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# Gender and Genre in Ancient Egyptian Poetry: the Rhetoric of Performance in the Harpers' Songs\*

PATRICIA A. BOCHI

Few texts in ancient Egyptian literature are as intriguing as the so-called harpers' songs. Prima facie these songs, which occur mostly in Thebes from the late Eighteenth Dynasty to the Twentieth, exhort the listener to enjoy life in this world in the face of life's transitoriness and death's inescapability while enjoining him to act righteously so as to reach the blessed next world.<sup>1</sup> The complexity and apparent contradiction of the songs' message continue to elude Egyptologists, who in the final analysis view the songs as expressing a deep awareness of death, yet disagree over the significance or implications of such awareness. In this way, for some the songs are essentially lyrics venting the individ-

ual's skepticism about the afterlife combined with an ensuing carpe diem attitude, while for others the songs embody the ultimate affirmation of the individual's faith in an afterlife. Moreover, the question as to whether these were originally works sung in the world of the living and, hence, of a secular nature, or made solely for funerary purpose, or possibly both, is yet another vexing point about which specialists hold divided views.

Although this divergence of opinions is perhaps unavoidable given the apparent ambiguity of the texts, it should not conceal the fact that ultimately scholars may be responsible for producing this interpretive gridlock.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the tendency among scholars has been to study the harpers' songs chiefly as literary texts with a religious message. The obvious merits of such an approach notwithstanding, other aspects are bound to remain unexplored. For example, it is all too often overlooked that all but one of the known written compositions are not only carved on tomb walls, but also include a pictorial element. The fact that the songs were originally created as permanent records designed to be seen by the visitor is in itself fairly significant. In this essay, I therefore propose to examine the songs' visual dimension and to (re-)view them as concrete visual manifestations in an attempt to depart from the traditional approach in which typically the latter are treated as abstract literary

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<sup>1</sup> The standard study on the songs is still that by M. Lichtheim, "The Songs of the Harpers," *JNES* 4 (1945): 178–212; for later studies (including songs that were unknown to Lichtheim), cf. J. Assmann, "Fest des Augenblicks—Verheissung der Dauer: die Kontroverse der ägyptischen Harfnerlieder," in J. Assmann, E. Feucht, and R. Grieshammer (eds.), *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur: Studien zum Gedenken an Eberhard Otto* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 55–84; idem, "Harfnerlieder," *LÄ* 2:972–82; H. Brunner, "Wiederum die ägyptischen 'Make Merry' Lieder," *JNES* 25 (1966): 130–31; M. V. Fox, "A Study of Antef," *Orientalia* 46 (1977): 393–423; P. Gilbert, "Les chants du harpiste," *CdÉ* 29 (1940): 38–44; H. Goedicke, "The Date of the 'Antef Song,'" in J. Assmann, E. Feucht, and R. Grieshammer (eds.), *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur: Studien zum Gedenken an Eberhard Otto* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 185–96; D. Lorton, "The Expression 'Iri Hrw Nfr,'" *JARCE* 12 (1975): 23–31; idem, "The Expression *šms-ib*," *JARCE* 7 (1968): 41–54; idem, "A Note on the Expression *šms-ib*," *JARCE* 8 (1969–1970): 55–57; and E. F. Wente, "Egyptian 'Make Merry' Songs Reconsidered," *JNES* 21 (1962): 118–28. I am concerned here with the post-Amarna songs and in particular the so-called heretic, as opposed to orthodox, compositions; for the distinction, Assmann, *LÄ* 2:972–73.

<sup>2</sup> Briefly observed by Wente, who attributes this narrowness of interpretation to the one-sidedness of the nature of the evidence, *JNES* 21:118; and by Fox, who attributes it to the historical approach generally followed by Egyptologists, *Orientalia* 46:393–94. My approach to the songs is generally similar, albeit not exactly identical, to the latter's perspective.

compositions.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, the issue of representation and the degree to which it bears out the historical reality will also need to be examined. While focusing on the formal presentation of the harpers' songs may not give us all the answers to our queries, the types of issues that such an approach raises can nevertheless improve our understanding of the role these songs played in the cultural milieu in which they flourished.

\* \* \*

Broadly defined, the imagery of a harper's song is fairly predictable, if not fixed, as it includes the written words of the song next to which a musician—usually a harpist, but occasionally a lutist—plays his instrument while seated in front of the deceased tomb owner and his wife, who are either seated at a table of offerings, participating in a banquet, or seemingly listening to the music. The musician is depicted as a shaven or bald-headed man, often wearing a fashionable dress. He is also sometimes shown facially wrinkled, sporting a bulging stomach, and blind or visually impaired.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the musician tends to perform as a soloist in a position that is either spatially discrete from the rest of the scenes or simply facing away from them.<sup>5</sup>

Despite variations, the iconographic presentation of a harper's song thus follows a formula, from which one particular feature emerges that requires some attention, namely, the musician's gender, which is exclusively male.

The regular exclusion of women from the performance of the harpers' songs is all the more puzzling, as such exclusion could hardly have been due to the nature of the activity, namely, music playing, or even the type of instrument, namely, the harp, as being the preserve of men.

<sup>3</sup> I deal with other aspects elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> Blind or visually impaired musicians constituted a common, although by no means regular, motif in Egypt as well other cultures. However, since this feature is relatively rare in the case of the Theban solo harpists (unlike the musicians depicted at Amarna and Karnak), it cannot be considered as typical of the iconography of the songs under study; cf. L. Manniche, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1991), 97–107.

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions exist, notably in the Memphite tomb of Paatenemheb, where the harpist is part of an ensemble.

Indeed not only does music appear to have played an important role in the life—be it secular or sacred—of ancient Egyptian society, but it also seems to have involved both men and women as early as the Old Kingdom, when numerous scenes of music-making are depicted in the tombs of Egyptian officials. In the Old Kingdom particularly, tomb representations of women playing the harp in either a public or a private setting are common.<sup>6</sup> The answer to the question of gender selection in the harpers' songs, therefore, lies elsewhere.

In terms of literary texts, the harpers' songs are traditionally classified as being related to the genre of wisdom literature and more specifically the meditative, as opposed to the instructional or prescriptive, type.<sup>7</sup> As a genre, the sapiential writings share a number of features that concern us here. For example, in the instructional writings women neither give nor receive the advice that is being formulated.<sup>8</sup> When mentioned at all—the references to women are by and large incidental—the latter tend to be portrayed in fairly passive and subordinate roles as devoted wives and mothers. Another role in which women are cast, already in the Old Kingdom (e.g., Instructions of Ptahhotep), is as potential trouble makers whom a husband should control and the wise man avoid. By the New Kingdom, this negative attitude towards women increases and is reflected in the introduction of a new type of women, namely, the courtesan with whom,

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Nikaure at Saqqara and the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Idu at Giza.

<sup>7</sup> Lichtheim, *JNES* 4:207; for the distinction, K. A. Kitchen, "The Basic Literary Forms and Formulations of Ancient Instructional Writings in Egypt and Western Asia," in *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (Fribourg, 1979), especially 236–40. For the time being the songs remain loosely defined as wisdom texts. However, whether the songs might not belong perhaps more accurately to another category is an important question, which is beyond the scope of this essay, but one which I address in a forthcoming study.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, L. J. Archer, S. Fischler, and M. Wyke (eds.) (New York, 1994), 24–52; G. Robins, "Some Images of Women in New Kingdom Art and Literature," in B. Lesko (ed.), *Women's Earliest Records From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia* (Atlanta, 1989), 114–15; and on the double nature of women, L. Troy, "Good and Bad Women: Maxim 18/284–288 of the Instructions of Ptahhotep," *GM* 80 (1984): 77–81.

according to the Egyptian phraseology, one “spends a pleasant hour” and the stranger, who becomes synonymous with treacherous seduction. The disparagement or insignificance of women is also characteristic of the writings of the non-instructional didactic genre, of which the *Lebensmüde*, the Prophecies of Neferti, and the Admonitions of Ipuwer are representative.<sup>9</sup>

Arguably, the harpers’ songs’ affinity with the wisdom literature, a genre thus defined as being written essentially by men and for men,<sup>10</sup> that is, a genre in which men are the main exponents and women mere tangency to the basic literary premise would equally have influenced their visual representation on the walls.

By the same token, one could further argue that depicting women performing songs with a definite literary import would be the visual equivalent to showing *litterati* in the exercise of their function. The evidence for literacy in Egypt suggests, however, that a very small segment of the population, namely, the bureaucratic elite, could in fact read and write.<sup>11</sup> Since only men could gain access to bureaucratic offices, literacy as a professional requirement became the province of men’s formal training. Such restriction, of course, does not mean that women could not have been literate, but the evidence for female literacy is far from being conclusive.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that letters sent to and

from women do not prove the latter’s reading or writing ability, as these could have been handled by professional male scribes. Similarly, the title *seshet*, which is occasionally found in the Middle Kingdom, taken by some to be the feminine form of *seš* (scribe) is also understood by others to mean “painter of her mouth” or “cosmetician.” Even allowing for the existence of a word for the female equivalent of a male scribe, the fact that unlike men women are never depicted in the exercise of the scribal function weakens the argument. Finally, it has been suggested that the presence of writing implements depicted in a few New Kingdom tombs beneath a woman’s chair or found among the tomb equipment may allude to that woman’s literate status, which in this case would refer more accurately to her elite rather than professional status. Given the scarcity of the scenes depicting women in company of writing implements, it has also been interpreted as being simply the artist’s way of dealing with a lack of pictorial space under the man’s chair. In view of the ambiguity with which female literacy is generally rendered, I submit that depicting unequivocally literate women in the midst of reciting the *wisdom* (here taken broadly) of a harper’s song would have been contrary to the cultural reality.

Germane to this notion is the fact that most of the known harpers’ songs are engraved on tomb walls, the exception being the so-called Antef Song, which is inscribed on a papyrus (Papyrus Harris 500), amidst a collection of love poems. Rather than being fortuitous, the physical contiguity of both genres on the papyrus may well be intentional, constituting a sample of the repertoire of lyric poetry in use during the late Eighteenth Dynasty.<sup>13</sup>

While some Egyptian love poems are called “sayings,” others are called “songs,” in reference no doubt to the fact that many of these poems were sung or recited to the accompaniment of a musical instrument, rather than spoken. In them, men and women equally express their passionate outpourings, but while the lyrics sung by men tend to be courtly and sophisticated in

<sup>9</sup> Although not defined as didactic per se, a number of Egyptian tales are typically written in a moralistic vein; see, for example, the tales of the Eloquent Peasant, Sinuhe, the Two Brothers, and Truth and Falsehood.

<sup>10</sup> Depla, “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 25.

<sup>11</sup> A figure of one percent or less has been argued by J. Baines, “Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society,” *Man* n.s. 18 (1983): 584; C. J. Eyre and J. Baines, “Four Notes on Literacy,” *GM* 61 (1983): 65–72; and H. te Velde, “Scribes and Literacy in Ancient Egypt,” in *Scripta Signa Vocis: Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East Presented to J. H. Hospers by his Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (Groningen, 1986), 254. By contrast, L. H. Lesko has argued for a somewhat larger percentage, cf. “Some Comments on Ancient Egyptian Literacy and Literati,” in S. Israelit-Groll, *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1990), 656–59.

<sup>12</sup> For the following points, see the recent discussion by G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 111–13; also B. Bryan, “Evidence for Female Literacy from Theban Tombs of the New Kingdom,” *BES* 6 (1985): 17–32.

<sup>13</sup> B. S. Lesko, “True Art in Ancient Egypt” in L. H. Lesko (ed.), *Egyptological Studies in Honor of Richard A. Parker* (Hannover and London, 1986), 91.

spirit, those sung by women are generally more ribald.<sup>14</sup> If we take the comparison one step further, it is conceivable that in view of the complex and reflective nature of the harpers' lyrics, tradition would have required that they only be sung by men. In other words, just as the harpers' songs' affinity with the wisdom literature in general could have led to excluding women from the representations of performances, so could their affinity with the love poetry, in which stylistic distinctions based on gender are shown to have existed.

Egyptian royal and private households, as well as religious institutions, retained the services of outside professional musicians and dancers. Differences seem to have existed between both types, however. In the New Kingdom at least, the female musicians associated with temples appear to have been derived from the elite class and to have held a high status.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the female musicians and dancers who were hired for secular entertainment seem to have held a low, if not disreputable, status, as they not only belonged to the category of women outside the family circle, but also, if we believe the texts, were associated with libertine behavior.<sup>16</sup> In view of the negative connotations attached to this latter group, women might similarly have been perceived as ill-suited to enunciate ideological notions about life, death, and the afterlife that

were couched in a high literary and poetic form. Their presence in both the written and pictorial records would, hence, be best avoided.

From an artistic point of view, it seems possible that a display of 'female wisdom' would similarly be inimical to the male oriented ideal as evidenced on funerary monuments. Gay Robins has shown that in two- and three-dimensional art when couples are depicted on the same monument the husband almost always appears as the dominant figure, thereby reflecting a gender hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> Robins has also observed that relationships in the later Eighteenth Dynasty between banquet guests and attendants seem to be limited to persons of the same sex, perhaps as the result of a new rule of social etiquette.<sup>18</sup> Working from this last assumption, the depiction of the songs as solo performances verbally addressed to the male tomb owner specifically and literally taking place in front of him might arguably have been deemed acceptable only if rendered by a male musician.

Finally, as we move away from the songs' literary setting and societal considerations, the exclusion of women in the representation of the harpers' songs may be attributed to yet another factor, namely, the structural and semiotic relationship between the pictorial element and the written text. At its most basic level, the songs' pictorial component can be understood as illustrating or referring to the musical event. It does not, however, attempt to illustrate in concrete terms the content of the texts the way in which, for example, vignettes in religious books typically do to various extents.<sup>19</sup> There is, of course, little doubt that the complex and abstract nature of most of the concepts expressed in the songs would have made a literal translation either artistically impossible or ideologically inappropriate. On this last point, the Egyptians,

<sup>14</sup> Lesko, "True Art," 92–97.

<sup>15</sup> Robins, *Women*, 147–49.

<sup>16</sup> For early allusions to the attitude towards secular entertainers, see the famous boating party described in the Westcar Papyrus, in which King Snefru is being entertained by dancers and musicians wearing bead-net dresses with no undergarments (which is contrary to the way in which these dresses are believed to have been worn; R. Hall, "Garments in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology," *Textile History* 13 (1) (1982): 39; idem, *Egyptian Textiles* (Aylesbury, 1986), 64–65; for a broader discussion of this type of garment, G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Pharaonic Egyptian Clothing* (Leiden, 1993), 125–29). Similarly, the boating scene in Ukhhotep's tomb at Meir, in which scantily clad women seem to provide a diversion comparable to that mentioned in the papyrus (H. G. Fischer, "Some Iconographic and Literary Comparisons" in J. Assmann, E. Feucht, R. Grieshammer (eds.), *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 164 and fig. 10). Women and music also appear in scenes with more explicit erotic connotations, the Turin Papyrus being among one of the best known examples; for a discussion of music and sexuality, Manniche, *Music and Musicians*, 108–19.

<sup>17</sup> G. Robins, "Some Principles of Compositional Dominance and Gender Hierarchy in Egyptian Art," *JARCE* 31 (1994): 33–40; and *Women*, passim, but especially 169–70 and 172.

<sup>18</sup> Robins, "Images of Women," 112.

<sup>19</sup> Compare, for example, the typically elaborate vignettes of *BD* 1 (BM 10470/5 and 6) and 125 (BM 10470/3) on the papyrus of Ani with the succinct vignettes of *BD* 6 (BM 9900/10) on the papyrus of Nebseny and of *BD* 83 and 86 (BM 10477/10) on the papyrus of Nu.

who avoided depicting explicitly notions such as death, decay, and destruction, found instead creative ways to refer symbolically to chaos and other dreaded and despicable events. Thus as a rule, the scenes depicted in the private tombs abstain from depicting chaos.<sup>20</sup> As for the vignettes in the books of the netherworld, their formal conciseness and highly symbolic value seldom make them as frightening as the concepts verbally expressed in the accompanying texts.

By far, the most striking formal feature of a harper's song is the considerable discrepancy of space between that allotted to the written text and that to the pictorial. By comparison with the text, the musician's figure is dwarfed and, hence, first appears as a marginal, ornamental and, hence, almost obsolete element in the overall expression. Yet, the high degree of regularity with which the songs are accompanied by a pictorial representation of the performing harpist suggests otherwise.

Upon closer examination, the attributes that characterize the musician's appearance including his *embonpoint*, signs of age, bald-headedness, fashionable costume, as well as his spatial position separate from the rest of the activities, contribute towards presenting the harpist as a professionally successful middle-aged man.<sup>21</sup> By analogy with the text, such image may be construed as that of a wise man to whose advice one ought to listen. The musician thus becomes an icon for the wisdom that embodies the essence of the song. By becoming the visual symbol of a wisdom text, the harpist effectively reinforces the sapiential import of the very song it accompanies.

<sup>20</sup> Even indirect references to chaos such as the flood water during the inundation season seem to be avoided. I observed this point in my analysis of the visual components of the agricultural sequence in private tombs and the patterns of inclusion and exclusion hence derived, cf. P. A. Bochi, *Agricultural Scenes in the Private Tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty: A Study in Iconographic Polyvalence* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992), chapter V.

<sup>21</sup> The image of corpulence as a way to denote social status goes back to the Old Kingdom; see, for example, the famous statue of Ka-aper, also known as the 'Sheikh el Beled', of the Fifth Dynasty. Similarly, pleated and sleeved clothing, which would fetch higher prices on the commodity market than, say, a simple short kilt, would also suggest a comfortable socio-economic status.

Given that most individuals who would have visited the tomb chapel were illiterate, the easily identifiable depiction of the harpist next to the song is likely to have fulfilled the function of visually prompting the notions expressed in the texts which would presumably have been widely known from the oral tradition. In this way, the depiction of the musician performing the song would have insured that *all* had access to and benefitted from the reflections and exhortations found in the texts. By denoting both the aural nature of the adjacent text and its content, the harpist assumed a pivotal semantic function.

Despite its relatively small scale and minimal formal rendering, the iconography of the pictorial component appears to have been carefully thought out and suggests that the artist sought to produce a visual impact on the viewer who could not read the accompanying text, equal to that produced by the written words on the viewer who could. In this way, the artist elevated the status of the pictorial to be the equivalent to the text, making both written and pictorial texts virtually interchangeable.

To the literate visitor, a song typically included a heading which described the harpist as speaking the words of the songs to the tomb owner. For example, the song known as Neferhotep I begins in the following manner: "Thus speaks the harpist who is in the tomb of<sup>22</sup> the Osiris, the divine father of Amun, Neferhotep the justified; he says: . . ."<sup>23</sup> From the textual point of view, the harpist is used as a pictographic device that rhetorically introduces the words to the viewer. His role can be compared to the various expressions *ḏḏ mdw in* (words spoken by), *ḏḏ.f* (he says, he said), *r ḏḏ* (saying), and *m ḏḏ* (in saying) which introduce direct speech in ancient Egyptian language. Owing to the structural function of the figure of the singer in the text-image relationship—that of *introducing* or *referring to*, as opposed to *illustrating*, the song—the direction of the reading goes from the singer

<sup>22</sup> The *n* following the word for tomb, here translated as a genitive by Lichtheim, is commonly translated as a dative by other authors, cf. J. L. Foster, *Echoes of Egyptian Voices: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Poetry*, 80; Fox, *Orientalia* 46:398; and Wente, *JNES* 21:122.

<sup>23</sup> For a translation and references, Lichtheim, *JNES* 4:195.

to the song, that is, from the image to the text. The musician's figure in this case functions virtually as a syntactic element, that is to say, as a verbal rather than a pictorial element.

At the same time, both the graphic nature of the musician's figure and its spatial proximity to the text suggest yet another possible function which the musician would have assumed, namely, that of an element designed to clarify the nature of the entire text or enlarged determinative (even though typically determinatives define individual words). Such integration of the pictorial element into the textual recalls the symbiosis of the texts and images typically observable in the Old Kingdom, which often results from the use of determinatives.<sup>24</sup> The direction of the reading is in this case reversed, going from the song to the singer, that is, from the text to the image.

The telescoping effect produced by the musician's figure—from the harpist *introducing* the words, to the words proper, and back to the harpist *defining* the words—is reminiscent of that assumed by the vignettes in the books of the netherworld, where the sense of the reading can go either way depending on the spells. In the harpers' songs, the pictorial component could thus be used and understood on a variety of levels depending on the viewer's intellectual requirements. When addressing the illiterate, the pictorial would function as or replace the verbal text; but when addressing the literate, it would instead complement the written by introducing while, at the same time, defining the latter. The role assumed by the pictorial would therefore vary in importance—from primary to secondary—according to the visitor's own cognitive potential.

Yet, as the songs' pictorial component would ultimately be meaningful to a greater number of individuals, it would supplant the written text in its role to inform. By comparison, the illustrated religious books derived their significance not so much from whether the deceased could read the spells in the afterlife (a moot point in the major-

ity of cases) or even identify them through the illustrations, but from the fact that he/she owned such a book, whose mere presence near the body in the tomb was believed to be magically efficacious. In this case, the written words lost neither their potency or their primacy, irrespective of their audience's intellectual requirements and the elaboration of the vignettes. (To be sure, not all spells were illustrated, particularly in the early books.<sup>25</sup>)

From the above structural analysis, the role of the pictorial text and, by analogy, that of the musician in the harpers' songs emerges as pivotal. If we accept this premise, this very centrality would be the reason why women cannot help but be conspicuously absent from the visual representation of these particular musical performances.

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In conclusion, the literary tradition to which the songs belong, the social and artistic conventions, and last but not least, the pivotal role assumed literally and metaphorically by the visual component in the text-image relationship are likely to have been the factors which contributed to the formal exclusion of women from these specific musical scenes. The Egyptians seem to have preferred to cast and, hence, depict men rather than women in the function of enunciating thoughts that may have been perceived as being reflective, spiritually refined, intellectually challenging, and/or possibly progressive. The selection of gender in this case would have been motivated by the desire to display involvement in learned poetry (and by implication literacy) as a male prerogative.<sup>26</sup> Such a cultural ideal would have denied women the opportunity to be depicted as being involved in the performance of this particular genre of lyric poetry.

While it is true that caution must be exercised about interpreting the visual material too literally, in some cases the visual evidence can be taken at face value and presumed to reflect, if

<sup>24</sup> H. G. Fischer, *L'écriture et l'art de l'Égypte ancienne* (Paris, 1986); *The Orientation of Hieroglyphs*, pt. I (New York, 1977); and "Redundant Determinatives in the Old Kingdom," *MMJ* 8 (1973): 7–25.

<sup>25</sup> T. G. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day* (Chicago, 1974), 2; R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, rev. ed. (London, 1985), 12.

<sup>26</sup> The male dominance in art frequently denotes ownership of the monument, cf. Robins, note 17 above.

only in part, reality. It is therefore possible that either through social pressures or even through personal choice women did not perform these particular compositions in real life.

By the same token, the fact that women are neither visually or verbally associated with the harpers' songs does not rule out the possibility that in real life women might otherwise have sung the lyrics at banquets and on other special occasions. In fact, the opposite is likely to be true. After all, there exists a whole corpus of evidence indicating that women had a tradition of singing and of harp playing as early as the Old Kingdom and there would seem to be no reason to believe that they could not have performed these particular compositions. Furthermore, the fact that the harpers' songs were literary texts and that most (if not all) female musicians are likely to have been illiterate need not have created an obstacle. Insofar as there is no known system of notation and musicians in Egypt are frequently represented blind, musical instruction would not have required literacy.<sup>27</sup> To the contrary, oral tradition is likely to have played a significant part in ancient Egyptian society, as indeed typically in most ancient cultures, and should not be overlooked. Thus, women could have memorized the songs given that in oral poetry (broadly defined) the performers are not necessarily the actual creators

or composers.<sup>28</sup> Finally, study shows that the representational records are frequently at variance with the written records including those concerning women's legal and economic status.<sup>29</sup> In this way, I would suggest here that the same discrepancy between the visual and the written could also apply to the harpers' songs.

Whether women did perform the harpers' songs orally or 'off the record', as it were, remains a moot point. What emerges from this study, however, is the fact that, at least officially or 'on the record', women did not perform them. The male orientation, indeed, gender coding of the harpers' songs thus indicates that a certain level of rhetoric was applied to this poetic genre. Although the reasons behind such attitude lie deep in the significance given to the songs by the Egyptians, itself still a matter of debate, a number of them have been suggested here.

In terms of understanding the harpers' songs better, the foregoing discussion has shown that much is yet to be gained from broadening our inquiry on this most difficult subject. (Re)-viewing these unusual literary compositions as concrete visual manifestations, with real and symbolic connotations, is but one way in which we can achieve this goal.

Washington, D.C.

<sup>27</sup> On the absence of a true system of notation but the presence of isolated signs and gestures performed by chironomists as possibly indicating rhythm and melody, G. Careddu, "L'art musical dans l'Égypte ancienne," *CdÉ* 66 (1991): 40–45; and Manniche, *Music and Musicians*, 11–15 and 30–34. As for the question of blindness, it may well be an artistic convention.

<sup>28</sup> For the distinction between performance and composition, reproduction and re-creation, cf. Milman Parry's theory on oral poetry as summarized by A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960). The question of authorship in Egypt remains so elusive that we may in fact never be able to clarify this point. For a recent discussion of this pervasive state of affairs and its practical implications, P. A. Bochi, "A Note on the Canopic Jars of Pentaweret (WAG 48.432–435)," *GM* 148 (1995): 13–19.

<sup>29</sup> Robins, *Women*, 127–41 and 176–91.