Osiris, and may have been a cosmic deity (Heyob 1975:37). The Pyramid texts describe her as the mother of Horus (Lesko 158) or the mourner, with Nephthys, of Osiris, but the three do not really come together in the cult of the divine family until the New Kingdom (Pinch 150).

Her name in Egyptian is Aset or Eset (Guirand 57);²¹ “Isis” is the Greek rendering of this. Aset is written with the hieroglyph for “seat” or “throne,” and this figure often appears as a kind of crown on her head in pictures (see Figure 4). This emphasizes her role in the divine lineage: “Isis, as one of the deities of the Heliopolitan Ennead and the sister-wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus, was the guarantor of the progression of the royal line from father to son” (Mamdouh El-Damaty in Hornung & Bryan 170). She was wife of the dead king, into whom every pharaoh transformed upon death, and mother of the living king, with whom all pharaohs were identified during their lifetimes. Interestingly, in some African kingdoms in modern times, the throne of the chief is called “Mother of the King” (Lesko 156). Whatever her origins, then, her name identifies her as crucial to the kingship of Egypt.

²¹ Budge’s rendering is Ast or As (Budge 202).

Isis as Mother

Pinch, with nice psychological insight, describes Isis as a “devoted but domineering mother” (Pinch 29); we will see that she does much for her son, who at one point “repays” her by chopping off her head or raping her. Pinch also describes this divine trio as a “markedly dysfunctional family” (150), but of course that could describe the behaviors of the divinities of other cultures as well. But she also notes that “the kind of unselfish love that Isis displays toward Osiris and Horus is rare in Egyptian myth” (150). One of the most common images of Isis is that of her nursing the infant Horus (Armour 33); it is this image that influenced and sometimes became that of Mary and Jesus in the Christian period (see Figure 5).

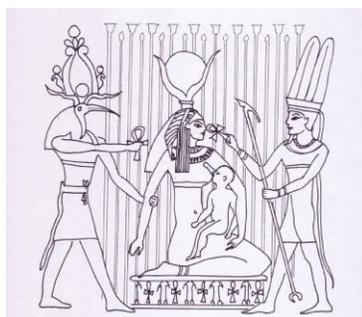


Figure 5: Isis nursing Horus in the papyrus swamp

After Isis became pregnant, Seth locked her into a dark prison, but Anubis helped her escape. She hid in the swamps, gestating her baby for 10 months (Pinch 80).²² The delivery was long and painful, but finally two gods came to her assistance. Horus was born on the vernal equinox, the time when “young shoots of grain were beginning to sprout from the darkness of the ground” (Armour 60). He was born very weak or with weak legs. Still alarmed by the threat of Seth, and with the warning of Thoth, she raised the infant Horus even deeper in the papyrus swamps with the help of Wadjet, a cobra goddess of Lower Egypt (Armour 61; Pinch 212-13), Hathor, the cow-goddess (Pinch 80), and other deities. Some texts say that Osiris frequently arrived and schooled his son in battle so that he could fight Seth effectively (Guirand 71).

Once when Isis was away looking for food, Seth appears to have poisoned Horus, possibly by taking the form of a poisonous snake (Guirand 61).²³ In a prefiguration of the later

²² Guirand describes it rather as a premature birth (71). The point is certainly that as with other divine births, it was unusual in some way.

²³ Other versions call it a scorpion bite, which resonates with Isis’ later power to cure such stings (Armour 62). But she had the power also to cause and cure serpent bites as well.

battles between Horus and Seth that will rage for years, it symbolizes the struggle between the forces of order and disorder that permeate Egyptian myth. The stakes are high here, as Horus represents the powers of the pharaoh to keep chaos at bay. If Seth wins, “Ra’s whole creation (i.e. the world) will be annihilated and Seth, the principle of evil, will reign supreme” (Guirand 61). Therefore the sun-boat, traveling across the sky actually stops, plunging the world into darkness. Thoth descends, and manages to extract the poison from the future king. Some say it is the power of Isis that stops the boat (Pinch 151). Her magic was not strong enough to cure Horus directly, but in another story (see below), she does have the power to use scorpion stings in retribution, and also to cure them. But the key point here is that she has access to Thoth, the highest repository of wisdom or logos, and he comes to her aid without fail. Her angry speech to the gods about their indifference toward her dying child is “one of the most powerful emotional passages in all of Egyptian literature” (Pinch 39).²⁴ In later years, this episode was written on magical statues offered by mothers to cure their children of poisoning (ibid).

In a variant of this myth (and Egyptologists have identified fifteen different forms of Horus, so it is quite complicated) (Armour 70), the baby in Isis’ womb is a falcon, who immediately takes flight upon his birth. Even so, Isis is not indifferent or passive; she “immediately began to negotiate a seat for him in the solar boat” (Armour 72). Her role as a powerful and involved mother permeates the stories.

In yet another example of her deep maternal instinct, before the birth of her own child, she was able to accept and raise Anubis, the monstrous dog- or jackal-headed offspring of Osiris’ dalliance with Nephthys. Osiris consorted with Nephthys either because he mistook her for Isis or because she seduced him. At any rate, Nephthys became pregnant but exposed the baby because she feared the wrath of her husband, Seth. Dogs rescued the boy and led Isis to him, whereupon she raised him as her own son, completely forgiving Nephthys also. Anubis was completely loyal to her, and it was he who invented funeral rites and embalming to preserve the body of Osiris, and he who led her out of Seth’s prison when she was pregnant with Horus.²⁵

²⁴ See translation in Clark 188-93.

²⁵ Summarized from Plutarch 39, Armour 57, Pinch 171, and Guirand 80.

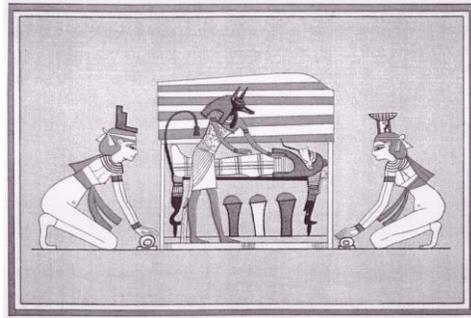


Figure 6: Anubis mummifying Osiris with Isis and Nephthys

Isis the Healer, Great of Magic

In addition to bringing Osiris back to life, Isis performed two other major healing rituals. Interestingly, in both cases, she or her helpers first *caused* the illness, in the first case through anger, and in the second through desire for power.

When Horus was still an infant and they lived in hiding, wandering from place to place, they once came to a small town.²⁶ With them were seven scorpions as helpers and companions: Tefen and Befen behind, Mestet and Mestetef to the side, and Petet, Thetet, and Maatet leading. The wealthy lady at whose house Isis first asked for hospitality refused, presumably because of the scorpions. Isis continued onward, and a poor woman invited them into her home. Meanwhile, the seven scorpions decided among themselves to take revenge on the unkind rich woman. Six of them transferred their poison into the tail of the seventh, Tefen, who returned to the first house and slipped under the door. She stung the son of the rich lady and he died; simultaneously, the house burst into flames.²⁷ Isis heard the cries of that mother and she decided to help her, as the child himself had done nothing wrong. She called to the mother to bring the child, and, while laying her hands on the boy, uttered “words of power” over him, including naming all the scorpions who had bitten him and commanding them to withdraw their poison.²⁸ She revived the child and stopped the conflagration. The words of Isis from this story were, from that time on, used as a charm against scorpion bites.²⁹

Perhaps counterintuitively, the scorpion was the symbol of motherhood in Egypt and the

²⁶ This story comes from the Metternich Stele (Budge 205) and dates from the Late Period (Lesko 181).

²⁷ Clark has this as a metaphor and not an actual fire: “It was as if a fire had broken out and there was no water to put it out...” (Clark 194).

²⁸ The epigram of this chapter comes from this point in the text. Budge 207.

²⁹ Summarized from Lesko 181-82; Budge 206-09; Armour 61-2.

Near East (Wilkinson 234), and Serket, the main scorpion goddess, came to assist Isis in guarding Horus after he was stung; the seven scorpions of the above story are her emanations (Wilkinson 234). Although the cult of Serket existed from the 1st Dynasty and continued to exist in the Late Period, the majority of extant scorpion bite spells invoke Isis, not Serket (Wilkinson 235), perhaps because of the poignancy of this story.

The other story shows how Isis got her most powerful magic. Interestingly, Serket, the scorpion goddess, narrates the story although she plays no role in it.³⁰ Isis desired to know the true name of Ra, the sun god, which would give her ultimate magical power. Her motivations are described variously: she was “cleverer than millions of gods” and lacked only this information (Pinch 69); she envied Ra’s control over the whole world (Armour 49); she wanted power over Ra (Lesko 177). She saw her chance and took it when she noticed that in Ra’s old age, he was drooling. She scooped up some of the earth where Ra’s saliva had fallen, and fashioned it into a poisonous snake which came to life. Then she left it at a place that Ra passed every day. It bit Ra and the poison was especially powerful as it contained his own divine essence. He begged all the gods to cure him, and Isis pretended to be ignorant of the actual situation. She told him that she could only remove the poison if he divulged his secret name to her. Ra himself became a little tricky here and recited many of his titles, but left out the secret name. Finally, in unbearable agony, he did whisper his secret name to Isis. And now comes the real reason she wanted the name, according to the story, for Ra tells her that she may transmit the secret name to the son, Horus, who will be born to her. She never divulged the name to another, and seems to have used the information in service to Horus and not for herself. But having this information now made her the most powerful magician and healer.³¹

Plutarch relates a story of Isis curing the son of the King of Byblos. The son was ill, and Isis slowly cured him, for he became stronger every day. But when his mother peeked into the room against Isis’ instructions, she saw the baby in flames while Isis flew around him in the form of a swallow. The rescue of the boy by his mother insured that he would not be immortal, as Isis had intended. This episode is most likely Plutarch’s invention, for it almost perfectly parallels the story of Demeter doing the same for Demophon (Guirand 58). But it may have felt appropriate to insert it because Isis was known as a great healer (and also because Plutarch identified the

³⁰ The story seems to come from a Middle Kingdom original and was thereafter recited as a spell against poisoning (Pinch 95 n.19).

³¹ Story summarized from Pinch 69-70; Armour 49-52; Lesko 177.

Egyptian gods as versions of the Greek gods).

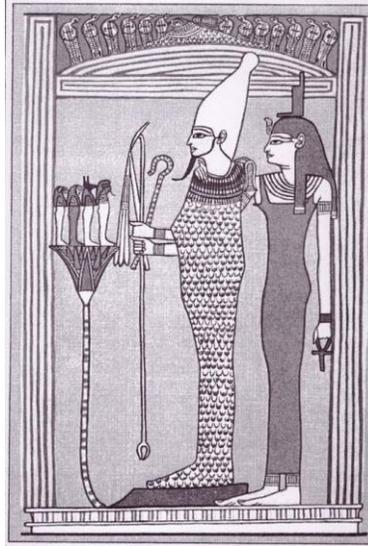


Figure 7: Isis, Osiris, and the Four Sons of Horus

In some stories Isis performs the healing or magic herself, in others, she relies on the assistance of Thoth, the ibis-headed god of writing and knowledge. It was he who gave Isis the charms or spells that restored Osiris to life and enabled her to conceive Horus, and also the god who stepped off the sun-boat to cure Horus of the poison that Isis could not cure (Armour 127). Known as the god of wisdom as well as science and medicine (ibid), Thoth was also known as the “lord of divine words” (Budge 214). Although Isis directly obtained the highest form of word magic by tricking Ra, it is important that she also was able to rely on Thoth, a valuable source of knowledge and magical power. Thoth may represent a more practical kind of wisdom (Armour 124), but this more “linear” method may be slow in times of crisis. When Horus was dying of poison in the swamp, Thoth was “slow and garrulous” (Armour 127) in coming to his aid. This was when Isis was forced to make her emotional appeal to the gods, perhaps thereby balancing the painstaking logos with the necessary eros.

The profound feeling of eros that pervades the stories of Isis may be one reason that her worship lasted so long and was so widespread. As we saw above, Serket healed scorpion bites, but was eclipsed by prayers to Isis for this problem. Perhaps people could relate to this goddess at a feeling level, and this, coupled with her ultimate knowledge, made her so attractive.

Wilkinson says that her “relationship with her followers was a personal one extending from this

life into the afterlife itself' (146).

Disguise, Shape Shifting, and Trickery

We have already seen that Isis employed a devious trick to obtain the secret name of Ra; she did not go about it in a straightforward manner, which most likely would have failed.³² Additionally, in the above trick, timing was crucial, as she noticed his spittle fall to the ground, without which the spell would not have worked. Her painstaking burial of the imitation bits of Osiris that Seth had scattered was intended as a ruse to keep Seth away from the real body (Armour 63). When she traveled to Byblos to retrieve Osiris's body and when she traveled with the seven scorpions, she was in disguise, and not immediately recognizable as a goddess. She healed the prince of Byblos in the form of a swallow, and reanimated Osiris in the form of a kite. Some of her most deliberate shape shifting occurs in the story of Horus' mythic battle with Seth.

There are two versions of this myth, and it is not clear what their chronological relationship is (Armour 77). Armour calls them the "epic" and "satiric" versions (ibid). The former is similar in tone to the Iliad: serious in tone but full of fantastic events. In the satiric version,³³ the struggle becomes an 80-year-long court case between Horus and Seth to decide which god should become the ruler of Egypt. Horus is the direct descendant of Osiris, but is still "a youth"; Seth is not in the direct bloodline, but is older, wiser, and more experienced. Isis is involved in her son's battle in both versions, and Horus cuts off her head in both. But she is trickier and cannier in the satiric version and more successful in helping her son.

The epic version consists of episodes of powerful magic that confused the enemy, soldiers changing into hippopotamuses and crocodiles so that they could fight in rivers, and a rather gruesome scene in which, in single combat, Seth tore out Horus' left eye and Horus pulled off his testicles. Isis' role is modest here: she decorated Horus' boat with gold before a water battle. But in a scene that also occurs in the satiric version, she was swayed by sisterly feeling for Seth and freed him after he had been captured by Horus. Horus was so furious that he cut off his

³² Interestingly, funeral spells sometimes used this technique of tricking the god on behalf of the dead person. All the other gods were fair game, but these spells were rarely used in invoking Osiris, "who now came to be regarded as a just and kindly king, the principle of good who through his son had triumphed over Seth, the principle of evil" (Guirand 143).

³³ Called by modern scholars *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* (Clark 109). The extant manuscript dates from around 1150 BCE but was probably based on an earlier source, as its theology seems to be from the Early Middle Kingdom (Clark 196).

mother's head, which Thoth promptly replaced with Hathor's (explaining why Isis sometimes wears the horns and solar disc usually associated with the cow goddess) (Armour 78-80).

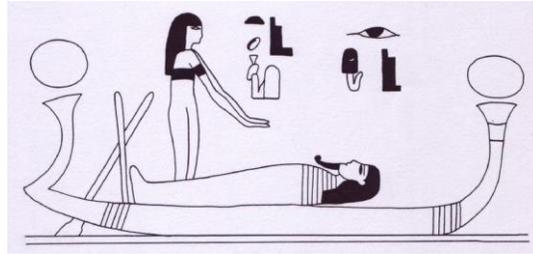


Figure 8: Isis with the body of Osiris

In the satiric version, Atum-Ra is the judge in the trial of Horus against Seth concerning who will take over Osiris' role on earth. Even though Horus' case was perhaps more just, the judge worried about the behavior of Seth should he lose. The larger issue, as Armour explains, was "the classic case for civilization versus barbarism, a theme that runs throughout much of Egyptian mythology" (81). Following some amusing episodes, Seth refused to participate if Isis was there, as he felt that she had too much influence. So they changed the setting of the trial to an island. Anty, the ferryman of the gods, was charged to avoid transporting Isis at all costs. But she disguised herself as an old hag, convinced him she had nothing to do with Isis, and bribed him with a gold ring.³⁴ After arriving at the island, she again transformed herself, this time into a sexy young woman. Seth is intrigued and starts to flirt with her. She tells him a sad story of how her shepherd husband had died. Now a stranger is trying to take the cattle away from her son who watches them, and she asked Seth for his help against this stranger. Seth's lust is stronger than his intuition at this point, and he replies, "Should cattle be given to strangers when a man has a son and heir?" (Guirand 73). Isis promptly transformed herself again into a kite,³⁵ flew to the top of a tree, and taunts him that he has just made a perfect argument for Horus' case. This was a particularly powerful trick as it forced Seth to speak the truth himself, even against his own interest. All the gods agreed with Isis, which infuriated Seth, who now challenged Horus to

³⁴ A rather terrible punishment resulted from his actions: Seth insisted he be punished for disobeying the gods and bringing Isis to the island. His toes or claws (he was a falcon god) were all chopped off (Pinch 103). Armour says that his lower legs were cut off (83). Additionally, Anty said that from thenceforth, no gold would be used in his town, so only silver is found in his temples (Pinch 103).

³⁵ Armour says the bird is a vulture (83).

single combat.

Next is the one place in the myth where Isis used a purely “heroic masculine” style instead of her usual canny feminine mode, and made a terrible mistake. The uncle and brother changed into hippopotamuses and fought under water. Isis forged a deadly weapon that she hurled with all her might at Seth, but it missed and pierced Horus instead. She was able to remedy this by magic and next the harpoon pinned Seth, which might have ended the battle. But it was at this point in the story that she freed him, enraging Horus, who cut off her head.³⁶ Here we see that using a purely martial style is not effective for Isis, and hurts her own son. Getting her head chopped off symbolizes that too much thinking is dangerous, and that she needs to redress the balance of her head and heart.

The next episode is fairly risqué, and many accounts pass over it rather quickly. Seth raped Horus hoping that this would lower Horus’ esteem in the eyes of the other gods.³⁷ But again Isis knows how to turn the trick back against Seth. She put some of Horus’ semen on a lettuce leaf, and Seth unknowingly ate it in a salad. When they next went to court, the gods did deride Horus when Seth described what had happened. But when Horus challenged them to “call up his seed,” the semen that Seth had unwittingly ingested swelled up and became a disk on his head, so Horus was vindicated again (Armour 84). This is a fine example of what I call “Aikido ethics” (Chapter 4): it does not initiate hostile action, but rather turns the hostility back against the aggressor.

Isis resorted to disguise in other stories. Once, disguised as a traveling band of entertainers, she, Nephthys, and Heket acted as emergency midwives to three future kings of Egypt who were born in humble circumstances (Lesko 180).³⁸ When hard-pressed, she resorted to shape shifting, and had the ability to transform others also. When Seth was persecuting them, she changed herself into a cow goddess, and Horus into the Apis bull, and they calmly entered

³⁶ Summarized from Armour (80-83) and Guirand (71-73). Psychologically, we can see that it is necessary for Horus to cut off his mother’s ego interference in his life, and also for her to experience the drawing of this clear boundary. That she receives a cow’s head may indicate the need to change to a more “bovine,” instinctual, placid, and less interfering relationship with her son now that he is a man. There is also a version of this story that has Horus rape his mother. Pinch finds it strange, but explains that perhaps “each king had to take possession of the throne goddess and beget a replica of himself” (151). But she also wonders if it instead identifies Horus with Min, the fertility deity known as “the bull of his Mother (Pinch 97 n. 41). The image comes from a spell recorded on the Harris Magical Papyrus in the British Museum, and has Isis sitting by the river, crying, after Horus has had sex with her (ibid).

³⁷ Apparently only the one receiving the seed was thought to be homosexual (Armour 84). But actually, this may not be meant seriously as “relations with a male wife” was one of the “sins” in the *Book of the Dead* (James P. Allen in Cott 1994:29-30).

³⁸ Middle Kingdom tale in the Papyrus Westcar (Lesko 180).

the Apis temple and met Osiris there (Budge 212).

Isis: Fertility and Sexuality

The story of Isis and Osiris was directly linked to the cosmos and cycles of nature. Isis was associated with Sirius, the Dog Star, called Sothis³⁹ in Greek. Osiris was thought to dwell nearby in the constellation Orion (Egyptian: Sah) (Budge 215). When the star of Isis rose, it signified the new year, summer solstice, and perhaps most important for the Egyptians, the beginning of the inundation, when the Nile overflowed its banks and brought fertility and moisture to the land (Witt 19). In the same way that Isis revived her dead husband, the appearance of her star signaled the transformation of the parched, dead land into fertile ground (Lesko 156; 159). Poetically put, Osiris is the flooding Nile, but what causes this to happen are the tears that Isis sheds for his death—again it is her agency that causes his waters to flow.”⁴⁰ Osiris, when paired with Seth, is the black, fertile earth, opposed to the dry, red sand of the desert. But he also seems to be the waters of the Nile—perhaps the complex ecosystem

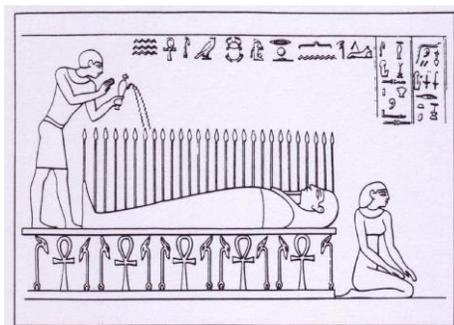


Figure 9: Wheat growing from body of Osiris

containing land and water and its varying amounts of fertility and moisture. Osiris was also a vegetation god, so this conflux of earth, water, and plants constitutes his essence in nature. The growth of crops was a key part of the drama:

The growth cycle of food crops (particularly wheat and barley) was linked to the myth of Osiris. The scything down of the grain and its trampling and winnowing were equated with the murder and dismemberment of the “good god.” The sprouting of the seed that began the next agricultural cycle was celebrated as a resurrection for Osiris. There were annual festivals in which corn mummies—miniature figures of Osiris filled with mud and seeds—were planted in sacred areas and watered till they sprouted. These ceremonies were

³⁹ Called in Egyptian Sept (Budge 215) or Soped (Lesko 156).

⁴⁰ Much less poetically, the rising Nile was also seen as the “efflux from the decaying body of Osiris” (Pinch 91).

not just a remembrance of long-ago events; the death and renewal of Osiris were seen as archetypal acts that maintained the cosmos (Pinch 91).

Unlike Aphrodite, Isis does not usually employ her feminine charms or sexual allure to achieve her ends. The only record of her doing this was the trick against Seth, when she transformed herself into a very desirable young woman to attract his attention. Her reason for doing this was to help her son win the court case. Presumably, she and Osiris had a “normal” sexual life (begun precociously early) before his murder. But the sexual act by which she became pregnant with Horus was more or less entirely through her actions. She had to reconstitute Osiris, create a penis, fan the spirit of life into him (which presumably activated the penis), and then receive his seed. Pinch gives her full credit: “Like the creator deity Atum, she is able to produce life without an active partner. She stimulates the ‘inertness’ of Osiris and takes his seed into her body to conceive a son” (Pinch 150).⁴¹ This parallels the first creation, when the Hand Goddess stimulated the penis of the creator (Pinch 80).⁴² She does this again in one version of the Seth-Horus rape deception. When Horus brought home Seth’s semen in his hand, Isis chopped off that hand because it was polluted and threw it into the river, then used her own hand to give Horus an erection, so they could procure the semen to spread on the lettuce leaves in Seth’s garden (Pinch 82). The image of her hand is key here: it is the dexterous part of the human body that can fashion, create, and get things done. Isis does not wait passively for the fertilizing element to enter her and grow; she causes it to happen.

Isis and Emotion

We have seen in the above stories that the loving and compassionate Isis also has a dark side. Usually it is not deliberate, but rather due to her mighty emotional power. Her lament for Osiris was so terrible that the prince of Byblos died; later her countenance was so awful that his brother died too. In Plutarch’s words:

Then the goddess threw herself down upon the coffin with such a dreadful wailing that the younger of the king’s sons expired on the spot. The elder son she kept with her, and, having placed the coffin on board a boat, she put out from land. Since the Phaedrus river toward the early morning fostered a rather boisterous wind, the goddess grew angry and dried up its stream.

In the first place where she found seclusion, when she was quite by herself, they relate that she opened the chest and laid her face upon the face

⁴¹ See Witt 44 for a similar interpretation.

⁴² She is called the Hand of Atum, Iusaas, or Hathor Nebet-hetepet (Pinch 136). In older texts Atum masturbated to create the next two gods, but from the New Kingdom on, his own hand was personified as a goddess (Pinch 111).

within and caressed it and wept. The child came quietly up behind her and saw what was there, and when the goddess became aware of his presence, she turned about and gave him one awful look of anger. The child could not endure the fright, and died (Plutarch 43).

In the story of the seven scorpions, she seems to have contained her anger. It was the scorpions who caused the trouble that she then stepped in and fixed. In the cases of stopping the solar barque and learning Ra's secret name, her motivation was benefit for her son. She therefore does not cause trouble except in the service of helping others. But of course any magician-healer who can cure poisoning can also poison, so we must be aware of the dark potential.

Something seems to have shifted by the Graeco-Roman period when Isis' original character was lost under her heavy syncretic roles. She was known as a gentle goddess, the protectress of lovers, pregnant women, and families. But her wrath could be aroused by the improprieties of her devotees, and there are records of her followers performing rather severe acts of penance to regain her goodwill such as immersion in the icy Tiber followed by crawling naked on bleeding knees on the streets of Rome (Heyob 66). Sinners might be blinded for transgressions, but Isis also cured blindness (there are many ex-votos in the shape of gold and silver eyes at her temple at Delos) (Heyob 65). This feels like a different Isis to me: not the canny Isis of the classical tales, causing trouble only in the service of those she loved. Now her followers see her as demanding and vindictive. This is not the Isis who freed even Seth (at the cost of her head).

Life and Death

Another balance in Isis' roles is between fostering life and fertility and caring for the dead. From the early Pyramid Texts, Isis and Nephthys are the chief mourners over the body of Osiris and in a sense become "the prototypes for all mourners" (Pinch 150). One reason that the two goddesses might be identified with the kite is because its piercing cry "is suggestive of the cries of women wailing in mourning" (Wilkinson 147-8). In a way, the two roles are not contradictory, for in addition to mourning for the dead person, Isis was actually able to protect and sustain that person in the afterlife (Wilkinson 148). The Pyramid Texts describe the milk of Isis as a necessary requirement if the deceased was to be revived (Lesko 161). She was thought to take care of the dead person with as much devotion as she took care of Horus, and even as the centuries passed, this idea continued: that she nurtured the deceased like a mother (Wilkinson

148). As she wrapped the bandages that mummified Osiris, she effected his transformation into eternal life (Lesko 163).

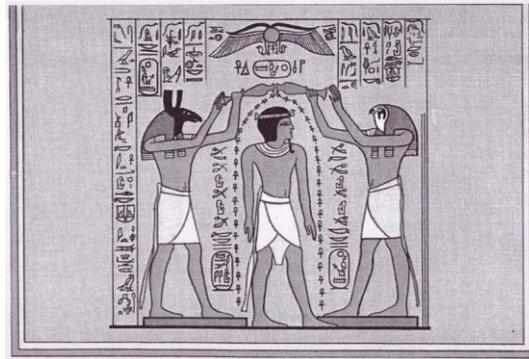


Figure 10: Horus and Seth pouring water of life over pharaoh

Logos and Eros Roles

Although Isis was known as the quintessential wife and mother, her roles extended far beyond traditional care for her male kin. Most impressive in this regard was her ability to wield pneumatic and phallic power in the service of eros when she fanned the breath of life back into dead Osiris and magically conceived Horus with a penis of her own construction. Although I think Witt goes too far when he calls her “potentially hermaphrodite” (22) and “a woman who turned herself into a male” (44), he is trying to describe the extreme unusualness of what she did. She commanded both roles, but did require the presence of Osiris and his seed, so it was not some sort of parthenogenesis. At the very least, we can say that this story dramatically shows that she was not the passive partner waiting to be impregnated, but the active partner in the process. But again, note that Isis’ activities are for the purpose of conceiving the child who will become the great king of Egypt—it is not for benefit to herself.

She also saved Horus when he was inert at least twice: once when he was dead from the poison animal sent by Seth when Horus was a baby, and also the time that she had to repair the damage that she caused with her magic harpoon. Although both males later become extremely powerful, Osiris in the underworld and Horus on the earth, without Isis’ intervention, neither would have survived. Isis is the link between the dead, inert, passive Osiris and the powerful Lord of the Dead as the mother of Horus. It is not until the son of Osiris and Isis “opens the mouth” of his father that Osiris regains his soul (Clark 122).

When Osiris had finished delivering the Egyptians “from their destitute and brutish manner of living” (Plutarch 35), he traveled to other lands and also spread civilization there. While he was gone, Isis ruled Egypt, and because she was so “vigilant and alert,” Seth “attempted nothing revolutionary” (ibid). This story seems to be embellished by Plutarch, suspiciously parallel to stories of Dionysus and Orpheus, for it describes how Osiris civilized through music and never needed to use violence (Guirand 55).⁴³ However the detail that Isis was capable of ruling and ruled wisely does seem to fit in with her general capabilities.

As the funerary cult developed, she was later portrayed as one of the judges of the dead in the Hall of Osiris (Lesko 168). And even more interesting, in pictures showing the solar barque in the underworld during the second hour of the night, Isis is included sitting at the end of a row of mummiform gods—wearing a false beard (Hornung and Bryan 166).⁴⁴

Here, Isis has stepped out of her usual roles as wife of Osiris and protector of the mummy and is more to be understood as a member of the pantheon that guarantees the maintenance of the sun god’s order, within both this world and the netherworld (Hornung and Bryan 166).

And as we saw above, Isis had a close relationship with Thoth, who might be seen as the embodiment of logos for the early Egyptians. He performed the magic that she could not, coming to her aid when she was desperate. Again, this is an important sign that Isis did not completely embody logos functioning, but had a good relationship to it. She was a female wife and mother who had an extraordinary ability to use logos functioning to help her family and others in need. But she also knew how to tap into the natural fertility of Osiris.

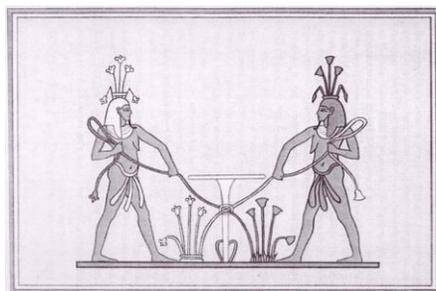


Figure 11. Hapi of Northern Egypt and Hapi of Southern Egypt

⁴³ A New Kingdom hymn describes Osiris bringing justice and prosperity to Egypt in a kind of golden age (Clark 103).

⁴⁴ The female pharaoh Hatshepsut of the New Kingdom also wore, and was sculpted wearing, a false beard, as this was one of the insignia of power.

Balance in the System

Isis' balance between eros and logos functioning is just one aspect of the many balances that occur throughout Egyptian mythology. The opposition of Osiris and Seth is, at one level, the given of the ecosystem: the stark contrast between the fertile, green land on either side of the Nile and the barren desert. But it also symbolizes the necessary inclusion of the dark, dry, or evil aspects in human beings as well. Seth serves as a useful catalyst that counters the vegetative inertness of Osiris. Pinch notes that in some texts Seth is "massively strong and monumentally stupid, like a giant in a fairy tale" (193). In the battle between light and dark, no indignity is too small. One Coffin Text tradition has it that Seth transformed himself into a flea, crawled into Osiris' sandal, biting and poisoning him. "However, what-ever the variations of traditions, Osiris was always reduced to impotence, if not killed by his wicked brother" (Clark 104).

Although Isis is normally active and counters Osiris' inertness, in the battle as court-case myth, he takes an impressive stand. (We should remember that this was a satiric version and the Egyptians may have been giving him a role quite deliberately and amusingly out of character.) When the gods finally ask Osiris his opinion of the situation, he "threatened to unleash the dogs of the Underworld against the gods if they did not settle the dispute in favor of his son" (Lesko 176). But in fact, he was powerful: he became the counterpart of Ra in the underworld and was, as the god of death, "The Mighty One," to whom every person was destined to go in the end (Pinch 179).

Nephthys has been called the "dark alter-ego" of Isis (Hornung & Bryan 216). Even though she is more faithful to Isis than to her husband Seth in the myths, she represents death and decay in contrast to the life and birth of Isis, darkness in contrast to light, and the invisible in contrast to the visible (Armour 38). One of the Pyramid Texts refers to her as "an imitation woman with no vagina"—Pinch thinks this may be due to her "sham marriage" with Seth (171). Of course later she is said to give birth to Anubis. Perhaps the contrast here is between the licit and illicit sex, resulting in the birth of a great king and a jackal-headed underworld figure. But again, both sides of the pairing are necessary psychologically, and must be acknowledged.

The battle between Seth and Horus may rage for "80 years," but the need for their reconciliation is also stressed. "To the Egyptians, the conquest and annihilation of something was never the goal. Rather, it was the incorporation, the peaceful coexistence of things, that was important" (James P. Allen in Cott 1994:29-30). An image common in Egyptian art is a

depiction of Seth and Horus tying together the lotus and papyrus that symbolize Upper and Lower Egypt (Pinch 144) (together they honor the pharaoh in Figure 10). Even more powerful is the image in Figure 12: an image of the dual god Horus-Seth in which the animal heads of each god top a single body (Budge 242). This symbolized the arrangement by which Horus ruled the day and Seth the night. His power was recognized as necessary in stopping the Apophis monster that threatened to destroy the sun boat each night in the underworld. In other words, evil is real and must be acknowledged and somehow dealt with within the system. Armour sums up Seth's evil well here:

In this role he was to be defeated, even maimed, in battle, but he was never killed or eliminated, for his power was too great and of too much use to the other gods. Much like Milton's Lucifer, he is a fascinating and compelling incarnation of evil, the manifestation of a recognized and necessary component of human behavior, and ultimately an agent of other gods who ironically accomplish their good through him (Armour 34).

When Isis spares the life of Seth, she is recognizing this truth.

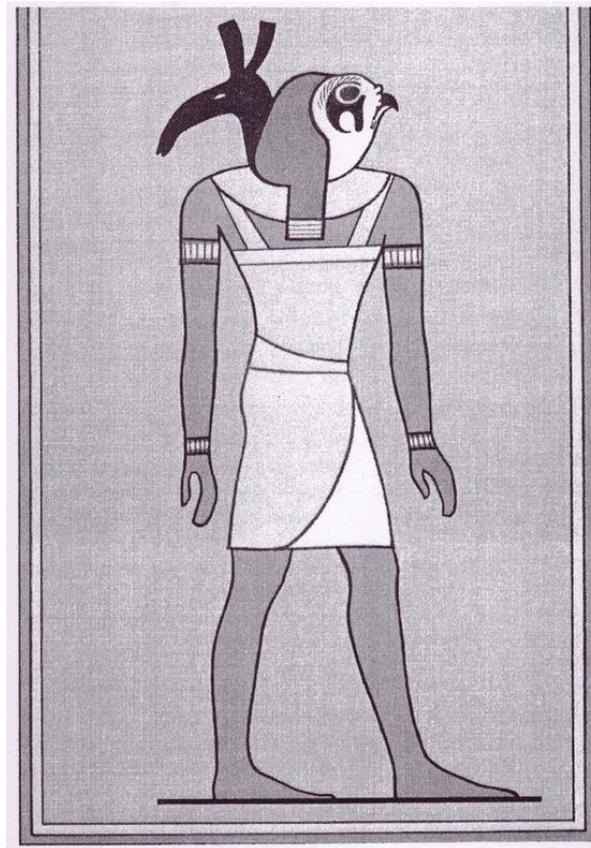


Figure 12: Horus-Seth as single god.

Isis and the Canny Feminine

The story of Isis exemplifies the canny feminine in many respects. By using her wits, Isis goes beyond the usual limits of the role of divine mother. Although she may trick and deceive, she never uses these methods for her own gain, but always to help others. We will learn about the methods of the canny feminine in more detail in the next chapters. Isis uses the basic ones: she employs disguise, bricolage, listens to the talk of children, has good timing, and can turn evil action back against itself. She values local knowledge, called by Plutarch “the divine inspiration of Rumour” (41). Her magic heals others. Pinch says, “Magical and literary texts stress the cunning and determination of Isis” (151). Her magic protected Egypt’s borders better than “millions of soldiers” (Pinch 151).⁴⁵ She was the only god to ever challenge the authority of Ra (Pinch 69), and perhaps the only way this could have succeeded was via the canny feminine. Indeed, we saw that when she tried to use simple brute force, it backfired and hurt her son instead.

There is a great deal of Hermes in the canny feminine, but the reason Isis is its divine representative rather than Hermes is that Hermes is not particularly psychologically related. The canny feminine is open to the inspiration of Hermes—tricks, opportunities, guile—but uses these styles in necessary combination with eros. Isis uses these styles always in the benefit of her husband or son, and even for Seth her brother and enemy who must also be included.

⁴⁵ The Egyptians seemed to value the former over the latter, as their heroes tended to be magicians and not warriors (Pinch 161).