

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING: SETH THE DIVINE TRICKSTER

Mia Rikala

INTRODUCTION: THE CONFUSION THAT IS SETH

In ancient Egyptian mythology Seth is a god who is perhaps best known as an evil murderer, the committer of fratricide.¹ He kills his brother Osiris in order to steal his kingdom and rule the land of Egypt alone. However, he is the serpent slayer also, saviour of the sun god during his dangerous voyage on the night sky. He protects the sun god Re by killing the evil serpent Apep, who represents the chaotic forces forever threatening the Egyptian world order. Later in Egyptian history Seth becomes the very thing he slays, the evil he opposes on the solar boat. He always had a chaotic personality, but during the Late Period he becomes evil, a demon whose images are to be abolished. The dichotomy of Seth, murdering and saving, is an interesting notion. Seth's powers are vast, his confusion great, his hot temper famous, and his lust notorious. He is the god of thunder, the god of foreign lands, and most importantly: the god of desert, the inhospitable region. The last two are aspects that link Seth to the border regions of Egypt making him a borderline creature, something in-between, neither good nor evil; trademark of the trickster.

¹ This article is based on my Finnish seminar paper presented at the Department of Comparative Religion during spring 1994 as part of my Master's degree. I have since translated and augmented it to better suit the current purpose. My heartfelt thanks to Angela McDonald for her insightful and helpful comments: "truly thou areth a great Sethian"! Thanks are due also, and once again, to my friend Lisa Heidorn for revising the language. Many thanks to Mia Meri for the map.

I. SETH AND HIS CULT

Ancient Seth: historical origin

Seth is among the oldest of the Egyptian gods. The earliest artefacts representing the so-called Seth animal date to the predynastic Naqada I Period (c. 4000–3500 BCE). The morphology of the animal representing Seth is unclear to date. In spite of this, there is some dispute as to the morphology of the animal depicted in these early objects. Nevertheless, from this evidence Egyptologists such as Jan Zandee, and Walter B. Emery deduced that Seth must have been the primary god in the Naqada I culture. The Lower Egyptian people, who later conquered Egypt, worshipped Horus, and scholars deduced that the fusion of these two peoples must have produced a religious synthesis explaining the ambiguous aspects of the god Seth in ancient Egyptian religion. It is obvious that the theory, based on such uncertain evidence (a few disputed objects without textual reference), is far from conclusive. The first certain evidence for the existence of god Seth is the votive mace head of the so-called Scorpion king, currently on display at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (*Fig. 1*). The Scorpion Mace Head dates roughly to 3000 BCE, the time of Egyptian unification. (te Velde 1967: 7–12)

The animal depicting Seth has aroused lively debate; its zoological identification remains unsolved. Various it has been suggested that the animal is a donkey, an antelope, an okapi, or a giraffe. Generally scholars have resolved to call it simply “the Seth animal” leaving the identification question unsettled. Among the discipline, it has been agreed that it is likely that the animal, as well as the hieroglyph depicting it, are purely fictional. This is not to say that the Egyptians did not believe in its existence, quite the opposite (cf. griffin, or sphinx, figures in many cultures). However, it is equally possible that the depiction of the deity had evolved from the depiction of a real animal. (te Velde 1967: 13–15) In any case, from the Third dynasty (c. 2649 BCE) onward the body of the Seth animal resembles a dog, while its head has a long, elongated snout and erect, square-tipped ears. Often the animal has an always upright, forked tail (*Fig. 2*). Members of the fauna such as hippopotamus, ass and pig were animals, whose forms he could take, and thus considered sacred to Seth.

In textual sources Seth’s name has many forms. There are variables such as *stš*, *sth*, *swth*, *swty*, *st*, or simply depiction of the Seth animal as an ideogram. The meaning and etymology of the word are unclear. The current form, Seth, is a Greek derivative. Margaret Murray had an interesting pseudo-etymology suggesting that the name is a causative of the verb *th* which means “drunkenness” (in Egyptian the prefix *s* often denotes causality in a verb); thus Seth would mean

“the one that causes drunkenness” (Murray 1949: 131; te Velde 1967: 6). The Egyptians themselves seem to have attributed three meanings to the name Seth: “causer of chaos”, “runaway”, and “drunk” (te Velde 1967: 1–7).

Seth in the cosmogony of Heliopolis

According to the so-called Heliopolitan cosmogony, Seth belongs to the Ennead of gods (Fig. 3). Seth is one of the great-grandchildren of the Creator, Atum-Re. The self-created Atum-Re spat out Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture), who coupled producing Geb (earth) and Nut (sky), who in turn received four children (two couples): Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys completing the Heliopolitan Ennead, a group of nine gods. However, Seth’s birth was not natural and he tore himself out of his mother’s side (cf. the Pyramid Texts; Plutarch). This being the case, one tended to avoid using the verb *msi*, “to give birth” in the case of Seth. The unnatural birth of Seth may be the reason why he is sometimes connected with miscarriage. In a collection of magical texts found in Papyrus Harris III, it is said that Seth causes the opening of the wombs of Anath and Astarte (the Semitic wives of Seth during the New Kingdom), the wombs, which Horus has closed (i.e. causing them to miscarry).² This aspect of Seth seems to coincide with Plutarch, who wrote that the hippopotamus goddess of childbirth, Taweret, also known as Seth’s concubine (Seth sometimes taking the form of a hippopotamus), left him.³ (te Velde 1967: 27–29)

Thus, the process of Seth’s birth was unnatural; he disconnected the natural order of events. He did not follow as a generation after Osiris and Isis, but came out concurrently forming a parallel couple with Nephthys (whose Egyptian name *nbt-hwt*, *Nebet-hut*, means “Mistress of the House”⁴). However, it seems that this couple was not exactly equal with Osiris and Isis. (te Velde 1967: 29) Thus, Seth brought a certain amount of chaos to the cosmic order.

² Another thing altogether is could “the opening of wombs” refer to the beginning of childbirth, or menstruation in general, instead of miscarriage? In this case, timing would be the essential question. However, the usual interpretation of this concept seems to be miscarriage; see e.g. te Velde 1967, 28–99, 55.

³ Both of the topics: the opening of the wombs of Anath and Astarte as well as Seth as a trickster have been further discussed by Sergio Donadoni in his article *Per la morfologia del dio Seth* (1981).

⁴ It occurred to me while I was writing this that the names of major Egyptian goddesses are connected to objects, or denote a container of some type, for the king, e.g. Isis, whose Egyptian name *3st* means “throne”, Hathor, whose name *hwt-hr* means “House of Horus (i.e. the king)”, or Nephthys, *nbt hwt* which means “Mistress of the House”. However, for the purpose of the present study, I will not elaborate further on this.

Seth and Osiris: the duality

Seth is perhaps best known in his role as murderer of his brother, Osiris. Seth commits fratricide seemingly because of jealousy over his brother's position as the king of Egypt. This story has been recorded in the Pyramid Texts, but in fragments.⁵ It was a Greek historian, Plutarch, who gathered pieces into his famous rendition of the Osiris Myth called *About Isis and Osiris (Peri Isidos kai Osiridos)*. The story can be summarized as follows. Jealous of his brother Osiris, Seth devises a killing plot, which includes a party and a coffin. He invites Osiris into a party, having had a coffin secretly made to fit Osiris' measurements perfectly. During the party, Seth invites everybody to try out the coffin knowing full well that it would fit Osiris only. Seth promises the coffin to the one whom it suits. Intrigued, Osiris tries the coffin, but once he is inside, Seth closes the lid throwing the coffin out to the Nile, and thus killing his brother. Desperate to rescue her husband, Isis seeks out Osiris' body assisted by her sister, Nephthys (who, incidentally, is also Seth's wife). Using her magic Isis resurrects Osiris and conceives a child by him, Horus, who is to avenge his father. This conflict is further elaborated in the Egyptian story recounting the Conflict of Horus and Seth (Papyrus Chester Beatty I).

According to Herman te Velde, Seth's role in the Osiris myth must be seen in the context of resurrection, and the fact that Osiris is the god of the dead (te Velde 1967: 81–82). Everything else must be understood from this point of view. However, from a cosmological perspective, one may wonder, how much was the death of Osiris a sacrifice of the god, and how much a necessary part of *maat*, the world order? Depending on our point of view, this has a strong implication as to the purpose of Seth's actions. Primarily, the cult of Osiris is about resurrection, and the mourning of his death. (te Velde 1967: 81–82) On the one hand, one might consider that Osiris *had* to die to become the god of the dead, and enable the existence of life after death. On the other hand, Osiris' death was unnatural and caused by his jealous brother Seth, therefore one must mourn for Osiris. What, then, was the role of Seth in this episode?

According to te Velde, the lack of source material makes it impossible to deduce whether Seth's role in this episode was secondary, and if so, in what

⁵ Unlike, for example, Greek mythology, Ancient Egyptian myths lack a consistent, canonical form. There were no written narratives earlier than the Middle, or the New Kingdom period. The spells of Pyramid and Coffin texts form a large corpus of mythological fragments, which the trail of myths can be traced back to. It is likely that myths and narratives belonged largely to the oral domain before the fore mentioned periods. For further discussion, see e.g. Assmann 1977 and Baines 1991.

capacity (te Velde 1967: 85). Te Velde continues “Seth is the one, who opposes the order of life and death by murdering Osiris, who had to die”. (te Velde 1967: 95) Furthermore, one may consider the role of Seth best by substituting suicide in the place of fratricide, since by murdering Osiris, Seth, the other end of a duality, sacrificed himself. Seth is a character, who foolishly tried to vanquish death. Where Osiris is the god of death, Seth is the demon of death. Seth and Osiris are two ends of a duality: one is life, which causes death, the other death, which causes life. Seth, however, has upset the original order of existence by manifesting death, the great evil, and this makes him a demonic god. (te Velde 1967: 95–96) An alternative point of view would be to think of Seth as a demonic procreator, who leads his brother into a life eternal through a violent death (te Velde 1967: 98).

Seth and Osiris manifest the duality in ancient Egyptian philosophy of the world order. This order of existence is a multifaceted dichotomy: black land (*kmt*, Egypt, the realm of Osiris/Horus) and red land (*dšrt*, desert, the realm of Seth); order (*m3ʿt*, the realm of gods and man) and chaos (*isft*, the realm of the terrible Apep (Apophis) serpent). Again, Seth is clearly a borderline divinity, since his realm lies on the fringes of cosmos, close to the realm of chaos. In spite of this, Seth belongs to the world of order, because his chaos is controlled, and needed to maintain cosmic order. He personifies the chaos inside cosmic order.

Seth and Re

The sun god Re travels through the sky on his boat during the 12 hours of the night. This is a perilous voyage for him as great dangers threaten his journey. The greatest of these dangers is the serpent Apep, who threatens to swallow the solar boat. Re is defended by a group of various gods, lead mostly by the mighty Seth standing at the prow of the solar boat (*Fig. 4*). Seth is the appropriate measure against Apep, because of his status as an aggressive borderline divinity. In other terms, Seth’s desert realm is the first, or the final outpost defending the borders of Re’s cosmic order. Only Seth is mighty enough to strike down Apep. It seems that Seth has been worshipped mainly in his capacity as the mighty defender of the solar boat (te Velde 1967: 99).

Seth, son of Nut (the sky goddess) as he is often described in texts, is also the god of thunder, storm and rain. It is easy to think that in the battle between Seth and Apep manifests Seth’s role as the lord of thunderstorm. Furthermore, one sees that Seth is also the lord of other storm related weather elements such as wind and air. As the lord of wind Seth moves the solar boat forward. (Zandee 1963: 150–51) Seth is the primary helper of the sun god. Among his epithets one sometimes finds names such as “The Chosen One of Re” and “The Son of Re”; in the “Conflict/

Contendings of Horus and Seth” (henceforth *Contendings*) Re adopts Seth and takes him to live with him in the sky. In the same narrative Re is clearly biased toward Seth, who, after losing an episode, always seeks comfort from the sun god, the Lord of All as he is called in the *Contendings*.

The cult of Seth and the Nineteenth Dynasty

The cult of Seth is largely obscure to modern scholar. This lack of information is due to the later persecution of Seth as a demon. It is well known that the name and images of Seth are all but destroyed (luckily a few examples remain). After the Ramesside period his temples were neither built nor repaired. All theophoric personal names containing “Seth” disappeared as well. It is likely that persecution happened both due to the growing hostility toward foreigners (due to his close proximity to foreign lands, Seth was associated with foreign lands and gods), and the rising importance of the cult of Osiris during the first millennium BCE (te Velde 1984: 910).

The main places for the cult of Seth were at the border of the desert, where the caravan routes began, seemingly at the oases of the western desert also. In the Nile Valley the main centres for Seth worship were Ombos (the Fifth Upper Egyptian Nome; Seth is sometimes referred to as “the Ombite”), Sepermeru (the Nineteenth Upper Egyptian Nome), and Avaris/Pi-Ramesse, the residence of both the Hyksos, and the Ramesside kings (see map, *Fig. 9*). (te Velde 1984: 910) Thus, Seth was the symbol of all things foreign and alien, too. It is hardly surprising that Seth was sometimes identified with foreign gods such as Ash, Baal, or Reshep (*Fig. 5*).

Avaris is the city known for the cult of Seth, situated in the Northeast Delta. The area of Avaris, home to the Ramesside kings, served also as the residence for the Hyksos-rulers⁶ of the Second Intermediate Period (1650–1550 BCE). According to Barry J. Kemp the reason for the strong cult of Seth in this area was its close proximity to Asia. Further, the fact that the Hyksos-kings associated themselves with Seth was due to the local importance of this god as well as Seth manifesting foreign elements inside Egypt. (Kemp 1983: 157–158) Instead of local importance, te Velde stresses Seth’s mythological status as the disturber of peace, which meant that he had to be revered on the fringes of cosmos.

⁶ The term “Hyksos” stems from the Egyptian words *ḥkꜣw ḥꜣswt*, which means “Rulers of the Foreign Lands”. The Hyksos formed the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Dynasties (1640–1532 BCE), and ruled Lower Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period. It seems that they consisted of Semitic tribes who, after a period of unrest, seized power in Lower Egypt. The partly concurrent Upper Egyptian Seventeenth Dynasty finally conquered Lower Egypt and threw the Hyksos out of the country uniting Egypt under one powerful dynasty.

Mythologically speaking Seth is a disturber of peace, cosmically the god of thunder, and geographically a foreigner. (te Velde 1967: 117–118)

It seems that Seth shared a very special relationship with the Nineteenth Egyptian dynasty (1295–1186 BCE). Evidence of this can be found in a few textual sources, inscriptions in *stelae*, temples, or bases of statues. Also, it is known that this dynasty hailed from Northeast Delta, where the cult of Seth had flourished, quite possibly already before the Hyksos⁷.

The second pharaoh of this dynasty, Sety I (1294–1279 BCE), had the temple of Abydos built in honour of Osiris, but he seemed to have had a special relationship to Seth as well, already on the basis of his “surname”, Sety.⁸ A base of a statue, originally from the city of Avaris, bears a testament to this fact. Labib Habachi, who studied the relationship of Sety I to Seth, concluded from the inscription on the base, that it is no doubt a statue base made in honour of Seth (Habachi 1974: 99). He further added that the six dedicatory inscriptions explicitly state that the base was made in honour of Seth, Lord of Avaris. There is an additional triple inscription, where the king is said to be “Beloved of Seth, Lord of Avaris”. Based on this, Habachi has further deduced that the base had stood in the temple of Seth, commissioned by Sety, in Avaris. In my point of view, it is likely that the temple had existed already before Sety’s reign; it is a quite common Egyptian practice of the pharaohs to add parts, or smaller monuments, such as *stelae* or statues with dedicatory inscriptions to already existing monuments. Nevertheless, I think Habachi is right saying that the base is important, if only for the fact that it is the only surviving monument dedicated to “Seth, Lord of Avaris”. (Habachi 1974: 100–101)

The successor of Sety I, Ramesses II (1290–1224 BCE) commissioned a so-called “400-Year-Stela”, which one could characterize as somewhat apologetic (from the view-point of Seth worship). The stela, which Ramesses had made in honour of his ancestors, relates that the worship of Seth was common in Avaris already before the coming of the hated Hyksos, 400 years ago. The stela is interesting in that it accents the Baal-like features of Seth, depicted completely in an-

⁷ The Nineteenth Dynasty was a military family, who gained the throne by appointment of Ramesses I’s predecessor Horemheb, who died without natural heirs. Like Horemheb, before becoming the pharaoh, Ramesses I had been a general in the Egyptian army. It is likely that Ramesses served under Horemheb already during the latter’s military days. By the time Ramesses I ascended the throne, he already had successors; son, the future pharaoh Seti I, and at least one grandson, who later became Ramesses II, the most famous of Egyptian pharaohs. Not only was Seth a local deity for this family, he was also a warlike god, an appropriate patron for such a family.

⁸ Angela McDonald kindly pointed out that, interestingly, there is a complete avoidance of Sethian hieroglyphs in the texts of his Abydos temple – even in the writing of his name – something she discusses in her unpublished doctoral thesis (2002, University of Oxford). See also Bonnet 1952: 711.

thropomorphic form, wearing an Asian dress, but holding in his hands emblems of Egyptian deities (*Fig. 5*). Te Velde states that the stela is quite revolutionary, since it implicitly connects the worship of Seth in “Baalistic” form with Egyptian traditions, not with the Hyksos. He continues:

How little the traditional Egyptian state cult was open to foreign influence is evident from the paradoxical necessity to demonstrate that the divine foreigner had already been known and adored in this form for more than 400 years. Only the foreign god with Egyptian rights of citizenship was acceptable as state god beside Amon, Ptah and Re. (te Velde 1967: 126)

At the same time, the line between an Egyptian and a foreigner became less obvious as contacts with foreign countries were frequent on many levels (te Velde 1967: 126). The cult of the “Baalistic” Seth seems to have risen during this period perhaps due to the many military campaigns to Asia, and the influence of these Syrian countries in Egypt.

Another example of the special relations between Seth and the first Rameside dynasty is the so-called “Marriage Stela”, commissioned by Ramesses II. In this stela the king asks Seth to provide amicable weather conditions to ensure the safe arrival of the pharaoh’s new Hittite bride in Egypt. Furthermore, it is notable that both the pharaohs, Sety I and Ramesses II named one of their army divisions “Seth”; according to Raymond Faulkner the divisions were always named according to the main divinities of the state (Faulkner 1953: 42).

Other signs of Seth worship during this period are theophoric personal names. These are names that consist of a god’s name and some other word, or words, e.g. Sat-Seth, which means “Daughter of Seth”, or Seth-em-wia, which means “Seth in the bark (i.e. the solar boat)”. It was common that names consisting with the word “Seth” often had attributes that referred to Seth’s power and strength, e.g. Seth-nakht, which means, “Seth is powerful”, name of one of the Ramesside pharaohs. Some people donned Seth-attributes often given to other gods, examples of these are names such as “Seth is kind”, or “Seth rules”. (te Velde 1967: 135–138). People also had names with indirect reference to the god, e.g. the name Aapehty (in the Stela of Aapehty⁹, Nineteenth Dynasty; incidentally, this stela shows Aapehty worshipping the god as well), which means “Great of Strength”, an epithet of Seth.

⁹ The limestone stela of Aapehty belongs to the Egyptian collection of the British Museum (EA 35630). For publication, see e.g. M.L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Hieroglyphic texts from Egyptian stelae, etc. in the British Museum, Part 10* (London, The British Museum Press, 1982), 30–31, plate 71(2). I owe knowledge of this to Angela McDonald.

II. SETH: A COMPROMISE IN EVIL?

Seth and Horus: Polar opposites and a unity

In ancient Egyptian mythology, following the death Osiris, Isis conceives and gives birth to their son, Horus, who is to avenge his father. The result of this is the great conflict between Horus and Seth, which happens when Horus demands his father's throne to himself (see e.g. Griffiths 1960). The conflict has been described as early as in the Pyramid Texts, and there is an entire narrative, in fact, one of the very few complete ancient Egyptian mythical narratives, called "The Contendings of Horus and Seth" preserved in one manuscript known as Papyrus Chester Beatty I (tentatively dated in the Twentieth Dynasty (1186–1069 BCE)). The *Contendings* is an interesting piece of literature as the gods are portrayed rather comically in this account. They are not able to decide who should win the contest to rule Egypt. Their morality is questionable at best, and they frequently resort to blackmail and threats. Furthermore, the Lord of All, the sun god Atum-Re is grossly biased towards Seth. The true purpose of this text is unknown, whether it was just a mythical narrative designed to entertain listeners (presumably read out loud), or some clever political propaganda with juridical implications (cf. Verhoeven 1996; Allam 1992).

In any case, Horus and Seth are the manifestations of ancient Egyptian duality in as much as Osiris and Seth. Horus represents the good, positive and constructive element, where as Seth the evil, negative and destructive part. This dichotomy is well represented in the so-called "Unification of the Two Lands" (*smꜣ bꜣwy*) motif (Fig. 6). Here Egypt is represented with a hieroglyph depicting lungs (*smꜣ*), into which Horus (Upper Egypt) and Seth (Lower Egypt) are tying a knot. The knot represents the integration of opposites into a unity. This motif forms the emblem of the unified state, and was used to decorate the base of the king's throne. Even though there is a clear political explanation for the symbol, it may be applied elsewhere too: in psychology, for instance. For a person to be complete he must know both sides of his nature; i.e. for a kingdom to function, both of its parts must cooperate. (Englund 1989: 77–78)

Another example of this divided unity is a character known from the funerary context called *hrwy.fy*, "The One with Two Faces" (Fig. 7). This creature is a type of Janus figure, character with two faces in opposite directions; these two faces belong to Horus and Seth. Te Velde sees *hrwy.fy* representing the mystery of the totality of the other side (te Velde 1967: 70). Gertie Englund, on the other hand, sees that being separated, Horus and Seth represent the two principles, which, according to the Egyptian idea, construct the reality (Englund 1989: 79). They

come together in the person of the king; he is both, together and apart. He is Horus when he rules, Seth when he uses force. Both gods are needed to cooperate in order to maintain the well being of the nation, and the king. Even though the king definitely had his “Sethian” side, it does not show in his official titles, one of which was “Golden Horus” (*hr nbw*).¹⁰ We know only of one early king, who had a separate Seth-name on top of the Horus-name: Peribsen of the Second Dynasty (c. 2600 BCE) (te Velde 1967: 71–72). Oddly enough, another king of this dynasty, in fact the last, Khasekhem, had *both* Horus and Seth on top of his *serekh* (a rectangular hieroglyph incorporating the facade of a palace that contained the Horus name of the king; especially before cartouches became more common). The meaning of this has been largely speculated among Egyptologists. Sadly, the lack of information from these early days prevents us from making any definitive conclusions as to the period in question, or the matter at hand.

Seth of the *Contendings*: A trickster in the making?

Papyrus Chester Beatty I and the *Contendings* therein were briefly mentioned earlier. The papyrus, part of the rather extensive Chester Beatty Collection (now in the British Museum), is important in many ways, not the least for its narrative value. The papyrus has been dated to the latter part of the Ramesside period, more precisely to the reign of Ramesses V (Twentieth Dynasty, c.1160 BCE). The *Contendings* is a light-hearted narrative with many dialogues and humorous characters. Despite its “lightness”, the text is no doubt mythical, although the text itself does not constitute the myth of Horus and Seth. Jan Assmann has made a distinction between a myth and a mythical statement/narrative (the latter in German “mythische Aussage”). According to Assmann, the main category of mythical narratives consists of texts, which convey a myth, or a part of a myth. (Assmann 1977: 37) Thus, a narrative is, in a way, a realisation of a myth. John Baines has been critical of Assmann, and adds that the realisation of a myth or a mythical narrative can affect the underlying myth itself: their relationship can be that of reciprocity (Baines 1991: 88). In any case, the myth of Horus and Seth must have obtained some additional “colour” during the Ramesside period, as shown in this text.

The *Contendings* presents Seth as dumb, aggressive and unfair. He tries to win by threatening and using force, thus trying to prove his supremacy over the young and weak Horus. The unlikeliest feature of the text is, however, the undecidedness of the gods, the Great Ennead, and their bias towards the obviously

¹⁰ Robert K. Ritner has interpreted this name of the king referring especially to Horus’ victory over Seth in Ritner 1995: 132.

impetuous character of Seth. After several episodes (Isis deceives Seth into admitting that he is wrong, Horus loses his eye, Seth approaches Horus homosexually, Seth loses his testicles) Horus is finally declared the winner, and Seth, outrageously, denies ever having tried to stop Horus from ascending the throne of his father; a blatant lie. In spite of this, the sun god Re declares that Seth is to be feared as the god of thunder, and adopts him into the sky to live with him.¹¹

Throughout the text, Seth exhibits characteristics, which could be connected with those of a trickster. Moreover, the ancient Egyptians seem to have discerned a certain personality type akin to Seth's persona as seen, for example, in the *Contendings*. The ostrakon Deir el-Medina 1265 (as well as the Instruction of Amenemope) mentions a certain character described as the "hot one" (*p3 šmw*). This character is juxtaposed with that of the "silent one" (*p3 grw*).¹² It appears that this term is used to describe a typical outsider of the community, as someone who is particularly hateful to one member of it and one who is even persecuted with sticks. (Borghouts 1980: 21–28: esp. 24) It seems that this is a description of an unruly, Sethian personality, and one who is the exact opposite of the "ideal" member of the community. The "hot one" is seen as despicable person, standing outside what is considered as socially acceptable behaviour in everyday life. (Borghouts 1980: 21–28: esp. 24–26)

III. THE ARCHETYPE OF TRICKSTER AND SETH

Defining the trickster

The main issues dealing with tricksters are twofold: firstly the historical definition of the term, and secondly, the major approaches to the figure. Furthermore, some of the problems caused by the figure's complexity consist of the issues of 1) universals versus particulars (Can there be a general definition of the character?), 2) western cultural bias against allowing humour to represent serious and important cultural information (our sense of propriety), and 3) interpretation. (Doty & Hynes 1993: 13) However, for the purpose of the present study, focus will be mostly on the defining issues, where as the historical study of the trickster figure will be addressed only briefly.

¹¹ Ursula Verhoeven has suggested a plausible historical interpretation of the social context of "the *Contendings*", according to which the tale may be seen as one to legitimize the double "son to brother" succession after Ramesses IV to Ramesses VIII; particularly during the time of Ramesses V (a son to Ramesses IV with powerful surviving uncles). (Verhoeven 1996) Angela McDonald suggested that Re's adoption of Seth might have been a way of harnessing Seth's aggression as well (personal communication).

¹² I owe my thanks to Jaana Toivari-Viitala, who, several years ago, directed my attention to this particular article of the infamous "hot one".

Attempts to define the trickster archetype first arose from the discipline of North American Studies, where a character such as the trickster was a frequent phenomenon in Native American Indian tales (Brandon 1970: 622–623; Hultkrantz 1997). However, the trickster appears in the mythology and tales of many other cultures as well, most notably in Africa. Amongst others, trickster is also found in Greek and Scandinavian religious traditions. (Brandon 1970: 622–623) The seminal character of the trickster has been noted within the cultural studies. These culminated in the 1955/1956 with the influential work of Paul Radin: *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. The Radin book consists of essays of such notable scholars as Radin himself, Kerényi, and Jung, who consider that the figure progresses developmentally within cultures as within an individual's psychological growth, learning over time to deal with its bodily and sexual appetites (Doty & Hynes 1993: 15).

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, the trickster is a mythical figure, who is “distinguished by his skill at trickery and deceit as well as by his prodigious biological drives and exaggerated bodily parts” (Sullivan 1987: 45). Further, a trickster may introduce fire, or death to the human world, thus helping to shape human culture into its familiar form. In this aspect, he is almost a culture hero. On the other hand, trickster mimics human needs and drives bringing out the imperfections of an ambitious but flawed intelligence. In this respect, the trickster reflects the state of human kind (mind?), or the nation. (Sullivan 1987: 45)

William J. Hynes has summarized the problem of defining the trickster as follows:

The sheer richness of trickster phenomena can easily lead one to conclude that the trickster is indefinable. In fact, to define (de-finis) is to draw borders around phenomena, and tricksters seem amazingly resistant to such capture; they are notorious border breakers. (Hynes 1993: 33).

Hynes offers six similarities or shared characteristics, which can be identified as those of the trickster. These may be used as a matrix to survey the known examples of tricksters and to judge their degree of “tricksterness”. It should be noted that not every trickster necessarily has all of these characteristics. Among *the shared trickster traits* are 1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster, which features him as a 2) deceiver/trick-player (*lying is his game*), 3) shape-shifter (*he has many disguises*) 4) situation-inverter (*just when you thought it was safe...*) 5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and 6) sacred/lewd bricoleur (*a tinker, or a “fixer-up” type of character*). (Hynes 1993: 34) While there are other characteristics to the trickster, the six are the most common as well as most central to his identity (Hynes 1993: 45). Generally, characteristics such as chaos, liminality, humour and entropy are connected to the trickster: these seem to exist within the six denominators elaborated by Hynes. In short, the trick-

ster seems impelled inwardly to violate all taboos, especially those that are sexual, gastronomic, or scatological (Hynes 1993: 42).

According to Hynes many specific trickster figures appear to have most of the six characteristics, but a particular figure may occasionally have only one or two (Hynes 1993: 45). Without further probing, tricksters in various cultures, ancient and contemporary, include Hermes (Hermes Trismegistus), Prometheus (Ancient Greece), Ananse (Africa), Loki (Nordic/Scandinavia), and perhaps even Stallu/Taalo (Lapp) to a certain degree. Some contemporary western trickster figures in American popular culture include Wylie Coyote, Bugs Bunny (Warner Brother's cartoon characters), and Q (*Star Trek: the Next Generation* Television Series). Finally, an important observation is that there is no one mode of trickster studies, no one classical model of the figure – in spite of the nearly canonical work of Radin (Doty & Hynes 1993: 25).

“Wylie” Seth?

As a trickster, Seth has been compared to the West-African Ogo-Yurugu of the Dogon. Like Seth, Ogo-Yurugu had a twin brother, Nommo, who sacrificed himself in order to create the world (Bianchi 1971: 113–135). From this perspective, Ogo-Yurugu is almost a demiurgic figure, which goes with trickster's definition, but does it concur with Seth's? Could the role of Seth, as the demonic procreator in the murder of Osiris, be considered as demiurgic or even culture heroic? According to Sergio Donadoni, this is a function, which does not suit Seth (Donadoni 1981: 118). However, this depends entirely on one's point of view. David Leeming sees Seth absolutely as a trickster god, although he adds Thoth to the equation and sees the god as the positive aspect of the trickster, Seth remaining the negative. (Leeming 2004: 67–68) Seth's connection and interchangeability, seen for example in ancient monuments, with the Egyptian god Thoth, the divine messenger and god of wisdom, is perhaps no mere coincidence. Certain West African tricksters, ones belonging to the *orisha* deities, Eshu(-Elegbara) of the Yoruba, and Legba of the Fon are seen as linguistically able, communicating the cosmic language to the worshippers, thus tying together the cosmic pattern and daily life (Davis 1991: 5, 9; Pelton 1989). Thus, it seems that the trickster has an inherent function of communication as well. As such, he is often thought of as a gatekeeper to another world, a border being.

Herman te Velde, who wrote about Seth as a trickster in 1968, asserts that there are five elements, in which Seth functions like the other tricksters in the world. These are: 1) Seth is chaotic, 2) Seth is uncivilized, 3) Seth is a murderer, 4) Seth is a homosexual, and 5) Seth is the slayer of the monster. According to te Velde, Seth is not exclusively a trickster, but he does exhibit several tricksterlike

qualities. (te Velde 1968: 39–40) Adding to te Velde’s functional definition, I would like to elaborate Seth’s tricksterness a little further.

First, I consider the physical appearance of the famous Seth animal. Angela McDonald has written about this composite creature concluding that the iconography of the Seth animal conveys the essential characteristics of this god, which are aggression, dominance and strangeness. These are mirrored in the appearance of the god’s symbolic animal, and feed into the words it determines. (McDonald 2000: 78). Such words usually denote either aggressiveness or various negative aspects of life, such as illnesses. Morphologically speaking Seth is very much like his famous counterpart, the trickster in North America, the coyote. As stated, Seth’s zoological identification remains unclear, if it is relative to the matter at all (the current interpretation sees it as a composite creature; see cf. McDonald 2000). But, he does have a tall tail, an agile looking body, and two large ears; the usual features of a canine or feline predator (*Fig. 8*). Moreover the tail is often erect, a common biologically attested sign of alertness and aggression in the animal world (McDonald 2000: 77). The western world knows this character very well from the Warner Brothers’ cartoon with the Roadrunner; it is the nefarious and unfortunate Wylie Coyote. Terence DuQuesne has written about Seth’s jackal like qualities discussing his connection to another canine deity, the jackal Anubis. The two obviously share an ancient connection both in the context of kingship and nether-worldly issues. (DuQuesne 1998: 613–628) Seth, however, is not merely the animal. Particularly when he is worshipped, it seems that he is then often in his anthropomorphic form: a male human body with a head like that of the Seth animal. Also, the so-called Seth deity determinative has the body of a sitting anthropomorphic deity.

Second, Seth’s outrageous actions, which clearly fall to the category of the trickster acts: in New Kingdom texts Seth’s deeds include committing a series of sacrilegious crimes such as felling sacred trees and hunting sacred fish, birds, and animals. His sexual appetite is well-known from the *Contendings*, on top of which he is accused of having other inappropriate sexual encounters, such as mating with the “seed goddess”, who personified the semen of the creator (Seth was punished accordingly for this trespass). (Pinch 2002: 193–194) In later texts, keeping with the tradition of Seth as the killer of Osiris, Seth tries to steal the amulets protecting Osiris’ body by disguising himself; however, he is always recognized and brutally punished by Anubis and Thoth. The primary sources recounting Seth’s many escapades include the *Pyramid Texts*, spells 215, 222, 356, 359, 477; *Book of the Dead* spell 39; *Contendings of Horus and Seth* (Papyrus Chester Beatty I Recto); *Astarte and the Sea*; *Papyrus Leiden I 343 + 345*; *Papyrus Salt 825*; *Papyrus Jumilhac, Demotic Magical Papyri XII*; *Greek Magical Papyri XXXVI*; Plutarch’s *About Isis and Osiris*. (Pinch 2002: 193–194)

While Seth may be considered as a divine trickster, he is not exclusively a trickster god (cf. te Velde 1968). He has an inherently divine character (he is a full member of the first family of gods since the creation, the Ennead), which is uncommon with most tricksters, who exist somewhat outside, or in the fringes of the divine community (cf. semi-divine Loki). However, this is not necessarily a problem, since African divinities in general often have trickster qualities, whether they are human or animal-like. These include playfulness in words, which may upset the cosmic order. (Hultkrantz 1997: 8) Another, perhaps less tricksterlike issue regarding Seth is his demonization during later Egyptian periods. Usually tricksters remain tricksters, but in Egypt the trickster became the very monster he used to slay (this, with the notable exception of the Judeo-Christian demon Satan, who often exhibits some tricksterlike characteristics). He became one with the dragon, and his counterpart Horus became the slayer. How did this happen, and when?

Seth the demon

Seth's character as the representation of all things foreign and threatening made him vulnerable to the hatred of the unknown, and foreigners. The latter was a rising phenomenon as Egypt gradually lost its position as an empire. Foreign conquerors (Persians, Assyrians; maybe even the Kushites to a certain degree?) became despised, and Seth received his share of this dislike. It might be concluded that after the Twentieth Dynasty, Egyptians were no longer interested in the worship of Seth. The Assyrian conquest of Egypt meant a turning point for the cult of Seth. (te Velde 1967: 140, 145; Kees 1956: 412; Bonnet 1952: 711) At this point, the latest, everything connected to Seth became negative: he was an enemy of the gods, identified with Apep himself. Rituals to banish Seth were performed in temples; an image of red wax was made for burning, inscribed with the words: "the wretched Seth". (te Velde 1967: 150) However, it is interesting that during the Greco-Roman Period (332BCE–395AD) Seth was worshipped in the Egyptian western desert, for instance at the Dakhleh oasis, in form of a man with a falcon's head! (E.g. Kaper 1997 & Osing 1985) Additionally, in the temple of Hibis at Kharga oasis, Seth is seen falcon-headed in very Horus-like manner, spearing the serpent Apep (Davies 1953: pls. 42–43, 77b). Thus, it seems that in the oases (surrounded by Seth's territory, the desert), the demonization of Seth did not occur, at least not in the same manner as it did elsewhere in the Nile Valley itself after the Third Intermediate Period. Herman te Velde suggested that perhaps the Egyptian priests, who had long ceased to worship Seth in Egypt proper, had no objection to his worship in more distant parts of the realm (1967: 116).

It would seem that the fringe living, all too exotic (or ridiculous) nature of the redheaded trickster became his undoing. Either this or a case of religious

development where the duality Osiris-Seth disintegrated, and became to represent the extreme opposites: good and evil. This progressed to the need to eliminate Seth, the evil as such. In his article concerning North American tricksters, Åke Hultkrantz refers to this process of depreciation and polarization regarding the trickster as culture hero, which he, among other scholars (e.g. Radin), sees the more dominant aspect of the trickster. As a culture hero, the trickster is seen as the less successful double of the Supreme Being in mythology. This “competition” leads to the gradual degradation of the other, whose failures make him ridiculous, a trickster. (Hultkrantz 1997: 8–9)

The conclusion: Feeling the ambivalent Seth

Seth, chaos in cosmos, is one of the most interesting characters in ancient Egyptian mythology, and religion. He represents many contradictory elements in the Egyptian view of the world. Typically Seth is considered as a bad character, an evil god, but he has a few positive aspects as well. These have to do with the survival of the cosmic balance, that is, the divine order of the creator. In this aspect, Seth represents the necessary evil, the instigator of certain essential cosmic processes. In this aspect, he resembles a culture hero; though this is a label not easily reconciled with Seth’s character (e.g. Donadoni 1981: 118).

The contradictory nature of Seth’s character makes it difficult to interpret the god as merely the other half of a duality, or the representative of evil. The ambivalence of Seth is shown clearly during the Ramesside period: on the one hand he is the dynastic god, a state god, the one who leads armies into victory, and on the other hand, he is the devilish trickster, who murders his own brother in his blind ambition, and after this atrocity dares to claim the throne of Egypt for himself. The trickster-like qualities of Seth’s nature are referred to already in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, where Seth is usually regarded as the nasty one, against whom certain spells are to be directed. How do these contradictory qualities exist together in the troublesome Seth? It seems that the ambivalent god represented a dichotomous symbolism on several different levels. The official religious practice during the Ramesside period focused on Seth’s prowess in war, and thus saw him as a necessary god, who was easy to associate with foreign deities, especially the Semitic Baal. Moreover, Seth’s position as the storm god of Egypt, a meteorological being, attributes him with the ambivalence of the storm deities in general: creativity and chaos (Chemery 1987: 489ff).

Seth is traditionally essential to the cosmic balance repelling the dreaded Apep serpent. This aspect coincides with another, well known from Papyrus Chester Beatty’s *Contendings*, and perhaps among the general populace too; in the tale Seth brags uncontested that “there is no other god, who would do it” (that is,

to kill Apep). Together with this aspect Seth seems to have represented to the Egyptians a trickster, who knows his importance, plays with it (walks on the edge), threatens, and makes fun of the common law and judiciary system, both deceitful and lustful with his flawed ambition and all too human desires. On this level, one might consider regarding Seth as a symbol of the flawed human being, the feeling illogical. In fact, Lawrence E. Sullivan asserts that the trickster is a symbol of the human condition (1987: 45). The appeal of the unruly deity Seth might be in the fact that he justifies the negativity in human nature. Everybody secretly wants to be like Seth and wreak some occasional havoc.

Furthermore, thinking of the opposites good and evil, which, in Egyptian mythology is personified either by Osiris and Seth, or Horus and Seth, are aspects that merge in the king. In the *Contendings*, the wrongdoing that is Seth receives mercy and even a certain promotion. Does this reflect a justification of evil on some level? In confrontation, Seth, or evil, is the side that usually manifests in special cases, when it is necessary to apply force into a situation. Psychologically interpreting Seth as the trickster may be seen as a negative model of conduct, showing how not to behave while simultaneously affording a release through fantasy and humour from the strain of behaving properly (Cunningham 1997: 813). Seth represents the side that needs to be controlled, even though at the same time its existence is a fact of life. Barbara Babcock concluded that the trickster is tolerated and welcomed because the narratives of the trickster figure have the power to transform perceptions of reality (Babcock 1975: 147–186; Cunningham 1997: 813). Both good and evil, Horus and Seth are needed to maintain the cosmic balance. This, in part, explains the ancient necessity of divine kingship and its importance in ancient Egyptian culture. The pharaoh is the one in whom both lords are at peace. Only the divine king is capable of using both aspects appropriately.

In the end, one can regretfully declare that Seth and his importance in ancient Egyptian religion, and society, still remain a small mystery. This is partly due to the demonization and the following purge regarding Seth's cult. In spite of this, the ancient Ombite is a deity not easily ignored. His red-haired¹³ mayhem speaks for itself, and his trickery is appealing to the modern scholar in many ways. If not openly, we feel for him in secret.

¹³ For the "Sethian" associations of the colour red, see e.g. Ritner 1995: 147, esp. n. 622.

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Figure 1. Seth animal in the Scorpion Macehead. Author's drawing after fig. 4. in te Velde 1967: 12.

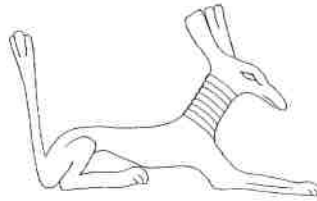


Figure 2. Seth animal; Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BCE). Author's drawing after fig. 6. in te Velde 1967: 16.

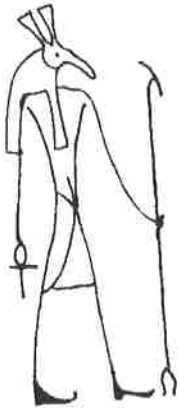


Figure 3. Seth in the tomb of Tuthmose III as depicted in the Netherworld book *Amduat*; New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE). Author's drawing.

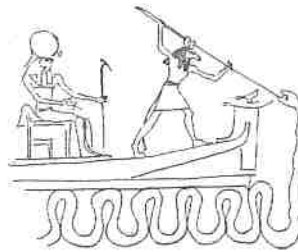


Figure 4. Seth on the solar boat defending Re from the serpent Apep; Third Intermediate Period (1069-664 BCE). Drawing by Jaana Toivari-Viitala.

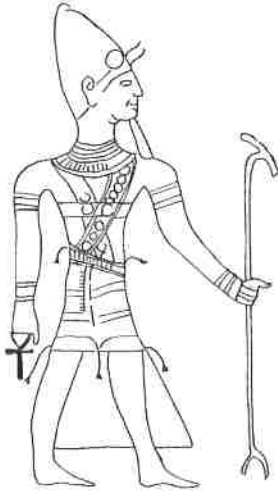


Figure 5. Seth in “Baalistic” form resembling the Levantine deity Reshep on the 400-year-stele; New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE). Author’s drawing after fig. 15 in te Velde 1967: 125.



Figure 6. Seth unifying the Two lands. An excerpt from the so-called *sm3 t3wy* motif; Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE). Author’s drawing.

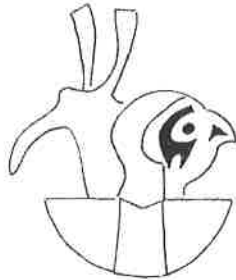


Figure 7. The “Janus” figure Hrwy.fy (“The One with Two Faces”). Author’s drawing after fig.10 in te Velde 1967: 69.



Figure 8. Seth animal; Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE). Author’s drawing after fig. 6 in te Velde 1967: 16.

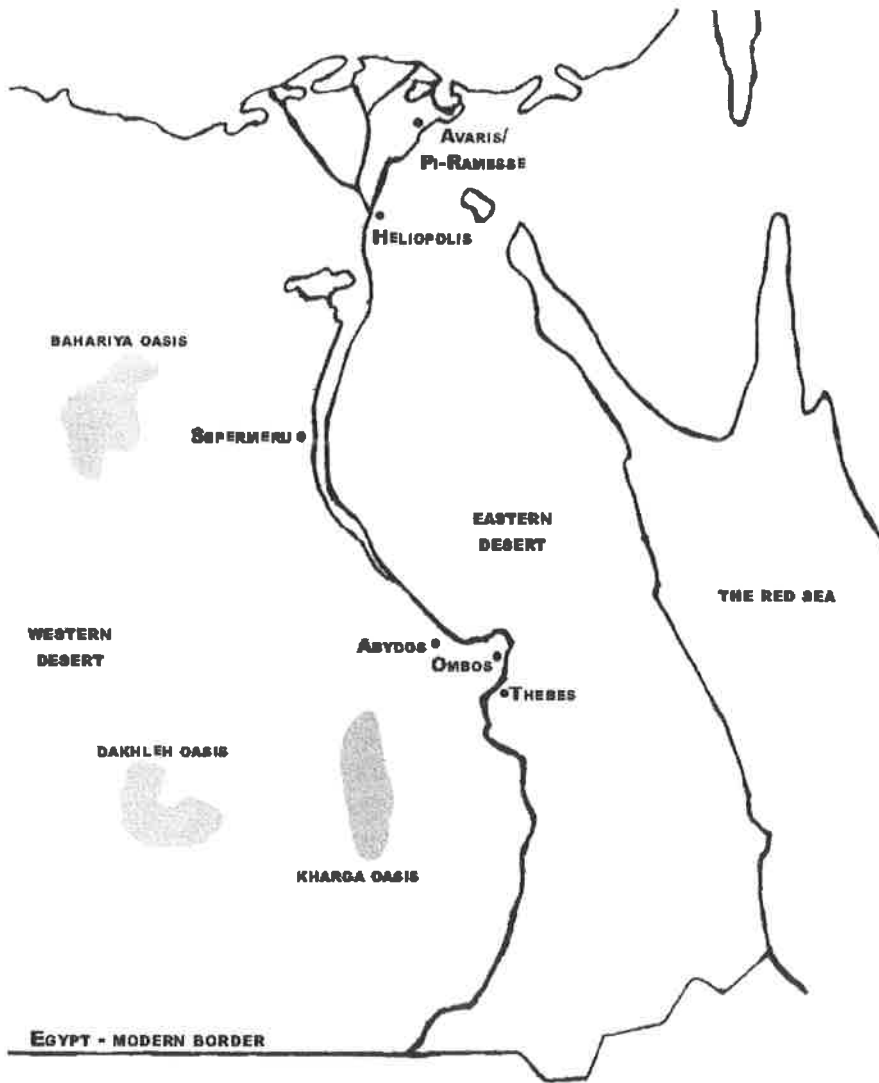


Figure 9. Map by Mia Meri.