Move over Gardiner et al, here comes the girls!

In class, you have read the short excerpts from Gardiner (1960), Wilson (1951) and Steindorf and Seele (1942) reproduced by Lawless in Studies in Ancient Egypt. Of course, in your wide reading you have read more of each historian’s writing on Hatshepsut.

Recent historians, especially women, have referred to the historiographical issues and bias that arise with the study of Hatshepsut. Tydesley, in the 'Introduction' to Hatchepsut, The Female Pharaoh, refers to:

1. gender as an historiographical issue:

Had Hatchepsut been born a man, her lengthy rule would almost certainly be remembered for its achievements: its stable government, successful trade missions and the impressive architectural advances……. Instead, Hatchepsut’s gender has become her most important characteristic and almost all references to her reign have concentrated not on her policies but on the personal relationships and power struggles which many historians have felt able to detect within the claustrophobic early 18th Dynasty Theban royal family.1

2. the social context of the historian:

Egyptologists, normally the most dry and cautious of observers, have been only too happy to allow their own feelings to intervene in their telling of Hatchepsut’s tale and, more particularly, in their interpretation of the motives underlying her deeds. These feelings have tended to coincide with the beliefs common to a generation,2

In addition, she mentions:

3. bias and objectivity, including her own:

While it is very difficult for any biographer to remain entirely impartial about his or her subject, I am attempting to provide the non-specialist reader with an objective and unbiased account of the life and times of King Hatchepsut…3

4. limitations of archaeological and textual evidence (a problem for personality)

The contemporary records which have been preserved are almost invariably official documents which, by their very nature, rarely express private opinions. We have no intimate letters written to, by or about Hatchepsut and no diaries or memoirs to provide us with a glimpse of early 18th Dynasty court life…4

5. the west (our milieu) v’s ancient Egyptian mindset

In the west we have grown used to the idea of the figurehead monarch as nominal head of state; the present Queen of England, for example [reflects Tyldesley’s British perspective]…… In ancient Egypt, however, things were very different. …. The office of the divine king was itself an integral part of the concept of maat…5.

Tyldesley’s Introduction provides a good model for how we might assess Hatshepsut’s reign in terms of maintenance of ma’at. I have added a copy of her introduction at Set Maat for you to read in full. (It will also be useful for understanding New Kingdom society) She draws on O’Connor6, which you have in diagrammatic form (Pharaoh’s roles and responsibilities 7).

The areas in which historians have represented Hatshepsut’s reign in the most negative light are:

- her accession (usurpation) - illegitimacy. How could a woman even think such a thing!
- her personality - the evil, power hungry stepmother with poor Thutmose III as Cinderella
- her lack of military exploits - she was such a girl!
- the role of her officials, especially Senenmut - as a woman she couldn’t do it alone; almost a touch of the desperate housewife!
- her propaganda

One could be forgiven for thinking that a patriarchal discourse runs through the history (surely not!).

(Note: you should be reading critically and asking about the bias of this writer: a middle-aged male of the early 21st C, teaching in a girls school and a reconstructed feminist!)

Another good critique of earlier historians is by Gae Callender, even though written in 1988: Callender, ‘A Critical Examination of the Reign of Hatshepsut’ in

2 ibid p.2
3 ibid p.3
4 ibid p.4
5 ibid pp.6-9
6 O’Connor, M. in Trigger, et al Egypt, A Social History
7 Slow, C. ‘Pharaoh’s Roles and Responsibilities’, @ Set Maat (riversideghs.nsw.edu.au), 2006
Sub-headings: The sequence of kings during the Thutmosid Period; The political queens of the Seventeenth Dynasty; The Eighteenth Dynasty; Claim to the Throne; The Achievements of Hatshepsut; Hatshepsut's campaigns?; Senenmut; Hatshepsut's building program; Conclusion

But you need to be ever vigilant!

Thus writing on Hatshepsut has been shaped by the dominant ways of thinking in the society of the time and the evidence available at the time. One consequence of our Postmodern experience is that voices other than those reflecting dominant ways of thinking have entered the debate (eg feminists). Another is a more critical reading of the historians' language. The language used in all texts contains a bias. This bias has shifted with recent Egyptologists. Or has it?

How is Hatshepsut presented in more recent writings?

Nicholas Grimal might be the most recent candidate for criticism. Grimal is Professor of Egyptology at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. Have a read and see what you think!

Grimal, N  
A History of Ancient Egypt  
Blackwell publishers, Oxford, 1992  
pp.207 - 213

I am interested in the particular word choices made. The bias does not have to be overtly hostile, but the cumulative effect of word choice shapes the reader's view:

Hatshepsut failed to produce a male heir….. therefore, Hatshesut, stepmother of the young Thutmose…..

In the second or third year of her regency, Hatshesut abandoned the pretext and had herself crowned as king ….Officially Thutmose III was no longer her coregent. In order to justify this usurpation she effectively ignored Thutmose II by inventing a co-regency with her father, Thutmose I. She incorporated this fabrication into a group of texts and representations ……

It seems that during her lifetime she faced less opposition than might have been expected, considering the fury with which her stepson later set out to erase her memory after her death.

Then there is focus on her officials - (no officials focused on in the following section on Thutmose III)

During her reign she relied upon a certain number of prominent figures of whom the foremost was a man called Senenmut……..

Even in Senenmut's time there was spiteful gossip suggesting that he owed his good fortune to intimate relations with the queen…….. Senenmut was a ubiquitous figure throughout the first three-quarters of Hatshepsut's reign, but he subsequently fell into disgrace for reasons that are not precisely known. It is thought that after the death of Neferure…..he may have embarked on an alliance with Thutmose III which led Hatshepsut to discard him…

This expedition [Punt], recounted in great detail on the walls of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, represented the high point of a foreign policy that was limited to the exploitation of the Wadi Maghara mines in Sinai and the despatch of one military expedition into Nubia.

When Tuthmosis III finally regained the throne in about 1458 BC he still had thirty-three years of rule ahead of him, in which he was to carry out a political programme that established Egypt as the undisputed master of Asia Minor and Nubia. During the reign of Hatshepsut the only military actions were to consolidate the achievements of Tuthmosis I,…..

Just a thought!

Are Callender, Robbins and Tyldesley biased by their gender? Do the interpretations of Hatshepsut's rule line up according to the gender of the historian? Perhaps we need more female Egyptologists and more female professors in History chairs at our universities! Where does that leave me? and you?

Other historians: Kemp, Allen, Dorman, Bryan, Redford, Watterson, Roehrig et al
Overview of Historiography on Hatshepsut

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