

The Mysteries of Osiris

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The Practice

Students adapt an ancient source for group performance in the final week of the class. The adaptation and performance are based on course readings and independent student research during the course.

1. Course Context

This full-year course is a part of the Faculty of Arts Foundations Program. Students attend standard lectures and two-hour tutorials where they analyse and discuss readings with particular attention paid to the development of critical skills. The course presents an introduction to the civilization of Pharaonic Egypt and shows how it interacted with other cultures, especially those of classical Greece and Rome during the period following the conquest of Egypt by Alexander in 332 B.C.E.

2. Materials and Procedure

Course materials consist, for the most part, of Classical and Egyptian sources in translation. Because of the difficulties inherent in understanding and contextualizing such material, students are presented with a graduated series of assignments, beginning with a series of terms for class discussion taken from each reading. These assignments are designed to develop writing and comprehension skills as well as encouraging students to search for and report on works in the disciplines of Classics and Egyptology in the campus library. Group presentations on these materials are made at the end of first term, and at the beginning of the second students are presented with a major assignment based on an ancient source which was intended for, or may be adapted to, performance of some kind. Students must write their own scripts, do research and facilitate props and settings. They are encouraged to form working groups to execute this project, and lectures and tutorials in the second semester are designed to support, enlarge on, and contextualize the major assignment. Student communication is facilitated by a class listserv which they must log on to from the beginning of the academic year. The major assignment is concluded on the last day of class and individual reports are due the following week.

In 1999-2000, the material for the major assignment was *The Mysteries of Osiris in the Month of Khoiak*, a hieroglyphic text from a temple at Dendera in southern Egypt, dating from the reign of Cleopatra the Great (51-30 B.C.E.). It describes a ritual activity undertaken around the winter solstice where two symbolic figures of Osiris, a god who died and came back to life, are made from barley and sand and alchemical ingredients. Their manufacture, embalming and burial takes place over a period of three weeks. I provided students with my own English translation of this text as well as supplementary materials so that they could generate their own scripts for performance. The activity was documented on video and in individual reports.

Guiding Principles Behind the Practice

1. Reworking materials for dramatic presentation spurs a different kind of thinking than conventional assignments and enhances understanding of the material, both by students and scholars.
2. Improvements in writing and critical thinking are more likely when students are deeply engaged in the material under consideration. Coming to grips with practical considerations regarding the

manipulation of materials in a performance or laboratory setting make imperative a full comprehension of the directions for action.

Sources of Inspiration or Influence for the Practice

When I first ran this course, I wanted to avoid the mechanical and mediocre material that students often produce in response to standard essay assignments. One night in University of Toronto library, I came across *The Triumph of Horus* a forgotten, if controversial publication, which claimed that a text in an Egyptian temple of the 2nd century B.C.E. was a script for dramatic performance. I decided to give it try, and the rest, as they say, is history. The year ended with a memorable performance of this work in Vari Hall Rotunda at York University (Gillam, 2000). However, the outcome was not achieved without a struggle. Initial student adaptations of the material were more reminiscent of Walt Disney than ancient liturgy and we had to insist on a closer reading and interpretation of the original texts.

In choosing this kind of major assignment I was also influenced by the example of Christopher Marshall of the University of British Columbia who has had his students mount Classical dramas in a variety of formats. I was also encouraged by my own past experience in the classroom when I had found the performance option greatly enhanced student participation and understanding. There exists a limited literature on this kind of pedagogical practice, and, to date it is mostly used at primary and elementary school levels (see Caso and Finkelberg, 1999; D'Amato and Dean, 1988).

Frequently Asked Questions About the Practice and Responses

1. How do you keep students from going off track and just playing around?

The major assignment is worth a considerable portion of their final grade (typically between 25 or 30%). Two progress reports and a final essay have to be submitted. Participation can also be monitored through attendance in tutorials and participation in the class listserv. Attendance at the closure of the assignment is also mandatory. The performances generally take place in a public venue. The threat of humiliation in front of their peers is also a great spur to a good student performance.

2. Group assignments raise a danger that less motivated students can ride on the coat tails of their hard working colleagues. How do you deal with this problem?

*In my experience, the students deal with it themselves. For example, during work on the *Mystery of Osiris*, a student in one tutorial was ostracized for just this behaviour. While I think that such a reaction was a little extreme, peer pressure seems to work.*

For More Information (References and Links)

For a list of the major assignments undertaken by students in this course and the evaluation structure, [click here](#).

For a video clip of the making of the egg of Sokar in accordance with ancient texts and representations, [click here](#).

For a program of activities connected with the Mysteries of Osiris in the month of Khoiak posted on the web by students, [click here](#).

Sample essays written before and after the major assignment by a student in this course.

Cauville, S. (1997). *Le Temple de Dendara: Les chapelles osiriennes (Commentaire & transcription et traduction)* Three Volumes. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.

Chassinat, É. (1966). *Le mystère d'Osiris au mois de Khoiak*. Two Volumes. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.

Caso, D. S. & Finkelberg, S. L. (1999). Psychoeducational drama: An improvisational approach to outreach." *Journal of College Student Development*, 40, 89-91.

D'Amato, R. C. & Dean, R. E. (1988). Psychodrama research – therapy and theory: A critical analysis of an arrested modality." *Psychology in the Schools* 25, 305-314.

Gillam, R. (2000). Re-staging the Triumph of Horus: Hunting the hippo in Toronto. *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt* 11, 72-83.

Gillam, R. (2000). The York Plays: Ancient Drama at Keele and Steeles. *Performing Arts and Entertainment in Canada* 32(4), 4-8.

Meeks, D. & Favard-Meeks, C. (1996). *Daily Life of the Egyptian Gods* (G. M. Goshgarian, Trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press. (see pages 168–176).