Undergraduate Research Academy (URA)

Cover Sheet

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Amber L. Myers

STUDENT

Dr. Allison Thomason

MENTOR

Garden of Delight: A Comparative Study of the Love Poetry of Ancient Egypt and its Historical Context

PROJECT TITLE

ABSTRACT: The abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the content of the proposal in about 150 words in plain language. Reviewers receive their first impression from this abstract. The information needs to be concise, well organized, self contained, and understandable to persons outside your academic discipline.

The nature of this project is historical research. This study will examine primary sources in translation and secondary sources. In addition, travel in Egypt (January 2002), will allow for examination of non-textual primary sources. It will ultimately result in an academic paper (approximately 40 pages) that will be presented in a condensed form at the annual Phi Alpha Theta Southeastern Illinois Regional Conference for undergraduate and graduate students and will serve as my senior assignment. This interdisciplinary study will examine the love poetry of Ancient Egypt and compare it with that of Mesopotamia, and the Song of Solomon (from the Old Testament). It will seek to produce a literary critique of the selected ancient texts and will aim to place these texts within their historical and cultural background by considering the following questions: What common threads link the love poetry between these three cultures? Is there a connection between the extensive diplomatic and economic contact between Mesopotamia and Egypt during the New Kingdom (the height of the Egyptian Empire in the ancient Near East, ca. 1600-1100 B.C.E.) and the appearance of love poetry in Egypt at that time? Also, in order to further evaluate the cultural context of these ancient literary achievements, the representations of women and sexuality—particularly those of ancient Egypt—will be explored. This is an interdisciplinary study in that it fits into the areas of comparative ancient history, literary criticism, art history, and women’s studies. It also explores some of the roots of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Upon submitting this proposal, I verify that this writing is my own and pledge to fulfill all of the expectations of the Undergraduate Research Academy to the best of my abilities. I understand that failure to do so may result in return of fellowship money to the University and forfeiture of academic credit and honors recognition.

Signature of the Student

Amber L. Myers 3-29-01

I am able, willing, and committed to providing the necessary facilities and to take the time to mentor this student during this project. I verify that this student is capable of undertaking this proposed project.

Signature of the Faculty Mentor

Allison Thomason
This project is within the mission and scope of this department, and the department fully supports the faculty mentor and student during this venture.

Ellen Nore
Signature of the Department Chairperson

I testify that all necessary research protocols (human, animal, toxic waste) have been fulfilled, and I support this proposed faculty-student scholarly activity as within the mission of the College/School.

David Sember
Signature of the Dean of the College/School
Introduction and Significance

The nature of this project is historical research. This study will examine primary sources in translation and secondary sources (e.g. scholarly articles, books, etc.). In addition, travel in Egypt (January 2002) will allow for examination of non-textual primary sources. It will ultimately result in an academic paper that will be approximately 40 pages in length. The paper will be presented in condensed form at the Phi Alpha Theta Southeastern Illinois Regional Conference for undergraduate and graduate students.

This interdisciplinary study of the love poetry of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Song of Solomon will pursue many routes of inquiry. It will seek to produce a literary critique (e.g. explore the use of metaphors, forms, etc.) of the selected ancient texts and will aim to place these texts within their historical and cultural background by asking the following questions: Why were these writings produced and by whom? What common threads link the love poetry between these three cultures?

The fourteenth century B.C.E. in particular was characterized by extensive international trade and peaceful diplomatic relations between Egypt and its neighbors in the Near East. Cuneiform tablets, known as the Amarna Letters, from this time period were discovered in Egypt and provide evidence of amicable diplomatic communications between Egypt and major rulers in the Near East. However, not all of these tablets are letters--some of them are myths and epics, which indicates that there was an exchange of literature. Is there a connection between this direct contact of Mesopotamia and Egypt during the New Kingdom (the height of the Egyptian empire, ca. 1600-1100 B.C.E.), which resulted in the exchange of literature as well as goods, and the appearance of love poetry in Egypt? The love poems often describe women’s beauty in erotic language. Therefore, in order to further evaluate the cultural context of these ancient literary achievements, the art of these cultures—specifically the images of women and sexuality (e.g. tomb reliefs)—will be explored. Whereas in Mesopotamia we learn of representations of women from the poetry, in Egypt we can learn of representations of women from images as well as poetry.

This study is significant and worthy of funding because it fits into the areas of comparative ancient history, literary criticism, art history, and women’s history; it also forms a more complete picture of the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition by exploring some of its roots. It is this interdisciplinary quality that will make the study a unique and worthwhile addition to the existing body of literature on the history of Egypt in the fourteenth century B.C.E. and the love poetry of the ancient Near East. The existing sources are primarily concerned with literary critique, yet they are not fundamentally comparative in nature. In addition, they do not examine the historical context, and they do not study the images of women in art alongside the images of women produced in the love poetry. This study also increases the awareness of similarities and differences between the three cultures and furthers the understanding of ancient history which in turn increases the awareness of today’s world by exploring its ancient roots.

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1 Phi Alpha Theta is an international history honor society, the purpose of which is to promote the study of history through encouraging research, publication, the exchange of ideas among historians, and good teaching.

2 Cuneiform was the written script of Mesopotamia (located in the area of modern Iraq).
Literature Review

The study and analysis of the love poetry of the ancient Near East began with the recovery of the texts (e.g. papyri, tablets, etc.) by European archaeologists in the nineteenth century C.E. Scholars have since studied the texts and published their translations, findings, and interpretations. It is the translations of the texts that form the core of my research.

Translations of the texts come from several different sources. In the case of the ancient Egyptian poems, I will utilize the translations of Miriam Lichtheim (1976), William Kelly Simpson (1976), and Michael V. Fox (1985). Translations of the Mesopotamian texts have been published in works by Erica Reiner (1985), Gwendolyn Leick (1994), and William Moran (1992). For translations of the Song of Solomon I will use works by Michael V. Fox (1985), Marvin H. Pope (1964), and Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (1991). Each scholar translated the texts differently and defended that translation based on his or her individual interpretations of the original text. Since I cannot produce my own translations, it is important that I note the differences in each scholar’s translation and the reasons for those differences.

Analysis of the Egyptian texts is provided in works by Fox (1985), and White (1978), who provide comprehensive literary and philological studies of the poems. They include commentary on the texts and discuss concepts of love. Their comparative studies focus only on the ancient Egyptian love poems and the Song of Solomon. White’s study is distinguished by some additional characteristics—it traces the development of ancient Egyptian love poetry and includes a survey of scholarly opinion on the Song of Solomon. Any comparisons with the (much larger) body of surviving Mesopotamian material is minimal, and thus does not fully explore the common features of the love poetry of the three cultures.

Analysis of the Mesopotamian texts is provided by Reiner (1985) and Leick (1994). Reiner’s study is useful as it considers the poetry from Babylonia and Assyria, rather than just texts that could be considered to fit under the category of love poetry. Leick’s study, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on Mesopotamian literature that involves sex and eroticism. It is a comprehensive study that not only analyzes texts, but compares different scholars’ translations and interpretations. Both of these studies are concerned only with Mesopotamian sources, thus any comparisons with the ancient Egyptian love poems or the Song of Solomon are limited to brief comments.

The two comparative sources are those of Pope (1964), and Westenholz (1992). Pope (1964) deals comprehensively with the Song of Solomon, providing a translation as well as an analysis of the text. Though the focus of the work is solely the Song of Solomon, there is an entire section devoted to its Egyptian and Mesopotamian parallels. The parallels Pope focuses on are limited to those that deal with praise of the physical beauty of the subjects of the poems. Another comparative source is an article by Westenholz (1992), which deals comparatively with the metaphorical language within the love poetry of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Song of Solomon. The nature of the article limits the discussion to the similar uses of common metaphors in the love poetry of the
ancient Near East. This article is a valuable resource since it compares this genre of poetry in all three cultures.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is the interdisciplinary quality of the study I propose that will make it a unique and worthwhile addition to the existing body of literature on the love poetry and history of the ancient Near East, since existing sources are primarily concerned with literary critique, and are not fundamentally comparative in nature (i.e. they do not set out to compare the poetry of all three cultures). Also, none of the sources contribute to the history of the second millennium B.C.E and the history of the Amarna period (ca. 1353-1335 B.C.E.) in particular. They do not consider the evidence that the Amarna Letters provide about the conditions of international relations that set the stage for the exchange of literature during the fourteenth century B.C.E. Neither do they study the images of women in art alongside the images of women produced in the love poetry. Both of these elements will be integral parts of my study. However, it is important to note that each of these sources provides an important block in the foundation that my study will stand on.

**Hypothesis**

Is there a connection between the direct contact of Mesopotamia and Egypt during the New Kingdom period (the height of the Egyptian empire, ca. 1600-1100 B.C.E.) and the first appearance of love poetry in Egypt at that time? The fourteenth century B.C.E. in particular was characterized by extensive international trade and peaceful diplomatic relations between Egypt and its neighbors in the Near East. Cuneiform tablets (known as the Amarna Letters) from this time period were discovered in Egypt and provide evidence of amicable diplomatic communication between Egypt and other major rulers in the Near East. Interestingly, not all of these tablets are letters--some of them are myths and epics, which provides evidence of the exchange of literature. The influence that these two cultures exerted over each other is generally acknowledged. However, the conditions that set the stage for such cultural influences have not been explored. This study will approach this issue with the idea that the extensive international trade and diplomatic relations that characterized the New Kingdom (particularly those of the fourteenth century B.C.E.) set the stage for such cultural influences and thus the development of love poetry in Egypt. Pursuing this issue will provide an examination of the historical context of the poems. The cultural context of these ancient literary achievements will be further explored by examining representations of women and sexuality in art (e.g. tomb reliefs)—particularly the art of ancient Egypt. I intend to determine how the exposure to other cultures during the New Kingdom influenced how sexuality (especially women’s sexuality) was portrayed in all art, textual or pictorial.

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³ There are more images Egypt than in Mesopotamia, so it is possible to study representations of women in images as well as poetry.
**Timeline**

My project will begin in Fall 2001 with an independent study with Dr. Thomason and library research that involves evaluation of secondary sources and textual primary sources in translation. This library research will continue throughout the semester and will eventually result in a draft of a preliminary outline by the end of the semester. The trip to Egypt is scheduled for January 2002 and will take place over the semester break. (Since the trip is integral to this study, the entirety of the requested funding will go to defray travel expenses.) While in Egypt I will continue my research through examination of non-textual primary sources (e.g. tomb reliefs, artifacts in the Cairo Museum, etc.).

During the Spring 2002 semester the final outline will be completed and the paper drafted and revised. In April the final paper will be completed and I will present a condensed version of the paper at the annual Southeastern Illinois Regional Phi Alpha Theta Conference for undergraduate and graduate students.

**Fall 2001:**
- Independent study with Dr. Thomason and Library research--evaluation of secondary sources and textual primary sources in translation
- Drafting of preliminary outline for the paper

**Over the Semester Break:**
- Examination of textual and nontextual primary sources in Egypt

**Spring 2002:**
- Compose final outline and draft of the paper
- Revision of draft & presentation of a condensed version of the paper at the Phi Alpha Theta conference
- Presentation at URA Spring Symposium

**Bibliography**


Budget Justification

Budget Summary Total: $ 800

Commodities: $ 0 Contractual Services: $ 0

Travel: $ 800 Other (specify): $ 0

The requested budget amount is for travel expenses and would be applied to defray the cost of a trip to Egypt (in January 2002), which is sponsored annually by SIU. In order to cover the remaining costs of the trip, I plan to apply to the College of Arts and Sciences for funding to travel and the remaining cost I will pay for myself. Travel to Egypt will enable me to continue my research and produce a higher quality of academic work in the following ways:

- On a most basic level, the opportunity to visit the archaeological sites will increase my overall understanding of ancient Egypt. The SIU trip is designed to be a fully educational experience as experts in various fields accompany each trip and many more sites are scheduled on the itinerary than are scheduled for other trips to Egypt.
- Being in Egypt will offer the opportunity to visit and learn more about Deir el-Medina, which is the site at which some of the ancient Egyptian love poems were found. This is also the site where a papyrus depicting sexuality was discovered.
The Cairo Museum holds a fragmentary vase on which some of the ancient Egyptian love poems are inscribed; visiting the museum would allow me to see the fragment for myself. (By January 2002 my proficiency in hieroglyphs will be limited but sufficient to decipher some texts because by that time I will have taken a class on Egyptian hieroglyphs.)

Travelling to Egypt would enable me to visit the tomb of Nefertari, which is located in the Valley of the Queens. The walls of Nefertari’s tomb are decorated with vibrant images of Queen Nefertari. The opportunity to study these images first hand would directly impact my paper, as I am including a section on the images of women and sexuality.

Another point that is worth making is that historians learn about the past from primary sources—in the case of this project examples of primary sources would be the archaeological sites, images on the walls of Nefertari’s tomb, and the papyri on which the love poems are written. It is inconceivable that a historian would attempt to add to knowledge of a past time without examining for herself the primary sources of that time. To complete this project without having examined all of the primary sources that are within my ability to examine would ignore the historical methods set forth by the discipline, result in a lower quality research paper, and would speak poorly of my scholarship and commitment to the advancement of knowledge within the field of historical studies.

Budget

Expenses

Air $1100

Lodging, food, Museum admission, Transport in Egypt, water, etc. $2700

Revenues

$800 (URA)
$600 (URA)
$?? (College of Arts and Sciences)
$?? (Personal contribution and tuition)

4 Estimated based on the cost of the 2001 trip. (See accompanying information regarding the trip.)
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