

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# EGYPTIAN POETRY

## Egyptian Lyric

Ancient Egypt equals its Ancient Greek counterpart, in artistic achievement. From the pyramids and temples that meet us in the third millennium B.C.E., to the love poetry that seems astonishingly contemporary to us—though dating from the still ancient aesthetic revolution of the 19th and 20th dynasties—1290-1078 B.C.E.—the Egyptian mark on literature, visual art, and religious thought is strong and distinctive. Thanks to the privileging of historical context, and cultural familiarity, ancient Greece got the ear of later centuries, while the Egyptians world got buried in the sand. But this imbalance yields, on a closer look, to the sense that our attention should fall on Ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures, if we want to understand the true achievements of either Greeks or Egyptians.

The background to the explosion of verbal art, in Egyptian love poetry, looms over the lyric's sensuous outbreak in the innovative theological poetry of the first 'nearly Monotheistic,' sun worshipping Pharaoh Akhnaten (d. 1336 B.C.E.) The passionate sense of nature's course, in Akhnaten's *Hymn to Aten*, readies us for the marshes, hunting scenes, fleeing gazelles which stud the natural backdrop of the love lyric we discover in the 'aesthetic revolution,' above, the lyric created not so remote in time from the brilliant creations of the Greek Sappho and Archilochus, in the seventh century B.C.E.

What most stuns us, in this accessible Egyptian love poetry, is the ease of reading it today—that despite the frequent lacunae in the papyrus texts, which make the basic interpretation of many lines difficult. The overall play of this poetry, however, is never difficult to grasp: from the 'red fish in the water,' Norton I, pp. 119-20, to the 'milk shot through water' (p. 122) to the 'Moringa oils/ in her diaphanous garments...' (p. 124). It is in fact the Greek Sappho who most comes to mind, as a parallel to the directness, simplicity, and passion of this lyric outburst.

### ***Egyptian Love Poems*** 13th Century B.C. (Egypt)

**Emotion in language.** Egyptian love poems, from the thirteenth century B.C., open our way to what seems a direct expression of emotion, and a verbal field on which we can read without endless footnotes, cautions, and uncertainties. (And without that awesome sense of strangeness that the *Pyramid Texts* or *Book of the Dead* enforce in style and narrative technique.) We should no doubt keep some guard up, for where ready feeling offers itself there is always room for delusion and even deception. The comparison of alternate translations is one way to remind ourselves that the original is never of a single meaning, but in literary work flays out into multiple meanings. And that reflection will remind us that the quest for selfhood, and for ways for formulate it, is (in literary art) a byproduct of language. The language of poetry is inherently ambiguous, and thrives on a margin of half clarity, and is in that different from the languages of, say, the *Code of Hammurabi*, which *proscribes* and lays down, or the language of *The Instruction for Merikare*, which *prescribes*. We will start with a juxtaposition of two translations of a single text, whose language neither proscribes nor prescribes, but *suggests*.

**The languages of translation.** The distinguished pioneer Egyptologist, Adolf Erman, published his *Ancient Egyptian Literature* in 1923, and in it we read (itself a translation from German into English) the following:

\_\_\_\_my god. My brother, it is pleasant to go to the (pond) in order to bathe me in thy presence, that I may let thee see my beauty in my tunic of finest royal linen, when it is wet\_\_\_\_I go down with thee into the water, and come forth again to thee with a red fish, which (lieth?) beautiful on my fingers\_\_\_\_Come and look at me.

(Erman, p. 248; trans. Blackman, 1927).

The language is an archaized English—itsself a kind of translation, of seventeenth century English/ King James Bible translation language—and simulates a difficulty of disengaging meaning from material (papyrus) not easily read, and syntax not easily converted into the languages of English poetry. This is the kind of anti-English English translation which we will find generative in Week 14, when we turn to lived verbal creations of our time, in which Ancient Near Eastern Literature becomes part of English language newspeak. Erman's translation work contrasts sharply with our second example (in a volume translated 2001), also by a talented Egyptologist:

Love, how I'd love to slip down to the pond,  
    Bathe with you close by on the bank.  
Just for you I'd wear my new Memphis swimsuit,  
    Made of sheer linen, fit for a queen—  
Come see how it looks in the water!

Couldn't I coax you to wade in with me?  
    Let the cool creep slowly around us?  
Then I'd dive deep down  
    And come up for you dripping,  
Let you fill your eyes  
    With the little red fish that I'd catch.

(John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2001; p. 23.)

Foster's translation not only smoothes and charms, where Erman/Blackman scrape rough meanings straight off the papyrus, but Foster also attempts to simulate the meter and rhythm of Egyptian poetry, an effort Erman (p. xxxi in his Introduction) speculates on, but makes no effort at.

**Reaching the past through language.** Translation is the hidden issue below that 'distance' of Ancient Near Eastern literature, which we discussed in our first paragraph this week. (As a student of literatures not native to you, you may want to reflect on the enormous importance of translation as a whole, is establishing our senses of the creative traditions of our world. ) That being said, however, it remains true that Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry, of the Ramasside Period (13<sup>th</sup> century. B.C.), does what it can to touch broadly human registers, and thus to overcome its birth passage to us through language and artifact barriers—papyrus quickly dries and cracks, and is rarely intact; stelae are often hard to read--not to mention the pure hazards of location and discovery. In this week's readings you will find poems by women as well as men, sensuous as well as longing poems, and lustful poems.

**Selfhood and the love lyric.** It is from this small collection that we now pay our weekly homage to the issue of selfhood and the person. The language before us, in whatever translation, is clearly one of suggestion and implication, as distinct from the languages of law, manners, or religious adulation. (We can see that suggestive trait of this language, even through the mist of translation.) The expression of longing, passion, nostalgia, which drives Egyptian love lyrics, is at bottom just a distinctive kind of language, the language of feeling yes but in a deeper sense the language of implication and suggestion. Is this language of poetry different from the language of prose, say from that of *The Tale of Sinuhe*? It is difficult to answer, given our distance in time and language from the texts in question. *The Tale of Sinuhe*, we might want to say, is as allusive/suggestive as the love-poems we are reading, but the language of the tale is more causatively sequential, and narrative. In either case, *Sinuhe* or the love-poem, it is the self-identity of the narrator that provides the driving eros of the piece, and that keeps us under a spell that at the same time involves ourselves.

## Reading

John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* pp. 17-31.

Foster, John L., *Love Songs of the New Kingdom*, Austin, 1992.

Adolf Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 254-310.

Wilson, Penelope, *Sacred signs: Hieroglyphics in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, 2003.

## Discussion Questions

1 Historically speaking, we in the West seem to inherit our cultural and artistic values more from the Greco-Roman than from the ancient Egyptian tradition. How do you explain this state of affairs? What is responsible for it?

2 It is easy to say, and has some truth, that ancient Egyptian love poems are very modern. But is it true? Are the translations you look at, of Egyptian love poetry, characteristic of the way an English language poet would express his or her love today?

3 Does the *Hymn to Aten* use sensuous language, like the love poems we have just discussed? Does it bring the god directly into the world of sensuous experience?

4 Is there any norm for good translation? Should it be as literal as possible, and try to replicate (in the case of poetry) the meter and even sound of the original? Or should the translation of poetry strive for a new version entirely in the new language? This is a classic conundrum in translation theory, and there have been as many responses as translators. Do you have a position on this issue? Do you prefer Foster or Erman, from our own brief survey above? What is your impression of the translations we have been reading in this course? Is there any text that seemed to you to fare especially badly in its English version, and if so what do you surmise was the problem?

5 Do *The Tale of Sinuhe*, *Gilgamesh*, and the love poems we have read seem to you have in common that they all spring from the imagination? We have implied that point repeatedly here, in an effort to consider the width of the range of the texts that go into this class. But are we to think there is not imagination in the *Enuma Elish* or that there is nothing but imagination in the kinds of love poetry we are reading? If imagination means what is created from within special wholeness-establishing powers of the person, might we not say that the pond-poem we sampled above is rather a literal descriptive statement of an emotional condition, while, say, the *Enuma Elish* employs the imagination of huge cosmic conflicts—rather like Milton?—even while purporting to account for the actuality of events in heavenly time? What, finally, do you think of our tripartite division of three kinds of language? Is it proving a useful guide for you as you move through these archaic texts?

6 As you peruse the love lyrics in Erman or Foster, do you accept Foster's view, that when it comes to 'love lyrics' the universal kicks in; we all understand what is going on here, in a way we do not with, say, a creation hymn or a hymn to the sun. Erman's translation segment, above, seems to suggest that at least the flowing syntax of Foster's translation must have cost something in the course of 'smoothing out' the original. Nevertheless, though, do you buy into the idea that the way the 'romantic' is expressed in widely different cultures will be fairly consistent and similar—as distinct, say, from the way the languages of high theology are expressed?