

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## THE FIRSTBORN



### ACT ONE

#### SCENE ONE

*The terrace of the palace of Seti the Second, at Tanis. A morning in the summer of 1200 B.C. A flight of steps (unseen) leads down through a gate to open ground. The terrace looks out upon an incompleated pyramid.*

*A scream.*

*Enter from the palace ANATH BITHIAH, a woman of fifty, sister to the Pharaoh, and TEUSRET, a girl of fifteen, the Pharaoh's daughter*

*Anath.* What was it, Teusret?

*Teusret.* Did you hear it too?

*Anath.* Some man is dead. That scream was password to a grave. Look there: up go the birds!

*Teusret.* The heat on this terrace!

You could bake on these stones, Aunt Anath.

*Anath.* Ask who it was.

*Teusret.* They're working steadily at father's tomb. There's no sign of trouble.

*Anath.* We're too far off to see.

We should know more if we could see their faces.

*Teusret (calling down the steps).* Guard! Come up here.

*Anath.* I should like to be certain.

Oh, that pyramid! Everyday, watching it build,

Will make an old woman of me early.

It will cast a pretty shadow when it's done.

Two hundred more men were taken on to-day,

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

2

## THE FIRSTBORN

ACT I, SC. 1

Did you know that, Teusret? Your father's in a hurry.  
 Their sweat would be invaluable to the farmers in this drought.  
 What pains they take to house a family of dust.

*Teusret.* It's a lovely tomb.

*Anath.* Yes, so it may be.

But what shall we do with all that air to breathe  
 And no more breath? I could as happily lie  
 And wait for eternal life in something smaller.

(*Enter A GUARD*)

*Teusret.* What was that scream we heard?

*Guard.* It's nothing, madam.

*Anath.* You are right. Nothing. It was something once  
 But now it is only a scare of birds in the air  
 And a pair of women with their nerves uncovered;  
 Nothing.

*Teusret.* Who was it screamed?

*Guard.* One of the builders

Missed his footing, madam; merely an Israelite.  
 They're digging him into the sand. No, over to the left.

*Teusret.* Oh yes, I see them now.—That was all I wanted.

(*Exit THE GUARD*)

So that's all right.

*Anath.* Can you remember your cousin?

*Teusret.* Why, which cousin?

*Anath.* My foster son. You knew him

When you were little. He lived with us in the palace.

*Teusret.* The birds are back on the roof now.

*Anath.* Moses, Teusret.

*Teusret.* What, Aunt? Yes, I think I remember. I remember  
 A tall uncle. Was he only a cousin?  
 He used to drum his helmet with a dagger  
 While he sang us regimental marches to get us to sleep.  
 It never did. Why?

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

ACT I, SC. 1

THE FIRSTBORN

3

*Anath.* No reason. I thought of him.

Well, they've buried the man in the sand. We'd better  
 Find our morning again and use what's left.

*Teusret.* Why did you think of him? Why *then* particularly?

*Anath.* Why not then? Sometimes he blows about my brain  
 Like litter at the end of a public holiday.

I have obstinate affections. Ask your father.

He would tell you, if it wasn't impolitic

To mention Moses, what a girl of fire

I was, before I made these embers.

He could tell you how I crossed your grandfather,

And your grandfather was a dynasty in himself.

Oh Teusret, what a day of legend that was!

I held forbidden Israel in my arms

And growled on my stubborn doorstep, till I had my way.

*Teusret.* What do you mean?

*Anath.* Well, never mind.

*Teusret.* I do.

You've told me so far.

*Anath.* Keep it to yourself then.

The summer of '24 had brilliant days

And unprecedented storms. The striped linen

You once cut up for a doll's dress was the dress

Made for me that summer. It was the summer

When my father, your grandfather, published the pronouncement.

*Teusret.* What pronouncement?

*Anath.* That all the boys of Jewdom  
 Should be killed. Not out of spite, Teusret; necessity.

Your grandfather ordered that Defence of the Realm be painted

At the head of the document, in azure and silver.

It made it easier for him.

*Teusret.* Were they killed?

*Anath.* Yes, they all died of a signature. Or we thought so,

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

4

## THE FIRSTBORN

ACT I, SC. 1

Until the thirtieth of August. I went bathing on that day.  
 I was a girl then, Teusret, and played with the Nile  
 As though with a sister. And afterwards as I waded  
 To land again, pushing the river with my knees,  
 The wash rocked a little ark out  
 Into the daylight: and in the ark I found  
 A tiny weeping Israel who had failed  
 To be exterminated. When I stooped  
 With my hair dripping on to his face  
 He stopped in a screwed-up wail and looked.  
 And when I found my hands and crowded him  
 Into my breast, he buried like a burr.  
 And when I spoke I laughed, and when I laughed  
 I cried, he was so enchanting. I was ready  
 To raise a hornet's nest to keep him; in fact  
 I raised one. All the court flew up and buzzed.  
 But what could they do? Not even my Pharaoh-father  
 Could sting him out of my arms. So he grew up  
 Into your tall cousin, Egyptian  
 From beard to boots and, what was almost better,  
 A soldier of genius. You don't remember  
 How I held you on this terrace, to see him come home from war?  
 It was ten years ago. Do you remember  
 The shrieking music, and half Egypt shouting  
 Conqueror! Peacemaker!

*Teusret.* No.

*Anath.* They have all tried to forget.  
 They have blotted him out of the records, but not out  
 Of my memory.

*Teusret.* Why did they blot him out?  
 I can never get at the truth of what came next.  
 I sometimes overhear his name muttered  
 In the corridors, between servants or the soldiers.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

ACT I, SC. 1

THE FIRSTBORN

5

But when they see me they stop their conversation.  
 I have seen my father fidget at the name of a battle  
 And change the subject. What is it all about?  
 Moses was a prince of this house, my cousin.  
 Now he is someone not to be spoken of.  
 “The murder” I’ve heard them say, and “Since the murder”.  
 What did he do? Did he go mad or something?

*Anath.* I might have known that I should say too much.

*Teusret.* Aunt, you must tell me.

*Anath.* Well, no doubt I meant to.

The day I held you here, he came as the conqueror  
 Of Abyssinia. In all the windows and doors  
 Women elbowed and cracked their voices; and men  
 Hung on the gates and the trees; and children sang  
 The usual songs, conducted by their teachers.  
 As for me, nothing would stop me shaking.  
 As for him, as for Moses, he was as tired  
 As a dog, and stumbled when he climbed the steps to the palace.  
 There was a brilliant reception. He was decorated  
 By your grandfather.

*Teusret.* Yes, but what happened to make him—

*Anath.* All right, I’m coming to it, Teusret. The day after,  
 For the country-side also to be able to see the hero,  
 He went to inspect the city being built at Pithom.—  
 My book was closed from that day forward.  
 He went round with an officer who unfortunately  
 Was zealous but unintelligent. Silly man:  
 Silly, silly man. He found a labourer  
 Idling or resting, and he thought, I suppose,  
 “I’ll show this prince that I’m worth my position”  
 And beat the workman. A Jewish bricklayer.  
 He beat him senseless.

*Teusret.* And then?

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

6

THE FIRSTBORN

ACT I, SC. 1

*Anath.*

What happened then

I only know out of the sleepless nights  
 Which I endured afterwards. In those nights  
 I made myself a knowledge, and believe it.  
 Moses turned—turned to what was going on—  
 Turned himself and his world turtle. It was  
 As though an inward knife scraped his eyes clean.  
 The General of Egypt, the Lion and the Prince  
 Recognized his mother's face in the battered body  
 Of a bricklayer; saw it was not the face above  
 His nursery, not my face after all.  
 He knew his seed. And where my voice had hung till then  
 Now voices descending from ancestral Abraham  
 Congregated on him. And he killed  
 His Egyptian self in the self of that Egyptian  
 And buried that self in the sand.

*Teusret.*

Aunt—

*(Enter A GUARD)**Guard.*

The Pharaoh.

Madam, the Pharaoh is here.

*Anath.*

Can we look innocent?

*(Enter SETI. Exit THE GUARD)**Teusret.* Good morning, father.*Seti.*

Go indoors, my Teusret.

*(Exit TEUSRET)*

*Anath.* Is the day such vexation? Did you listen to me  
 And sleep apart from your empire for one night?  
 You didn't. Egypt has argued in the dark again  
 While the night struck bitter bells on every clock.  
 Look at you! Your eyes are deaf with listening  
 To your wretched pillows, Seti.

*Seti.*

Where is Moses?

*Anath.* Seti!

ACT I, SC. 1

THE FIRSTBORN

7

*Seti.* Where is Moses? You will know.  
 In what country? Doing what?

*Anath.* Why Moses?

*Seti.* I need him.

*Anath.* I've no reason to remember.  
 I'm without him.

*Seti.* But you know.

*Anath.* Why should I know?  
 Why should I? When the sun goes down do I have to know  
 Where and how it grovels under the world?

I thought he was a dust-storm we had shut outside.

Even now I sometimes bite on the grit.

*Seti.* Time has made it easier. The men are dead  
 Who wanted his death-sentence. I must have him home.

*Anath.* Indeed you've not slept!

*Seti.* I have found him necessary.  
 Libya is armed along the length of her frontier,  
 And the South's like sand, shifting and uncertain.  
 I need Moses.—We have discarded in him  
 A general of excellent perception.

*Anath.* He's discarded, rightly or wrongly. We've let him go.

*Seti.* Deeds lie down at last, and so did his.  
 Out in the wilderness, after two days' flight,  
 His deed lay down, knowing what it had lost him.  
 Under the boredom of thorn-trees his deed cried out  
 For Egypt and died. Ten years long he has lugged  
 This dead thing after him. His loyalty needn't be questioned.

*Anath.* We're coming to something strange when a normal day  
 Opens and lets in the past. He may remember  
 Egypt. He's in Midian.

*Seti.* In what part of Midian?

*Anath.* Wherever buckets are fetched up out of wells  
 Or in his grave.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

8

## THE FIRSTBORN

ACT I, SC. 1

*Seti.* We'll find him. If we have to comb  
 Midian to its shadows we'll find him.

*Anath.* He's better where he is.

*Seti.* He is essential to my plans.

*Anath.* I tell you

He is better where he is. For you or me

He's better where he is.

We have seen different days without him

And I have done my hair a different way.

Leave him alone to bite his lips.

*Seti.* He and I

Were boys who went well together, in spite of a difference

In age. He was old for his years. We were excellent friends.

*Anath.* Boys go home from school. After a time

All boys become initials cut in wood.

*Seti.* Prepare yourself to see him back.

*(His eye is caught by something below and beyond the terrace)*

What's this,

What is this crowd?

*Anath.* It's Ramases! No qualms

For the dynasty, with a son as popular as he is.

*Seti.* There's half the city round him. Where are his guards?

*Anath.* There: a little behind.

*Seti.* The boy's too careless

Of himself. This mobbing is a fever and out of proportion.

You would think he had brought them a conquest; he might be a hero

The way they cheer him. They're even climbing the gates

To see him come through. What is the matter with you?

*Anath.* What do you mean?

*Seti.* You're shaking.

*Anath.* Nonsense, *Seti.*

*Seti.* I'm not altogether at rest in the way he's growing,



Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

ACT I, SC. 1

THE FIRSTBORN

9

Not altogether pleased with his free-and-easy good humour,  
 His good graces for no-matter-whom.

The young have keys that we have lost. They enter  
 Life by doors which were better never unlocked.

This easily-come-by popularity, for instance,  
 Is a danger above all dangerous to princes.

I don't like his drift or trust his politics.

*Anath.* What are his politics?

*Seti.* Exactly so;

What are they? There are no politics more dangerous  
 Than politics that don't seem to exist.

I can trust my enemy, trust him to be my enemy,  
 But Ramases follows unpredictable instincts.

They'll turn on him one of these days, like lion-cubs  
 Who play so innocently and later on

Find a mouth for blood. He must learn to abdicate  
 His heart and let the needs of Egypt rule there.

*Anath.* He will learn. He is learning.

*Seti.* Egypt should pray so.

*Anath.* I would hazard a guess that Egypt's women  
 Have prayed for him often enough. Ra, raising  
 An eyebrow stiff with the concentration of creation  
 Probably says: That boy again? We'd better  
 Make something of him early and have them satisfied.  
 O, Ramases will be all right.

*Seti.* I hope,

I hope.

*(Enter RAMASES, a boy of eighteen)*

*Ramases.* Did you see the excitement? I think it's the drought.  
 Like the air, we're all quivering with heat.

Do you find that, Aunt? Either you must sleep like the dead  
 Or something violent must happen.

*Anath.* Look: your father.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62922-6 - The Firstborn: A Play in Three Acts  
 Christopher Fry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

10

## THE FIRSTBORN

ACT I, SC. 1

*Ramases.* I didn't see you, father. I'm sorry, sir.  
 Did I interrupt state matters?

*Seti.* If they had been,  
 We should have fetched you here. What morning have you had?

*Ramases.* Holiday—books rolled up, military exercises  
 Over, and no social engagements. I've been fowling  
 Down at the marshes.

*Anath.* Any luck?

*Ramases.* Not much flesh  
 But a paradise of feathers. I was out before daybreak.

*Anath.* It's a good marksman who hunts by batlight.

*Ramases.* But I  
 Waited for daylight. Until then the marsh was a torpor.  
 I clucked and clapped as the sun rose  
 And up shot so much whistle and whirr  
 I could only hold my spear and laugh.  
 All the indignant wings of the marshes  
 Flocking to the banner of Tuesday  
 To avoid the Prince of Egypt!  
 Off they flapped into the mist  
 Looking about for Monday  
 The day they had lived in peace: and finding nothing  
 Back they wheeled to Tuesday.  
 I had recovered myself by then and killed  
 One that had the breast of a chestnut.  
 At last he could feel the uninterrupted darkness  
 Of an addled egg. I watched his nerves flinching  
 As they felt how dark that darkness was.  
 I found myself trying to peer into his death.  
 It seemed a long way down. The morning and it  
 Were oddly separate,  
 Though the bird lay in the sun: separate somehow  
 Even from contemplation.