

Niall Dalton

October 2016

Section C

Ancient Secular Egyptian Poetry (Rewrite)

Love poems from ancient Egypt found in Deir el-Medina reveal that this village of tomb builders was highly literate for its time during the New Kingdom, when they built the tombs of Ramses II and Tutankhamen. Having to be skilled and able to read and write in order to construct the tombs, the people of Deir el-Medina were given special privileges. For example, they were given housing, had water taken to them, and were employed by the state. However, in return, they lived in isolation in order to protect the secrets of the tomb and were cut off from the greater Egyptian society. To combat the isolation, the people of Deir el-Medina used poetry, thought to be set to music, as a form of expression and wrote them on papyrus and shards of pottery. The two most popular forms of poetic expression in Deir el-Medina were praise songs and personal introspections, both of which were articulated through common ideas about love involving beauty, sickness, the heart, and excitement. Similes, metaphors, and personification were used to effectively portray these common beliefs about love.

Similes are an important form of figurative language that was used by the ancient Egyptians to give the reader a more complete depiction of love. One of the poems, *The Sister Without Peer*, describes the love the poet has for a woman without equal using a simile. The author illustrates that women's elegance in the final lines of the poem: "When she steps outside she seems / Like the Sun!" By comparing her to the importance and glory of the sun, a hugely significant object in Egyptian culture, the author demonstrates her unmatched grace and charm, and moreover, his love and appreciation of her. Therefore, this passage reveals a relation

between beauty and love in ancient Egypt. Likewise, in *Her Love Gives Me Strength*, the author talks about how the love of a woman makes him feel by saying how, when she comes, the author's "...heart exults, / [the author's] arms spread out to embrace her; / [the author's] heart bounds in its place, / Like the red fish in its pond." The author herein equates his heart to an excitable fish in a pond, which shows the energy and intensity of his love. Moreover, the color red is representative of passion and love, and hence the author's love in this poem is representative of the connection between love and excitement. Another simile can be found in *The House of My Beloved* and is used to convey a strong emotional connection between two people when the author says he wants to hear "... [his lover's] voice when she is riled, / And [the author] would make like a child in the face of her anger." The simile herein is used to show how the author playfully exposes his amusement in the face of his lover's anger, which testifies to his love towards her. Given these points, such similes in ancient Egyptian poems create a more vivid characterization of love that embodies the Egyptian's beliefs towards love.

Metaphorical statements were also used heavily in ancient Egyptian poetry to explore and contemplate feelings of love. For example, the author of *Sickness Invaded Me* details how his lover makes him feel through metaphors. One such metaphor references an amulet: "She does more for me than all medicines; / Her coming to me is my amulet." The metaphor in these lines portrays how the author's lover is highly valued to the author, even as much as something as prized as an amulet. Consequently, the author shows great appreciation for his lover. By the same token, *The Sister Without Peer* also expresses ideas about love through metaphors. The author compares his lover to precious materials, when he says that her "Hair [is] true lapis lazuli; / [with] Arms surpassing gold." Through comparing such expensive and treasured substances, the author signifies his lover's beauty. Similarly, *The Flower Song* also promotes the use of

metaphor in illustrating love when the author declares that “To hear [his lover’s] voice is pomegranate wine to [the author].” This passage relates a person’s voice to a sweet drink, pomegranate wine. In doing so, it conveys how the author appreciates the beauty of his lover’s voice and thus this passage communicates how love and beauty go beyond just physical appearance. Overall, such metaphors are crucial to depicting concepts of love in ancient Egyptian poetry.

Attributing human properties to a non-human object, otherwise known as personification, is also used in this poetry to maintain and promote the significance of emotion and love. The most prominent example of personification in is in relation to the heart. One instance of this usage is shown throughout *My Heart Flutters Hastily*. The author, stricken by love, complains that “[her heart] lets [her] not act sensibly, / It leaps from its place. / It lets [her] not put on a dress.” The heart is an important symbol of love in culture, even going back to ancient Egypt, as shown by this passage which uses personification to connect the heart to the excitement and confusion of love. Another example of personification of the heart occurs in *My Brother Torments My Heart*, where the author shows love sickness by saying her “...[lover] torments [her] heart with his voice, / He makes sickness take hold of [her].” Similar to the earlier passage, this one associates the heart with love. However, this passage also relates the heart specifically to the pain and jealousy that comes with love and sickness. A final poem, *How Well She Knows to Cast the Noose* expresses a comparable personification. The author is infatuated with a woman, who “...casts the noose on [the author] with her hair, / She captures [him] with her eye.” Hair, which cannot literally cast a noose on someone, and the eye, which likewise cannot literally capture someone, are personified to show the effect of the woman’s beauty and power on the author, thus demonstrating the idea that beautiful things are related to love. Hence, the

consequence of personification within ancient Egyptian poetry is to develop and exhibit the aforementioned beliefs associated with the heart and love.

Simile, metaphor, and personification are fundamental components to the development of ideas about love in ancient Egyptian poetry. They describe the various beliefs about love the people of Deir el-Medina had, such as those involving beauty, sickness, the heart, and excitement. The expression of feelings and ideas through figurative language is an important vessel in which to effectively portray unique human emotions, such as love. Furthermore, figurative language has a certain aesthetic that allows it to encapsulate such intricacies of humanity, which set us apart from all other known life. These unique emotions, a common thread throughout history, are indicative of the human experience, and poetry, such as that of the people of Deir el-Medina, as well as other forms of expression, are an unquestionably important mechanism in which to communicate these emotions and associated beliefs.