
**AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF EMOTION: PERFORMANCE, AFFECT, AND
CULTURAL MEANING IN NEW KINGDOM EGYPTIAN LOVE
POETRY**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines New Kingdom ancient Egyptian love poetry as a culturally embedded form of emotional expression, advancing the concept of an “archaeology of emotion.” While existing scholarship has emphasized symbolism and genre, the cultural structuring of affect in these texts remains underexplored. Drawing on performance theory, cultural memory studies, and close textual analysis, the study situates these poems within their historical, social, and symbolic contexts. It argues that love is represented not as a static state but as a dynamic, embodied process structured through recurring patterns of longing, anticipation, and union. By analyzing natural imagery, gendered voice, and performative context, the article demonstrates how emotional experience is articulated through shared cultural frameworks. Rather than opposing dominant ideological forms, love poetry functions as a complementary mode of representation, introducing subjectivity and variability into a system oriented toward order and permanence. The study contributes to interdisciplinary debates on emotion, literature, and culture in antiquity.

KEYWORDS: *Ancient Egyptian literature; love poetry; archaeology of emotion; performance; cultural memory.*

INTRODUCTION: Poetry as Performance and Cultural Medium in Ancient Egypt

Poetry, among the earliest forms of literary expression, emerged within communal and performative environments structured by music, ritual, and oral storytelling. As Finnegan (2012) and Foley (2002) demonstrate, early poetic traditions cannot be understood as purely textual artifacts; rather, they arise from performance contexts in which voice, rhythm, gesture,

and audience interaction collectively produce meaning. In such settings, poetic language functions as an event rather than a static object, unfolding in time through embodied expression (Foley, 2002; Chaniotis, 2013). This study defines an “archaeology of emotion” as the reconstruction of culturally structured affect through symbolic, performative, and textual traces preserved within literary forms. Interpretation must therefore account for the sensory and social conditions shaping poetic production, including the culturally embedded nature of emotional expression (Harris, 2018; Rosenwein, 2016; Barclay, 2021).

This performative dimension has significant implications for understanding ancient literary cultures. Oral traditions rely on repetition, parallelism, and rhythmic patterning not merely as stylistic features but as functional mechanisms that facilitate memorization and transmission. Formulaic structures enable performers to adapt compositions dynamically, responding to specific audiences while maintaining thematic continuity. Poetry thus operates within a flexible yet structured system in which meaning is generated through interaction rather than fixed in written form. Such dynamics align with theoretical models that conceptualize cultural expression as embodied and practice-based (Scheer, 2012; Wulff, 2019).

Ancient Egyptian poetry developed within a similarly integrated cultural framework. Archaeological and visual evidence—particularly tomb and temple reliefs—depict musicians, singers, and dancers performing together, indicating that poetic compositions were frequently accompanied by music (Manniche, 1991). These scenes, often situated within banquets, festivals, and funerary rituals, suggest that poetry functioned as part of multisensory performances combining auditory, visual, and kinetic elements. Rather than existing as an isolated literary practice, poetry occupied a central place within a broader aesthetic system integrating sound, movement, and symbolic representation (Wulff, 2019; Erll, 2017).

Literary evidence further supports this connection between poetry and performance. Surviving texts display repetition, parallelism, and rhythmic structuring consistent with oral delivery (Lichtheim, 2019). Even in written form, these compositions retain traces of their performative origins, indicating that writing served to record and transmit performance traditions rather than replace them. This interplay between orality and textuality is now widely recognized as a defining feature of ancient literary systems (Erll, 2017; Tamm, 2019). Poetry in ancient Egypt was also deeply embedded in religious practice. Rituals associated with temple worship and funerary ceremonies frequently involved recitation, chant, and song, highlighting the role of poetic language in mediating relationships between human and divine realms. In this context, poetry functioned not only as artistic expression but as a vehicle for

articulating cosmological beliefs and reinforcing social order. The structured and rhythmic qualities of poetic language were integral to its perceived efficacy, suggesting that form itself held symbolic and functional significance.

Theoretical approaches to Egyptian literature further emphasize the inseparability of textual form, performance, and cultural meaning. Loprieno (1996) argues that Egyptian literary texts operate within communicative systems that differ fundamentally from modern genre distinctions, often integrating narrative, lyrical, and ritual elements within a single composition. Similarly, Assmann (2001) situates Egyptian literature within the framework of cultural memory, viewing texts as repositories of symbolic knowledge that preserve religious concepts, social norms, and collective identities. More recent scholarship expands this perspective by emphasizing that such transmission occurs through embodied and performative practices, not solely through textual preservation (Erll, 2017; Tamm, 2019).

Despite this growing body of scholarship, the cultural structuring of emotional experience within Egyptian literary texts—particularly love poetry—remains insufficiently theorized. While previous studies have focused on symbolism, genre, and intertextual comparison, less attention has been given to how these compositions encode culturally specific forms of affect and emotional expression. This study addresses that gap by examining ancient Egyptian love poetry as a performative and culturally embedded system of emotional articulation.

In this study, “affect” refers to embodied, pre-discursive intensities, while “emotion” denotes culturally articulated and symbolically mediated forms of feeling. This distinction allows for a more precise analysis of how experience is both lived and structured within poetic expression. Egyptian history is conventionally divided into the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, separated by Intermediate Periods of political decentralization (Shaw, 2003). While earlier historiography framed these periods as decline, more recent scholarship emphasizes their dynamism and cultural transformation (Bard, 2015). Across these shifts, Egyptian literary production exhibits remarkable continuity in symbolic language and aesthetic conventions (Parkinson, 2002), suggesting that poetry functioned as a stable medium for articulating social values, religious beliefs, and emotional experience.

Within this broader tradition, love poetry emerges as a distinctive genre during the New Kingdom (c. 1500–1080 BCE). Preserved on papyri and ostraca, these compositions display emotional immediacy and stylistic refinement that distinguish them from earlier religious and didactic texts (Foster, 1974; Fox, 1985). Their focus on interpersonal relationships and affective experience marks an expansion of literary expression, reflecting both the development of scribal culture and the increasing prominence of individual voice. At the

same time, these texts retain formal features—such as repetition, parallelism, and symbolic imagery—that connect them to earlier poetic traditions.

Understanding ancient Egyptian love poetry therefore requires an approach that integrates literary analysis with cultural and historical context. These compositions cannot be read simply as expressions of individual feeling; rather, they must be situated within the performative, social, and symbolic systems that shape their production and reception. By examining love poetry as both literary form and cultural practice, this study explores how emotional experience was structured, articulated, and transmitted within ancient Egyptian society. Methodologically, this study combines close textual analysis with performance theory and cultural memory studies, situating literary interpretation within broader historical and symbolic frameworks.

Historical Context and the Emergence of Love Poetry in New Kingdom Egypt

The development of ancient Egyptian love poetry must be situated within the broader historical transformations of Egyptian civilization. Conventionally divided into the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, Egyptian history reflects cycles of political consolidation and decentralization (Shaw, 2003). While earlier scholarship characterized the Intermediate Periods as phases of decline, recent Egyptology reinterprets them as periods of cultural reorganization and regional dynamism (Bard, 2015; Moreno García, 2021). This perspective underscores the resilience and adaptability of Egyptian cultural forms, including literary production.

In the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE), literary expression was closely aligned with royal and religious institutions. The Pyramid Texts, inscribed in royal tombs, constitute one of the earliest corpora of Egyptian poetic language. Functioning within ritual contexts, these compositions invoked divine protection and facilitated the king's transition to the afterlife (Parkinson, 2002). Their formal features—repetition, parallelism, and symbolic imagery—established enduring conventions of Egyptian poetics, reflecting broader systems of aesthetic and ideological regulation (Baines, 2015).

The Middle Kingdom (c. 2055–1650 BCE) witnessed a marked expansion of literary activity, often described as a classical phase. Narrative and didactic works such as *The Tale of Sinuhe* and *The Eloquent Peasant* demonstrate increasing attention to individual experience and emotional complexity (Parkinson, 2002). Although explicit love poetry remains limited, these texts signal a shift toward the articulation of personal voice, a development emphasized in recent studies of Egyptian subjectivity (Nyord, 2019; Miniaci & Betrò, 2020).

It is in the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE), however, that love poetry emerges as a distinct genre. This period, marked by imperial expansion and economic prosperity, fostered literary innovation. The growth of urban centers and the expansion of scribal education contributed to a more diversified literary environment (Baines, 2015; Miniaci, 2017).

The corpus of New Kingdom love poetry survives primarily on papyri and ostraca, many from Deir el-Medina, a community of artisans responsible for royal tomb construction (McDowell, 1999). The preservation of these texts in a non-elite setting is significant, suggesting a localized and socially embedded form of literary production. Evidence of relatively high literacy within this community indicates that poetic compositions may have circulated beyond elite scribal circles (White, 2024). This context complicates conventional models of authorship, pointing instead to a hybrid system in which oral performance and written transmission coexist (Miniaci, 2017; Baines, 2015).

Thematically, New Kingdom love poetry represents a notable expansion of Egyptian literary discourse. Whereas earlier texts emphasize religious devotion and moral instruction, love poems foreground interpersonal relationships, sensuality, and emotional immediacy (Foster, 1974; Fox, 1985). This shift is evident in the incorporation of everyday experience into poetic imagery:

“I’ll go down to the water with you...
carrying a red fish...” (White, 2024)

Here, a quotidian action becomes a vehicle for expressing intimacy, embedding emotion within lived and sensory experience. Love is thus articulated not through abstraction but through embodied interaction, aligning with theoretical approaches that emphasize affect as experiential and culturally situated (Barclay, 2021; Rosenwein, 2016).

At the same time, these poems remain deeply rooted in established symbolic systems. Egyptian love poetry frequently draws on imagery from the natural and material world—flowers, honey, rivers, and precious substances—to express desire (Allon & Patch, 2015). Such imagery links emotional experience to broader cosmological patterns of fertility, renewal, and abundance, reflecting an integrated semiotic and ecological worldview (Nyord, 2019; Assmann, 2022).

A particularly striking feature of this corpus is its construction of emotion as embodied experience, often articulated through metaphors of illness and healing:

“For seven days I have not seen my beloved...
My beloved is more beneficial for me than any remedy...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

Here, emotional absence is expressed as physical affliction, while conventional remedies are rendered ineffective. The beloved functions simultaneously as cause and cure, suggesting that affect operates beyond institutional knowledge systems. This reflects a cultural understanding in which emotional and physical states are inseparable (Nyord, 2019).

Formally, these poems retain features associated with oral performance. Repetition, parallelism, and metaphorical layering function not only as stylistic devices but as mechanisms that facilitate memorization and intensify emotional expression (Fecht, 1960). Such features support the view that Egyptian poetry emerged from performance-based traditions (Scheer, 2012; Wulff, 2019).

The relationship between love poetry and religious symbolism is equally significant. Although focused on human relationships, these compositions frequently invoke imagery associated with divine figures and cosmological processes. References to fertility and renewal, as well as associations with deities such as Hathor, link romantic desire to broader cycles of life and regeneration (Allon & Patch, 2015).

The social contexts in which these poems were performed further illuminate their function. Festivals, banquets, and communal gatherings provided spaces in which poetic expression became collective experience:

“Seeing you... is a festive day...

Musicians... songs of love...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

Such imagery underscores that love poetry operated not only as literary expression but as a performative and social practice, aligning with models that conceptualize emotion as collectively enacted within cultural frameworks (Barclay, 2021; Wulff, 2019).

The emergence of love poetry in the New Kingdom thus reflects a convergence of factors: the expansion of scribal culture, the interaction of oral and written traditions, and the increasing articulation of personal experience within established symbolic systems. These texts do not merely reflect individual emotions but construct culturally intelligible forms of affect shaped by historical and social conditions.

In this sense, Egyptian love poetry embodies both continuity and transformation. It preserves formal and symbolic elements inherited from earlier traditions while introducing new thematic concerns centered on emotional and relational experience. This synthesis highlights the adaptability of Egyptian literature as a cultural medium, capable of evolving while maintaining continuity with enduring symbolic frameworks.

Representation, Ideology, and Love Poetry as Counter-Discourse

One of the central challenges in reconstructing ancient Egyptian society lies in the nature of its surviving evidence. Much of the visual and textual record—especially temple inscriptions, tomb decoration, and royal monuments—was produced within elite contexts and shaped by ideological imperatives. As Baines (1990) argues, Egyptian representation operated within a highly codified system of decorum that privileged order, hierarchy, and symbolic stability over empirical realism. Rather than documenting lived experience, such representations constructed an idealized world aligned with cosmological principles. Subsequent scholarship reinforces this view, emphasizing that Egyptian visual culture functioned through systems of normativity and ideological control rather than observational realism (Baines, 2015; Moreno García, 2021).

This system is particularly evident in tomb decoration. Scenes of agriculture, banqueting, and domestic life appear to depict everyday activity, yet they are governed by strict conventions. Figures are rendered in canonical poses, scale reflects social hierarchy, and actions are arranged in ordered sequences that emphasize continuity and balance. The enlarged figure of the tomb owner visually asserts dominance, reinforcing the ideological function of the image. As Wilkinson (2013) notes, such representations prioritize stability and divine order rather than experiential realism.

The implications of this framework are significant. Because much of the surviving record is mediated through elite ideology, reconstructing emotional life or non-elite experience becomes difficult. Even seemingly “realistic” scenes are shaped by symbolic conventions that obscure variability, subjectivity, and emotional nuance. This limitation has led scholars to turn toward alternative archives of affect—particularly literary and performative texts—as key sources for reconstructing emotional experience in ancient societies (Rosenwein, 2016; Barclay, 2021).

It is within this representational gap that love poetry assumes particular importance. Unlike monumental inscriptions, which stabilize meaning, love poetry foregrounds emotional fluctuation, relational dynamics, and subjective perception. These compositions offer access—albeit mediated—to aspects of human experience largely absent from official sources, especially desire, longing, and intimacy. However, they should not be read as transparent reflections of lived reality. Like all literary forms, they operate within conventions and symbolic systems. Their significance lies instead in providing an alternative representational mode. Whereas monumental art constructs fixed identities, love poetry

explores uncertainty, transformation, and emotional process, introducing psychological nuance into Egyptian cultural expression (Scheer, 2012; Barclay, 2021).

This distinction is especially evident in the articulation of emotion. Monumental discourse emphasizes permanence; love poetry emphasizes process. Relationships are not presented as stable conditions but as dynamic experiences shaped by absence, anticipation, and encounter:

“For seven days I have not seen my beloved...

Illness has overcome me...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

Here, emotional absence is expressed as physical affliction, introducing vulnerability and instability into the representation of the self. Unlike monumental imagery, which suppresses fluctuation, this poetic language foregrounds it, reflecting a conception of the body as an integrated emotional and physiological system (Nyord, 2019).

Similarly, sensory metaphors intensify subjective experience:

“To hear your voice is pomegranate wine to me...” (White, 2024, para)

The comparison dissolves conventional sensory boundaries by translating sound into taste and intoxication. This synesthetic fusion heightens emotional immediacy, suggesting that affect is apprehended through embodied perception rather than abstract cognition.

At a broader level, this synesthetic fusion organizes perception into a unified experiential field, departing from the restrained symbolic vocabulary of elite visual culture and privileging immediacy, immersion, and lived intensity.

The use of first-person voice further distinguishes love poetry from monumental discourse. Many compositions present direct expressions of personal feeling, allowing perspectives rarely visible in official texts. This emphasis on subjectivity creates a space for exploring emotional experience beyond the impersonal tone of monumental representation.

At the same time, these texts remain embedded within broader cultural frameworks. Their imagery draws on symbolic systems rooted in Egyptian cosmology—fertility, renewal, and natural cycles. Landscapes such as gardens, marshes, and riverbanks function not merely as settings but as symbolic environments that connect desire with regeneration (Allon & Patch, 2015). Love poetry thus does not reject ideological structures but reconfigures them within an affective register. As recent scholarship suggests, such symbolic systems reflect an integrated worldview in which emotional, natural, and divine domains are interconnected (Assmann, 2022; Nyord, 2019).

The relationship between human and divine imagery further illustrates this dynamic. References to deities such as Hathor—associated with beauty, sexuality, and joy—situate

emotional experience within a broader cosmological framework, linking personal desire to cycles of fertility and renewal.

Spatial representation provides another point of contrast. Whereas monumental art situates figures within rigid, hierarchical compositions, love poetry evokes fluid, natural environments as sites of interaction. Lovers move through landscapes, encounter one another, and imagine journeys, introducing temporality and transformation absent from monumental imagery.

This emphasis on movement is particularly evident in scenes where desire motivates action despite danger:

“The river is before me...

a crocodile waits...

yet I enter the water...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

The willingness to confront danger demonstrates how emotional intensity reconfigures the perception of risk, transforming a threatening environment into a field structured by desire. In this formulation, emotion operates as an active, embodied force rather than a passive state, foregrounding processes of transformation and aligning with theoretical models that conceptualize emotion as practice (Scheer, 2012).

Love poetry can therefore be understood not as a counter-discourse in a strictly oppositional sense, but as a complementary mode of representation. While monumental art constructs a vision of order and permanence, love poetry introduces variability, subjectivity, and emotional depth. It expands the representational range of Egyptian culture, making visible dimensions of experience that remain marginalized in official sources.

The significance of this genre lies in its mediating function. By encoding emotional life within culturally intelligible symbolic systems, love poetry preserves aspects of human experience otherwise inaccessible through monumental evidence. It does not replace ideological representations but enriches them, enabling a more nuanced reconstruction of ancient Egyptian society—one in which stability and change, order and emotion, coexist. In this respect, the study contributes to broader interdisciplinary efforts to reconstruct historically specific emotional worlds through literary and cultural analysis (Rosenwein, 2016; Erll, 2017).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that emotional expression in ancient Egyptian love poetry operates at the intersection of performance, cultural memory, and embodied practice. Rather than emerging from purely individual interiority, emotion is structured through shared symbolic systems and enacted within social and performative contexts. This synthesis

reinforces the view that affective experience is both culturally mediated and historically situated.

Affective Structures, Gender, Performance, and Cultural Continuity

The emotional landscape of ancient Egyptian love poetry is structured through recurring affective patterns that reflect both individual experience and broader cultural frameworks. These patterns—longing, anticipation, union, and separation—function as organizing principles that shape the progression of emotional meaning within the texts. Rather than presenting love as a static condition, Egyptian poetry constructs it as a dynamic process, unfolding through movement between presence and absence, desire and fulfillment, and certainty and uncertainty. This fluidity aligns love poetry with experiential and performative modes of expression and corresponds to what historians of emotion describe as culturally structured “emotional scripts” (Rosenwein, 2016; Barclay, 2021).

A central feature of this structure is anticipation. Many poems foreground the imagined or impending encounter rather than fulfilled union, intensifying desire through delay. This temporal orientation produces an affective register in which longing becomes generative rather than deficient. The beloved often exists simultaneously as physical presence and mental projection, allowing emotional experience to extend beyond immediate reality.

Equally significant is the role of absence as a constitutive condition of desire. Separation produces emotional intensity through distance, frequently articulated through the metaphor of love as illness:

“For seven days I have not seen my beloved...

Illness has invaded me...

My beloved is more beneficial for me than any remedy...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

The metaphor encodes a cultural understanding of the body as an integrated affective system in which emotional disruption manifests physically. In this framework, absence manifests as bodily disorder, while the beloved assumes a paradoxical role as both cause and cure. The failure of physicians—who “do not know my illness”—signals that emotional experience exceeds conventional systems of knowledge, positioning love as an embodied condition governed by a symbolic logic beyond institutional diagnosis (Nyord, 2019).

Affective meaning is further structured through symbolic imagery drawn from the natural world. Egyptian love poetry consistently employs ecological metaphors—flowers, water, gardens, and cultivated landscapes—not as ornament but as semiotic systems encoding emotional experience. Vegetal imagery signifies emergence and fertility, while water evokes

movement and transformation (Allon & Patch, 2015). This symbolic integration situates emotion within a broader cosmological framework, linking human desire to cycles of regeneration. Ecocritical approaches similarly emphasize the continuity between human and environmental systems in such representations (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014; Buell, 2021).

This ecological symbolism reflects a fundamental feature of Egyptian cultural thought: the integration of human experience within a larger cosmic order. Emotional states are articulated through shared symbolic structures that connect affect to fertility, balance, and renewal. Love poetry thus participates in a wider system in which meaning emerges from the interaction of human, natural, and divine domains.

Gender representation constitutes another crucial dimension of this affective system. Egyptian love poetry is notable for its prominent female voices, which articulate desire with clarity and agency. Female speakers frequently initiate encounters and express longing, complicating assumptions about passivity in ancient societies:

“My mother commands me: ‘Avoid seeing him.’

But my heart is smitten...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

This tension between social regulation and personal desire suggests that emotional subjectivity operates within, yet is not entirely constrained by, normative structures. As Robins (1993) and Sweeney (2001) argue, such representations indicate that women’s perspectives were culturally legible, even if not direct reflections of social reality. More recent scholarship further interprets these voices as discursive constructions that encode culturally sanctioned expressions of female desire (Graves-Brown, 2015; Miniaci & Betrò, 2020).

The performative dimension of these texts significantly intensifies their affective force. Egyptian love poetry was likely recited or sung within social and ritual contexts, integrating music, voice, and bodily presence (Manniche, 1991). Performance transforms poetic language into an event, enabling emotion to be collectively experienced. This communal dimension is particularly evident in references to festive settings:

“Seeing you is a festive day...

Musicians... songs of love...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

Here, emotion is inseparable from performance, embedded within a multisensory environment that amplifies affect through sound, rhythm, and social interaction. This aligns with theoretical models that conceptualize emotion as embodied and socially enacted practice (Scheer, 2012; Wulff, 2019).

Spatial representation further contributes to this affective structure. Unlike the rigid and hierarchical spaces of monumental art, love poetry situates emotional experience within fluid and fertile environments—gardens, marshes, and riverbanks. These landscapes function symbolically, reinforcing associations between desire, fertility, and transformation. Movement through these spaces—searching, approaching, imagining—introduces temporality and process into emotional experience.

This dynamic is especially evident in scenes where desire motivates action despite danger:

“The river is before me...

a crocodile waits...

yet I go down to the water...” (Allon & Patch, 2015)

Here, emotional intensity reshapes the perception of risk, transforming the environment into an affective field. Love emerges as a force that enables action, reinforcing its transformative character.

The transmission of these texts within scribal culture further underscores their complexity. Many examples originate from Deir el-Medina, preserved on papyri and ostraca (McDowell, 1999). Their preservation indicates literary value, while their reliance on repetition and rhythm reflects origins in oral performance. This interplay between literacy and orality highlights the hybrid nature of Egyptian literary culture (Miniaci, 2017; Erll, 2017).

Ultimately, Egyptian love poetry operates at the intersection of individual experience and cultural expression. Emotional life is structured through shared symbolic frameworks, performative practices, and ecological imagery. Love is not presented as a purely private emotion but as a dynamic process embedded within social, ritual, and cosmological contexts.

The enduring significance of this corpus lies in its capacity to preserve what may be termed an “archaeology of emotion.” Through recurring metaphors, affective structures, and performative dynamics, these texts encode culturally specific ways of experiencing and articulating desire. In doing so, they provide access to dimensions of human experience largely absent from monumental and ideological sources, contributing to broader interdisciplinary efforts to reconstruct historically situated emotional worlds (Rosenwein, 2016; Barclay, 2021; Erll, 2017).

CONCLUSION: Toward an Archaeology of Emotion in Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry

This study has argued that ancient Egyptian love poetry provides a critical lens through which to access dimensions of experience largely obscured in monumental and ideological sources. While temple inscriptions, tomb decoration, and official texts construct a vision of stability, hierarchy, and cosmological order, love poetry reveals a complementary register characterized by emotional fluctuation, relational dynamics, and embodied perception. These compositions do not simply reflect individual feeling; they articulate culturally structured modes of experiencing and expressing emotion within shared symbolic frameworks, aligning with broader theories of emotion as historically and socially constituted (Rosenwein, 2016; Barclay, 2021).

Several key patterns emerge from this analysis. First, Egyptian love poetry constructs emotion as process rather than state, structured through recurring movements between longing and fulfillment, absence and presence. The frequent depiction of love as illness—where separation produces physical debilitation and reunion promises restoration—demonstrates that emotional experience is conceptualized as embodied and dynamic. Such representations reveal a cultural logic in which physical and emotional states are deeply interconnected (Nyord, 2019).

Second, emotional experience is embedded within a broader symbolic and ecological framework. Imagery drawn from the natural world—flowers, water, gardens, and fertile landscapes—functions as a semiotic system through which desire is articulated. These motifs connect interpersonal relationships to cycles of fertility, renewal, and balance, situating emotion within the cosmological logic of Egyptian thought. Love poetry thus does not stand apart from religious or ideological systems but reconfigures them within an affective register (Assmann, 2022; Erll, 2017).

Third, the prominence of female voice and dialogic structure introduces a level of subjectivity and relational complexity largely absent from monumental discourse. While these voices should not be read as direct reflections of social reality, they nonetheless indicate that literary space enabled the articulation of affective subjectivity within culturally intelligible forms (Graves-Brown, 2015; Miniaci & Betrò, 2020).

Equally significant is the performative dimension of these texts. Egyptian love poetry functioned not only as written composition but as part of oral and musical performance. Through recitation, song, and communal participation, emotional expression became a shared experience, enacted through voice, rhythm, and social interaction. This reinforces theoretical

models that conceptualize emotion as embodied and performative practice rather than purely internal state (Scheer, 2012; Wulff, 2019).

Taken together, these elements support the central claim of this article: that Egyptian love poetry functions as an “archaeology of emotion.” These texts preserve not only expressions of feeling but the cultural frameworks that make it possible to reconstruct historically specific emotional worlds.

At the same time, their interpretive value lies in their mediation. Love poetry does not provide direct access to historical reality; rather, it offers insight into the frameworks through which experience was represented and understood. Its significance is therefore analytical rather than evidentiary, expanding the range of perspectives available for reconstructing ancient life to include emotional and relational dimensions.

The enduring resonance of Egyptian love poetry further underscores its broader significance. Themes of longing, desire, anticipation, and fulfillment continue to appear across literary traditions, from biblical lyric to modern poetry. Yet what distinguishes the Egyptian corpus is the specificity of its symbolic and performative structures, which embed these experiences within a distinctive cultural logic.

By integrating performance theory, cultural memory, and close textual analysis, this study demonstrates that emotion is neither universal nor purely individual, but historically and culturally constructed. Ancient Egyptian love poetry thus offers not only insight into the past but also a framework for understanding the complex relationship between emotion, culture, and expression across human societies.

This framework may be extended to other ancient literary traditions, offering a model for reconstructing culturally specific emotional worlds across diverse historical contexts.

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