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**Review of Eleanor Dobson, Nichola Tonks (eds.):
*Ancient Egypt in the Modern Imagination:
Art, Literature and Culture***

**Bloomsbury Academic (London/New York 2020), 384 pp.,
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Ancient Egypt has always exerted a certain fascination that, over the centuries, has found expression in a number of cultural phenomena. In modern Western societies, curiosity for the ancient Pharaonic civilisation has even developed into a real Egyptomania that has spread across literature, architecture, cinema, art, and fashion. To keep track of this evolution, the past twenty years have witnessed a growth in academic interest in Ancient Egypt Reception Studies.

The volume “Ancient Egypt in the Modern Imagination: Art, Literature, and Culture”, edited by Eleanor Dobson

and Nichola Tonks, appeared within this scene. The book collects contributions by scholars who attended two conferences held at the University of Birmingham, “Tea with the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt in the Modern Imagination” (2016) and “Tea with the Sphinx: Defining the Field of Ancient Egypt Reception Studies” (2017). The cover image directs the reader straight to the topic since it is based on the libretto of “Star Light, Star Bright”, a waltz from the Broadway burlesque operetta “The Wizard of the Nile” (1895). This is to pull us in a new direction as compared to previous Egyptological works, that the editors do not

fall short of presenting in the introduction and in an extensive bibliography. Dobson and Tonks approach this non-traditional topic in a multidisciplinary way, putting the Egyptological view in a multifaceted perspective enriched by archaeology, history, anthropology, art history, fashion history, cinema history, and media and cultural studies. The collected essays focus on phenomena taking place from the eighteenth century to the present day, mostly within the British context.

The volume is divided into three sections, “The Egyptological Imaginary”, “Death and Mysticism” and “Gender and Sexuality”, each consisting of 5 chapters.

In Chapter 1, *‘Wonderful things’ in Kingstone upon Hull*, Gabrielle Heffernan focuses on the replicas of three objects discovered by Howard Carter inside the Antechamber of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922. Now owned by the Hands on History Museum in the city of Hull, these replicas were created in 1924 by the sculptor William Aumonier under the expert advice of the Egyptologist Arthur Weigall for the British Empire Exhibition. Heffernan sparks off a debate on the definition and function of copies in museums, stressing out the full dignity of replicas as autonomous pieces of art instead of mere representations of an authentic original. She also shows the shift of meaning that these replicas have undergone. If their original purpose was to celebrate the grandeur of the British Empire through the success

of a British discovery, the replicas can now be interpreted as evidence of the Egyptian cultural impact, to be framed within the global phenomenon of Tutmania.

In discussing Ancient Egypt’s influence on modern societies, one cannot miss considering the ‘alternative’ historical reinterpretations that add their voices to ‘official’ orthodox archaeology. Some pseudo-archaeological theories, for example, went as far as claiming the existence of a common matrix between all ancient cultures. Hyper-diffusionist theories seek their confirmation in architectural similarities between megalithic sites across the globe. Thus, some sporadic artefacts found on the British Islands became apparent evidence of the Egyptian influence on the ‘British’ Neolithic. In Chapter 2, *‘Let sleeping scarabs alone’: When Egypt came to Stonehenge*, Martyn Barber presents the case study of two limestone scarabs inscribed with the cartouche of Thutmosis III, that were found near Stonehenge in 1928. The author traces the curious biography of these artefacts through the engaging reports of the experts who studied them at the time. This essay rightfully raises the question of uncritical acceptance of data reported in past publications and encourages reviews of reports on those old archaeological excavations that were not carried out with a necessary scientific method.

Hyper-diffusionist hypothesis are discussed also in Chapter 3, *‘Mummy*

first: Statue after': Wyndham Lewis, *diffusionism, mosaic distinctions and the Egyptian origins of art*. In this essay, Edward Chaney deals with the art and literature of the British Modernist writer Wyndham Lewis. As evidenced by the analysis, Lewis' progressive point of view became a more static, past-oriented perspective under the influence of the theories already reported in the previous chapter. This led Lewis to develop a form of 'historicism' according to which ancient Egyptians invented then spread art to the all-world. The author's analysis reveals how the evolution of Lewis' perspective derived from his inspiration for Grafton Elliot Smith and Sigmund Freud within the vibrant European philosophical, artistic, and political context where Tutmania was playing a key cultural role.

Chapter 4, *Ancient Egypt in William S. Burroughs's novels*, revolves around literature too. In this contribution, Riccardo Gramantieri sheds light on hitherto overlooked elements in the creative work of William Burroughs. In his late novellas, Burroughs leaves the Mesoamerican context behind in favour of Ancient Egypt through a perspective that merges academic Egyptology with pseudo-scientific beliefs. The result is a variegated pantheon setting a peculiar background to his stories. As his prose evolves through the 80s and 90s, the motif of Egyptian religious beliefs is transposed into a sci-fi world. Here, death is but a temporary transition and

the characters undergo interstellar travels as an inner journey experienced through the Egyptian hereafter of Duat.

To conclude the first section, Chapter 5, *Between success and controversy: Christian Jacq and the marketing of 'Egyptological' Fiction* by Vassilaki Papanicolaou, pays homage to the most famous and prolific contemporary author of Pharaonic fiction – Christian Jacq. In his novels, Jacq lets academic Egyptology and popular Egyptomania coexist. In spite of his PhD in Egyptian Studies at the Université Paris-Sorbonne and the world-wide success as a best-selling author, however, little attention has been paid to his work by the academic field. By analysing Jacq's work with a specific focus on the "Ramsès" cycle, this contribution aims to fill this gap to revalue Jacq's undeniable merit of having brought the public closer to Egyptology.

The second section opens with *Egyptomania, English pyramids and the quest of immortality*. In this contribution, Jolene Zigarovich explores the early British fascination with ancient Egyptian funeral practices. The author focuses on "Nekpokhdeia, or The Art of Embalming" (1705), a work where the surgeon Thomas Greenhill points out the theological, medical, and political advantages of artificial body preservation. This book gained such popularity among aristocracy and bourgeoisie that along with public mummy unwrapping, it led to an increase in in-

terest for such practices as well as demand for embalming.

Farther into the volume, we delve into the influence of ancient Egyptian symbology on the nineteenth-century Christian tradition. This is Nichola Tonks' topic in Chapter 7, *Obituaries and obelisks: Egyptianizing funerary architecture and the cemetery as a heterotopic space*. Tonks describes the growing presence of pyramids, obelisks, and Egyptian-inspired mausolea in British cemeteries going from the 1830s to the 1840s. In this appropriation of ancient canons and symbols, Pharaonic monumental civilization became a paradigm for the celebration of achievements of the deceased or their family. This chapter investigates the emblematic case of the 10th Duke of Hamilton and the real Egyptian syenite sarcophagus that he asked to be buried in, inside his mausoleum in Southern Scotland.

In Chapter 8, *Tutankhartier: Death, rebirth and decoration; or, Tutmania in the 1920s as a metaphor for a society in recovery after World War One*, Lizzie Glithero-West analyses how the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb influenced first post-war European art. Using a multidisciplinary approach that combines anthropology and art history, Glithero-West examines the case study of Cartier's scarabs and other Egyptian-revival jewellery. The chapter, however, makes it clear that in this specific context, Egyptian jewellery has another layer to it. Cartier's Egyptian-inspired

set was therefore to express a new reflection on the much-needed concepts of life after death and rebirth, after the traumatic experience of World War One.

In modern times, symbolism and cults of Ancient Egypt have often been appropriated by esoteric and Masonic movements, as they lend themselves well to pseudo-historical reinterpretations. In *Celtic Egyptians: Isis priests of the lineage of Scota*, Caroline Tully provides two interesting examples. The first is the Isis movement established in Paris by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and his wife Moina Bergson at the end of the nineteenth century. The second is the Fellowship of Isis, founded in Ireland by Lawrence, Olivia, and Pamela Durdin-Roberston during the 1970s. Despite the half century time range that divides them, these organizations share indisputable similarities, as they both combine a more stereotypical vision of Egyptian religion with an increasing interest in the socio-political event of Celtic Revival. Both see a syncretistic connection point between the two civilizations in the Egyptian queen Scota, a mythological figure who is claimed by some medieval sources to have founded Ireland and Scotland.

The influence wielded by Egyptian mythology on nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occultism and esoterism is also made evident in the closing chapter of this section, *Jack the Ripper and the mummy's curse: Ancient Egypt in From Hell*. Here, Eleanor

Dobson analyses how the Victorian setting in the graphic novel “From Hell” by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell takes inspiration on ancient Egyptian supernatural elements. In her analysis, Dobson traces every reference to Egypt back to its historical context and examines in detail how existing archaeological artefacts – these are Cleopatra’s Needle, an Egyptian obelisk, and the ‘Unlucky Mummy’ in the British Museum – triggered curse-legends that inspired the mystical powers skilfully reproduced in the graphic novel.

The last section opens with Chapter 11, *From Sekhmet to suffrage: Ancient Egypt in early twentieth-century women’s culture*. In this contribution, Mara Gold captivantly combines archaeology, cinema, and fashion with the history of battles for women’s rights in 1920s Britain. As it is shown throughout the chapter, interest in the ancient world arose in Britain even before the pivotal discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb. Consequently, cinema and theatre began making extensive use of the oriental woman stereotype. Gold emphasizes that not only did these new icons foster modern women’s aspiration for this kind of aesthetic femininity, but they also fuelled their ambition for equal rights in the society they lived in. Specific examples are the excavation of the Hatshepsut temple already begun in the 1880s and the bust of Nefertiti discovered in 1913. These, the author highlights, profoundly impressed British

women by providing them with female ideals in which beauty and power co-existed.

The ‘feminine’ associated with a mysterious and decadent perception of Ancient Egypt is further explored in Chapter 12, *‘The use of old objects’: Ancient Egypt and English writers around 1920*, by R. B. Parkinson. Parkinson analyses the Egyptian topic explored in 1920s British literature. Through a range of Modernist writers, the author identifies a shared rejection of the stereotype, which peaks in the works by Edward Morgan Foster. As Parkinson shows, not only does Foster disapprove of these stereotypes, but he also explicitly attacks the melodramatic mysticism and imperialism of British Egyptology by embodying them especially in Wallis Budge.

The following essay, titled *Women Surrealists and Egyptian mythology: Sphinxes, animals and magic*, delves into the ancient Egyptian influence on female Surrealist artists. As Sabina Stent notes, although the Surrealist tendency of drawing symbolist and mythological elements for Eastern cultures has been widely investigated, little attention has been paid to female Surrealist artists. Stent thus focuses on the art of Leonor Carrington, Leonor Fini, Lee Miller, and Remedios Varo in its opposition to both the male chauvinist canon and the patriarchal society lying at its core. Using several case studies compared through a multidisciplinary approach,

the author sheds light on female perception and interpretation of Egyptian themes and symbols all the way to a real feminization of Egyptian tradition.

Throughout this volume, many were the examples of Western glamourisation of Egyptian iconography. This strand found its peak in the release of the Hollywood blockbuster “Cleopatra” (1963). In *Egyptian excesses: Taylor, Burton and Cleopatra*, Siv Jansson analyses the genesis of the film with a specific focus on its effects on the public perception of Cleopatra as mirrored by an evolution in fashion. A parallel is drawn between two couples, the main historical figures and the actors who actually played them. As Jansson stresses out, the scandal and gossip caused by Elizabeth Taylor’s and Richard Burton’s relationship can indeed be compared to the ostracism suffered by the affair between Cleopatra and Antony two thousand years before. This was also reflected by the public reception of ‘Liz&Dick’, which let this decadent, sensual, and flashy couple turn into an orientalisating paradigm.

Lastly, *The Mummy, the priestess and the Heroine: embodying and legitimating female power in 1970s girls’ comics* by Nickianne Moody closes the collection of essays. This contribution analyses the production of comic books published in Britain during the late 1970s whose main target was young girls. A specific focus is given to two series: “Spell-bound” (1976–7) and “Misty” (1978–9).

What seems to be a typical combination of traditional Western narratives in an exotic atmosphere – awakened mummies, evil priests, curses, and unwary archaeologists – actually displays more than meets the eye. Moody’s analysis indeed identifies a moral dimension to the story. Paradoxically enough, by stumbling on what seemed like an ancient society, the young heroines meet arcane forms of inspiring knowledge and empowering historical figures. This will serve them as a chance to grow, get to know themselves, and consolidate their personal and mutual strength.

All the topics covered in the book are unpublished or at least little treated by other scholars. However, although the selection of case studies is rather specific and circumscribed, especially related to the British context, the resulting overview guarantees a broader critical debate and the identification of common points in the various phenomena of ancient Egyptian civilisation’s influence on the modern Western culture. The main merit of the volume consists in the multidisciplinary approach guaranteed by the different academic background and specialisation of the authors. The editors were able to combine various point of views applied to common or at least similar topics. In addition, the book touches subjects, historical phases, and media usually less explored within the Ancient Egypt Reception Studies. The given examples of Ancient Egypt’s

influence are not limited to the post-Napoleonic fascination and Tutmania, but also concern the 18th century and the first years of the third Millennium.

Moreover, the interest in this publication is certainly current in a period in which a new Egyptian revival is clearly perceptible due to the concomitance of important anniversaries for the Egyptological discipline, like the bicentenary of the Champollion's "Lettre à M. Dacier" and the centenary of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb.

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