

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
*Erotic
Literature*

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EGYPTIAN LOVE POETRY, ANCIENT

Ancient Egyptian love poems have survived antiquity in the form of four papyrus collections, a number of small fragments, and one large ostrakon. Though all of these materials hail from the period 1300–1150 BCE, the language employed in them reflects a more archaic stage of development, suggesting that the poems might be copies or later editions of earlier love lyric traditions.

Native terms applied to these materials include "songs" (ʿsw), "utterances" (rʿw), and "sayings" (tsw). A number of poems also open with the words "the beginning of the song of entertainment" (ʿ>t-> m ʿsΔmΔ-ib). This title appears also in a few tombs in conjunction with banquet and dancing imagery, suggesting that at least some of the love poems served as diversions at festive occasions.

Though the poems themselves do not appear to have been used in ritual contexts, in a few cases, cultic settings provide literary contexts for the lyrics. Thus, the lovers who speak and are described in the poems are sometimes said to be en route to a cultic festival or center. Some of the poems also employ language elsewhere associated with deities, especially Hathor, the goddess of love. In one poem, Hathor is even invoked by a lover for her help in securing her beloved's perpetual affection.

Egyptian love lyrics are well known for their sophisticated language and emotive contents. Each of the extant poems records the innermost desires of male and female lovers who laud their love for each other, albeit indirectly, in the first person and in alternating stanzas. Periodically,

the poet also makes his voice known. Though the lovers frequently address each other as "sister" and "brother," as well as by a few royal epithets, no incestual relationship is implied. Typically the poems express premarital desires (only one of the poems references marriage explicitly) and often characterize love as a state of mutual bliss and perpetual sensual desire.

A number of topics and themes pervade the love poems, many of which reflect the rich Nile landscape, with its serene and reliable waters and fertile flora and fauna. Thus in Papyrus (P.) Chester Beatty I, we find the female voice describing her lover as "a gazelle prancing over the desert." Elsewhere the beloved is likened to heavenly bodies. The male voice in the aforementioned poem, for example, describes his beloved as "more lovely than all women, look, she is like the Sothis star rising, signaling a happy year!"

Often the lovers describe each other by listing their most alluring bodily features, sometimes equating them with flowers and the attributes of animals. P. Chester Beatty I, for example, portrays the woman as saying, "He offered me the delights of his body; his height is greater than his width!" P. Harris 500 employs agricultural language: "I am yours like an acre planted with flowers for me, and with every kind of sweet-smelling herb."

In one poem, pomegranate and fig trees do the speaking and eventually offer the lovers shade. Throughout, the lovers' innermost desires are expressed self-consciously, even insecurely. They are love-sick for each other, and yet often

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their attempts at secret trysts are frustrated. In one poem, P. Harris 500, the male lover even feigns illness to get the woman's attention: "I'll lie down inside, then I will fake sickness, then my neighbors will come in to visit, then (my) 'sister' will come along with them. She will put the doctors to shame, because she knows what really ails me!" The love-sick state of the lovers sometimes provides the poet with an opportunity to describe the lover as a medicine. Thus, in P. Chester Beatty I, we: "Greater is she to me than the compendium. My *wd3* is her entering from the outside. Seeing her, then, is health—she opens my eyes, rejuvenating my body." This verse also demonstrates the literary sophistication that one finds in these poems. Here, the Egyptian word *wd3* is used for its polysemous nature. On the one hand, it refers to the Eye of Horus, a magical amulet used by Egyptian doctors and embalmers for resuscitating life; and on the other, the pictorial dimensions of the script suggest "seeing" (the word is written with the image of an eye). The poet underscores these associations by saturating the poem with references to seeing, medicine, doctors, diagnoses, and rejuvenation. Such puns are common in the Egyptian love poems.

Metaphorical language abounds, and much of it is shared among the collections. One hears, for example, frequent references to locked doors, morning's first light, and love as an intoxicating liquor. Egyptian love poetry offers a veritable feast for the senses. Taste, sight, touch, smell are all referenced. Thus, in P. Harris 500, we find: "[T]he scent of your nostrils, only you, is what revives my heart!" A great many features, including some of the aforementioned themes and metaphors, appear also in the biblical Song of Songs, which has led some scholars to see Egyptian influence in the biblical poem.

Unlike the erotic elements in Mesopotamian love poetry, the erotic aspects of Egyptian love poetry are rarely explicit, but are instead often expressed by way of euphemisms, innuendos, and double entendres. In P. Chester Beatty I,

we read: "You will have your desire with her door-bolt, and the porticoes will shake. The sky descends with a breath of its wind, so that it brings you her perfume." In P. Harris 500, we find: "My sister's mansion, her door is in the midst of her home. Her doors are open, the bolt is unlocked.... Oh that I were made the door-keeper!" Sometimes, metaphors are chosen for their sexual charge, like the aphrodisiacs mentioned in P. Harris 500: "Sister is a lotus bud, her breasts are mandrakes." Such subtlety goes in the face of a number of Egyptian artistic representations (as well as mythological texts) that do not shy from graphically portraying sexual activity. Be that as it may, rich metaphors and the tight structural patterns of the oscillating monologues are sufficient to evoke erotic tensions and lend to the poems' exquisite beauty.

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