

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SECULAR POETRY

This selection of ancient Egyptian love poems was recovered from pieces of papyrus and shards of pottery, most of which were uncovered in Deir el-Medina, a village of tomb builders during the New Kingdom. Here, many skilled artisans worked on the tombs of Ramses II and Tutankhamun.

The evidence of these poems indicates that these villagers may have been remarkably literate for their time. These poems were likely set to music and used images and events from daily life as metaphors.

These poems are all monologues and fall into two general categories: praise songs and personal introspections. There are often clear differences between the poems that have female speakers and those that have male speakers.

Note: The terms 'brother' and 'sister' were used by Egyptian lovers to indicate intimacy and affection. Some early Egyptologists believed that marriage between siblings was common; however, this was not true. Royal siblings sometimes married in order to keep power within families, but this was not the case with ordinary people.

The Flower Song (Excerpt)

*To hear your voice is pomegranate wine to me:
I draw life from hearing it.
Could I see you with every glance,
It would be better for me
Than to eat or to drink.*

The Sister Without Peer

My one, the sister without peer,
The handsomest of all!
She looks like the rising morning star
At the start of a happy year.
Shining bright, fair of skin,
Lovely the look of her eyes,
Sweet the speech of her lips,
She has not a word too much.
Upright neck, shining breast,
Hair true lapis lazuli;
Arms surpassing gold,
Fingers like lotus buds.
Heavy thighs, narrow waist,
Her legs parade her beauty;
With graceful step she treads the ground,
Captures my heart by her movements.
She causes all men's necks
To turn about to see her;
Joy has he whom she embraces,
He is like the first of men!
When she steps outside she seems
Like that the Sun!

I Wish I Were Her Laundryman

If I could just be the washerman
doing her laundry for one month only,
I would be faithful to pick up the bundles,
Sturdy to beat clean the heavy linens,
But gentle to touch those finespun things
lying closest the body I love.

I would rinse with pure water the perfumes
that linger still in her tunics,
And I'd dry my own flesh with the towels
she yesterday held to her face.

The touch of her clothes, their textures,
her softness in them . . .

Thank god for the body,
its youthful vigor!

My Brother Torments My Heart

My brother torments my heart with his voice,
He makes sickness take hold of me;
He is neighbor to my mother's house.
And I cannot go to him!
Mother is right in charging him thus:
"Give up seeing her!"

It pains my heart to think of him,
I am possessed by love of him.
Truly, he is a foolish one,
But I resemble him;
He knows not my wish to embrace him,
Or he would write to my mother.

Brother, I am promised to you
By the golden of women!
Come to me that I see your beauty,
Father, mother will rejoice!
My people will hail you all together,
They will hail you, O my brother!

My Heart Flutters Hastily

My heart flutters hastily,
When I think of my love of you;
It lets me not act sensibly,
It leaps from its place.
It lets me not put on a dress,
Nor wrap my scarf around me;
I put no paint upon my eyes,
I'm even not anointed.
"Don't wait, go there," says it to me,
As often as I think of him;

My heart, don't act so stupidly,
Why do you play the fool?
Sit still, the brother comes to you,
And many eyes as well.
Let not the people say of me:
"A woman fallen through love!"
Be steady when you think of him,
My heart, do not flutter!

I Passed before His House

I passed before his house,
I found his door ajar;
My brother stood by his mother,
And all his brothers with him.
Love of him captures the heart
Of all who tread the path;
Splendid youth who has no peer,
Brother outstanding in virtues!
He looked at me as I passed by,
And I, by myself, rejoiced;

How my heart exulted in gladness,
My brother, at your sight!
If only the mother knew my heart,
She would have understood by now;
O Golden One, put it in her heart,
Then will I hurry to my brother!
I will kiss him before his companions,
I would not weep before them;
I would rejoice at their understanding
That you acknowledge me!
I will make a feast for my goddess,
My heart leaps to go;
To let me see my brother tonight,
O happiness in passing!

Sickness Invaded Me

Seven days since I saw my sister,
And sickness invaded me;
I am heavy in all my limbs,
My body has forsaken me.
When the physicians come to me,
My heart rejects their remedies;
The magicians are quite helpless,
My sickness is not discerned.
To tell me "She is here" would revive me!
Her name would make me rise;
Her messenger's coming and going,
That would revive my heart!
My sister is better than all prescriptions,
She does more for me than all medicines;
Her coming to me is my amulet,
The sight of her makes me well!
When she opens her eyes my body is young,
Her speaking makes me strong;
Embracing her expels my malady—
Seven days since she went from me!

How Well She Knows to Cast the Noose

How well she knows to cast the noose,
And yet not pay the cattle tax!
She casts the noose on me with her hair,
She captures me with her eye;
She curbs me with her necklace,
She brands me with her seal ring.

Her Love Gives Me Strength

My love is on the far side.
The river is between our bodies;
The waters are mighty at flood-time,
A crocodile waits in the shallows.
I enter the water and brave the waves,
My heart is strong on the deep;
The crocodile seems like a mouse to me,
The flood is land to my feet.

It is her love that gives me strength,
It makes a water-spell for me;
I gaze at my heart's desire,
As she stands facing me!
My sister has come, my heart exults,
My arms spread out to embrace her;
My heart bounds in its place,
Like the red fish in its pond.

O night, be mine forever,
Now that my queen has come!

I Devised to Drink in Her Beauty

I devised to drink in her beauty while sitting in her house.

On the way, there was Mehy in his chariot, with his enchanted men in tow
(How could I escape?) Could I just walk on by?

But the Nile was the road where could I put my feet?
(O foolish heart! Why are you so anxious to avoid Mehy?)

If I pass by him, he will see where I am going!
It is as good as surrendering to him.

Then he will call my name and put me in first place among his devotees.

A Woman's Lost Love

Lost! Lost! Lost! O lost my love to me!
He passes by my house, nor turns his head,
I deck myself with care; he does not see.
He loves me not.

Would God that I were dead!

God! God! God! O Amun, great of might!
My sacrifice and prayers, are they in vain?
I offer to thee all that can delight,
Hear thou my cry and bring my love again.
Sweet, sweet, sweet as honey in my mouth,
His kisses on my lips, my breast, my hair;

But now my heart is as the sun-scorched South,
Where lie the fields deserted, grey and bare.
Come! Come! Come! And kiss me when I die,
For life, compelling life, is in thy breath;
And at that kiss, though in the tomb I lie,
I will arise and break the bands of Death.

I Shall Lie Down

I shall lie down in the house
And pretend to be ill.

Then my neighbors will drop in to see me,
And my beloved will come with them.
She will send the physicians away,
For (only) she understands my illness.

The House of My Beloved

The house of my Beloved:
The entrance to her (room) is at the heart of the house,
Her double doors are open,
Their bolt is unlatched,
And my beloved is angry.

If only I could be appointed as door keeper!
I would make her irate at me,
And so I would hear her voice when she is riled,
And I would make like a child in the face of her anger.