

an off-  
She  
2

ings was made.  
priests;<sup>1</sup>  
was made for me,  
a garden in its proper place,  
of Friend.  
aid with gold,<sup>2</sup>

and its kilt with electrum.

It is his Majesty who has caused this to be done.

There is no other lowly man for whom the like was done.

I was in the favours of the king's giving,  
until the day of landing came.<sup>3</sup>

*So it ends, from start to finish,<sup>4</sup>  
as found in writing.*

1. Sinuhe receives an endowment to support and continue his mortuary cult after death and burial. At the same time, the "garden" implies that this is a place of delight to which his spirit could return from the next world.

2. No gilded statue of a nonroyal person is known; gilding seems to have been reserved for the gods and the king. This is another instance of likely hyperbole, as is implied by the next

two lines. As he dies and is buried, Sinuhe's status becomes higher even than that of a normal member of the elite.

3. A euphemism for death. Since most travel in Egypt was by boat, one "landed" on the other side after death.

4. A short note by the copyist, known as a colophon, written in red at the end of the text.

## EGYPTIAN LOVE POEMS<sup>1</sup>

ca. 1300–1100 B.C.E.

Although love poetry must have existed in oral form in earlier periods, love poems only survive on papyri, potsherds, and flakes of limestone from the later part of the New Kingdom. Looking at the women musicians and nearly nude girls singing and dancing in the paintings on tomb walls, we can imagine that love songs were performed with music and dance at banquets. Composed in rather informal, at times graphic language, similar texts were also used in the cult of goddesses and in praise of royal women. Egyptian love poetry shows striking parallels with love poetry of other Near Eastern traditions,

such as the somewhat later Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible.

The lovers in the poems are young and often not yet free from parental supervision. As a gesture of endearment, they address each other as "brother" and "sister," words that have a broad meaning in ancient Egyptian. Roughly half of the poems are spoken by the girl, and half by the boy. (A small group, not represented in this selection, gives the words of the garden tree in whose shade the girl and boy have a tryst.) Many poems imagine situations in which the lovers might meet and make themselves attractive to each other: by

1. All selections translated by Michael V. Fox.

going into the water to retrieve a fish—an erotic symbol—the girl, for example, can make her dress transparent and expose her charms. Many of the poems brim with imagery of the pleasures of desire and sex, but some also

remind us how fleeting love can be: in one poem the girl worries, after the lovers have spent the night together, that the boy is now more interested in breakfast than in staying with her.

## The Beginning of the Song That Diverts the Heart

(Girl)

How beautiful is your beloved,<sup>2</sup>

the one adored of your heart,

when she has returned from the meadow!

My beloved, my darling,

my heart longs for your love—

all that you created!

I say to you:

See what happened!

I came ready to trap birds,

my snare in one hand,

my cage in the other,

together with my mat.<sup>3</sup>

All the birds of the land Punt<sup>4</sup>

have descended on Egypt,

anointed with myrrh.

The first to come

takes my bait.

Its fragrance comes from Punt,

its claws full of balm.<sup>5</sup>

My heart desires you.

Let us release it<sup>6</sup> together.

I am with you, I alone,

to let you hear the sound of my call,<sup>7</sup>

for my lovely myrrh-anointed one.

You are here with me,

as I set the snare.

Going to the field is pleasant (indeed)

for one who loves it.<sup>8</sup>

2. In the original, this is literally "your sister." *Sister* and *brother* are frequent terms of affection in the Egyptian love songs. The terms imply intimacy, not consanguinity.

3. Perhaps to be placed as a cover over the birdcage.

4. A region bordering on the southern Red Sea from which aromatics came, as well as an ideal location known as "God's Land."

5. Or "its claws are caught by the balm." (The

Egyptian can be read as a double entendre.) Birds were sometimes trapped by pitch smeared on a tree.

6. "It" is the "bait" mentioned before. This probably refers to the fulfillment of sexual desire.

7. Fowlers imitated bird calls to lure birds to the trap.

8. Just what "it" refers to is vague, perhaps intentionally so. Is it bird trapping? Lovemaking?

[My god, my Lotus . . .]

(Girl)

My god, my lotus . . .<sup>1</sup>

The north wind blows . . .

How pleasant it is to go to the river. . . .

My heart longs to go down

to bathe before you,

that I may show you my beauty

in a tunic of the finest royal linen,

drenched in fragrant oils,

my hair plaited in reeds.

I'd go down to the water with you,

and come out to you carrying a red fish,<sup>2</sup>

which feels just right in my fingers.

I'd set it before you,

while gazing at your beauty.

O my hero, my beloved,

come and see me!

(Boy)

My beloved's love

is over there, on the other side,

The river surrounds my body.<sup>3</sup>

The flood waters are powerful in this season,

and a crocodile waits on the sandbank.

Yet I went down to the water

to wade through the flood,

my heart brave in the channel.

I found the crocodile to be like a mouse,<sup>4</sup>

and the surface of the water like dry land to my feet.

It is her love

that makes me strong.

She casts a water spell for me!

I see my heart's beloved

standing right before me!

(Boy)

My beloved has come,

my heart rejoices,

my arms are open to embrace her.

My heart is as happy in its place

as a fish in its pond.

O night, you are mine forever,

since my lady came to me!

1. The lotus was the most important Egyptian flower, whose aroma was held to excite the senses. The "north wind" is the breeze that makes the heat bearable and brings the breath of life.

2. A tilapia, a well-known erotic symbol that was also used as an amulet made of red stone.

3. He has—at least in imagination—stepped into the Nile, braving its dangers to reach the girl on the other side.

4. This alludes to tales of magic in which a magician can turn a tiny figure into a crocodile and vice versa.

## [I wish I were her Nubian maid]

(Boy)

I wish I were her Nubian maid,

her attendant in secret,

as she brings her a bowl of mandragoras.<sup>1</sup>

It is in her hand,

while she gives pleasure.

In other words:

she would grant me

the hue of her whole body.<sup>2</sup>

(Boy)

I wish I were the laundryman

of my beloved's clothes,

for even just a month!

I would be strengthened

by grasping the garments

that touch her body.

For I would be washing out the moringa oils<sup>3</sup>

that are in her kerchief.

Then I'd rub my body

with her castoff garments,

and she . . .

O how I would be in joy and delight,

my body vigorous!

(Boy)

I wish I were her little signet ring,

the keeper of her finger!

I would see her love<sup>4</sup>

each and every day,

And I would steal her heart.

## [I passed close by his house]

Sixth Stanza<sup>1</sup>

(Girl)

I passed close by his house,

and found his door ajar.

My beloved was standing beside his mother,

and with him all his brothers and sisters.

Love of him captures the heart

of all who walk along the way—

1. The mandragora fruit was thought to be an aphrodisiac. It was also an erotic symbol, both for its flower and probably for its long taproot.  
2. In the boy's fantasy, he is a maidservant in the girl's bedchamber. He would offer fruit while the girl gave him pleasure. That is to say,

she would let him see her naked.  
3. Moringa oil was the normal ancient Egyptian oil, and evidently could be perfumed.  
4. Her capacity to inspire love.

1. This poem and the next are excerpted from a set of numbered stanzas.



a precious youth without peer,  
 a lover excellent of character!  
 He gazed at me when I passed by,  
 but I must exult alone. 10  
 How joyfully does my heart rejoice, my beloved,  
 since I first saw you!  
 If only mother knew my heart  
 she would go inside for a while.  
 O Golden One,<sup>2</sup> put that in her heart! 15  
 Then I could hurry to my beloved  
 and kiss him in front of everyone,  
 and not be ashamed because of anyone.  
 I would be happy to have them see  
 that you know me, 20  
 and would hold festival to my Goddess.  
 My heart leaps up to go forth  
 that I may gaze on my beloved.  
 How lovely it is to pass by!<sup>3</sup>

## [Seven whole days]

*Seventh Stanza*

(Boy)  
 Seven whole days<sup>1</sup> I have not seen my beloved.  
 Illness has invaded me,  
 my limbs have grown heavy,  
 and I barely sense my own body.  
 Should the master physicians come to me, 5  
 their medicines could not ease my heart.  
 The lector priests<sup>2</sup> have no good treatment,  
 because my illness cannot be diagnosed.  
 But if someone tells me, "Here she is!"—that will revive me.  
 Her name—that is what will get me up. 10  
 The coming and going of her messengers—  
 that's what will revive my heart.  
 More potent than any medicine is my beloved for me;  
 more powerful than the *Physician's Manual*.  
 Her coming in from outside is my amulet.<sup>3</sup> 15  
 If I see her, I'll become healthy.  
 If she but gives me a glance, my limbs will regain vigor.  
 If she speaks, I'll grow strong.  
 If I hug her, she'll drive illness from me.  
 But she has been gone for seven days. 20

2. Hathor, the goddess of love.  
 3. Each stanza in this seven-stanza song starts and ends by punning on a word. In Egyptian *six* and *pass by* sound alike.  
 1. The number seven is used because this is the seventh stanza. Ancient Egypt did not have

a seven-day week.  
 2. Specialists in religious and magical texts. Here the term means "magicians."  
 3. *Amulet* also means "well-being," and both senses apply here.

[Am I not here with you?]

(Girl)

Am I not here with you?

Then why have you set your heart to leave?

Why don't you embrace me?

Has my deed come back upon me?

If you seek to caress my thighs.

Is it because you are thinking of food

that you would go away?

Or because you are a slave to your belly?

Is it because you care about clothes?

Well, I have a bedsheet!

Is it because you are hungry that you would leave?

Then take my breasts

that their gift may flow forth to you.

Better a day in the embrace of my beloved

than thousands on thousands anywhere else!

## SETNE KHAMWAS AND NANEFERKAPTAH (SETNE 1)

ca. 250 B.C.E.

The protagonist of *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah*, and of another relatively well-preserved tale from the Ptolemaic period (332–30 B.C.E.), is based on the legendary son of the famous ruler Ramses II (ca. 1279–1213 B.C.E.), who was high priest of the god Ptah of Memphis and restored many ancient monuments. The fictional character is a magician who spends time in the old tombs of the necropolis, and in that way is comparable with his historical model. He is both a warning to others that one's ambitions should not overreach what is proper for human beings and a figure of fun, because his misjudgments get him into ridiculous situations.

The magic at the core of the Setne Khamwas tales had been a theme of Egyptian stories for at least fifteen hundred years. Egyptian magicians and healers were famous throughout the ancient Near East, and several motifs in the Setne tales have parallels in other ancient literatures, showing that they belonged to a wider literary world of the Near East and the Ancient Mediterranean.

*Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah* is set in the time of Ramses II, a thousand years before the tale was composed, but that period is made into the frame for yet older events, narrated by the deceased Ahwere, a king's daughter who had married her own brother,