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The Different Perspectives of Love in Ancient Egypt

Most of Ancient Egyptian literature was mythology and religious writing; however, many secular works were also written in Egypt. In Deir El-Medina, a village of tomb builders, pieces of papyrus containing secular poems were discovered. These poems mainly focused on the topic of love, and were written by both male and female speakers. The male speakers typically focused on the physical aspect of love and had a positive view of love, while female speakers mainly had a negative view of love and focused more on the emotional aspects of it.

One major difference between poems with male speakers and those with female speakers is that poems written by males generally had a more positive view of love, while those written by females had a negative view of love. In the poem “Sickness Invaded Me,” the male speaker describes how he is ill and that the only thing that could save him would be “to tell [him] ‘She is here’” (9). He states that “The sight of her makes [him] well” and that “her speaking makes [him] strong” (17-19). Similarly to the speaker of the poem “I Wish I Were Her Laundryman,” the speaker of this poem describes his desire to be with the woman he loves, and has an optimistic view of the future. His “sickness” is a metaphor for his longing to be with the woman who left him, and he describes how getting back together with her would cure him of this sickness. Rather than focus on how he is depressed about the fact that the woman he loves has broken up with him, the speaker chooses to focus on how this depression would be over the

second that he saw the woman. Thus, even with his depression, he still has a positive outlook on love. Contrarily, poems with female speakers tended to focus on the negative aspects of love. In the poem "A Woman's Lost Love," the speaker describes how she wishes that the man that she loves would acknowledge her. She states that she "deck[s] [her]self with care; he does not see. He loves me not. Would God that I were dead!" (3-5). In this poem, the speaker believes that the man that she loves does not notice her at all, and thus he does not love her, and because of this, she wishes that she were dead. This contrasts with poems with male speakers, because in poems with male speakers, the speaker mainly focuses on how cheerful they would be if they could be with the people that they love, whereas in this poem, the speaker wishes that her life would end because the man that she loves does not love her back.

Another major difference between poems with male speakers and those with female speakers is that male speakers focused on the physical aspects of love, whereas females focused more on the emotional aspects. In the poem "I Wish I Were Her Laundryman," the male speaker describes how he would be excited to do the laundry of the woman that he loves. He discusses if he were the woman's laundryman, he would "dry [his] own flesh with the towels she yesterday held to her face" (9-10). By describing how he would enjoy being near the clothes that the woman wears, the speaker shows that he values the physical state of being with the woman, and how he would be content with only having the clothing that touches her. In the poem "The Sister Without Peer," the male speaker describes the physical traits of the woman he loves. He describes "the look of her eyes," "the speech of her lips," her "heavy thighs, narrow waist," and her "graceful step." The speaker of this does not describe the personality of the woman or any emotional connection that he has to her; rather, the entire poem focuses on her physical beauty. Contrarily, poems written by females focused on the emotional aspects of love. In "My Brother

Torments My Heart,” a poem written by a female speaker, the speaker focuses on her emotional connection with the man she loves. She describes how “his voice” “torments [her] heart” and how he “is ... foolish”, but she “resembles him” because of that (1-10). The speaker of this poem focuses on the man’s voice and personality rather than on his appearance and physical beauty. This directly contrasts the poems with male speakers, which generally focused on how they felt that the women were beautiful without discussing any personal emotional connection to them.

The poems discovered at Deir el-Medina demonstrate the differences between male and female views of love in Ancient Egypt. While males had a positive view of love and focused on the physical attributes of the women that they loved, females had a more negative view of love and focused more on their emotional connections to the people that they loved.