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THE NOCTURNAL WANDERINGS OF KING NEFERKARĒ^c

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The following short contribution concerns a story about one of the last great kings of the Old Kingdom, written down in a manuscript which in all likelihood dates to the XXVth Dynasty – two periods in Egyptian history to which the recipient of the present *Hommages* has devoted much of his scholarly career. It is a great honour to dedicate it to him, in the hope that he will read it with as much pleasure as I had in writing it.

The literary text known as *The Story of King Neferkarē^c and General Sasenet* was published by Posener in 1957.¹ The three sources for it do not overlap, but each of them contains a different part of the story; this makes it rather difficult to establish the relationship of one fragment to another. A writing tablet in Chicago (OIC 13539) and another in the IFAO in Cairo, the latter found in Deir al-Medīna (oDeM 1214),² appear to contain the beginning of the text. These two tablets date from the New Kingdom, the first to the late XVIIIth or early XIXth Dynasty, the second to the beginning of the XXth Dynasty. Neither of the two gives more than a few very fragmentary lines, but we do learn that one of the main protagonists, the general Sasenet, did not have a wife (*nn wn s.t-ḥm.t m [pr=f (?)]*, “there was no woman in [his house]”), an unusual state of affairs for any Egyptian concerned with his future mortuary cult, for without a wife there would be no son “to make his name live”.³

More informative is the third source of our story, a papyrus in the Louvre (P. Louvre E 25351), known after its former owner as Papyrus Chassinat I. The recto of this document preserves a few signs of an initial column of text, followed by two further incomplete columns written in a hieratic hand of the XXVth Dynasty or somewhat later. Each of these columns contains a different episode of the story and the transition between them is lost in the lacuna at the beginning of the third column. The first

1. G. POSENER, “Le Conte de Néferkarê et du général Siséné (Recherches littéraires, VI)”, *RdE* 11, 1957, p. 119-137.

2. Cf. POSENER, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques littéraires de Deir el Médineh* II, Cairo, 1951-1972, p. 29, pl. 48. The attribution of this text to the story

of King Neferkarē^c is probable but not certain.

3. A. DE BUCK, “Oudertrots, kinderplicht en de klacht van een kinderloze”, *JEOL* 11, 1949-1950, p. 7-15; R. EL-SAYED, “Formules de piété filiale”, *Mélanges Gamal Eddin Mokhtar* I, Cairo, 1985, p. 271-292.

episode deals with the misadventures of an unnamed character called “the Petitioner of Memphis”, who is prevented from presenting his case in the courts by a musical hullabaloo which is apparently instigated by the courtiers or perhaps even by the King himself. It is the final episode, however, which will concern us here. It is not my intention to present a new philological treatment of the text, and the following translation serves only to refresh the reader’s memory and to set the scene for the discussion to follow.⁴

[...] *Then [he (i.e., Tjeti the son of Hentu) saw] the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferkarē^c going out at night all alone, with nobody with him. Then he moved away from him so as not to be seen by him. Tjeti son of Hentu stood still, being concerned and saying: “Obviously it is true what people say, that he goes out at night!”. Tjeti son of Hentu followed this god closely, without letting his heart restrain him, in order to see everything that he was going to do. He (the King) arrived at the house of the general Saset. Then he threw a brick and stamped with his foot, so that a [ladder (?)] was lowered to him. He climbed up, while Tjeti son of Hentu stood waiting till His Majesty would return. After His Majesty had done what he desired with him, he returned to his palace and Tjeti followed him. When His Majesty had returned to the palace (l.p.h.), Tjeti went home. Now His Majesty went to the house of the general Saset in the course of the fourth hour of the night, he spent the next four hours in the house of the general Saset, and he entered the Palace when four hours remained till dawn. And Tjeti son of Hentu followed His [Majesty] every night without letting his heart restrain him, and (each time) after [His Majesty had entered [the house of the general Saset (?)]/the Palace (?), Tjeti...].*

It is well known that Egyptian art and literature often make use of symbols whose meaning was self-evident to the educated Egyptian, but which to us, members as we are of a different culture, look more like messages in a secret code. It is only in fairly recent years that some of these “secret codes” have been deciphered, notably by Westendorf⁵ and Derchain.⁶ Attention has been drawn by these scholars to the symbolic meaning of some plants and animals, but also to the hidden significance of certain gestures. On the other hand, in literary texts such symbolism may sometimes refer to myth, itself a symbolic statement about reality, or to the ritual enactment of myth. Thus the mythical aspects of *The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*⁷ have long

4. Apart from Posener’s study, translations have appeared in E. BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Altägyptische Märchen*, Düsseldorf, Köln, 1963, p. 143-145, 283 sq.; L. MANNICHE, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt*, London, New York, 1987, p. 73; R.B. PARKINSON, *Voices from Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Middle Kingdom Writings*, London, 1991, p. 54-56.

5. W. WESTENDORF, “Bemerkungen zur ‘Kammer der Wiedergeburt’ im Tutanchamungrab”, *ZÄS* 94,

1967, p. 139-150; *id.*, “Schießen und Zeugen. Eine Gemeinsamkeit afrikanischer und ägyptischer Vorstellungen”, *Ägypten und Kush*, Fs. Hintze, Berlin, 1977, p. 481-486.

6. P. DERCHAIN, “La perruque et le cristal”, *SAK* 2, 1975, p. 55-74; *id.*, “Le lotus, la mandragore et le perséa”, *CdE* 50, 1975, p. 65-86; *id.*, “Symbols and Metaphors in Literature and Representations of Private Life”, *RAIN* 15, August 1976, p. 7-10.

been recognized and Derchain has shown that even the magicians' stories of Papyrus Westcar, which appear on the surface to be mere folktales, refer to myth: Snofru and his rowing ladies enact the voyage of the sun god in the company of Hathor.⁸ I believe that the story of King NeferkarĒ^c and Sasetet contains just such a "hidden" reference to myth. A clue may be found in the passage towards the end of the story, where a sort of timetable for the King's nocturnal wanderings is given. During the fourth hour of the night (*jw wnw.t 4 <m> pḥr m grḥ*) he goes to the house of the general, where he spends the next four hours, and he returns to his palace when there are four hours left before dawn. The scheme repeats itself "every night" (*tnw grḥ*). The four central hours of the night which NeferkarĒ^c spends with Sasetet, *i.e.* the hours five to eight, correspond to the period of night which the Egyptians called *wš3w* "profound darkness".⁹ It is during this period that the sun god goes through one of the most crucial phases of his journey through the underworld: he encounters the body of Osiris which rests there motionless and seemingly dead; then the two unite, they become one god, "RĒ^c has come to rest in Osiris and Osiris has come to rest in RĒ^c". Osiris is revived by RĒ^c and becomes the nocturnal form of the sun god;¹⁰ at the same time RĒ^c, who had "died" and entered the realm of the dead, is re-born as a result of this unification and resurrected in the morning as Horus, son of Osiris (RĒ^c-Ḥarakhty).¹¹ This is the central theme of the *Unterweltbücher*, and the united RĒ^c and Osiris are the main object of worship in the Litany of RĒ^c, whose Egyptian title is "Book of Adoring RĒ^c in the West and of Adoring the United One", and which for that reason has to be recited *ḥft wš3w*.¹² It is true that this union of RĒ^c and Osiris is never, as far

7. G. LANCZKOWSKI, "Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen. Versuch einer religionsgeschichtlichen Interpretation", *ZDMG* 103, 1953, p. 360-371; M.T. DERCHAIN-URTHEL, "Die Schlange des 'Schiffbrüchigen'", *SAK* 1, 1974, p. 83-104; cf. W.K. SIMPSON, *LÄ V*, col. 619-622.

8. DERCHAIN, "Snéfrou et les rameuses", *RdE* 21, 1969, p. 19-25; similarly, the King and Queen act as Atum and Hathor in a passage from the Story of Sinuhe, *id.*, "La réception de Sinouhé à la cour de Sésostris 1^{er}", *RdE* 22, 1970, p. 79-83.

9. O. NEUGEBAUER, R.A. PARKER, *Ancient Egyptian Astronomical Texts I*, Providence, London, 1960, p. 64; HORNUNG, "Lexikalische Studien", *ZÄS* 86, 1961, p. 108 sq.; *id.*, *Das Buch der Anbetung des Re im Westen II*, Basel, Geneva, 1976, p. 147 [517].

10. J. VAN DIJK, "An early hymn to Osiris as nocturnal manifestation of RĒ^c", in G.T. MARTIN, *The Memphite Tomb of Ḥoremheb, Commander-in-chief of Tut^cankhamūn I*, London, 1989, p. 61-69. In this hymn, as well as elsewhere, the visible manifestations of the nocturnal form of RĒ^c are the moon and Orion, and the latter is said to be born *m wš3w*.

11. HORNUNG, *Das Amduat II*, Wiesbaden, 1963, p. 123 sq., *id.*, *Der Eine und die Vielen*, Darmstadt, 1971, p. 85-87; *id.*, *Ägyptische Unterweltbücher*, Zürich, München, 1972, p. 49; *id.*, *Das Buch der Anbetung des Re II*, p. 53 sq.; DERCHAIN, *Le Papyrus Salt 825* (B.M. 10051), *rituel pour la conservation de la vie en Égypte I*, Brussels, 1965, p. 35-37; J. ASSMANN, *Liturgische Lieder an den Sonnengott*, Berlin, 1969, p. 101-105.

12. HORNUNG, *Buch der Anbetung I*, 1; II, p. 61. In the temple of Ramesses II in Abydos, the Litany of RĒ^c is associated with the text of BD Chapter 144 (HORNUNG, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter*, Zürich, München, 1979, p. 502), which also deals with RĒ^c's nocturnal voyage through the underworld. In the Book of the Dead of Nu, a rubric is added to this chapter, instructing the mortuary priest of the deceased to recite and then erase the text "in the course of the fourth hour of the day (*jw wnw.t 4 pḥrw m hrw*)", the same phrase which is used in our text; *m hrw* may be a mistake for *m grḥ*, but it is perhaps more likely that it refers to day-time in the underworld, which is night upon earth.

as I know, described explicitly in sexual terms.¹³ On the other hand, the texts do mention that the two gods (or their *bas*) “embrace each other” and Rē^c who becomes one with Osiris is called “Horus in the arms of his father Osiris”;¹⁴ in the morning “Rē^c arises from the arms of his father Osiris”.¹⁵ It is with some justification, then, that one may speak with Derchain¹⁶ of an *union intime* of the two gods. Moreover, the resulting re-birth of the young sun god as Osiris’s son Horus well nigh implies a union of a sexual nature, albeit not one of the “normal” kind. This becomes even more evident when one compares the myth of the union of Rē^c and Osiris with another myth, one which in fact expresses the same “great mystery” in different terms: the sexual union of Isis with the “dead” body of Osiris which results in the posthumous conception and birth of Osiris’s son and reincarnation Horus. When the sun god enters the underworld in the evening he is called Atum, the primaeval creator god, who at the beginning of time began the creation of the world by impregnating himself through his mouth¹⁷ and by subsequently giving birth to the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut. In the Dat, the normal boundaries of time and space do not exist; in many respects this gloomy abode resembles the chaotic, undifferentiated state of the world before creation.¹⁸ Often the underworld itself is called Nun, the primaeval waters from which the sun god emerges in the morning, and it may indeed be the arms of Nun, instead of those of Osiris, which raise Rē^c aloft at dawn.¹⁹ It is in this primaeval world that the mysterious union of Rē^c and Osiris and the re-generation of the god take place, here the god re-creates himself and begins the creation of the universe. Here Rē^c-Atum, the primaeval, sexually undifferentiated god, having absorbed into himself the body of Osiris, begets himself to be re-born as Rē^c-Horus-of-the-Horizon.

This myth, which the Egyptians called a “great mystery” and which reveals and conceals one of the most essential aspects of Egyptian religion, is mocked in the story of King Neferkarē^c’s nocturnal meetings with his general. Both the mythical event and the King’s visit to the house of Sasetet take place during the four central hours of the night, and the King returns to his palace when there are four hours left until dawn, *i.e.* in the ninth hour of the night, when the deepest darkness is passed and preparations for sunrise begin.²⁰ At dawn the king will arise in his palace like the sun god on the horizon; his palace is “the horizon in which Rē^c dwells” and the King himself is “the embodiment (*q3j*) of his father Rē^c who shines in heaven, ... whose rays penetrate the cavern (*i.e.*, the underworld)”.²¹ In the story the mysterious union

13. See, however, the texts studied in my article “The Birth of Horus according to the Ebers Papyrus”, *JEOL* 26, 1979-1980, p. 10-25.

14. Cf. ASSMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 103-105.

15. P. Ch. Beatty IX, rt. 6, 1.

16. DERCHAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

17. *CT* II, 18 a-e; cf. *JEOL* 26, p. 13, n. 22.

18. HORNING, *Ägyptische Unterweltsbücher*, p. 30-34.

19. Cf. VAN DIJK, *OMRO* 66, 1986, p. 13 sq.

20. H.O. LANGE, O. NEUGEBAUER, *Papyrus Carlsberg No. I. Ein hieratisch-demotischer kosmologischer Text*, Copenhagen, 1940, p. 26.

21. P. Anast. II, 5, 6-9 (= *Anast.* IV, 5, 6-9); cf. J. ASSMANN, *Sonnenhymnen in thebanischen Gräbern*, Mainz, 1983, p. 19 (15), with p. 22, n. (p).

of Rē^c and Osiris is transmogrified into a homosexual encounter between the God-King²² and his general. That this encounter is of a sexual nature is beyond doubt; Posener himself has already referred to the XVIIIth Dynasty texts and scenes describing Amun's sexual union with the Queen and the subsequent birth of the divine King, where almost exactly the same phrase is used as in our text: "...after His Majesty had done everything which he desired with her".²³ In our text, this phrase may well have been intended as a deliberate quotation²⁴ from these ancient texts, which have been described as "seriously ceremonious and religiously austere";²⁵ this would provide another indication that the story of King Neferkarē^c is a parody of the myth of divine regeneration. Even the ladder which is lowered to Neferkarē^c and by means of which he climbs up to the house of Sasetet is probably to be interpreted as a mythological motif: in the Pyramid Texts and in later funerary literature as well as in the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus the gods often rig up a ladder for the King,²⁶ by means of which "he mounts up to Kheperer when he comes into being on the eastern side of the sky" after he has been "conducted to the West".²⁷

Unfortunately, the *Story of King Neferkarē^c and General Sasetet* shares the fate of so many other Egyptian literary texts in that its end is lost. We do not know whether the application, or indeed the parody,²⁸ of the mythological model was carried on beyond the fragment which happens to have survived. If it was, it may well have been modelled on the mythological stories in which the god Seth attempts to prevent the resurrection of Osiris or the rebirth of Rē^c by robbing the god of his seed.²⁹ Such attempts are thwarted by Isis, who restores the god's procreative abilities. This would cast the obviously homosexual general Sasetet in the role of Seth, a not altogether unlikely possibility in view of Seth's well known homosexual inclinations. It would also imply that King Neferkarē^c eventually abandons the general in favour

22. Cf. the use of *ntr pn* "this god", in 1. x +5.

23. See for the correct grammatical interpretation of this line, H. BRUNNER, *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs*, Wiesbaden, 1964, p. 53.

24. On quotations in Egyptian literature, see W. GUGLIELMI, "Zur Adaption und Funktion von Zitaten", *SAK* 11, 1984, p. 347-364.

25. J. GWYN GRIFFITHS, *JEA* 51, 1965, p. 219.

26. Including, incidentally, for Neferkarē^c; *Pyr. Utt.* 688.

27. *Pyr.* 2079c-d, 2085c. See for this motif J.H. BREASTED, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, New York, 1912, p. 111-114, 153 sq.; S.A.B. MERCER, *The Pyramid Texts in translation and commentary* IV, New York, etc., 1952, p. 4 sq.; H. KEES, *Totenglauben und Jenseitsvorstellungen der alten Ägypter*, Leipzig, 1956², p. 70 sq.; D. KESSLER,

LÄ III, col. 1002-1005.

28. See for the similarities and differences between satire and parody, E. BRUNNER-TRAUT, *LÄ* V, col. 489-491. Although our text does not imitate a fixed narrative structure, its use of a mythological theme and the quotation from the Birth of the Divine King in my opinion justify the designation parody. Assmann's definition of parody as a strictly literary category and as a form of poetical reflexion, *LÄ* IV, col. 911 sq., seems to me to be too narrow in an Egyptian context.

29. VAN DIJK, "Anat, Seth and the Seed of Prē^c", H.L.J. VANSTIPHOUT *et al.* (ed.), *Scripta Signa Vocis. Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East, presented to J.H. Hospers, by his pupils, colleagues and friends*, Groningen, 1986, p. 31-51; see esp. p. 42 sq.

of a woman,³⁰ which would certainly be more in keeping with the ideal of *m3^c.t*. But here we enter the domain of speculation.

The satirical aspects of the story have often been commented upon; Neferkarē^c's behaviour is quite obviously disapproved of as not being in agreement with *m3^c.t*, the more so since the conduct of a King is concerned, but at the same time the story was doubtless told in order to amuse an audience.³¹ The parody of a mythical theme adds a malicious flavour to this mockery. Religious subjects are rarely, if ever, used as vehicles for satire, let alone satirized themselves, and blasphemy is condemned in the Negative Confession in the Book of the Dead.³² The author of *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* makes fun of the gods, but he obviously knows where the limits are, for when the god Baba ridicules Rē^c the consequences are grave and he receives a serious reprimand. A closer parallel is afforded by the famous Turin Erotic Papyrus, which appears to parody certain religious scenes illustrated in the Amduat and in the Mythological Papyri,³³ but here the aspect of political satire is absent. This latter element is a prominent feature in a number of graffiti left by some of the men who were responsible for the construction of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir al-Bahari in an unfinished rock tomb in the cliff high above the temple which, it seems, provide a none too subtle comment on the queen's claim to the title "Strong Bull" and hence implicitly on the myth of her divine conception and birth inscribed on the walls of the temple.³⁴ On the other hand, it is difficult to assess the kind of reception the Story of Neferkarē^c is likely to have had in Ancient Egypt. Only an educated audience would have understood the *double entendre* in the story. Doubtless some people were greatly amused by it, whereas others may have been shocked, or even horrified. After all, it is not the least of Egyptian myths which is parodied in the tale, and a late text states that "he who will reveal it will die by being executed, for it is a great mystery, it is Rē^c, it is Osiris".³⁵

Finally, one wonders whether it is entirely by chance that a copy of the text of Neferkarē^c and Sasetet has survived which dates from the XXVth Dynasty. None of the great classics of ancient Egyptian literature have survived in manuscripts dating

30. PARKINSON also thinks that the tale "may well have ended with the king abandoning his affair and being forced into more decorous behaviour", *Voices from Ancient Egypt*, p. 54.

31. Cf. POSENER, *op. cit.*, p. 136 sq.

32. *BD* 125, Negative Confession, 38 and 42.

33. J.A. OMLIN, *Der Papyrus 55001 und seine satyrisch-erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften*, Turin, 1973, p. 61 sq.; cf. D.P. SILVERMAN, in *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558-1085 B.C.*, Boston, 1982, p. 278. H. TE VELDE, "The Theme of Separation of Heaven and Earth in Egyptian Mythology", *Studia Aegyptiaca* II, Budapest,

1977, p. 161-170, observed that the Geb and Nut scene which is apparently parodied in the Turin Erotic Papyrus is not attested before the XXIth Dynasty, *op. cit.*, p. 166, but I see no compelling reason why the papyrus could not be dated to the period of the late XXth or early XXIth Dynasty, say the time of Butehamon, on whose sarcophagi two of the earliest examples of the scene occur.

34. J. ROMER, *Romer's Egypt*, London, 1982, p. 157-159; cf. E.F. WENTE, "Some graffiti from the reign of Hatshepsut", *JNES* 43, 1984, p. 47-54.

35. *P. Salt* 825, p. 18, 1-2; cf. ASSMANN, *Liturgische Lieder*, p. 102.

to the period after the New Kingdom, although we know that they had not been forgotten by then. For a XXVth Dynasty audience the story may have held an extra attraction because NeferkarĒ^c also happened to be the name of Shabaka, the first king of the dynasty, who shared with his brother Pi('ankh)y and with his successors an obsession with Egypt's great cultural heritage, which he freely used for propagandistic purposes.³⁶ In fact, it is quite likely that Shabaka deliberately chose the name NeferkarĒ^c because it had once belonged to Pepi II, the hero of our story, who is credited by Manetho with a reign of 94 years. He was obviously unaware that his Egyptian subjects knew a story about this NeferkarĒ^c which he might well have found less amusing than they did.

36. Cf. N.-C. GRIMAL, "Bibliothèques et propagande royale à l'époque éthiopienne", *Livre du centenaire, 1880-1980*, Cairo, 1980, p. 37-48; F. JUNGE, "Zur Fehldatierung des sog. Denkmals memphitischer

Theologie, oder Der Beitrag der ägyptischen Theologie zur Geistesgeschichte der Spätzeit", *MDAIK* 29, 1973, p. 195-204.