

# GLOBAL HUMANITIES READER

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## VOLUME I

### Engaging Ancient Worlds and Perspectives

#### VOLUME EDITORS:

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## Egyptian Love Poetry

### SNAPSHOT BOX

**LANGUAGE:** Ancient Egyptian

**DATE:** c. 11th century BCE

**LOCATION:** Egypt

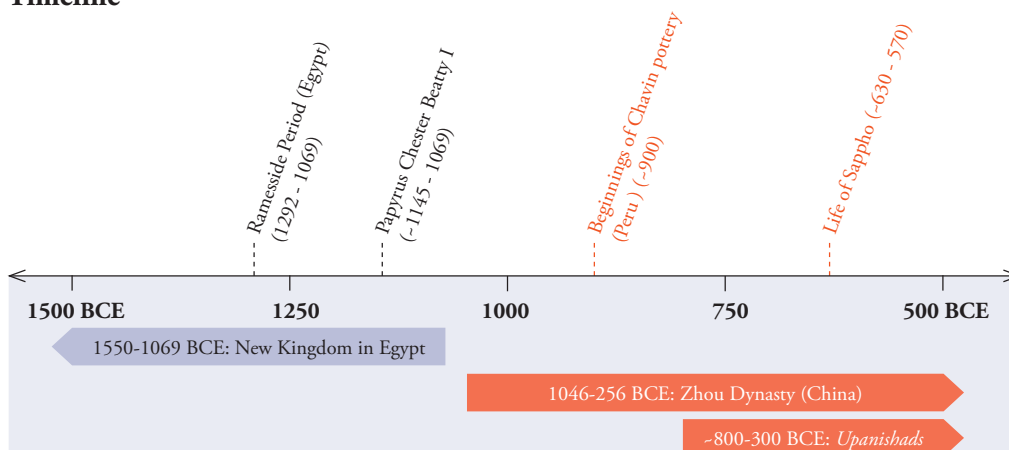
**TAGS:** Aesthetics; Emotion; Family; Love

### Introduction

Several anonymous collections of love poetry have survived from Ancient Egypt, totalling about fifty poems, all dating from the late New Kingdom. The poem given here is found on the back of a **papyrus scroll** currently held in the British Museum, called Papyrus Chester Beatty I, named for the individual who purchased it on the antiquities market in Egypt. The scroll is a compilation of several works of literature and even includes a copy of a receipt for the purchase of an ox! While some love poetry personifies and expounds upon the idea of love itself, Egyptian love poems portray the thoughts and emotions of people who are in love from the first-person perspective. The present selection is a single poem made up of seven stanzas, each with a single speaker, alternating between a female and a male voice.

The professional book maker who copied the poems onto the scroll gave them a title at the beginning: “The Sayings of the Great Happiness.” Explicit titles are rare for ancient works of literature. The Egyptian word for happiness also means “entertainment.” One scholar has suggested that it should be read as “The Great Entertainer,” referring to the poem’s author.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, since the gender of the noun “entertainer” in Egyptian is written here as feminine (the noun usually being masculine), this poem may be a rare ancient example of a work of literature authored by a woman. Prominent Egyptian women were priestesses as well as professional singers and harp players in temples, and thus would have been literate,

### Timeline



54. Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 55–56.

inviting a comparison with the Mesopotamian high priestess Enheduanna. Naming the author of these poems would be striking, since, as a rule, ancient Egyptian literature was anonymously written. Regardless of whether the author is named, can you find any clues to support an argument for female authorship based on the text of the poem alone?

The word “entertainment” literally means “make the heart forgetful” in Egyptian. For the reader or hearer, this poem provided a break from the difficulties of life. Forgetfulness of the heart is also relevant to the portrayal of the lovers in the poem. They take turns speaking at length (about twenty lines at a time) about their beloved, but instead of speaking directly to them, they address others who are listening, or their own hearts in soliloquy. They appear to be young and in the beginning stages of falling in love with each other. They call each other “brother” and “sister” out of affection, much like we use the same terms today, though in our case with friendly, not romantic, connotations. The young lovers reproach their own heart for its foolishness, describing it as fluttering, leaping, and exulting at the presence or even mere thought of their beloved. At times, the heart is treated like an independent entity with thoughts and feelings of its own. How does the author’s description of the experience of love compare to your own? Love also leads to an exuberance of language, making the creative medium of poetry particularly apt. A striking example of the typical descriptive language of Egyptian love poetry is the first stanza, where the young man describes his beloved from head to toe with a concoction of adjectives, metaphors, and similes drawn from a wide range of human experience.<sup>55</sup>

This love poetry would have been read and copied by students learning how to write hieroglyphs as they become trained to be **scribes**, similar to *Amenemope* (see page 77). Copies of Egyptian love poems have been found on chips of stone or shards of pots useful as scratch paper for students. For us, the idea of entertainment is often considered to be at odds with education. However, as you read the verses, how might this poetry be interpreted as conveying lessons about love? It also served as an engaging medium for practicing vocabulary as seen in its use of difficult language and rare words (which do not come across in the translation). An intriguing feature of this poem is how each stanza begins and ends with a pun or wordplay on its number. For example, in stanza 2, the word “brother” resembles the Egyptian word for the number “2.”

It is also possible that the scribe who created the surviving copy of this poem adapted it from another source, such as folksong. As you read, you should ask yourself if this poetry shows any indications of an original oral context of performance. Look for signs not only in the words but also in the way you imagine the poem could

55. A similar type of poetic description of a beloved can be found in the biblical Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon, after its legendary author), chapters 4–6. This work of ancient Hebrew love poetry is akin to the Egyptian, though written centuries later.

have been performed. Re-create this by reading the poem out loud, taking note of how long it takes you from start to finish, as well as how long each speech takes to read. Would this be appropriate as a staged dialogue performed in front of an audience? Or could the individual speeches by the lovers be performed as actual serenades?

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## From Papyrus Chester Beatty I: A Cycle of Seven Stanzas

### Beginning of the sayings of the great happiness (First Stanza)

The 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 other One!

### Second Stanza

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 Gold 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!

### Third Stanza

My heart devised to see her beauty  
 While sitting down in her house;  
 On the way I met Mehy<sup>56</sup> on his chariot,  
 With him were his young men.  
 I knew not how to avoid him:  
 Should I stride on to pass him?  
 But the river was the road,  
 I knew no place for my feet.  
 My heart, you are very foolish,  
 Why accost Mehy?  
 If I pass before him,  
 I tell him my movements;  
 Here, I'm yours, I say to him,  
 Then he will shout my name,  
 And assign me to the first ...  
 Among his followers.

### Fourth Stanza

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:

56. By some accounts Mehy was a fictional character, by others a historical figure. Recent studies have identified a historical personage with this name, a military commander under the New Kingdom, King Seti I (c. 1295–1280 BCE). In literature, Mehy may have become a romantic hero.

“A woman fallen through love!”  
 Be steady when you think of him,  
 My heart, do not flutter!

### **Fifth Stanza**

I praise the Golden, I worship her majesty,  
 I extol the Lady of Heaven;  
 I give adoration to Hathor,<sup>57</sup>  
 Laudations to my Mistress!  
 I called to her, she heard my plea,  
 She sent my mistress to me;  
 She came by herself to see me,  
 O great wonder that happened to me!  
 I was joyful, exulting, elated,  
 When they said: “See, she is here!”  
 As she came, the young men bowed,  
 Out of great love for her.  
 I make devotions to my goddess,  
 That she grant me my sister as gift;  
 Three days now that I pray to her name,  
 Five days since she went from me!

### **Sixth Stanza**

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, put it in her heart,

57. Though Hathor is best known as the goddess of the sky, she was also the goddess of music, beauty, and love.

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!

### Seventh Stanza

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.<sup>58</sup>  
 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,<sup>59</sup>  
 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!

“Egyptian Love Poems (From Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Poem 1).” In *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Readings: The New Kingdom*, edited by Miriam Lichtheim, 182–85. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

58. In Ancient Egypt, both physicians and religious healers or magicians worked together in medical practice.

59. Medical manuals from Egypt describe numerous prescriptions like the one referenced here. These would include a pharmaceutical concoction, with instructions for preparation and application, often accompanied by a prayer, or even short mythological story, to be recited when the medicant was applied.