

Exploring the Expression of Sexual Desire in Ancient Egypt through a Selection of Primary Sources: An Approach from the Emotional Perspective

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Résumé de l'article

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Exploring the Expression of Sexual Desire in Ancient Egypt through a Selection of Primary Sources

An Approach from the Emotional Perspective

by

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Abstract

Sexual desire involves a subjective experience that may differ significantly from one individual to another and is closely linked not only to personal preferences but also to the circumstances of the moment, cultural norms, and social expectations. When experiencing sexual desire, there are not only positive but also negative dynamics at play, and such an experience can also trigger a wide range of emotions that might differ depending on the circumstances of the moment. The aim of this paper is to explore the expression of sexual desire as well as its relationship to a broad spectrum of emotions through a selected group of ancient Egyptian textual sources, such as love songs.

About the Author

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Keywords sexual desire, sexuality, emotions, love songs, ancient Egypt

To talk about sex is to talk about a highly emotional experience,¹ in the sense “that it evokes and is influenced by emotional processes” [Castro 2014]. Sexual desire² is one of the basic experiences,³ an impulse, a stimulus of attraction that moves us to an intimate encounter with ourselves or other people. Although it can be experienced with different intensities, it motivates one to share intimacy, to maintain affective and sexual relationships, to enjoy and feel pleasure. The stimulation of sexual desire is not based solely on the visual domain.⁴ To understand otherwise would certainly be to have a rather limited view of the human capacity to establish sexual pleasure. Thus, sexual desire can be aroused in a number of ways, either through the imagination by recreating sexual fantasies or recalling past events or by perceiving an individual one finds attractive. In some cases, even an object or a scent can serve as a trigger for sexual desire. In the case of attraction to another person, it can be said that the whole human body should be understood as a trigger for sexual arousal without reducing it only to the sexual organs or the breasts (especially in the case of women). Even the personality of an individual can influence sexual desire. Human sexuality is a dimension of the individual’s personality that is pervaded and influenced by multiple factors that also involve important links between the sociocultural and emotional spheres. Moreover, it develops

¹ “People experience a variety of emotions when they engage in sexual activities, or even when they only think about doing so” [Everaerd, Both, and Laan 2006, 183].

² It is important to differentiate between love and desire, as they are two different concepts that do not always go hand in hand; not everything that is loved is desired, and not everything that is desired is loved.

³ Although there is no absolute agreement on categorizing sexual desire as an emotion, some more recent approaches [cf. Al-Shawaf, Conroy-Beam, Asao, and Buss 2016] emphasize mainly emotions in the context of human mate choice, such as sexual arousal [Lange, Schwab, and Euler 2019, 78]. On desire as an emotion, see also Mobbs 2020.

⁴ Some work in the field of Egyptology has focused on this aspect. For the erotic aspect of smell, see, e.g., Darnell 2016, 37; Verbovsek and Backes 2015, 109–110; Matic 2018. This motif is also recurrent in the so-called love songs: see, e.g., Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 166.

simultaneously with the experiences and changes of each individual and is expressed in different ways, both in the relationship of the person with him/herself, and in his/her interaction with those around him/her through affective bonds, sexual role, sexual response, eroticism, and reproduction. Addressing emotional bonds means bearing in mind that the cognitive and emotional capacities of each individual are in constant interaction with the norms and expectations established within the sociocultural model in which that individual lives and grows up.⁵ Nor, of course, should we forget other cultural models that the individual may come into contact with and that may influence him or her. Exposure to one or more cultural models, considering also one's already lived personal experience, provides certain parameters that allow each individual to develop his or her own emotional response mechanisms to different stimuli. It is in this framework that the issue under discussion, sexual desire, lies.⁶

As it is through the preserved heritage of an ancient culture, such as that of ancient Egypt, that it is possible to approach how emotions were codified,⁷ and based on the conception of sexual desire as an emotion, I will contribute to this special issue on emotions with a critical analysis of some Egyptian written sources dating mainly to the New Kingdom (*ca* 1550–*ca* 1069 BC)

⁵ On this link between the personal and the public, Christoph Antweiler [2017, 125] argues that the public display of emotions is subject to social norms. This would imply, in his words, that emotions are related to social roles and interaction situations. He further argues that in a given situation, a certain behavior is expected from a certain person, and this expectation may differ across cultures. Alexandra Verbovsek [2011, 237] states:

As existential neurobiological instrumentations, emotions are among the most elementary and earliest experiences of all human beings. Thus, they are constitutive both for the life of the individual and for social communities. Emotions are learned, shaped and modulated.

⁶ In Jeffrey Weeks' words, sexuality is

a contingent, culturally specific, often unstable linkage of related, but separable, elements: bodily potentials, desires, practices, concepts and beliefs, identities, and institutional forms. It is highly gendered, but notoriously malleable. It may have hegemonic patterns, but these patterns in turn are usually defined by excluded others, and marked by variations shaped by culturally and materially defined differences: age, class, ethnicity, nationality, geography. [Weeks 1999, 35]

⁷ On the importance of archaeological and textual evidence for the study of emotions, see Verbovsek 2011, 237–238.

[Shaw 2007, 626]. In particular, the so-called love songs will serve to offer an approach to the topic of sexual desire and the different emotions that can be linked to it.⁸ It should be stressed that not all love poems can offer sufficient elements for an analysis of the subject that concerns us here. It is for this reason that the aim is not to offer a compilation and analysis of all love songs but to analyze some of the songs that allow a deeper understanding of the emotions linked to sexual desire expressed through them.

1. Brief overview on the topic of sex in ancient Egyptian culture

Over the last decades, a great number of works have been published on the study of sex and sexuality in ancient Egypt. Some important works in this field are those published by Dominic Montserrat [1996] based mainly on primary sources from the Greco-Roman period and by Lise Manniche [1977; 1988] and Lynn Meskell [1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2002], who carried out research based on primary sources dating to different periods of ancient Egyptian history. Further publications, such as those by Carolyn Graves-Brown [2008] and Landgráfová and Navrátilová [2009; 2015], provide important contributions to this field of study. Also noteworthy are Marc Orriols-Llonch's many articles published on this subject [2009; 2012; 2015; 2016; 2020a; 2020b].⁹

In addressing this topic in the field of Egyptology, it must be stressed that in a large number of primary sources, religion and sex (or sexual activities) are closely related.¹⁰ This is certainly evident in Egyptian theories of mythological creation.¹¹

⁸ "Lovers are absorbed in each other. They are also absorbed in the experience of love, and the poets reveal this experience. The love poets treat the varieties of lovers' emotions as worthy of artistic exploration" [Fox 1985, 322].

⁹ On some annotations of sexual vocabulary in ancient Egypt, see Schreiber 1991. For erotic allusions in connection with duck or goose as well as bird hunting in both decorative scenes and textual compositions, see Gander 2006.

¹⁰ This connection has been frequently expressed in Egyptological research. Meskell, in her research on the construction of sexuality based on the study of New Kingdom primary sources, points out that sexual life was deeply involved in the sphere of domestic life and ritual practice. In this regard, Meskell states,

Sexuality infused so many aspects of ordinary life that it would have been unthinkable to isolate it. Specifically, I would argue that the sexual and the religious/ritual were united in ways which would be inconceivable from a twentieth-century Judeo-Christian perspective. That the sexual and the religious could exist harmoniously in Pharaonic Egypt suggest that we are witnessing real cultural difference. [Meskell 2000b, 255]

¹¹ "So, when we examine Egyptian ways of thought, we need to bear in mind this spiritual background. The holy and the secular are not poles apart" [DuQuesne 2005, 8].

Some texts about the creation of the universe, such as those in the Heliopolitan cosmogony, tell us how, before anything existed, there was Atum, the creator god and main deity of the Egyptian pantheon, who had the capacity to create himself. He was surrounded by nothing and was able to create the world and the first pair of gods through masturbation.¹² Thus, from Atum's ejaculation, the gods Shu and Tefnut were born, who through sexual intercourse would give life to the next pair of gods, Geb and Nut [see [Plate 1](#)], and so on, giving rise to the Heliopolitan pantheon of nine gods.



Plate 1. Part of the cycle of creation myths of ancient Egypt

The upper figure corresponds to the goddess Nut, who represents the sky, arching over the lying figure of her brother Geb, who represents the Earth. Third Intermediate Period. Funerary papyrus of Tameni (EA10008,3), British Museum. ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

From this cosmogony we can deduce the importance of the sexual act in the foundations of the Egyptian religion, masturbation in the first place and

¹² In Pyramid Texts [utterance 527.1248a-d]:

Atum is one who came into being as one, who came to erection in Heliopolis. He put his penis in his fist, in order to make orgasm with it, and the two twins, Shu and Tefnut, were born.

Dd mdw tm pr xpr m jw sAw ir.f m jwnw wn.n.f Hnn.f m xfa.f jr.f nDmmt jm.f ms zAtj Sw Hna tfnwt. [[Dvornichenko 2016](#), 25]

sexual intercourse between two divine figures in a second step of the creation of the universe.¹³ While one does not have to exclude the other, in cases where the goal of sexual intercourse is reproduction, the primary context of understanding the sexual act should be reproductive rather than pleasure. Depictions of sexual practices between nondivine figures have also been documented in some periods of ancient Egypt [see, e.g., [Orriols-Llonch 2016](#), 199–201]. These are represented visually by figurines or in scenes on ostraca or papyri, especially from the New Kingdom onward.¹⁴ Although in most cases a couple consisting of a man and a woman are shown in a clearly sexual practice [[Plate 2](#), p. 54 below],¹⁵ there are also other examples where a woman and several male figures are shown participating in the sexual scenario [[Plate 3](#), p. 55 below].

In the case of [Plates 2](#) and [3](#), the lack of information on the context in which they were found makes it difficult to establish whether their use involved a private or perhaps public arena, as well as the purpose of their use. These objects, however, are not an isolated case. Numerous statuettes, in which the

¹³ Regarding these sexual relations in the context of Egyptian religion, it is possible to find textual and iconographic references that refer to, e.g., Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, or Isis and Osiris during sexual intercourse.

¹⁴ An earlier example appears in the form of a hieroglyph in tomb 17 at Beni Hassan. It depicts a man and a woman having sexual intercourse on top of a bed. The case of this hieroglyph is curious, as it has been censored in several publications. For the mutilated hieroglyph in tomb 17 at Beni Hassan, see [Newberry 1893](#), pl. XIV. For uncensored representations, see [Champollion 1889](#), 347 and [Manniche 1988](#), fig. 21. Henry G. Fischer also explains that it “was censored by a Victorian visitor” [[1974](#), 11].

Regarding the treatment of objects or images labeled erotic in several museums, David Gaimster writes,

If archaeological discoveries or ethnographic collecting did contain an erotic element, then best to suppress it from those who would be incapable of understanding it. This paternalistic view involved removing artefacts from their original contexts and grouping them under the new and artificial heading of the “obscene”. Ironically, it is this curatorial strategy of compartmentalization that survived almost intact until the latter part of the twentieth century. [[Gaimster 2000](#), 14]

For the question of censorship of erotic-labeled representations, see also [Montserrat 1996](#), 210; [Parkinson 2008](#), 116; [Collombert and Volokhine 2005](#); [Myśliwiec 2004](#), viii.

¹⁵ See also the statuette E 13234, dated to the Late Period, in the Louvre.



Plate 2. Limestone relief showing a couple copulating

The figures are depicted facing each other, lying on their sides (the pillow under the man's head also indicates the lying position), and completely naked. Ptolemaic Period. 60.181, Brooklyn Museum. ©Brooklyn Museum.

male figure usually shows an overdimensional and, generally, erect penis, have been documented in various parts of Egypt. Some examples are those found in the so-called chambers of Bes¹⁶ at Saqqara and in the southern dependencies¹⁷ of the temple complex in the sacred animal necropolis at North Saqqara. The specific religious context in which these objects were found, as well as the large number of them, indicate a role as votive objects.¹⁸

¹⁶ Quibell 1907, 12–14, 28–29; Martin 1987, 71; Derchain in Martin 1981, 167.

¹⁷ Martin 1981, pls. 23–29; Derchain in Martin 1981, 166–170.

¹⁸ Derchain offers an explanation for these objects but focuses mainly on a group of statuettes depicting a kind of procession with a central figure with a large penis:



Plate 3. Limestone group showing in the center a nude woman surrounded by six nude male figures

Three of the figures direct their erect and disproportionate penises toward her body, while two of them are penetrating her. Another figure behind her also appears with an erect and disproportionate penis, although it is pointing at the penis of one of the other figures. Early Ptolemaic Period. 58.13, Brooklyn Museum. ©Brooklyn Museum.

Some authors have suggested that this particular plate has a religious meaning. In this regard, see [Cody 1999](#), 138.

The religious context in which these objects appeared and the emphasis on the penis with its oversized proportions could indicate that the purpose of

see, e.g., F 1975/11.2 in Rijksmuseum van oudheden Leiden. This leads him to see a connection with the Pamilia festival [Derchain in [Martin 1981](#), 166–167].

these objects was linked to aspects of the proper functioning of this organ and fertility.¹⁹

Other examples of depictions of sexual encounters, however, do seem to fall outside a religious context. Some examples might be found, among others, in the graffito dated to the New Kingdom that some authors have tended to identify with Hatshepsut and Senenmut [[Romer 1982](#), 157–160], while others have questioned this possibility.²⁰ Other examples are found in EA 50714 (British Museum), dated to the New Kingdom and from Deir el-Medina, on the stone fragment E 33023 (Louvre) from the same place and dated to the same period, and on the stone fragment CG 11198, also dated to the New Kingdom.

The examples presented are only a small sample of the existing material, but they serve to corroborate the statement that, although sexual intercourse played an important role in a clearly religious context concerning the creation of the cosmos, it also appears in contexts that are more mundane and provide different information from that obtained in the religious sphere. I do not intend to enter into a discussion of the ancient Egyptians' preference for one or the other sexual position, as deducing this from the known iconographic sources is certainly complicated and it would possibly be going too far if one were to extrapolate and reinterpret the limited information that is available. Furthermore, pursuing this avenue of research is beyond the scope of this article and is irrelevant to the topic at hand. However, based on the iconographic material it seems reasonable to deduce that sex was also seen from the perspective of sexual desire and pleasure. For example, the sketch on a fragment found in the tomb of Puyemre [[Plate 4, p. 57 below](#)] shows how the mouths of the man and the woman approach each other to kiss, possibly showing desire, sexual attraction, and the need for contact between them. The position of the two figures, facing each other, could also indicate the visual desire to observe the partner during sexual intercourse.

¹⁹ See [Pinch 1993](#), 235–245; [Hornblower 1926](#), 81–83 for the use of penis-shaped objects in a votive context related to the goddess Hathor. See [Myśliwiec 1997](#) for figurines from Tell Atrib in which the penis has been accentuated with unnaturally large proportions. On a group of statuettes in the museum of Naples, see [Cozzolino 2002](#).

²⁰ On the interpretation of this graffito, see [Wente 1984](#), 47–54; [Hue-Arcé 2013](#); [Matić 2016a](#); [Ragazzoli 2017](#), 111–113.



Plate 4. Sketch on a fragment found in the tomb of Puyemre [Manniche 1977, 17]

Considering the primary sources that serve for the study of sex in ancient Egypt, it can be said that their role was quite versatile, as they are documented in totally opposite spheres, fulfilling religious, ritual, and social functions that in some cases are not really separated from each other. Given its prominent role in ancient Egyptian life, it is also interesting to ask how sex, and more specifically sexual desire, affected the individuals themselves and how it was perceived and experienced in terms of emotions.

As far as archaeological sources such as statuettes or depictions are concerned, it is difficult to speak strictly of the expression of sexual desire through these representations. It would be more appropriate, perhaps, to refer to these primary sources as possible expressions of the execution of sexual desire. Even more complicated is the reflection of emotions,²¹ since the

²¹ On the study of emotions in Egyptology and neighboring disciplines, see Kipfer 2017; Tait 2009; Verbovsek 2011; McDonald 2020; Hsu and Llop Raduà 2021. Relevant work on emotion research in classical disciplines has been published by Angelos Chaniotis [2012] and Douglas Cairns and Laurel Fulkerson [2015]. For similar research in the field of archaeology, see Kus 1992 and Tarlow 2000.

absence of a “firsthand” description of the actors’ thoughts makes it difficult to analyze their emotional state.²² Different is the case of textual sources, which do allow an approach to the expression of sexual desire and its link with a variety of emotions.

2. State of research

The issue of sex, sexuality, and eroticism in ancient Egypt is a matter that must be approached with great caution, as the moral and social codes relating to sexual behavior between individuals in a given society such as that of ancient Egypt cannot be extrapolated to our current Western understanding(s) of sexual identity and practice.²³ In other words, it would be wrong to consider that different cultures, past or present, create categories based on the same ethical and moral values.²⁴ There may be commonalities, but each culture has its own particular characteristics and background that need to be understood on its own terms.²⁵

²² On the expression of emotions in Egyptian art, see [McDonald 2020](#), 3.

²³ As pointed out by Terence DuQuesne, “The term implies a concept of self which is no doubt radically different from that which was held in Egypt or other ancient civilizations” [2005, 7].

²⁴ According to Landgráfová and Navrátilová [2009, 23]:

Although the emotional impact of any historical narrative dealing with past intimacy is not to be underestimated, substantial changes have taken place in the perception of sexuality with all its attributes, which makes a direct comparison of our experiences to those of ancient Egypt impossible.

²⁵ A clear example of the different connotations that can be given to the same object among different cultural groups can be seen in the treatment given, e.g., to objects depicting the male genitalia, in particular the erect penis, by early researchers. Especially in the 19th century there was a strong aversion to such objects, which suffered various forms of rejection. On this, see [Pinch 1993](#), 235. Montserrat [1996, 210] points out that “it has to be borne in mind that excavators have tended to suppress or ignore phallic objects, or to assign them automatically to a very late period”. The position taken by researchers toward this kind of representation was also reflected in museums, where objects having a character labeled sexual were “stored” in the museum storage or deposited in special places such as the Secretum [see [Kennedy and Coulter 2018](#), 78; [Gaimster 2000](#), 10] in the British Museum or the Gabinetto Segreto [see [Cuzzolino 2002](#), 63] in Naples. As Stuart Frost advocates,

By segregating material either formally or informally nineteenth and twentieth century museums supported the notion that there was something wrong,

During the 18th, 19th, and roughly into the first half of the 20th centuries, the prevailing belief among many societies was that sex should serve the purpose of reproduction and that sexual relations merely for pleasurable ends should be seen in terms of sin, low morals, or debauchery.²⁶ Thus, through this cultural lens, researchers studied and compared ancient cultures, which were often quickly labeled as wild, uncivilized, and vulgar. From the second half of the 20th century onward, with the so-called sexual revolution,²⁷ and especially during the last 15 years, there has been an attempt to approach the issue of sexuality in ancient cultures in ethically neutral terms. In that regard, it has often been shown how many ancient societies considered the practice of sex for pleasure without negative connotations.²⁸

unnatural or “pornographic” about this material and stifled research. Museums appear to have dealt with sex and sexuality by denying its existence to the public. [Frost 2008, 32]

This rejection based mainly on the moral values of the time with reference to aspects linked to the field of sexuality cannot be documented in the primary sources of ancient Egypt, which, at first glance, express a very different way of dealing with representations of male sexual organs. On the use of the image of the horse in Egyptian love poetry compared to Greek textual sources, see Hagedorn 2016, 94–99. For an interdisciplinary work on nakedness, nudity, and gender in Egypt and Mesopotamia, see, e.g., Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006. For a cross-cultural study of concepts of semen in Egypt and Mesopotamia, see Garzón Rodríguez and Steinert 2024.

- ²⁶ In view of this panorama, it must be borne in mind that under Western premises, emotions linked to unrestricted sexual pleasure, especially when it came to the female figure, were subjected to social repression that resulted in the concealment, containment, or suppression of the pursuit of sexual satisfaction, as well as of the positive emotions linked to this experience. As Verbovsek points out,

The regulation and masking of emotions depend on cultural, social, and individual factors. Peculiar circumstances demand the control or suppression of undesired emotions, for example insecurity, fear, excitement and the like. In such circumstances, a person’s real emotional state is neutralized or covered up while s/he adjusts to conventions and lives up to the expectations of others. [Verbovsek 2011, 237]

- ²⁷ On cultural transformations of sexuality and gender in recent decades, see Hekma and Giami 2014, 1–24; Sigusch 2004.

- ²⁸ In this sense we could certainly also talk about the ancient Egyptian culture if we take into account the medical texts that provide us with prescriptions for contraceptives; the fact of looking for a remedy to prevent a pregnancy owing to sexual practice indicates that sex is also practiced for pure pleasure.

Contributions in the field of Egyptology on sex, sexuality, and eroticism have been growing in recent years.²⁹ Pioneering works in this field of research are the publications [Yoyotte 1959](#), [Omlin 1973](#), [Manniche 1988](#), and [Montserrat 1996](#). In the field of philology, there are several publications about love poetry: [Schott 1950](#); [Fox 1985](#); [Mathieu 1996](#); [Hagedorn 2005](#) and [2016](#); [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#) and [2015](#); and [Hsu 2014](#). Nevertheless, Egyptological studies on sexuality have also been influenced by incorrect (re)interpretations, since “the standard view of sexuality in ancient Egypt was constructed through a selective process of obscuring the evidence” [[Parkinson 2008](#), 116].

With few exceptions, erotic aspects of the civilization of ancient Egypt have been treated with the utmost discretion, the published comments most often reflecting the moral attitude of the authors or of their period, and not that of the ancient Egyptians themselves. [[Manniche 1977](#), 11]

Curiously, the opposite has also happened. Thus “often we are tempted to read more into the texts than is actually there” [[Landgráfová 2008](#), 71].

The study of sexual desire as an emotional response of an individual to stimuli is closely linked to the interests, preferences, and needs of that individual; to his or her sociocultural and moral context; and to the historical period in which he or she lives. These stimuli will provoke emotional responses or activations that may vary from person to person. Precisely for this reason it must always be kept in mind that sexual desire, attitudes, and behavior differ considerably from one individual to another, from one cultural group to another, and from one era to another.

3. Some textual sources dating to the New Kingdom

Human sexuality is a complex subject, and when this aspect is studied in a culture that is foreign to ours and with which it is no longer possible to interact actively, it becomes very complicated, if not impossible, to capture all its nuances. Throughout history, men and women, or femininities and masculinities, have expressed their sexuality especially by assuming a role that has generally been socially assigned to them, a role that stereotypes behavior between the two or the same sexes. There is a strong and inseparable link between the expression of sexuality and emotional/sentimental

²⁹ Many more publications could be cited, such as those mentioned in footnote 10 of this paper. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#), 28–29.

bonds,³⁰ so addressing both aspects together is an interesting way of addressing this topic.³¹ Taking an overall assessment of the primary sources that reveal information linked to the explicitly erotic-sexual sphere (for purely pleasurable and nonreproductive purposes), there is certainly less evidence available. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that researchers hardly ever documented such sources, something that has tended to change significantly in recent decades. This is even more extreme when it comes to examining the expression of sexual desire and related emotions.

In this article my focus will be on some primary sources dating back to the New Kingdom, a period for which there is sufficient evidence to address this issue. Although both objects and images showing explicit references to erotic-sexual themes, at least as far as the scene shown strictly speaking is concerned, are also documented for this period, only the textual transmissions allow us to approach the subject of emotions linked to sexual desire closely. The following is a selection of texts that highlight key ideas and concepts for the analysis and discussion of the expression of sexual desire in the domain of the most personal emotions embodied in ancient Egyptian written sources. In particular, one genre is of special interest for this study, namely, the so-called love songs,³² “a genre of lyric poetry reflecting emotional attachment, love, and erotic symbolism” [Meskell 2002, 127]. In this kind of text “one finds the entire range of love situations and characters; and the tones and attitudes vary from chaste and idyllic to passionate and even erotic” [Foster 2001, 17].³³ Thus, it is possible to obtain information not only about required

³⁰ Sexual desire toward another person appears as a very personal response, which can change over time.

³¹ I do not intend to discuss the role of sexuality linked to religion on this occasion but will address instead the topic of sexuality both as a generator of feelings and as an emotional response.

³² For more on this genre, see Köpp-Junk 2015.

³³ David O'Connor also states,

The “love-songs” are consistently provided a strong erotic charge unusual in Egyptian literature, and on occasion refer explicitly to sexual acts, even if the latter are not described in detail. [2011, 378]

On some metaphors of a sexual nature or with reference to intimate parts of the human body in the love songs, see Landgráfová 2008; López 2005a, e.g., 143–146, and 2005b, e.g., 19–25.

love, unrequited love, forbidden love, or even adultery³⁴ but also about the expression of pure sexual desire, both requited and unrequited.³⁵ This allows the researcher to get closer to the most personal and intimate aspects of certain social groups.³⁶ However, it should be noted that the love poems are based on the perspectives of a relationship between a female and a male character, which maintains the binary division of the sexes that pervades Western and Westernized cultures.³⁷ Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that the people who wrote these songs were members of the elite scribal class.³⁸ It is for this reason that I do not intend to enter into the discussion of whether what is analyzed in the texts bears any relation to the reality experienced by their human contemporaries.³⁹ No attempt is made to relate the texts presented to experiences actually expressed from the female and male points of view. Far from this, the aim is to analyze only the expressions of sexual desire present in the texts and their link to diverse emotions.⁴⁰

³⁴ Westcar Papyrus (dated to the Second Intermediate Period and located in the New Museum in Berlin) and the Tale of Two Brothers (Papyrus D'Orbiney dated to the End of the 19th Dynasty and located in the British Museum).

³⁵ As Navrátilová and Landgráfová [2015, xxix] write:

The love songs may perhaps be a hot candidate for a primary source for a history of Egyptian emotions, but they are in fact not equally revelatory on all aspects of “love”, especially concerning social aspects of intimacy, indeed they seldom explicitly refer to aspects such as commitment. They do, however, relate the intimacy and immediacy of desire and passion, even if it were expressed in role schemes, as has been suggested.

³⁶ It should be noted, however, that we cannot guarantee “that the events were enacted in ways other than verbal” or pictorially [Fox 2016, 11].

³⁷ For more information on gender roles, see Roth 2000 and 2005; Sweeney 2011; Matić 2016b.

³⁸ See Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 19–22. Bernard Mathieu also suggests that the love songs were “un genre vraisemblablement créé par les scribes du village [Deir el-Medina], puisque toutes les sources connues en proviennent” [Mathieu 2003, 127].

³⁹ O'Connor suggests that the love songs “depict fantasy, not the real world insofar as eroticism and sexual practice were regarded by the Egyptians” [2011, 378].

⁴⁰ Other primary sources of interest related to the topic of love and desire are the so-called love spells (also “erotic spells/curses”), which date predominantly to late periods [see, e.g., Vernus 1992; Nagel and Wespi 2015; Quack 2016, 79], although some examples have been documented from earlier periods, such as the late Middle

Some passages describe certain parts of both the female and male body that are seen with pleasure and serve the sensual-erotic-sexual game between individuals. Most often a male perspective is found from which the body of the loved one is described. Many passages show admiration and adoration for certain parts and characteristics of women.⁴¹

This is the case with women's breasts, which appear recurrently in various textual compositions. Thus, for example, in pTurin Cat. 1966 (Song 28) [see López 1996, 138]:

[The pomegranate tree opened his mouth...his voice:]⁴² My seeds are like their teeth, my fruits (lit.: shape) are like their breasts. [I am the most beautiful of fruits] of the garden.

[nʒy=j npj.ww mj.tt jbh.w[=s] kʒ=j mj mnd.wy=s [jnk nfr r šnw.w]⁴³ n '.t-n-t-
h.t].⁴⁴

The comparison of certain parts of the woman's body with parts of the tree, which in the end is described as the most beautiful, thus implies an acknowledgment of the woman's beauty. The mention of her breasts undoubtedly gives it an erotic touch that could be understood as a reflection

Kingdom and the New Kingdom [see, e.g., Quack 2016, 79]. On love/erotic spells in Coptic Egypt, see Frankfurter 2001. The functionality of such spells includes securing the love of the desired person, exerting control over that individual, and aspects of coercion and domination/submission. These motifs are also present in love/erotic spells documented in other cultures. On love magic in Mesopotamian culture, Gwendolyn Leick's opinion [1994, 194] is clear: "[The purpose of love magic] is...to gain power over another person, to force or coerce them to do what one wishes". Christopher Faraone's *Ancient Greek Love Magic* [1999], in which he analyzes the violent language of these texts with a focus on their social implications, is also relevant to love/erotic spells in Greek texts. A relevant work on the experience of curses connected to different emotions in the Roman Empire has been published by Irene Salvo [2020].

⁴¹ O'Connor suggests that

in the "love-songs" the frequent reference to the sexually desirable physical attributes of women, and the erotic tone given to the rich imagery employed, can reasonably be read as intentionally arousing, at least for male readers. [2011, 379]

⁴² For the addition of the first preserved characters to «[wḏ jnhmn r(?)=f hr]w=f]», see Mathieu 1996, 87 n275.

⁴³ Possible restitution according to Mathieu 1996, 87 n277.

⁴⁴ Cf. Lutz Popko in *TLA*, pTurin Cat. 1966, recto: Liebeslied Nr. 28–30.

of sexual desire. Another text from the New Kingdom (Papyrus Harris 500) states [see [Mathieu 1996](#), pl. 8]:

[The mouth] of the beloved is a lotus bud. Her breast(s) are mandragora!

[rʾ n] sn.t <m> wʾ.t n(t) nḥm.wt mnd{.t}y=s n rrm.t.⁴⁵

The reference to the mandragora is not random, but should be understood as an element with a highly erotic significance [[Casini 2018](#), 102]. In the New Kingdom, the mandragora becomes a popular element in both Egyptian art and textual compositions, as this plant, as well as its fruits, are associated with different concepts including love and sexual desire.⁴⁶ Philippe Derchain has suggested, for example, that interpreting the literary image of the mandragora as a symbolic representation of “sensualité Joyeuse” [[Derchain 1975](#), 86], while Lucas Baqué Manzano described the fruits of the mandragora as an “object of desire” [[Baqué Manzano 2005](#), 31]. Emanuele Casini, more recently, has indicated that the mandragora, at least in some contexts such as those of love songs, is used “as the means to awaken sexual desire” [[Casini 2018](#), 109].

Other texts reveal the desire to be close to the desired person, also referring to visual enjoyment as a consequence of their presence. Thus, one passage in the Papyrus Chester Beatty I [v. C 2.4–5] reads as follows [see [Mathieu 1996](#), pl. 2]: “My heart intends to see her beauty, while I sit in her home” (ḥm.t jb=j r mʾ nfr.w=s jw=j ḥms.kwj m-ḥnw=s).⁴⁷ While it is true that this love song refers especially to the feeling of love between a male and a female, the passage cited may also hint at the sexual desire expressed by the male toward her. The reference to her beauty and the desire to admire it refers to the attraction he feels for her, thus showing a link between the desire for her and the love (as romantic attraction) mentioned in other parts of the text. The act of planning something, of imagining a desired event, also shows excitement and emotion. Also P. Chester Beatty I [v. C 2, 3] tells

⁴⁵ Cf. Popko in [TLA](#), pHarris 500 = pBM EA 10060, recto 1–4: Liebeslieder 1. Gruppe: Lied Nr. 1–8.

⁴⁶ Casini [[2018](#), 108] states that the fruits of the mandragora “are symbols of female sensuality and of the eros-sphere, and they also promote a metaphorical image of love”. Kate Bosse-Griffiths [[2001](#)] suggests, e.g., that the mandragora had connotations related to male potency and the enhancement of sexual power, especially in the 18th Dynasty. On the smell of the mandragora, see [Verbovsek and Backes 2015](#), 110.

⁴⁷ Cf. Popko in [TLA](#), pChester Beatty I, verso, section C: Liebeslied Nr. 31–37. For the translation, see also [Fox 1985](#), 53.

us from the female perspective about the perfection/beauty of the beloved [see Mathieu 1996, pl. 2]: “Come to me that I might see your beauty” (mj n=j m3=j nfr.w=k).⁴⁸ As Verbovsek and Backes [2015, 107] note, the need to see the beloved can reflect a sometimes deep emotional desire. The woman’s desire to see the man’s beauty, to have him in front of her, in her proximity, reflects her interest in him and, in a way, a craving to be close to the man she desires.⁴⁹ The expression of this craving could at the same time also be translated into a state of happiness or joy in the event that her longing is fulfilled. One cannot overlook, either, the fact that the body of the beloved, the vision of it, is expressed in terms of beauty,⁵⁰ thus showing that the male body can also appear as the subject of a woman’s attention.⁵¹ Here again, reference is made to her sexual attraction to him.

The comparison of the beloved one’s beauty with elements endowed with positive connotations is very common. In this same sense, a stanza in Song 9 of the Papyrus Harris 500 states [see Mathieu 1996, 11]: “The beauty of your beloved, the beloved of your heart, comes from the flowers” (nfr.w n sn.t=k mr.yt <n> jb=k jy.t m š3.w). To which the woman in Song 11 insists [Mathieu 1996, 11], “I do not want to be away from your beauty” (nn w3y=j r nfr.w=k).⁵² From the point of view of emotions, this last sentence shows how the woman expresses the desire to be near her beloved in a way that hints at her fear of being away from him. This could imply, in turn, the feeling of fulfillment or happiness she feels when she is by his side. Being away from him, on the other hand, could provoke sadness or anxiety in her. Therefore, it can be deduced from this that the vision of the loved one is perceived as pleasant and satisfying [Verbovsek and Backes 2015, 108].

Noteworthy in these latter examples is the fact that sexual desire can also be expressed from the perspective of a woman,⁵³ who in other texts even

⁴⁸ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, pChester Beatty I, verso, section C: Liebeslied Nr. 31–37.

⁴⁹ On the expression of woman’s desire toward a man, see also Darnell 2016, 46–47.

⁵⁰ As Landgráfová and Navrátilová state, “nfr.w represents the overall attractiveness of a person, including sex appeal” [2009, 105]. Dimitri Meeks [1982] interprets “nfr” as “les attributs sexuels”. See also Verbovsek and Backes 2015, 107.

⁵¹ Another reference to the beauty of the beloved manifested by a woman appears in oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266 [see Fox 1985, 32].

⁵² Cf. Popko in *TLA*, pHarris 500 = pBM EA 10060, recto 4–6: Liebeslieder 2. Gruppe: Lied Nr. 9–16.

⁵³ At least as far as the narrative of the poems is concerned. I do not intend to enter into a discussion of whether the texts and images were produced solely by men.

describes the situation she wishes to happen with the intention of sensually/sexually provoking her beloved. An example of the latter appears in oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266 [see [Mathieu 1996](#), pl. 18]: “My heart desires to go down to bathe myself before you. I will let you [see] my beauty in a tunic of the finest royal linen” [[Fox 1980](#), 102–103; [1985](#), 32] (jb=j r h̄y.t r wʾb=j m-bʾh=k dj=j [ptrj]=k nfr.w=j m msš(.t) n sšr-nsw dp.tj).⁵⁴ Then the woman adds [see [Mathieu 1996](#), pl. 18]: “Beloved, come, you shall look at me” (sn mjj ptrj=k wj).⁵⁵ This example illustrates perfectly well the manifestation of the desire to be close to the man of her desire, the longing to be with him. On the other hand, the fact that the woman describes that she intends to sit in front of him and that she will show him her body (= beauty) covered by a linen tunic, adds a high erotic content to the passage. Thus, the woman, through her words, tries to provoke and sexually excite the man. The use of the linen tunic as a garment covering her wet body only increases this sexual tone, as the wet clothing would stick to her body, and the transparency of it would leave little to the imagination. A reference is therefore made to an erotic detail that is clearly related to lust.

As we have seen from the examples presented so far, primary sources show a wide range of elements that serve for erotic-sexual stimulation and help to establish arousal or increased sexual desire. This is also the case with the use of certain items of clothing, as shown in this last example. Analogously, in oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266 (song 21B), the linen tunics are mentioned again as an exemplification of the desire to touch the body of the desired person [see [Mathieu 1996](#), pl. 19]: “Oh, if only I were (at least) for a month the launderer of the linen of the beloved,...that touched her body” (h̄ʾ n=j pʾ r̄h̄t.j{w} ʾ sšr n sn.t m ʾbd.t wʾ.w...j.t̄hn n h̄ʾ=s).⁵⁶ The desire of the male lover to come close to the linen tunic that his beloved wears shows his longing to touch her body [cf. [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#), 121]. A longing that certainly reveals the sexual desire he feels for her. In a way, the expression of this longing also reveals the frustration of the lover, who is unable to satisfy this desire.

On the contrary, only the scenarios and experiences mentioned in the texts will be taken as a reference point for the study. On the question of the authorship of these texts, see [Köpp-Junk 2015](#); [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#), 12, 20–22, 220–221.

⁵⁴ Cf. Popko in [TLA](#), oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20.

⁵⁵ Cf. Popko in [TLA](#), oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20.

⁵⁶ Cf. Popko in [TLA](#), oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe B: Liebeslied Nr. 21; [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#), 120–121. For the translation see [Fox 1985](#), 37.

Love songs, as illustrated in this last example, also tell us about the role of tactile perception in the expression of sexual desire. oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266 shows the desire to touch the body of the loved one, while the following example in the Papyrus Harris 500 (Song 1) [see Mathieu 1996, pl. 8] shows the desire to be touched: “If you are looking for me to touch on my thigh(s),⁵⁷ it is my sleep[room] that will [receive] you” (jr wh3=k wj r gmgm=j <m> msd.t=j m p3y=j mn[kb šsp]⁵⁸=f tj).⁵⁹ In both examples, sexual desire is clearly expressed in the longing to touch the body of the desired person or to be touched by the desired person. In Papyrus Harris 500, moreover, the mention of the bedroom would load the phrase even more with sexual connotations. A similar motif seems to occur again in the same document (Song 19) [see Mathieu 1996, pl. 13]: “I will take your garlands after you have come back drunk (and) you lie in your bedchamber while I caress your legs (/feet)” (t3y=j n3y=k m3h.w jw=k jj.tj thj.w={j} jw=k sdr.tj={j} m t3y=k hnky.t={j} jw=j hr gmgm rd.wy=k).⁶⁰ As Landgráfová and Navrátilová state, “The feet are very sensitive to another person’s touch and the caressing and rubbing of feet may be a very erotic experience” [2009, 140: cf. Verbovsek and Backes 2015, 112].

The longing for physical closeness linked to erotic desire also appears in the pChester Beatty I [r. 16,11] [Mathieu 1996, pl. 6]: “You got her feelings (/emotions) in a mess!⁶¹ You will reward her with the night (desired by) her. Then she will say to you: Take me in your arms! We’ll be like that at dawn” (jry=k thth n3y=s šrgħ.w mnq=(k) st m p3y=st grħ.{t} hr dd=s n=k jmm wj m knjw=k ħd-t; jw={w}<n> m-mj.tt).⁶² Translating the passage in the

⁵⁷ See the commentary on the thighs in Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 159.

⁵⁸ For the addition made here, see Wimmer 2000, 32. Cf. Popko in *TLA*, pHarris 500 = pBM EA 10060, recto 7–8: Liebeslieder 3. Gruppe: Lied Nr. 17–19. Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 159 does not provide any further suggestions for the reconstruction of the sentence.

⁵⁹ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, pHarris 500 = pBM EA 10060, recto 1–4: Liebeslieder 1. Gruppe: Lied Nr. 1–8.

⁶⁰ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, pHarris 500 = pBM EA 10060, recto 7–8: Liebeslieder 3. Gruppe: Lied Nr. 17–19; Fox 1985, 27.

⁶¹ “Tu pourras faire se troubler ses sens” [Mathieu 1996, 48 n125]. Cf. Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 165.

⁶² Based on Popko’s translation in *TLA*, pChester Beatty I, recto 16.9–17.13: Liebeslied Nr. 41–47 (Nachtsobek-Lied). Cf. Fox 1985, 69; Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 163.

way proposed involves different aspects to be analyzed. First, this passage could be expressing the emotional confusion experienced when feeling love⁶³ or sexual attraction toward another person, a confusion that demands to be amended and even rewarded by the person who caused it. The reward coincides with the satisfaction of that desire aroused by the beloved, namely, with sexual intercourse (“the night she desires”).⁶⁴ Moreover, the expression of that desire by the emotionally charged subject also displays a mixture of enthusiasm and impatience (“take me in your arms”), as if they cannot wait any longer to finally have what they so ardently wish for. As expressed in [Verbovsek and Backes 2015](#), 111, the latter phrase expresses the longing for physical closeness or tenderness, erotic desire, and sexuality.

Gestures, looks, smells, and even specific elements such as a certain type of flower can also stimulate sexual attraction or an emotional reaction toward other people, including sexual desire or arousal (among other things). In this respect, it is worth looking at the following text from O. Gardiner 304 [[Mathieu 1996](#), pl. 26]: “I will kiss [her] in the presence of everyone, that they might know my love. Oh! She is who has stolen my heart. When she looks at me it is refreshment” (jw=j <r> snny[=st] m-b}h {wn} bw-nb ‘m=w p}y=j mrw.t y} mnts{t} jt} jb=j jr m-dr nw} s r=j kb);⁶⁵ The fragment selected here contains several metaphors and expressions that serve the study of emotions. First, it expresses his desire to kiss her. In other words, the sexual attraction he feels for her is referred to. To this is added the desire, the longing, to kiss her publicly so that everyone can witness how he feels about her.⁶⁶ Through the metaphor of “stealing the heart”, he reemphasizes his attraction to her, who has made him fall deeply in love with her. Furthermore, his mentioning that when she looks at him it is refreshing could allude to a

⁶³ As Martina Grünhagen [2019, 379] states, being in love leads to an “Ausnahmezustand” through which lovers are unable to express themselves as expected.

⁶⁴ Fox [1985, 70] states that the use of «mnq» in this sentence “seems to allude to sexual satisfaction”. This suggestion is also adopted by Mathieu [1996, 48 n125].

⁶⁵ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, oGardiner 304, recto 1–7: Liebeslied. See also [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#), 100–102; [Darnell 2016](#), 26.

⁶⁶ The theme of publicly showing the love that the two lovers feel towards each other occurs in other songs as well,...either combined with not being worried about the possible consequences or not being ashamed before anyone, or the right opposite—seeking public cognizance. [[Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009](#), 101]

state of happiness, perhaps also implying satisfaction and/or tranquility for feeling reciprocated, for feeling desired.

Similarly, another text (oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, 20G) states:⁶⁷ “Oh!⁶⁸ I want to kiss her,⁶⁹ her lips are opened. I am joyful without beer”⁷⁰ (j snn=j {sw} <st> sp.ty=s wn hntš=kwj nn hnḳ.t).⁷¹ The use of the particle «j» (Oh!) could be interpreted as a feeling of excitement on the part of the speaker, in this case the man, who then expresses the desire to kiss her. Once again, therefore, reference is made to attraction, to sexual desire.⁷² The last sentence, “I am joyful without beer”, also shows the expression of joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction for the moment he is experiencing and what might be about to happen. Also noteworthy is the specific mention of the woman’s lips being open.⁷³ This could be understood as clarification of a mutual desire, as the woman is also willing to respond to the man’s desire. In other texts, sexual desire is more often expressed in a much more discreet way. So in Papyrus Harris 500 [see Mathieu 1996, pl. 9], the man claims: “I will say to Ptah, the Lord of Truth: Give me the beloved [lit. sister] tonight!”

⁶⁷ See Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 141–142; Fox 1980, 102. For the hieroglyphic text, see Mathieu 1996, pl. 19.

⁶⁸ I have followed Popko in *TLA*, oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20 to understand «j» as an interjection and not as part of an emphatic «j.sDm=f» as proposed in Mathieu 1996, 99.

⁶⁹ Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 141 has the initial clause as “When I am kissing her”. However, I tend more toward the translation proposed by Popko in *TLA*, oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20.

⁷⁰ See Popko in *TLA*, oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20: cf. Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 141. Fox 1980, 103 [cf. 1985, 33] continues the incomplete text as follows: “How the void has been filled! Menqet shall be adorned thereby, while conducting (me) with...[to he]r bedroom”.

⁷¹ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20.

⁷² Meskell states regarding this passage that “ideal love between partners was supposed to be passionate, emotional and sexual” [2000a, 432].

⁷³ About this, Landgráfová and Navrátilová suggest that

the open lips suggest a kiss on the mouth or rather a deep kiss, though it is also possible that her open lips have expressed that she was enraptured by touching noses with her beloved. [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 141]

However, they omit the interjection «j» and understand the grammatical structure as a circumstantial form, thus giving a different meaning to the sentence from the one offered here.

(jw=j r dd n [Pth] nb-mʿ.t jmm n=j sn.t m pʿ grh).⁷⁴ Here the man expresses his wish to the gods, in this case to Ptah, to be able to spend the night with his beloved. The use of the imperative «jmm» could be showing a need, an eagerness to get what is being asked for. In the song 20E in oCairo GC 25218 + oDeM 1266, the night is also used as a reference to sexual intercourse. Here, the man says,

(My) beloved [lit. sister] has come, my heart rejoices, my arms are outstretched to embrace her. My heart is as happy in its place as a fish (Nile perch) in its pond. O night, you are mine forever because (my) mistress came to me. [cf. Fox 1985, 32–33; Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 136]

sn.t jy.tj jb=j hr 'd'd gʿb.wj=j pš(š) r qnjw=st hʿ.tj=j (hr) wnf hr mk.t=f wdj m pʿy=f mš pʿ g[r]h jw=k n=j r-nhḥ m-dr jwj n=j hn.wt.⁷⁵

This particular fragment vividly reflects the man's excitement, his joy that the woman whom he desires is with him. This exaltation could also demonstrate the satisfaction of the encounter but also the happiness for the correspondence of feelings/desires that is implied by the mention that his beloved has come to him.⁷⁶ His receiving her with outstretched arms to embrace her could also be understood in terms of longing for bodily closeness, for feeling closer to her. Furthermore, the sexual desire, the attraction to her is implicit in the reference to the sexual intercourse manifested by the expression "O night, you are mine forever" [cf. Fox 1985, 35 nc]. Another widely used formula to express sexual intercourse is «mj.t jry=n wnw.t sdr=n» (Come! Let's make an hour by sleeping [together]).⁷⁷ The explicit mention of sexual desire also appears in a passage from the divine birth legend of Hatshepsut: "He became lustful for her"⁷⁸ (sw ḥ3d⁷⁹ =f r=s) [see Müller 1966, 252, 255; Sethe

⁷⁴ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, pHarris 500 = pBM EA 10060, recto 1–4: Liebeslieder 1. Gruppe: Lied Nr. 1–8. For the translation, see also Fox 1985, 11.

⁷⁵ Cf. Popko in *TLA*, oCairo CG 25218 + oDeM 1266, Gruppe A: Liebeslied Nr. 20.

⁷⁶ Love songs often show this reciprocity of sexual desire between the participants involved. See in this regard Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 159; Fox 1985, 307.

⁷⁷ pBM EA 10183. Another variant of this expression in the same text is «mj jry=n n=n wnw.t sDr=n». The enjoyment of sex is also expressed in texts dating to the late and Greco-Roman periods. On this, see Quack 2016.

⁷⁸ "lust...for": see Faulkner 1991, 164.

⁷⁹ "He went to her at once, and had an erection towards her". Frandsen 1977, 84 also emphasizes that

the translation of such a passage is no easy matter, because the risk of over-interpretation and vulgar simplification is always present. Thus, the two most

1930, 220; Naville 1897, pl. 47]. In this sense, a passage [CT 576] in the coffin texts not only refers to sexual performance but also emphasizes the importance of female enjoyment: “He shall copulate in this land by night and by day, and desire shall come to the woman beneath him whenever he copulates” (jw=f nk=f m t̄ pn m gr̄h (m) r’ jw jb n ḥmt ḥr=f r-ṯnw nk=f) [see De Buck 1958, 191, l–m].

The written documentary repertoire presented above provides relevant information linked to the expression of sexual desire and a wide range of emotions.⁸⁰ Another document, dating from the New Kingdom, stands out above all others with regard to the expression of sexual desire and pleasure: the well-known Turin Papyrus 55001 or Turin Erotic Papyrus.⁸¹ Its explicit and often unexpected characterization of the sexual practices—it “shows a related means of achieving sexual satisfaction” [Manniche 1977, 15]—in an ancient culture like the Egyptian has given this text worldwide visibility. It is not the intention here to engage in a discussion of their representative character but only to consider their few fragmentary texts as case studies of the subject at hand. Leaving aside the interpretation of the nature of its content,⁸² the simple fact of having captured such scenes on a papyrus gives us relevant information about the sphere of sex, both real practices and possible erotic fantasies. The textual content is in a rather fragmentary state, with the scenes providing most of the information. However, in one of the texts the following can still be read: “Come behind me with your desire! Oh, your penis!” (mj m s̄=j ḥr t̄y=k mrw.t̄⁸³ j ḥnn=k).⁸⁴ These words are expressed

recent English translations of the phrase here rendered “had an erection towards her” (H3d) render the phrase as “he lusted after her”, and if the connotations of “lust” imply that which the word undoubtedly means, one might prefer the latter more decent term.

⁸⁰ For an analysis of further passages, see Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 90–219.

⁸¹ Discovered at Deir el-Medina during the 19th century and now housed in the Egyptian Museum in Turin, this papyrus features drawings of animal figures in human actions, on the one hand, and explicit scenes of erotic positions with human figures, on the other hand.

⁸² This papyrus has been interpreted in a variety of ways, including as a form of social criticism. For more on the interpretations of the nature of its content, see Brawanski and Fischer-Elfert 2012; O’Connor 2011; Janák and Navrátilová 2008.

⁸³ See Brawanski and Fischer-Elfert 2012, 70.

⁸⁴ For the text, see Brawanski and Fischer-Elfert 2012, 70, 92.

by one of the female figures and clearly show the (sexual) desire of the characters. This passage reveals how the female figure expresses impatience and desire for the man to approach her for an obvious sexual purpose. This is clearly emphasized by her last words: “Oh, your penis!” In turn, her words can be interpreted as an attempt to arouse the man, as she is hinting that his (sexual) desires are going to be fulfilled.

4. Conclusion

It is well known that what makes each person desire another person is very personal and that, moreover, it can change throughout our lives, just as people change. Thus, the experience of sexual desire is a subjective experience and should definitely not be defined as unitary or monolithic. Some people may feel shame or guilt, others may experience it as something very natural, while others again may seek sexual stimuli and a behavior that recreates pleasurable sensations. This also depends very much on the values that have been transmitted by the social and cultural environment in which one has grown up. Thus, both social norms and life experiences influence how sexual desire is interpreted, valued, and experienced.⁸⁵

As shown throughout this paper, sexuality is strongly present in the socio-cultural environment of ancient Egypt and is not reduced to the aspect of fertility [see [Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2015](#), xxxii; [Yoyotte 1959](#); [Robins 1988](#), 61]. The passages from love songs, Turin Papyrus 55001, and some religious texts presented demonstrate that Egyptian textual sources provide us with a great variety of forms of expression of sexual desire, showing the most commonplace aspects, such as sexual provocation, arousal, desire, and pleasure. The experience of sexual desire expressed in the written compositions also implies the manifestation of other emotions, such as happiness or sadness at being or not being close to the desired person or despair, among other things. As Fox points out,

⁸⁵ “The visceral experience of pleasure is clearly biological in origin, but an individual’s choice of sexual stimuli betrays obvious cultural biases” [[Abramson and Pinkerton 1995](#), 11]. [Landgráfová and Navrátilová](#) also state that “the cultural biases may most visibly concern what is considered sexually attractive. But differences run deeper than that. Physical stimuli applied to the same organs may produce different outcomes in different individuals within different communities” [[2015](#), xxxii].

The Egyptian lovers are fascinated by love, amazed at its power and its sensations. In attempting to show how love feels, the Egyptian poems characteristically use introspective reports on the speaker's emotions.... We get the impression of lovers taking their own emotional pulses and revealing what love does to them. [Fox 1985, 325]

Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that the compositions themselves serve not only as a scenario for the display of different emotions but also as a stimulus or as a trigger for emotions. As Navrátilová and Landgráfová note, the songs could provoke in the recipient thereof the memory of a personal experience and thus the shared feeling of the same warm or painful experience [2015, xxvii–xxviii]. Therefore, the textual compositions discussed should also be understood as a way of involving the recipients in the narrated situations. These recipients can not only come to recognize certain emotional patterns but also empathize and participate emotionally in the situation. This shared emotional experience also created a bond of solidarity, a common feeling, which in a way could also translate into a feeling of group identity.

Regardless of whether the scenarios described in the texts discussed throughout this paper were fictional or real, the evocation or stimulation of emotions expressed in the textual compositions is significant. The texts serve to express a wide range of emotions, both implicitly and explicitly. Such emotions addressed in Egyptian narratives are comparable to those known from other cultures, even from our modern Western context.

Sexuality confronts those who experience it with the challenges of full enjoyment and, especially in modern terms, mutual pleasure. Also in the case of ancient Egyptian culture, at least according to the textual sources cited, sexual desire seems to be linked not only to the male figure but also to the female point of view.⁸⁶ The triggering focus of these constructions is therefore not only the female body in the vision of the male figure but also the male body in the vision (referring strictly to what is expressed in the text) of the female figure. The texts presented, therefore, make explicit reference to

⁸⁶ Fellinger 2013, 52 states that “ancient Egyptian poets as members of the past society perceived women and men as equal partners”. Also O’Connor 2011, 380 suggests that “the couples described in the [love songs] enter into erotic relationships which seem often or usually to have included a mutual sharing of sexual pleasure”. Landgráfová and Navrátilová [2009, 163] also adopt this opinion, stating that “the love songs portray the girl as equal to the boy not only in sexual fulfillment, but also in desire and lustfulness”.

sexual desire experienced from female and male perspectives⁸⁷ in a framework based primarily on the binary division of the sexes, using expressions that can range from the most subtle to the most outspoken.⁸⁸ While being cautious due to the difficulty of attributing such behaviors to the domain of reality, these texts could provide insights for a better understanding of the codes of erotic-sexual interaction of the individuals of the time.

With reference to the topic of this special issue, emotions, the analysis of different text passages dating back to the New Kingdom has allowed us to explore how the connection between sexual desire and various emotional reactions, such as insecurity, frustration, joy, satisfaction, and sadness, can be expressed, at least in written compositions such as the ones analyzed. The texts do not reveal any kind of established cultural pattern in the textual transmission that would dictate an association between certain emotions and the sphere of sexual desire, but they do clearly show that the experience of sexual desire goes hand in hand with the manifestation of other emotions. Considering the primary sources, these emotional reactions respond to and/or generate different types of behavior that may differ from one individual to another and from one situation to another. The texts also express the idea that through any of the senses we receive various stimuli that can produce a gratifying sensation, a certain sexual enjoyment. These sensations, response mechanisms, and sexual pleasures may differ considerably among individuals, entailing different response patterns. From this it can be deduced that sexual desire is a very intense and powerful experience, so much so that it can sometimes lead to forms of behavior that would not otherwise be observed. Just as people do now, the ancient Egyptians experienced different ways of expressing their feelings, of expressing their erotic-sexual needs, impulses, and dreams.

As the focus of analysis in this article has been limited to a specific period and sources, the information obtained cannot be extended or applied to the whole of Egyptian cultural history without a study of primary sources

⁸⁷ Although sexual interaction between men and women is widely covered in Egyptian literature, the possibility of same-sex interaction cannot be excluded. At least some textual sources—such as the so-called negative confessions, dream interpretation [e.g., P. Carlsberg XIII], and “The Contendings of Horus and Seth” (among other literary creations)—also refer to same-sex sexual intercourse. On this topic, see, e.g., [Parkinson 1995](#), 2008; [Matić 2016b](#).

⁸⁸ As [Fox 1985](#), 298 states, “Sexual desire pervades the songs, and sexual pleasure is happily widespread in them”.

from other periods.⁸⁹ However, it does provide valuable information that sheds further light on specific issues, such as the emotional sphere linked to sexual desire, during the period in which the texts were conceived. In the specific case of so-called love songs, as Landgráfová and Navrátilová have pointed out, these “are indisputably important as evidence of cultural history”, especially because they seem to “open the door to the themes of Egyptian intimacy and sexuality” [see 2009, 11].

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Abbreviations

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⁸⁹ So-called erotic poems are not unique to the New Kingdom, although earlier examples are very rare. For more information, see Landgráfová and Navrátilová 2009, 18–19.

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