

LOVE SONGS OF THE NEW KINGDOM,  
translated by *John L. Foster*.  
Pp. xix + 120, illustrations 14.  
University of Texas Press, Austin. 1974.  
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Foster's collection of love poetry from the New Kingdom is accessible for the general reader and comprehensive, including all of the poems available from the few extant samples of this genre. He translates them for the English speaker from their original hieratic and includes samples of hieroglyphic text to accompany some of the poems. He includes illustrations throughout the book, all of which are reproduced from paintings by Nina M. Davies of scenes from Theban tomb walls that were painted during the time period referenced in the poetry. The poems, or songs as he alternatively describes them, are arranged into eight chapters, grouped roughly as they occur in their original texts. Foster's strategy of breaking up the four textual sources (Chester Beatty Papyrus I, British Museum; Harris Papyrus 500, British Museum; Turin Papyrus 1966, Egyptian Museum Turin; and Ostrakon Deir el Medineh 1266, Cairo) and rearranging them into his eight chapters, although maintaining the sequential ordering of the poems from their original "song cycles," encourages the reader to engage with the poems as representative parts of a larger literary tradition. This move subtly adds support to Foster's assertion from his Introduction that this poetry should be considered the earliest example of the long-lived tradition of "pastoral" or "courtly love" literature. He appears to understand these poems as technically sophisticated yet uncomplicatedly expressive of simple, universal, romantic sentiment. This uncritical perspective informs his translation techniques, resulting in a very contemporary feel that succeeds in giving the reader an experience of a shared immediacy of emotion with the characters and speakers of the vignettes. For the critical scholar, however, the book is frustrating in its organization, its composition, and its lack of contextualization—features that, when pursued, bring up larger issues concerning the politics of representation.

Because Foster strives primarily to convey to the general reader the "continuity of human imagination and feeling over the centuries," (xviii) the organization of his book appears whimsical or, perhaps, informed by an unspecified aesthetic model. The textual sources are not listed along with their corresponding chapters in the Table of Contents and are only noted parenthetically on the first page of each chapter, making it time consuming and difficult to locate the origins of any particular poem or to find poems from a specific source. This difficulty

in connecting the verses to their original texts has the broader result of obscuring the historical specificity of the poetry.

Foster's use of hieroglyphic transliteration is another problematic feature of his work. He includes these glyphs with only 14 of the 47 poems in the collection, but, curiously, he does not explain why he included any transliterations at all. Fortunately, the transcriptions that are given do match the ones in the major published sources of these texts, except in their orientation (for example Foster's glyphs all read from left-to-right while Gardiner's 1931 transcriptions from Papyrus Chester Beatty I are oriented, as is the hieratic original, right-to-left). The presence of the glyphs opposite their corresponding poems provides special interest for readers with some knowledge of this writing system, but can only be explained as exotic decoration for the general public.

Foster's choice of tomb paintings to illustrate the poems, although most likely dictated by the availability and beauty of these works, is another difficult aspect of this book. His explanation for choosing tomb scenes is that both the scenes and the love poetry are vibrant and alive, thus this presentation helps to correct the mistaken view that the ancient Egyptians were morbidly focused only on death. Unfortunately, the pairing of these specific arenas of death and life tends to secularize the tomb paintings, creating for the uncritical reader an impression of real-life scenes devoid of religious import. Foster's purely decorative, exoticizing use of these illustrations necessitates this superficial reading of the tomb paintings that then doubles to reinforce a similarly facile reading of the poetry itself, again obscuring the archeological context of the works including the relationships of power that informed and shaped the production of this poetry. Like the tomb paintings, these love songs are a pleasant fiction, carefully constructed to appear as simple representations of daily life. Because Foster acknowledges the skill and technical sophistication of the poetry, it is frustrating that every other aspect of his work in this book only reinforces the reading of these romantic fictions as facts.

The people of ancient Egypt were, indeed, humans like us. They laughed and cried and loved as we do. And their individual subjectivities, like ours, were produced within matrices of power that privileged certain ways of being while covering up this production under the guise of "nature." Love songs and poetry, like melodrama or fairy tales, are mechanisms in this process of "fixing" power. This manipulation is doubly obscured, however, when these narrative forms are presented (as they are here by Foster) as simply conveying universal human feelings, radically disconnected from the circumstances of their production, distribution, and reception.

Aside from narrating an abbreviated version of the archaeological discoveries of the Ostraca at Deir el Medina, the only hint of specific contextualization that Foster gives for these texts is his vividly evocative description of the anonymous scribe, “copying out the text for his master” on “clean, untattered papyrus or an unchipped, unflaked ostrakon” (xviii). With this briefly imagined scenario Foster appears to acknowledge this poetry as part of a social process, yet he avoids any and all analysis that would touch on this, using his book, instead, to privilege heterosexual romantic love as a common mark of humanity.

Foster’s goal of forging a personal, emotional connection across time between the modern reader and the people of ancient Egypt guides his approach to translation, resulting in poetry that does in many ways supply this connection. His use of poetic material demonstrates a cultural overlap of dominant ideas and attitudes concerning sex, love, and bodies, that appears to be a product of the inherent meaning of the ancient poetry rather than resulting from his use of contemporary American English idiom in translation. However, Foster’s caveat, at the end of his Introduction, that he does not intend this to be a scholarly book does not absolve him of his negligence in failing to address issues of context. The gendered power position of the male scribes who produced and reproduced these texts, producing normalizing ideals of femininity and giving voice to fictional women in song, might be important to consider if one wants to make the (implicit) claim that these poems convey an unmediated human experience. The translation of ancient poetry for publication is not a politically neutral act.