
Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric in the Old and Middle Kingdoms

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Abstract: The rhetorical ideas inherited from the Greeks have established the notion that skilled use of language is always indicated by eloquent expression, and that silence is either an aberration or a lack of skill. As we penetrate the silence that has surrounded one of the great civilizations of the earth, however, and look at Egyptian rhetoric, we find alternative views on what makes a skilled speaker. While the Egyptians esteemed eloquent speaking, a skill that in fact had a very high value in their society, Egyptian rules of rhetoric also clearly specify that knowing when not to speak is essential, and very respected, rhetorical knowledge. The Egyptian approach to rhetoric is thus a balance between eloquence and wise silence. Egyptian rules of speech also strongly emphasize adherence to social behaviors that support a conservative status quo. For the Egyptians, much more than for the Greeks, skilled speech should support, not question, society. The few studies of Egyptian rhetoric which have previously been done discuss some of the moral components of that rhetoric and the importance of silence. The current study looks at Egyptian attitudes toward language as both a magical and practical element of life, and in addition this study places the rules of Egyptian rhetoric solidly within the Egyptian social system.

Ancient Egypt is everywhere, with images of pyramids, hieroglyphics or Egyptian art encountered on a regular basis. The common image of ancient Egyptian culture, however, is of an exotic but voiceless people. Their thoughts, the way they expressed themselves, the stories they told—all these very human linguistic activities are not part of how western society usually thinks of ancient Egypt. Such a complex culture would certainly have had sophisticated language practices, but those practices have not been studied in much depth from a rhetorical standpoint. The difficulty of the Egyptian writing system and the condition of many surviving texts are no doubt part of the explanation for this lack of examination. We are at a point, however, where it is possible not only to penetrate the silence, but to ascertain some of the rhetorical principles operating in ancient Egyptian culture. In this article I will discuss some of the rhetorical rules followed by the Egyptians during the Old and Middle kingdoms (approximately 3100 BC to 1550 BC).¹

The basic rules of Egyptian rhetoric in the period that I've examined are predicated on being a good member of society, both as a public citizen and as a private person. In general, the Egyptians valued reticence, believing that language should not be used carelessly, and silence was often advocated as the most appropriate rhetorical approach. Rhetorical rules for the good citizen reinforced the social status quo, rather than challenging and exploring it, as might be the case in Greek practice. Egyptians highly valued correctly repeating either what had been said by a superior or what had been received by tradition. Egyptian rhetoric also advocates that a good citizen should be conscious of social status and speak accordingly, but speaking truthfully was often stressed. In addition to rules of speaking based on being a good citizen, we find Egyptian rhetorical practices addressed how to speak well privately. Private speech was also based on being a good person, just as public rhetoric was aimed at being a good citizen. Modesty of speech was emphasized,

along with restraining anger and always speaking the truth. This stress on telling the truth indicates that the ideal for Egyptian rhetoric had a strong moral underpinning. These rules are, of course, ideals, and we can be sure that the ancient Egyptians, like all other human beings, often violated their own rules.

Egyptian society was very conservative, and due to the cultural uniformity visible in the tremendous span of Egyptian history, it is common to make statements about ancient Egypt that ignore the changes which did occur. A serious examination of Egyptian culture, however, should not oversimplify continuity, and particularly in regard to the language, the presumed uniformity of Egyptian culture is extremely misleading. There were dramatic changes within the spoken language. Over time the Egyptian language changes from a synthetic to an analytic language,² and there are other major grammatical changes as well.³ Additionally, external linguistic influences affect the language and make us realize that statements such as “Egyptian rhetoric says” may not be appropriate statements to describe the entire period from consolidation of the kingdom around 3100 BC until conquest by the Romans in 30 BC. Previous scholarly works on Egyptian rhetoric have approached this topic with an assumption, perhaps unstated, that what appears to be true at any point in Egyptian history is true for the entire period. Unlike previous scholars, I have chosen an approach that divides the time I am looking at by historical kingdoms. Since outside linguistic influences become most prominent during the New Kingdom, beginning around 1550 BC, I have separated that period from the Middle and Old kingdoms before it. Later studies should examine the rhetoric of the New Kingdom separately, and although the current article does deal with a large period of time, the Old and Middle kingdoms as well as the first transition period between them (about 1500 years total), this was a time when Egypt was still a fairly insular culture. As the reader will see, the evidence from the writings of these two kingdoms does show a consistency of attitudes during this time.⁴ Nevertheless, future studies may discern differences within this period as well. One note of caution about the dating of the texts is in order here. While we can be reasonably certain of dating inscriptions and stelae, the literary texts can present more problems in dating. Different periods, for instance, may offer up different versions of a text, and exact dating can be difficult. I am working with texts that have been dated by experts in Egyptology, but because of the uncertainty, I must present my own findings as open to future changes.

Detailed examinations of Egyptian rhetoric have not been extensive. In the introduction to her book of readings, Miriam Lichtheim makes a brief reference to Egyptian rhetoric, writing that “To the Egyptians eloquence came from straight thinking. It was left to the Greeks to discover that rhetoric could also promote an unworthy cause”.⁵ Lichtheim thus acknowledges the moral foundation of Egyptian rhetoric. In 1983 Michael Fox took a more detailed look at Egyptian rhetoric in the first volume of

Rhetorica, when he published an article titled “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric”. Like my own work here, Fox’s article used texts from the Old and Middle kingdoms, with a focus on the texts called wisdom literature, or “instructions”. In that article, Egyptian rhetorical practices were categorized into what Fox called “canons”.⁶ Fox’s canons consisted of 1) maintaining silence, 2) restraining feelings, 3) finding the right moment to speak, 4) speaking fluently, and 5) speaking the truth. Fox also noted ethos as an important part of Egyptian practice, stating that ethos is “the major mode of persuasion of Egyptian rhetoric”.⁷ That article went on to look at the tale often translated as *The Eloquent Peasant*, which was presented as actually contradicting the five canons previously mentioned.⁸

Fox’s article is followed up in two later discussions of Egyptian rhetoric by Barbara Lesko and George Kennedy. Lesko has written on rhetoric among Egyptian women, in the 1997 collection *Listening to Their Voices: The Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women*.⁹ Lesko begins with the canons of Fox, but using letters written by women (probably dictated to scribes), she makes the point that the women dictating the letters were not following the rules as Fox describes them. Lesko attributes that difference to the fact that the women were not trained in the schools where rules of rhetoric would likely have been taught. In addition to women’s letters, Lesko presents a different variance from the modesty dictated by Egyptian rhetoric. The female ruler Hatshepsut, in royal proclamations on monuments, engaged in self aggrandizement that was common to pharaohs in general, not just to a female ruler. Lesko’s discussion of women’s rhetoric ends with a brief look at two love poems from women (from the New Kingdom). The major thesis that Lesko presents from all her evidence is that women do not adhere to the precepts of Egyptian rhetoric (which are, in fact, derived from mostly male writings). George Kennedy includes a brief discussion of Egyptian rhetoric in his 1998 book *Comparative Rhetoric*, in which he picks up Fox’s discussion of canons. Kennedy also talks in some detail about The Instruction of Ptahhotep, calling it “the earliest known rhetorical handbook”.¹⁰

The approaches of Fox, Lesko and Kennedy toward Egyptian writing, with their focus on rhetorical theory, are unusual. It is more common to find Egyptian writing discussed in terms of literary theory rather than rhetoric. In *Topos und Mimesis: Zum Ausländer in der ägyptischen Literatur*, Antonio Loprieno examined the *topos* of foreigners in Egyptian literature.¹¹ Certainly, more such studies as this would help to deepen our understanding of Egyptian rhetoric, similar to what A.J. Ferrara has done with particular *topoi* in Sumerian texts.¹² In a very interesting look at Egyptian literary practices, Van der Walle discusses numerical formulas beginning in the Old Kingdom. As he says, these numbers for the Egyptians “étaient chargés à leurs yeux d’une valeur sacrée ou mystique”.¹³ Van der Walle shows these formulas to have been used during the New Kingdom to create a poetic form. More recently, Rendsburg looked at a number of literary devices in the

Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, which is also a New Kingdom writing. Rendsburg particularly notes repetition and alliteration as literary devices.¹⁴

These literary studies certainly can aid our understanding of Egyptian rhetorical practices, along with more philological studies, such as “Les emprunts du grec à l’Egyptien”, which discusses a relationship between the Greek and Egyptian languages.¹⁵ Nevertheless, if we want to understand how Egyptian rhetorical ideas affected speakers and writers of the time, more rhetorically focused studies are needed.

ELEMENTS OF THE RHETORICAL SITUATION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE

Insight into Egyptian rhetorical practices can be gained by considering the different elements that make up the rhetorical triad of speaker, audience and the rhetorical circumstance. This triad cannot be taken as a complete definition of the rhetorical situation, however, as such a definition would ignore the method of communicating and the realization that language is not a transparent medium for communication of ideas. The addition of a fourth element, language, is therefore pertinent, and it is possible for us to determine some of the Egyptian attitudes towards language itself, attitudes that have an effect on the way the language is used.

Judging from the surviving writings in Egyptian, we can see that some of the rules of language for the first part of the triad—speaker—could and probably did apply to any speaker. When we look at the instruction genre, however, including some rules of speaking, we find that the audience is always male, and mostly of a non-peasant group, which would be a small minority in an agricultural society. Since the rhetorical rules described in this article are based on writing, I also wish to draw attention to the fact that all information is coming from a small elite group of literate individuals. As Lesko indicates, the rules of rhetoric, as found in the educated writings, may not always apply to uneducated speakers. I’m working from an assumption that the rules of Egyptian rhetoric described here apply to Egyptian culture in general, but given the sources, an alternative interpretation should be kept open. As for the second element of the communication triad, the audience, Egyptian rhetoric determined the audience by social class. Because social class is a modern concept, however, it may be more accurate to say that the Egyptians recognized audience in the very practical sense of looking at power relationships. The question for the Egyptians was whether they were talking to someone who had less power than them, or to someone who had more power than them. This concept is very different from the Greek and Roman ideas of audience, which developed under the conditions of Athenian democracy and the Roman republic, in which equal exchanges of ideas could take place. The Egyptian state was always either headed by an absolute ruler, the pharaoh, or was tempo-

rarily dissolved in chaos. Judging the audience in terms of power relationships is thus a logical development in Egyptian rhetoric. For the third element of the rhetorical triad, the rhetorical circumstance, there is no Egyptian text specifying rhetorical circumstances as clearly as does Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (with forensic, epideictic and deliberative), but we can nevertheless draw some conclusions about this third element of communication. Based on the data of existing writings, rules of speaking are given (even if what we can ascertain is incomplete) for a variety of situations, including social or private exchanges, judicial examinations, religious ceremonies and royal court interactions.

Language as Magic

The fourth element of communication, language, is more challenging to discuss, since the topic is connected with the way people in Egyptian society felt, probably unconsciously in most cases, about something that seemed so natural—the way they spoke. Nevertheless, a careful examination of the evidence allows us to describe some of the beliefs that form a background to language practice. One such belief that becomes evident is the conception among the Egyptians that language has magical power, at least in a religious context. Among the various creation myths that can be found in Egyptian religion is one that is particularly striking from a linguistic point of view. This myth presents the creation of the world by means of speech (evolving a comparison with creation in the book of Genesis). According to the Egyptian myth, from Memphis in the Old Kingdom, “It is Ptah, the very great, who has given life to all the gods and their *kas*,¹⁶ through this heart and through this tongue” (Lichtheim, p. 54). In this myth, the power of thought and speech provides the act of creation. The power of language is described even more vividly in another line from the same myth: “Sight, hearing, breathing—they report to the heart, and it makes every understanding come forth. As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart has devised. Thus all the gods were born and [Ptah’s] Ennead was completed” (p. 54). Philippe Derchain even suggests that the idea of such creation by language may have originated from earlier Egyptian beliefs in the power of the pharaoh to strike his enemies with language. Writing about an inscription to Sesostri III, Derchain says that “la puissance du roi est purement verbale”.¹⁷ From this, Derchain follows with the idea that “on pourrait penser que c’est dans une théorie du pouvoir royal, issue elle-même de spéculations inspirées par des formules littéraires, que la cosmogonie par le Verbe trouve son origine”.¹⁸

In addition to having tremendous creative power, the magic of language could also affect the Egyptians personally, both in this world and in the next. Magical spells could be cast (and such spells were in fact a part of the religion). From the Middle Kingdom, we find a complaint that the mystery of the spells is being lost, in *The Admoni-*

tions of *Ipuwer*: “Lo, magic spells are divulged,/Spells are made worthless through being repeated by people” (Lichtheim, p. 155). In the tale *The Boating Party*, a magician is described using words to move half a lake: “Then he said his say of magic and returned the waters of the lake to their place” (p. 217). Even in the next world, knowing the right words could make a difference to the fate of the soul, as the deceased sometimes needed to know the right words there in order to avoid dangers, for those “who died without knowing what to say when they stood trial before the gods in the underworld would be lost forever”.¹⁹ Knowing the right words could literally save an Egyptian’s soul.

The Egyptian belief in the magic of language was so strong that the culture even created a personified deity of eloquent speech, named Hu. As early as the Old Kingdom this personification already existed, and from a pyramid text in the Old Kingdom we find lines in which a sky goddess is speaking to the pharaoh Unas: “Make your seat in heaven,/Among the stars of heaven,/For you are the Lone Star, the comrade of Hu!” (Lichtheim, p. 33). A Middle Kingdom coffin text indicates that the deity Hu was still a vital concept, with the inscription, “I am not afraid in my limbs, for Hu and Hike overthrow for me that evil being”,²⁰ and in a Middle Kingdom building inscription of Sesostri I is found “Then spoke the royal companions in answer to their god: ‘Hu is in your mouth, Sia is behind you, O King!’”.²¹ We also notice from these inscriptions that one of the attributes of the godlike pharaoh is the power of eloquence.

The Power of Names

The Egyptian attitude toward the power of words found a very interesting expression in a belief in the secret power of names, an attitude that takes several forms. Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer write that early Egyptian instructions of knowledge were basically lists of names, and that such a list “reveals a belief in the omnipotence of words”.²² An expression of this belief in the power of names was the idea that the ability to name a thing provided a source of power over that thing. From both the Old and Middle kingdoms there are references to such a belief. In a religious variant, we find the story of how the goddess Isis acquired equal power with the supreme solar god Ra by tricking him into telling her his name. From one of the Old Kingdom pyramid texts we can also read, “[The Pharaoh] Unas is a master of cunning/Whose mother knows not his name” (Lichtheim, p. 36). Unas is thus so powerful that even his own mother, who normally names the child, does not hold the power over him of knowing what his name is. In the Middle Kingdom, a coffin text continues this idea of power through having an unknown name: “Words spoken by Him-whose-names-are-hidden, the All-Lord, as he speaks before those who silence the storm” (p. 131). Similarly, in a hymn to the god Hapy (personification of the Nile), we find, “Mighty is Hapy in his cavern,/His name unknown to those below,/

For the gods do not reveal it” (p. 209). From all these references it is clear that power is retained by not revealing what would give away that power—the name.

Another aspect of the power of names seems contradictory, as the name is believed to *express* power by being revealed. In this connection, Egyptian royal custom eventually developed a practice in which the Pharaohs had five names, each name being a particular type (such as the Horus²³ name) and chosen to express some idea of power that the Pharaoh wanted to publicize. One of the Middle Kingdom coffin texts expressed the same idea in saying, “Lord of the winds who announces the northwind, rich in names in the mouth of the Ennead” (p. 132). The unusual phrase “rich in names” indicates the attitude toward the power of names, as more names means more power. A third attitude regarding names was the power they had to bring good to the person who “owned” the name. That benefit might be something we would recognize now (like a good reputation), but the magical belief in names was also a religious conception, given the Egyptian belief that the soul of the person lived as long as the name lived.²⁴ The idea that a good name was important runs from the Old Kingdom, with the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* (“Your name is good, you are not maligned”; Lichtheim, p. 67), through a transitional period, in the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare* (“As a man’s name is not made small by his actions,/So a settled town is not harmed”; p. 105), and on into the Middle Kingdom, in an interesting negative version of this idea from the depressed narrator of *The Dispute Between a Man and His Ba* (“Lo, my name reeks/Lo, more than carrion smell/On summer days of burning sky” (there are eight more verses with metaphors denigrating the name); p. 166). Having a “good name” was important to the Egyptians, and trying to get and keep a good name may have been a source of influence over moral behavior.

The following citations dated from after the Old Kingdom show us the importance to the Egyptians of the name in connection with beliefs about eternal life. From the transitional period, the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare* contains the lines “Make your monuments worthy of the god,/This keeps alive their maker’s name” (p. 102). The *Instruction* indicates the religious connection more clearly in another section: “Work for god, he will work for you also,/with offerings that make the altar flourish,/With carvings that proclaim your name,/God thinks of him who works for him” (p. 106). During the Middle Kingdom, a building inscription for the pharaoh Sesostri I reads “He who plans for himself does not know oblivion, for his name is still pronounced for it” (p. 117). In a similar reference to immortality from the name, the tale *The Eloquent Peasant* says “When he is buried and the earth enfolds him,/His name does not pass from the earth;/He is remembered because of goodness” (p. 181), and a commemorative stela has a harper’s song with the lines “Yours is the sweet breath of the northwind!/So says his singer who keeps his name alive” (p. 194). Under-

standing the belief behind these citations, the actions of a pharaoh in trying to obliterate a predecessor's name become more serious, as eradication of the *person*.

The Value of Skilled Speech

Derchain's idea that the Memphite myth of creation through language originated from more common (if still magical) ideas about the pharaoh can also be applied to beliefs about the power of language. It is probable that those magical beliefs arose as an extension of daily observations of what could be achieved through skilled use of language. References to the more prosaic power of skilled speech are also found in Egyptian writing. From just before the Middle Kingdom, the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare* contains the lines "If you are skilled in speech, you will win,/The tongue is a king's sword;/Speaking is stronger than all fighting,/The skillful is not overcome" (p. 99). Later in the Middle Kingdom, the narrator of *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* says, "You must speak to the king with presence of mind. You must answer without stammering! A man's mouth can save him. His speech makes one forgive him" (p. 212). There is thus a practical recognition of the power of eloquence in daily life.

Related to the idea that skilled speech is powerful is the notion that such speech is useful or valued. From the Old Kingdom, the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* contains two references illustrating this idea. "If he is fluent in his speech,/It will not be hard for the envoy to report" (p. 67) and "It is the skilled who should speak in council" (p. 70). These citations recognize the value of skill in speaking in political circumstances. The value of skilled speech is further noted in two works from the First Intermediate Period. The *Autobiography of Ankhthifi* states "I am the vanguard of men... strong in speech, collected in thought" (p. 86) and in addition to this work, the ability of good speech to avoid trouble is graphically described (perhaps metaphorically) in a stela of the *Butler Merer of Edfu*. The stelae were often used as a kind of autobiographical eulogy, in which the deceased declared his good qualities. "I was not robbed, I was not spat in the eyes, owing to the worth of my speech" (p. 87). Thus another practical value of good speech is making one's life easier by avoiding difficulties. Later on in the Middle Kingdom, another stela, that of *Intef Son Sent*, continues this tradition, and again notes the skill of the deceased with words in several references (indicating that this was one of the positive qualities of the deceased, perhaps exaggerated, as we saw above with the pharaohs): "I am controlled, kind, friendly,/One who calms the weeper with good words"; "I am a straight one in the king's house,/Who knows what to say in every office"; "I am a speaker in the hall of justice,/Skilled in speech in anxious situations" (p. 122). A similar Middle Kingdom stela, of *Ikhernofret*, refers to the deceased in second person, as though being spoken to by the pharaoh (using first person): "My majesty made you a Companion when you

were a youth of twenty-six years. My majesty did this because I saw you as one of excellent conduct, keen of tongue, who had come from the womb as one wise" (p. 124). The importance of skilled speech is indicated here because the recipient of the pharaoh's favor is cited, in part, specifically for skill in speaking, for being "keen of tongue". Also in the Middle Kingdom is found *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, in which (ironically) the peasant suffers because his wonderful speech is so admired, but at the same time the tale clearly indicates, from admiration of the skill displayed, how highly valued such speech was. "Then the high steward Rensi, the son of Meru, went before his majesty and said: 'My lord, I have found one among those peasants whose speech is truly beautiful.' ... Said his majesty: 'As truly as you wish to see me in health, you shall detain him here... In order to keep him talking, be silent.'" (pp. 172-73). The skill of the peasant's speech is so great that the pharaoh connives in order to hear him.

The tale just cited also indicates another belief that is expressed more than once, the idea that skill with language, or eloquence, does not necessarily belong only to a particular class or group of people. In *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, it is a common farmer who is found to have such a great skill at speaking that he is psychologically abused in order to keep him talking, so that the pharaoh can enjoy his eloquent complaints. The same idea is found back in the Old Kingdom as well, in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, which contains the line "Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,/Yet may be found among maids at the grindstones" (p. 63). Here again a person of low menial class (and a woman) is cited as someone who might have such a skill. These citations bring up observations on two related discussions. Considering power relationships within Egyptian culture, although there was a strong division into social classes, and although language was recognized as a great source of power, that ability is nevertheless recognized (at least in literary works) as belonging just as likely to the most powerless members of society. A second observation is in the context of the discussion from Greek rhetoric over whether skill with rhetoric is learned or innate. Based on the two quotations cited above, the Egyptian view clearly is that anyone can be born with a basic ability (though other references indicate the idea of learning to be a skilled speaker).²⁵

Egyptian texts also give us information on attitudes toward literacy, in addition to ideas held about skill in speaking. Like ancient Greece, Egypt was mostly an oral society, and as in ancient Greece, literacy in Egypt was not common. Unlike Greece, however, literacy in Egypt was connected almost exclusively with government service, acquired in government schools and leading to what was considered a desirable government position. Possibly because literacy was connected with social status in a very conservative society, and possibly also because the Egyptian writing system was so extremely complicated, literacy must have seemed unimaginable

to the average Egyptian (though common people did make use of scribes to send letters). Probably in part for these reasons, Egyptians regarded writing as something connected with magic and special knowledge (an idea that has been expressed in other cultures as well). From the Middle Kingdom, three surviving works illustrate the connection of writing with magic. *The Prophecies of Neferti* describe a man who is going to make predictions of the future for the pharaoh. This man who can know the future is also a scribe: "There is a great lector-priest of Bastet, O king, our lord, Neferti by name. He is a citizen with valiant arm, a scribe excellent with his fingers" (Lichtheim, p. 140). In another story, *The Boating Party*, the pharaoh asks for a magician by saying, "Go, bring me the chief lector-priest, the scribe of books" (p. 216). And in *The Magician Djedi*, as the magician prepares to leave and go to the pharaoh, he says "Let me have a barge to bring me my children and my books" (p. 218). The ability to write was thought to be connected with the ability to understand things beyond day-to-day knowledge (extending into magic). The Egyptian system of writing changed enormously in visible form (if not in structure) over 3,000 years, from hieroglyphic to hieratic to demotic. Although the demotic form was much simpler to write, the Egyptians nevertheless retained the original more complicated hieroglyphic forms for religious purposes, and hieroglyphic writings was called "words of god".²⁶ Writing was so important, in fact, and such a rare skill, that pharaohs and nobility were sometimes portrayed either in painting or in sculpture with scribal equipment, pictured as scribes themselves.²⁷

HOW TO BE A GOOD RHETOR: EGYPTIAN RULES OF RHETORIC

The rules of speech in ancient Egypt would have been learned in several ways, perhaps largely by observation and noticing what was approved of or disapproved of by other people. In some cases, however, such rules might have been overtly taught (as they appear to be in the *Instruction* genre).²⁸ An aspect of Egyptian rhetoric that is most notable arises from the Egyptian cultural situation, with a division into rules for being a good citizen in the public sphere, and rules for being a good person in private life. In both cases, the proper use of language is intended to make the speaker a good person, whether public or private. This fits with Lichtheim's assertion, cited earlier, that Egyptian eloquence was joined with straight thinking, and that it was the Greeks who discovered that rhetoric could be used for bad purposes. This idea of associating eloquence with being a good person, and with having rhetorical rules that make the speaker a good citizen also evokes Quintilian's "good man speaking well" and Cicero's concern for rhetoric in the Republic. Egyptian rhetorical rules for being a good citizen no doubt derive in part from the fact that Egypt was both a conservative and a hierarchical society.

To be a good citizen

A fairly clear rhetorical rule, drawn from repeated references and from a variety of sources, and which distinctly reflects the conservative nature of this culture, is the injunction *not* to innovate, but rather to repeat things just as they were received. Such a rule would help to preserve and maintain the tradition of a culture, and it may be that this precept originated in the oral culture before writing was invented. Several citations from the Old Kingdom already show us the existence of this rhetorical rule. From a tomb inscription of *Nefer-Seshem-Re*: "I spoke fairly, I repeated fairly" (Lichtheim, p. 17). We find here, in this early text, an association of speaking with repeating, and this precept on repetition in speech occurs regularly. In *The Autobiography of Harkhuf* are the lines "I was one who spoke fairly, who repeated what was liked" (p. 24), and from the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, the rule is even taught overtly. "Teach your son to be a hearer, / One who will be valued by the nobles; / One who guides his speech by what he was told" (p. 74). A stela (one of the autobiographical eulogies) from the Middle Kingdom shows that accurately repeating was still highly valued at that later time. The *Stela of Sehetep-Ib-Re* reads "Master of secrets in the temples; overseer of all works of the king's house. More accurate than the plummet; the equal of the scales. Patient, effective in counsel; who says what is good, repeats what pleases" (p. 127). From the Old to the Middle Kingdom there is continuous evidence that the Egyptians valued repetition as good speech.²⁹

A second rule for successful speech in Egyptian rhetoric, and one which also helped the speaker to act as a good citizen within the culture, was the idea that proper speech depends on the social status of the listener. Since such a rule would have helped to maintain some of the distinctions that made up class structures, this is furthermore a reflection of the conservative nature of Egyptian society. It is also a recognition of the need to speak differently to different audiences. These rules related to social class are taught clearly in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* from the Old Kingdom. In different sections, the writer names three different social classes being addressed ("A powerful man, superior to you"; "your equal, on your level"; "A poor man, not your equal"; Lichtheim, p. 64), and then gives advice. The same instruction also gives advice for how to speak when dining with the upper class, "If you are one among guests / At the table of one greater than you.... Don't speak to him until he summons, / One does not know what may displease; / Speak when he has addressed you" (p. 65). The *Instruction* goes on to hint at consequences for shooting off one's mouth, "Wretched is he who opposes a superior" (p. 72). The implication of this last citation is that the rule of adjusting speech to audience has a foundation of recognizing power.

The same rule can still be found much later, in the Middle Kingdom. *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, although it was written hundreds of years after the *Instruction of Ptah*

hotep, contains some similar advice about responding to superiors when asked. “You must answer when questioned. You must speak to the king with presence of mind. You must answer without stammering!” (p. 212). Further advice on speaking to superiors comes in *The Satire of the Trades*, in a section on dealing with officials that states, “When you enter a man’s house,/and he’s busy with someone before you,/sit with your hand over your mouth./Do not ask him for anything.... Be weighty and very dignified,/Do not speak of secret things,/Who hides his thought shields himself./Do no say things recklessly” (p. 190). This passage also explains that keeping one’s thoughts to oneself can be prudent. Such reticence about speech is another value in Egyptian rhetoric. In another tale, the very popular *Story of Sinuhe*, Sinuhe is assured that he should not be afraid because he hasn’t offended the pharaoh, “What had you done that one should act against you? You had not cursed, so that your speech would be re-proved. You had not spoken against the counsel of the nobles, that your words should have been rejected” (p. 229). Since Sinuhe did not violate the rule of adjusting his speech to social superiors, he is told not to fear.

In addition to requiring that speech be adjusted according to the status of the listener, a third rule of rhetoric placed great importance on truth and justice in speech. In contrast with Greek rhetoric, the Egyptian practice seems to be in line with Plato’s belief that searching for truth was more important than the sly persuasions of rhetoric. R. B. Parkinson has summarized this rule as expressed in the instruction (or teaching) genre of writings: “In the Teachings there are frequent injunctions to ‘do’ or ‘say’ Truth in public and private contexts”.³⁰ We find evidence of this from the very beginning, with an Old Kingdom tomb inscription of Nefer-Seshem-Re reading “I spoke truly, I did right” (Lichtheim, p. 17), and similarly the *Autobiography of Harkhuf* credits Harkhuf with the line “I was one who spoke fairly” (p. 24). The injunction to truth is given in both positive and negative forms in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*: “If you are a magistrate of standing,/Commissioned to satisfy the many,/Hew a straight line./When you speak don’t lean to one side,/Beware lest one complain” (p. 71), and in a negative form: “[The fool] lives on that by which one dies,/His food is distortion of speech” (p. 75). Falsehood is here claimed to be such a negative trait that it can lead to destruction of the speaker. This idea continues into the transitional period after the Old Kingdom, in the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, which says, “Speak truth in your house” (p. 100). Later on in the Middle Kingdom, the rule of truth is also commonly found. A boundary stela of Sesostri III declares “As my father lives for me, I speak the truth!” (p. 119). In the social chaos genre, the *Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb* moans that “Right-speaking is abandoned” (p. 148). A similar complaint is made in *The Eloquent Peasant*, when the peasant himself criticizes an official who is ignoring his pleas for help, and in doing so the peasant actually gives advice on speaking properly: “You do not repay my good speech which comes

from the mouth of Re himself!/Speak justice, do justice,/For it is mighty” (p. 181). These repeated injunctions, over hundreds of years, continually state the value of truth in speech, as a value of Egyptian culture.

To be a good person

Alongside Egyptian rhetorical rules for behaving as a good public citizen, there were language rules for proper private behavior. It was important to be a *good person*, as well as being an effective, persuasive rhetor. One important rule is the same as for being a good citizen, to speak fairly and truthfully, as illustrated above. In addition, there are four rules which are all subdivisions of the general injunction to show restraint in speech (illustrated by the earlier citation “do not speak recklessly”; p. 190). These rules of restraint indicate that the Egyptian should speak with modesty, avoid angry speech, not criticize someone to their superior, and remain silent. It is not surprising to find such rules as these within the context of a conservative society like ancient Egypt, so that although these are rules for private behavior, they would also operate in such a way as to have a broader social function.

The first rule of restraint is to show modesty when speaking.³¹ From the Old Kingdom, the *Instruction Addressed to Kagemni* advises that the speaker will benefit from modesty: “The respectful man prospers,/Praised is the modest one” (Lichtheim, p. 59), and in the same work, “When you are summoned, don’t boast of strength” (p. 60). During the Old Kingdom, boasting and bragging are clearly not acceptable behavior. Also in the Old Kingdom, the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* teaches “do not boast at your neighbor’s side” (p. 66). From the Middle Kingdom, the same value on modesty is found on a boundary stela of Sesostri III: “It is no boast that comes from my mouth” (p. 119). Avoiding angry or spiteful speech is the second rule of restraint. This is considered important enough in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* that advice against it is given five times: [1] “Guard against reviling speech,/Which embroils one great with another;/Keep to the truth, don’t exceed it,/But an outburst should not be repeated” (p. 65), [2] (in advice on dealing with a son) “If he strays, neglects your counsel,/disobeys all that is said,/His mouth spouting evil speech,/Punish him for all his talk!” (p. 67), [3] “The trusted man who does not vent his belly’s speech,/He will himself become a leader”,³² [4] “Do not repeat calumny,/Nor should you listen to it,/It is the spouting of the hot-bellied” (p. 70), and [5] “A quarrelor is a mindless person” (p. 72). The fact that the writer of the *Instruction* felt it necessary to reiterate this rule so many times emphasizes the importance of restraining angry speech. Two references from the Middle Kingdom indicate that this rule was still valued hundreds of years later. A stela of *Intef Son of Sent* reads “I am cool, free of haste,/Knowing the outcome, expecting what comes./I am a speaker in situations of strife,/One who knows which

phrase causes anger” (p. 122). Additionally, in the tale *The Eloquent Peasant*, the advice is given to “Restrain your anger for the good of the humble seeker./No hasty man attains excellence” (p. 177). A third rule or restraint (found so far only in two Old Kingdom references) concerns a different kind of relationship with other people. This is a rule of not reporting someone to their superiors. In *The Autobiography of Harkhuf*, among the claims of good behavior, is “I never spoke evilly against any man to his superior” (p. 24), and in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*: “Do not malign anyone” (p. 65). It is possible that this rule means not to report anyone *unjustly*, that is to say, this is related to the rule on speaking the truth.

The fourth rule of restraint I believe is the most interesting, and it is clearly manifested in both the Old and Middle kingdoms. This is the precept of silence. Such silence is not from lack of ability to speak, nor is it necessarily from lack of power and fear of speaking. Instead, the Egyptians frequently taught an approach to speaking in which silence was deliberately used as a rhetorical choice. Silence was golden for this culture. From the Old Kingdom, the *Instruction Addressed to Kagemni* promises benefits of acceptance and hospitality for silence. “The tent is open to the silent./The seat of the quiet is spacious./Do not chatter!” (p. 59). The same instruction also advises “Let your name go forth/While your mouth is silent” (p. 60). Also in the Old Kingdom, the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* repeatedly teaches the value of silence. In a sequence that I referred to earlier, this instruction gives advice for dealing with different social situations (talking to someone socially above the speaker, equal to the speaker, or socially below the speaker), but the advice in each case is to remain silent.

If you meet a disputant in action
 A powerful man, superior to you,
 Fold your arms, bend your back,
 To flout him will not make him agree with
 you....
 If you meet a disputant in action
 Who is your equal, on your level,
 You will make your worth exceed his by
 silence....
 If you meet a disputant in action,
 A poor man, not your equal,
 Do not attack him because he is weak,
 Let him alone, he will confute himself.

(Lichtheim, p. 64)

Later on, the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* says, “One has great respect for the silent man” (p. 66) and “Your silence is better than chatter./Speak when you know you have a solution” (p. 70). Much later, during the Middle Kingdom, silence was apparently just as highly valued. From an autobiographical stela of *Intef Son of Sent*, in which Intef speaks of his good qualities, he says, “I am silent with the angry,/Patient with the ignorant” (p. 121). *The Eloquent Peasant* states “But none quick to speak is free from haste”

(p. 177). And in *The Satire of the Trades*, advice is given on how to behave in the home of an official: “Sit with your hand over your mouth./Do not ask him for anything./Only do as he tells you” (p. 190). And in another example of the instruction literature, *The Teaching of a Man for His Son*, some of the advice for the son reads, “Be exact, silent, and respectful!/Be excellent of heart! Do what is said!”³³ In these repeated assertions to use silence, Egyptian rhetoric clearly sets itself apart from Greek and Roman practices, where exuberance of eloquence is more valued.

It is also apparent that the ancient Egyptians recognized the cathartic value of speech, and even at times advised allowing such catharsis to occur. This is articulated very clearly beginning in the Old Kingdom in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*: “If you are a man who leads./Listen calmly to the speech of one who pleads.... A man in distress wants to pour out his heart/More than that his case be won./About him who stops a plea/One says: ‘Why does he reject it?’/Not all one pleads for can be granted,/But a good hearing soothes the heart” (Lichtheim, p. 68). In the Middle Kingdom, the *Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb* use negative statements to describe the catharsis of speech. “I grieve in my heart./It is hard to keep silent about it” (p. 147) and “It is pain to be silent to what one hears” (p. 148). This recognition of the relief of speaking is also found in *The Eloquent Peasant*, when the peasant criticizes an official for bad behavior: “There is no silent man whom you gave speech” (p. 180). It is interesting to see that part of the rules of Egyptian rhetoric specify allowing someone else to speak, which increases the ethos of the listener as a sympathetic person.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the fundamentally conservative nature of ancient Egyptian culture strongly affected the linguistic behavior of the people in that culture. Quite a few of the rhetorical rules that can be extracted from reading Egyptian literature would have shaped behavior in such a way as to help preserve both past practices and current social structures. There is also a striking difference from Greek culture in the Egyptian emphasis on proper or good behavior in linguistic terms. Perhaps there is some relation here to differences in religious beliefs as well. The Greeks created an amoral rhetoric and believed in an afterlife in which everyone who died went to the same place. The Egyptians emphasized good speaking and truth as part of personal morality, and they also believed that people were judged for their behavior after death, with rewards for the good and punishment for the bad.³⁴

I’ve divided Egyptian rhetorical rules into public and private, or those that make the speaker a good public citizen and those that make the speaker a good private person. In general, a very prominent theme of this ancient rhetoric is restraint, rather than eloquence, even though eloquence is valued. The idea of restraint is so strong in Egyptian rhetoric (in contrast with the expressive empha-

sis in Greek rhetoric) that I would categorize the rhetorical approach of Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt as “silence, restraint and truth”.

Notes

- As far as we know from what has survived, the Egyptians never explicitly discussed language to the extent that the Greeks did. There are thus no ancient Egyptian treatises on rhetoric. My discussion of Egyptian rhetoric is therefore based on an examination of surviving Egyptian literature, extracting from its ideas about language that may be only passing references in a given literary piece. Studying Egyptian literature for any purpose has its problems. One hurdle is the difficulty of learning to read the original (even ignoring the substantial differences in the writing systems of hieroglyphics, hieratic and demotic). For this study, I am using translations, and fortunately, good translations do exist; in particular I am indebted to the work of Miriam Lichtheim (see note 5 below). There are also other problems with ancient Egyptian texts: the randomness of physical survival of manuscripts, and the sometimes damaged condition of extant writings, has left holes in our knowledge. Because of problems of transmission and gaps in our knowledge of the development of the language there is sometimes disagreement over what the text actually says.
- Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer eds, *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 118.
- Leo Depuydt, “Four Thousand Years of Evolution: On a Law of Historical Change in Ancient Egyptian”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 56 (1997) pp. 21–35.
- For my analysis I am using a wide range of types of writing, recorded either in carving on walls, in painting on walls or objects, or written on papyrus. These include a creation myth from Memphis (later carved onto stone), instructions for proper behavior (also called wisdom literature), texts painted on the inside of pyramids, on coffins, and on tomb walls (including autobiographical writings), building inscriptions, commemorative stelae, tales, and complaints about the state of society (a kind of ancient Egyptian genre).
- Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings. Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) p. 10. All my quotations are from volume I. Page references in the text of the article refer to this anthology.
- Because I find the word “canon” in a rhetorical discussion of Egyptian writing evokes very different canons from Greek practice, I am going to use a different terminology.
- Michael V. Fox, “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric”, *Rhetorica* 1 (1983) pp. 9–22 (p. 16).
- I am not convinced that this tale contradicts rhetorical rules, and I use it in this article.
- Barbara Lesko, “The Rhetoric of Women in Pharaonic Egypt”, in Molly Meijer Wertheimer ed., *Listening to Their Voices: The Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997) pp. 89–111.
- George A. Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 138.
- Donald B. Redford, “Book Review: *Topos and Mimesis: Zum Ausländer in der ägyptischen Literatur* by Antonio Loprieno”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992) pp. 134–35.
- See A. J. Ferrara, “Topoi and Stock Strophs in Sumerian Literary Tradition”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 54 (1995) pp. 81–117.
- “contained, in their eyes, a sacred or mystical value” (p. 371). Badouin Van der Walle, “Formules et poèmes numériques dans la littérature égyptienne”, *Chronique d'Égypte* 60 (1985) pp. 371–78.
- See Gary A. Rendsburg, “Literary devices in the story of the shipwrecked sailor”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120 (2000) pp. 13–23.
- See Jean-Luc Fournet, “Les emprunts du grec à l'égyptien”, *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 84 (1989) pp. 55–80.
- The “ka” was a kind of spiritual double or life power, one of the three elements that made up the “soul” in Egyptian belief. The gods could also have *kas*.
- “The power of the king is purely linguistic” (in a magical sense, p. 25). Phillippe Derchain, “Magie et politique: A propos de l'hymne à Sésostri III”, *Chronique d'Égypte* 62 (1987) pp. 21–29.
- “One might speculate that the cosmogony by Speech has its origin in a theory of royal power, which comes in turn from speculations inspired by literary formulations”, Derchain, “Magie et politique”, pp. 27–28.
- Denise Dersin, ed., *What Life Was Like on the Banks of the Nile* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life, 1996) p. 151.
- Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 132. Hike is a personification of magic power.
- Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 117. Sia is the personification of understanding.
- Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, cit. in n. 2 above, p. 131.
- Horus was a sky god, son of Isis and Osiris, and usually pictured with a falcon head. He was also regarded as the first pharaoh.
- This could be used in a negative way as well, as when the pharaoh Hatshepsut's nephew attempted to eradicate her name by chiseling it off monuments she had built, or when Seti I and following pharaohs tried to eradicate Akhenaton and the Amarna rulers (as well as Hatshepsut) in the same way.
- In contrast to the prevailing admiration of skilled speech, an irritation with slick, overly controlled speech can be found in a few references in ancient Egyptian literature. From the First Intermediate Period, the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare* shows such irritation with the line “The talker is a troublemaker for the city” (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, cit. in n. 5 above, p. 99). Also in the Middle Kingdom, *The Prophecies of Neferti*, purportedly describing an apocalyptic future, says, “Speech falls on the heart like fire./One cannot endure the word of mouth” (p. 142).
- Quirke and Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, cit. in n. 2 above, p. 131.
- Richard H. Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992) p. 209.
- In creating a picture of the rhetorical rules of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, I am using writings that have been found and translated, but as we look forward to more writings becoming available in the future, it will become possible to add to and modify what is presented here.
- One Middle Kingdom text, by contrast, complains about the practice of repeating from the past. The *Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb* have the lines “Ancestor's words are nothing to boast of./They are found by those who come after” (Lichtheim, p. 146). The fact that the complaint is made,

- however, indicates that the practice was common enough to irritate this rare innovator, chafing against his culture.
30. R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 13.
 31. Some of the rules seem to change after death. The rule of modesty does not apply to proper behavior related to the next life, as witnessed both by numerous autobiographical/eulogist stelae (which grandly state the positive qualities of the deceased) or in *Book of the Dead* prayers, in which the deceased is advised to emphatically declare before the god Osiris a state of innocence so extreme that it even sounds exaggerated, e.g. “I am pure! I am pure! I am pure!”, Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History. Vol. 1: To 1700* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p. 19.
 32. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 67. The ancient Egyptians used the metaphor of releasing the belly to mean expression of strong negative emotions.
 33. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems*, cit. in n. 30 above, p. 292.
 34. Among the tomb decorations are many paintings illustrating the moment of judging, with the heart of the deceased weighed on a scale before the god Osiris.