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Why is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?*

There exists in the Hebrew Bible a text we know as the Song of Songs. My project here is to consider how this text happened to be created as a text in the first place and what the effect of its existence is. I choose the Song of Songs because these sounded quite difficult questions to address to this particular book.

The first of these questions, *Why is there a Song of Songs?*, may sound like an historical one, about writers, and the second, *What Does It Do to You?*, like an interpretational one, about readers. But I am not sure how distinct those categories are, for readers are always historically conditioned and how readers respond to texts is therefore essentially an historical matter; and, on the other hand, apparently historical questions about the origins of texts are only ever readers' concerns anyway, to which there are no objective answers 'out there' but only responses more or less satisfactory to the hermeneutical programmes or 'interests' of readers. So in principle I am disposed to collapse the familiar distinction between origins and interpretation, between writers and readers. But in practice I do want to enquire about two things: the causes of the text and the effects of the text; and so I have given my questions the form, *Why is there a Song of Songs?*, and, *What does it do to you if you read it?*

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1. *Why is There a Song of Songs?*

I could think of two meanings for ‘Why is there a Song of Songs?’, depending on whether I focused on the text as a text—on the conceivable demand for it at the time of its composition and on the circumstances of its production—, or whether I focused on its producer—the personal desires, needs and demands that generated the work. I did not of course imagine that I would be able to reconstruct historical actuality, like the name of the author or the date of the text’s composition, and I felt it would be merely speculative to try to describe the actual social matrix of the text or the psychology of its actual author. What would be less problematic, I thought, was to try to identify the *implied* author and the *implied* social setting of the text—to draw inferences from the text, that is, about the circumstances of its origin. My purpose was, then, not to attempt a move from the text to the historical actuality that generated the text, but rather to sketch the kind of historical matrix the text implies; and not to try moving from the text back to the actual author and his or her psyche, but rather to construct the kind of psyche implied by the text he or she authored.¹

Whether these sketches of the implied social setting of the text and the implied author are like or unlike historical actuality I have no way of knowing—but then neither does anyone else, so I am not greatly troubled. The *advantage* of my scheme is that it is open to debate; that is, my conversation partners can riposte that such and such is not a reasonable inference from the text, or that I have left out of account certain other aspects of the text. The *disadvantage* of my scheme is that it rather assumes that the text is somehow typical, that it is such and such a kind of text, of a kind that typically comes from such and such a situation—when all the time, in historic actuality, it might have been a maverick

¹ These are different aims from those of the traditional historical literary criticism. The Old Criticism (as we might call it) interested itself in *real authors* (their names and identities, when exactly they lived, what they had read, who influenced them, and so on) but recognized only *ideal readers* (like scholars, or like subtle, observant and unforgetting readers); the New Criticism that I profess (no relation to the Anglo-American New Criticism of the mid-century), on the other hand, is interested more in *implied authors*, while searching out the opinions of *real readers*, ancient and modern.

text by an eccentric author. But I do believe that most texts are typical, and that therefore this text is likely to be a typical text.²

a. *The Implied Circumstances of the Text's Production*

Why is there a Song of Songs? The first response concerns the circumstances of the text's production, the social matrix, the material causes, the economic and political realities that the text itself might point to.

1. *The textuality of the text.* For the question that is now on the agenda, Why is there (at all) a Song of Songs?, we need to begin with the idea of the Song of Songs as a *text*. The curious thing is that, in the scholarly literature, the textuality of the Song of Songs is quite transparent, invisible. No one seems to take any account of the fact that it is a *text*, and to ask what brings a text of this kind into being or what it signifies that there was a text of this character in ancient Israel.

Roland Murphy, for example, one of the more subtle of Canticles commentators, does not notice that his text is a *text*. 'Does the work represent', he asks,

folk poetry (*Volksdichtung*) or is it a sophisticated, elitist artistic composition (*Kunstdichtung*)? Those who favor associating the work with popular culture posit its origins in concrete social settings, such as ancient Israelite celebrations of betrothal and marriage. Those who view the Song as a refined literary creation attribute its composition and transmission to the educated elite of ancient Israel. Again, such arguments are unconvincing. It is evident that love poetry in particular is at home in all strata of soci-

² My programme may be thought to have some affinities with that of Lucien Goldmann, for whom literary texts attempt to be the coherent expression of the world view of a social group. According to him 'the work constitutes a collective achievement through the individual consciousness of its creator, an achievement which will afterwards reveal to the group what it was moving toward without knowing it' ('Genetic Structuralism in the Sociology of Literature', in *Sociology of Literature and Drama: Selected Readings* [ed. Elizabeth and Tom Burns; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973]). On Goldmann, see David Forgacs, 'Marxist Literary Theories', in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey; London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1982), pp. 134-69 (151-55); Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 32-34.

ety, and at all times. There is, in any event, no compelling way of discriminating between what was 'popular' and what was deemed courtly or 'cultivated' in ancient Israel. It is noteworthy that the question of cultural provenance reflects the division of scholarly opinion regarding 'folk wisdom' and 'school wisdom'. Here, too, a doubtful distinction is sometimes drawn between the cultural lore generated and nurtured within the Israelite family or the general populace and the higher 'wisdom' supposedly cultivated in courtly circles.³

What he does not take into account is that the Song is not just poetry, but written poetry,⁴ and it is not just a composition,

³ Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 5. Even when he asks, '[H]ow are we to understand the literary compilation and promulgation of the Song itself?' (p. 99), he simply takes refuge in Audet's ascription of 'this secondary level of work' (!) to postexilic sages; but this is strange, because the wisdom teaching of the 'sages' usually adopts a heavily moralizing tone on sexual matters—which is certainly not the case in the Song of Songs, the editors having added nothing more, apparently, than 'their own generalizing, self-consciously didactic signature in 8:6b-7': love is as strong as death. What postexilic sages thought they were doing in 'promulgating' this book of erotic poems is not explained. It is not very convincing to say that it was they who promoted the book because it was 'compatible with their intellectual curiosity about natural phenomena' (is that what sex had been reduced to in the postexilic age?) and with their 'pragmatic recognition of what contributed to ideal conubial bliss and marital fidelity' (p. 99; the idea of the Song of Songs being *pragmatic* is certainly an original one). Brevard S. Childs also wants to say that the poem is essentially wisdom literature, 'wisdom's reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage' (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [London: SCM Press, 1979], pp. 574-75). This is the 'canonical context', he says. But what are the wise doing 'reflecting' on marital love, and why, especially, do they compose a book of love poems by way of 'reflection' (is the Song of Songs really so cerebral, we ask)? Like many others, Childs has no vision of the work as a text prior to its incorporation in a canon.

⁴ The same is true of Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 244-50, who, no doubt rightly enough, describes the kinds of poems written in the Song of Songs and in the Egyptian collections of love songs as 'entertainment', but completely overlooks the fact that what we have in these books are not songs but texts, and that entirely different questions have to be asked about texts than about songs.

artistic or otherwise, popular or learned—it is a *written text*. No doubt love poetry is ‘at home’ (or out of the home) in all strata of society, but texts are not, especially in an only partially literate community. If not many people could actually *read* the Song of Songs, why was it *written*?

Do we not need to consider what a *text* is?

1. A text is not a performance. Whatever else the Song of Songs is, it is not a song. Songs can be melodious, loud, communal, and so on, but the Song of Songs cannot be any of those things, for it is not a song. It may be the imitation of a song. It may be the record of a song, or the preparation for a song, but it is not a song itself. It is no more than the words of a song, and it is the words written down. There is no music and there is no speech. The only thing you can do with it is read it. No doubt, as you read it you can perform it, but then you are making the text into something other than a text.

2. A written text purporting to be a ‘song’ represents the privatization of song. A song implies, for its realization, a singer and a hearer—at least one, but often many. A text implies, for its realization, only a reader. It actually requires a single, lone reader, for only one person can usually read a text at a time (of course, if one person reads a text aloud to other hearers, then it becomes a sort of performance).

3. A text is a production, a product, made in order to be copied, to be circulated. It is, moreover, a commodity, created to be sold in the market place, consumed by customers. That is what texts are, if they are not private texts like letters and contracts, but literary texts. Furthermore, an author of a text has had the intention of a readership for the work, and has had the conception of a public that would desire the work, enough to put their hand in their pocket for it. And the author has envisaged a public that would want ownership of the work, either in order to read it again whenever they wanted, or to possess in some way what they saw as the essence of the work even if they never opened or unrolled it. All these things are of the nature of literary works, ancient and modern. No doubt there are from time to time works that come into the public’s hands by some freakish route, as when private diaries enter the public domain after their author’s death and against his or her wishes; but there is no rea-

son in this case to suspect any unusual origins of the text.

2. *The social matrix of the text.* The Song of Songs being a text, we need to ask, if we are interested in its origins, What kind of author?, and What kind of public? To both I answer, Male, and Israelite. I can argue that the implied author is male, and I think the balance of historical probability about the actual author is overwhelmingly in the same direction.⁵ And I think I can argue that the book's public is male, too. There is no evidence for female literacy in ancient Israel,⁶ so in all probability we can suppose a male readership. That is to say, the Songs of Songs is a text written by an Israelite male to meet the desires and needs of other Israelite males. I think that is fairly obvious, but it needs to be said. None of the commentaries says it, which is a pity, because I think recognizing that probability may be an important factor in how we read the book.

Now for this text, the next question is, What is its social context? Where does it fit into the life of ancient Israel? The book offers one clue that has never been taken up, so far as I know. It calls itself the 'Song of Songs', which everyone acknowledges must mean 'the best song', 'the supreme song', 'the songiest of songs'. But I ask, Says who?, Who's judging? Under what circumstances, that is, would a claim be made for any text that it is the best of its kind? The Book of Isaiah does not claim that it is

⁵ So I take issue with Athalya Brenner, Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and others who would argue that female authorship of the Song is probable or at least a distinct possibility; see A. Brenner, 'On Feminist Criticism of the Song of Songs', in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 28-37 (32); *eadem*, 'Women Poets and Authors', *ibid.*, pp. 86-97 (87-91, 97); Jonnecke Bekkenkamp and Fokkelien van Dijk, 'The Canon of the Old Testament and Women's Cultural Traditions', *ibid.*, pp. 67-85; and cf. also S.D. Goitein, 'The Song of Songs: A Female Composition', *ibid.*, pp. 58-66.

⁶ At least, none that Alan R. Millard can mention in his article on 'Literacy (Israel)', *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), IV, pp. 337-40—with the possible exception of the reference in 1 Kgs 21.8-9 to Jezebel writing letters in Ahab's name. But, as Millard himself says, though references to kings and officials writing could mean they themselves wrote, 'equally, secretaries ("scribes") may have acted on their behalf' (p. 338a).

the best prophecy, and Chronicles does not represent itself as superior to Kings. No matter whether the title to the Song of Songs is 'original' or not (whatever that might mean), the title, unlike that of all the other biblical books, is a competitive one. It implies a competition (by males of course, who else?) to find the best song, the top of the pops, the ancient equivalent of the Eurovision Song Contest.

That is the *implied* social context; but it is of course impossible to say whether that was the *actual* social context. Perhaps there were in fact song contests at the Israelite court, or in the palaces of wealthy nobles of the postexilic age, as there were at the ducal courts of Languedoc by the troubadours of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of our era.⁷ But perhaps the musical competition that is implied is entirely fictive, being modelled on military contests like that of the warriors of Abner and Joab in 2 Sam. 2.14, for example. No matter, the social context implied is that of the male competitive world, in which song can be pitted against song, love song against love song, indeed. The text constitutes, therefore, not a transcript of happy Mediterranean hours *al fresco*, nor the recollection in tranquillity of bucolic emotions, nor yet a record of village festivities at a tipsy peasant wedding—but a *contrivance representing itself as a prizewinner*. The Song of Songs does not exist for the sake of love (well, not just), but for the sake of winning. That is what it says about itself; and if it is kidding, then it is deceptive as well.

The material cause of the Song of Songs is, then, the need of a male public for erotic literature (the title Song of Songs implies that there are other texts of the same kind).⁸ The economic con-

⁷. The female troubadours (see Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours* [London: Paddington Press, 1976]), whose very existence was long unacknowledged, could admittedly serve as a possible analogy for a female poet of the Song of Songs. We do hear of (professional, no doubt) female singers in 2 Sam. 19.36 (EVV 35) (Barzillai's), Eccl. 2.8, 2 Chron. 35.25, Ezra 2.65 = Neh. 7.67, and perhaps also in Amos 8.3 (of the temple).

⁸. Interestingly, the oldest evidence we have for the actual use of the Song of Songs reflects such a setting: 'Rabbi Aqiba says, "Whoever sings the Song of Songs with a tremulous voice in a banquet hall and (so) treats it as a sort of ditty has no share in the world to come"' (*Tosefta to Sanhedrin* 12.10; cf. *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 101a). We presume that, despite his severity, there remained men who put the evening's entertainment ahead of the

text is the existence of a market, with a choice for the consumer, and a publishing industry with copying facilities, a promotion department that bills the text *The Song of Songs*, and sales outlets. And the social context is one that approves the existence and distribution of erotic literature that verges on soft pornography. It is much the same male public as Ezekiel depicts when Yahweh tells him his audience will listen to him as to an entertainer, not as to a prophet whose words must be obeyed: 'My people will come to you as to a public gathering (פְּחָמֵי אֲזָעִים) and sit before you. They will listen to your words but not do them. For they have a taste for erotica (טַעֲמֵי) ... As far as they're concerned you're just a (singer of) erotic songs, who sings nicely and plays well. So they'll hear your words—but *do* them they will not!' (Ezek. 33.31-32).⁹

3. *The political matrix of the text. What of the political context?* All texts, according to Fredric Jameson,¹⁰ owe their existence to a desire to repress social conflict, to make life easier for both oppressors and the oppressed, to allow the oppressors to deny their role and to enable the oppressed to forget their suffering. They carry out that programme by papering over cracks in the social fabric, minimizing the conflict, writing it out of existence.¹¹ Now we do not have to analyse social conflict in terms of *class* conflict, which is what Jameson is most interested in. Gender relations are no less a site of social tension, and manifest a struggle for power no less than class relations do. *The Song of Songs* implies the author's desire to repress the conflict of interests between the sexes by representing the female and male lovers as more or less equal, and their desire, capacities and satisfactions as more or less identical. The social reality in ancient Israel, as in most societies known to us, is quite different: it is the

world to come. The 'tremulous voice', by the way, couldn't be of a male impersonating a female, could it?

⁹. Translation by Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, p. 248.

¹⁰. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).

¹¹. For an application of this outlook to a biblical text, see Chapter 3 above, 'Haggai's Temple, Constructed, Deconstructed and Reconstructed'.

reality of men having power over women, of women as a class having no power to speak of outside the domestic setting, and of a system in which women are regarded and treated as effectively the property of men. A text therefore that presents the relations between the sexes in the language of 'I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine'—which is to say, of a mutual possession—can only be an attempt, politically speaking, to drive underground the pervasive social reality with pillow talk, to develop, in Jamesonian terminology, a strategy of containment for the social tension, to achieve coherence and closure by shutting out the truth about history.¹² The patriarchal social system not only created the Song of Songs; it needed it.

Why then is there a Song of Songs? Because there was an economic, a social, and a political need for it. This is not the whole story, but it is a story that has to be told, especially when the prevailing story, in all the handbooks, is that it represents the cultured sensitivities of its author or the 'real' relations between the sexes in ancient Israel, and that it is nothing but an innocent recording of real life love poetry.

But there is another way of answering the 'Why is there...?' question. It is to enquire after the psychological profile of the author as it is implied by his text.

b. *The Implied Psychological Profile of the Author*

The text was called forth by a complex of social needs that it addressed. But it would not have come into existence if there had not been an author who was able and willing to produce the work. Its production must have satisfied some personal psychological need of his. Or rather, I should say, the implication of his text is that it did. That is the implication of texts in general, that they come into being at the free decision of their authors, who feel some internal compulsion to compose them, and derive some personal satisfaction, some lowering of interior tension, from completing them. That may not always be the actual case, of course. Some authors, no doubt, write at gunpoint, others are driven by financial necessity or greed to write works they have

¹² Cf. William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to the Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 77.

no personal involvement in, others are automata; but the implication we may reasonably draw from the existence of any text is that some author intended it, and satisfied psychological needs of his or her own in writing it. What need on the author's part did the Song of Songs satisfy, then? Or, rather, since we are studying not historical actuality but implied reality, What need does it imply that it satisfied?

My route into this question is to regard the text as a dream, its author's dream.¹³ Texts are of course products of the *conscious* mind, and most authors are unconscious of the psychological needs and drives that their works arise from, preferring to speak of their writings in terms of their conscious intentions and of their works' overt content. So if we desire to penetrate to the unconscious layer of the writing, it will, no doubt, have to be without the author's knowledge or consent.

The author of the Song of Songs has dreamed a dream in which the lovers are perfectly and equally desirous of one another.¹⁴ To be sure, their love encounters some difficulties and hindrances from sources outside themselves: the watchmen beat the woman as she wanders though the city seeking her beloved (5.7), and social constraints forbid her from expressing her love to him in public and taking him to her home (8.1-2). But the lovers have no doubt of one another—even if he is sometimes difficult to find (3.1-3), and disappears from the door after he has knocked on it in the middle of the night (5.2-6). There is no pain in their love, except for the inexplicable absences; there is no cru-

¹³ Marvin H. Pope, in his commentary (*The Song of Songs* [Anchor Bible, 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977], pp. 133-34), refers to the endeavour of the psychiatrist Max N. Pusin to understand the book in Freudian terms, identifying the woman's first dream (1.2-3.4) as a 'happy, wish-fulfilling dream', and the second (5.2-16) as 'an anxiety dream, a depressive nightmare...in which there is frustration and punishment of forbidden desires'. Pope professes himself 'not convinced' (p. 134), as does Harold Fisch (*Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], pp. 98-99); but the point seems obvious to me.

¹⁴ If anything, the woman is even more desirous than the man. In Francis Landy's eyes, she is certainly 'the more active partner, nagging, restless, decisive. The man on the other hand is predominantly passive and complacent' (*Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* [Bible and Literature Series, 7; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983], p. 69).

elty, no rejection, no faithlessness, no agonizing 'He loves me, he loves me not'.

What is more, the dream is a man's dream about a woman's love: it is hers that is the speaking voice throughout the poem. This is *her* poem, even though it was a man who wrote it. The opening words (1.2) are hers, 'Let him kiss me', and the closing words also (8.14), 'Run, dearest'. Her voice frames the whole Song: a woman encompasses a man. When he is present, he is present only through her imagination, through her conjuration. She is daydreaming about him, so when he speaks it is because she is calling him up, recalling him. The opening words tell us what kind of a dream this is, for they speak the language of conjuration: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!' It is 'him', 'his', for *he* is not present. When lovers are together, or even when they are writing poems to one another, they speak the language of 'thou'. Here, they are not together. In his absence, she dreams him into presence, she conjures him up

Her language is the language of conjuring, is it not? 'Let him kiss me', she says, 'with the kisses of his mouth.' With what else than kisses would he be kissing her, and with what kisses but the kisses of his mouth?¹⁵ This is the conjuring, bewitching language of 'eeny, meeny, miny, mo', but in the erotic mode. The superfluity of the words is of the essence of her desire, the excess springs from the wishing for his presence. Since he is *not* there, he can be brought there only by language, which is to say, by conjuring, by verbally dreaming him up. Sometimes it is explicit in the text of the Song that she is dreaming; but even when it is not, the text is representing itself as a dream, a fantasy. For what else can it be? It is not a speech addressed to another person who is present, but neither it is a letter or a message sent to someone who is absent. It is not a narrative of what has been the case, though it contains such narratives, and it is not a description of the lover, though it contains such description. It is not a psalm, or law, or prophecy. What else can it be?

So the Song is the dream of a dream. The male author is dreaming a love poem, and the love poem takes the form of a

¹⁵ With the kisses of his nose, thinks Fox (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, p. 97), taking a lead from some allusions in Egyptian love songs; but I don't believe him.

woman's dream, of a woman dreaming her male lover's words. It is a fetching ventriloquy, this voice that is doubly thrown.¹⁶ Can it be perhaps that this is the reason why it is the Song of Songs? Can it have earned its supremacy on account of the male author's giving such an excellent imitation of the woman's voice?—by male standards, that is. May he be like the Japanese Kabouki actors who play female parts, and are surrounded by admiring male fans, who see in them—not real women, but—women as imagined by men.¹⁷ Here too, the author as dreamer plays the part of a woman. And here the woman in the man's dream dreams of a man, and speaks in his voice.

What sort of a dream is this Song of Songs? Self-evidently, it is a wish-fulfilment dream. The male author dreams a text about a woman who is forward in love, who initiates the love-making,¹⁸ who boasts about her lover to other women, who professes herself sick with love (2.5; 5.8),¹⁹ who does nothing all day but day-dream and fantasize about him (even when she is down in the nut orchard to see if the pomegranates are in bloom, 6.11-12), volunteers to lose her honour by coming to visit him at siesta time when he is out in the fields with his flocks (1.7), and all night imagines him at her bedroom door (5.2). She is bold in love, wishing she could kiss him in the street,²⁰ turning tradition upside down by devising a *waṣ f* about *his* charms and the parts of *his* body,²¹ imagining speeches for him in which he invites her

¹⁶. I think of the collection of poems by Carol Ann Duffy, *Thrown Voices* (London: Turret Books, 1986), where she writes, in turn, in the voice of a spinster, a transvestite vicar, a psychopathic rapist, a cat, an adulterous wife—and a ventriloquist's dummy.

¹⁷. This is only one of the several places in this paper where Heather McKay gave me a welcome idea or bibliographic reference.

¹⁸. So Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), pp. 30-48 (42).

¹⁹. Lovesickness is a male complaint in Egypt, apparently; see the texts in Fox's *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, pp. 13, 38 (21F [C]), 55; though the woman's heart stands still in Pap. Harris, B 12 (p. 210), it leaps out of its place in Chester Beatty I, A, 34 (p. 53), and she collapses from love (*ibid.*).

²⁰. Like the 'loud' woman of Prov. 7.13.

²¹. I am assuming, perhaps wrongly, and certainly contrary to the textbooks, that the *waṣ f* is a male literary form, used by a man to compliment

to ‘come away’ into the countryside, to secret clefts of the rocks (2.14), and inviting him to ‘come to his garden’ (4.16) and to go out to the fields and lie with her among the henna bushes (7.12 [11 REB])—as brazen in her own way as the seductive woman of Proverbs 7. She talks explicitly, teasingly and allusively about her sexual experience; and she lets him speak intimately of her body without reticence on his part or coyness on hers.

She is a strange one, this woman in the Song of Songs.²² She is, literally, a strange woman, an *’ishshah zarah*—and that is because she does not exist. She is not a real woman, she is a figment of the poet’s imagination. What’s more, she is his wish-fulfilment dream. He dreams her up precisely because she does not exist. What we have we do not wish for.²³ He is a certain kind of man, who wants a certain kind of woman, a type that is not generally available in his culture. He fantasizes such a woman, he writes his dream, he finds an audience of like-minded men, his poem becomes a best-seller.

Perhaps there really were women like this in ancient Israel. But the text implies that the author of the text does not have one. Otherwise what would he be doing writing a text? The truth is,

his woman lover. The woman in the Song is so forward in love that she turns the form back on him. This is perhaps why some have found ‘[t]he poetic imagination at work in 5.10-16...less sensuous and imaginative than in the *waṣ f*s of chs. 4 and 7’, a failing that is hardly to be put to the account of ‘the difference in erotic imagination between poet and poetess’ (Richard N. Soulen, ‘The *waṣ f* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic’, in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 214-24 (216 n. 1) (originally in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 [1967], pp. 183-90). But see Marcia Falk’s comments, in ‘The *waṣ f*’, in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 225-33 (232).

²². ‘This domination by the woman may seem strange in a Near Eastern setting’, allows Landy (*Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 69).

²³. Francis Landy (personal communication) thinks all this is too reductive, that the fantasy is not compensation (as in classical Freudianism) but fulfils a desire for its own sake, the desire of the imagination as well of as reality. It’s a good point, but I think I am disposed to ‘reduce’ imagination to compensation nevertheless. I stick by Freud’s dictum, ‘[A] happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one’ (‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, IX [trans. and ed. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud; London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959], pp. 143-53 [146]).

we know nothing about the love life of the actual author. But the text, read psychologically, implies (probably, that is—though perhaps wrongly, in fact) that its author transforms his unfulfilled desire into a text, that that is *why* there is a Song of Songs.

2. What Does It Do to You If You Read It?

The question of the effect of our texts has rarely been raised in our scholarly tradition. This is perhaps the worst consequence of the historical-critical method (which was all very necessary in its own day and remains valid, please don't misunderstand me), since in its quest for origins it screened out the present, and, with that, the ethics of interpretation—including the ethics of keeping alive these texts by study and commentary and writing. The practitioners of the historical-critical method, like the inventors of the atomic bomb, were ethically irresponsible. Their commitment was to the 'truth', whatever that might be and wherever it might lead. And that is unquestionably a whole sight better than a commitment to falsity.²⁴ But it systematically ignored the question of effects on readers, and it is about time we regarded such study as part of our scholarly discipline and task.

There are two ways of coming at this question. One is to examine the ways the text has been received and interpreted by readers of the past. The other is to study the effects on readers of our own time.

a. *The reception of the text by former readers*

Now the first sounds like 'the history of interpretation', which, if not a fashionable form of biblical study, has at least been made respectable in recent years by its promotion by scholars such as Brevard Childs,²⁵ and, in relation to the Song of Songs, by Marvin Pope and Roland Murphy especially.²⁶ I have in mind,

²⁴. As Qoheleth would say, 'Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness' (Eccl. 2.13)—but it is nevertheless *hebel*.

²⁵. Systematically throughout his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, and specifically on the Song of Songs (p. 579). Cf. also J.W. Rogerson, C. Rowland and B. Lindars, SSF, *The Study and Use of the Bible* (The History of Christian Theology, 2; Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1988); and John F.A. Sawyer, 'Interpretation, History of', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden; London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 316-20.

²⁶. Note also Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Anne-Marie Pelletier, *Lectures du cantique des cantiques: De l'énigme du sens aux figures du lecteur* (Analecta Biblica, 121; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989); and, from an earlier period,

however, a rather more critical understanding of ancient interpreters, one that does not principally seek to *understand* them and their interpretations within their own historical context, but to critique them and judge them by a standard of reference other than their own—that is, by my own, by our own.²⁷ I am rather insistent on a programme of judging interpretations by standards other than their own; for if we do not judge them by our own standards of reference, we cannot be ethical. If we judge the references in our texts to slavery or to the oppression of women by the standards that operated in the ancient world, we might well find ourselves approving those practices, or at least being less antithetical to them. We do not owe any such debt to the past, however, and it is a more truly human activity to make

H.H. Rowley, 'The Interpretation of the Song of Songs', in his *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays* (London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1965), pp. 195-245. Note also James Doelman, 'Song of Songs', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (ed. David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 727-30.

²⁷. So I cannot approve of the programme of Roland Murphy, for example, who thinks that whether or not the hermeneutical principles evidenced in traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation 'are true or false from a modern perspective is not the primary issue. If such judgments are to be made, they should be preceded by an effort to understand the why and the how of our exegetical forebears' (*The Song of Songs*, pp. 11-12). Who is to say, I respond, what the 'primary issue' should be? It is just a convention that it is not the business of scholarship to make decisions, or that views on the validity of ideas are 'secondary' to a primary task of 'understanding'. Of course I am not in favour of ignorance or of trying *not* to understand; but it is curious how often the 'preceding' task of understanding precludes the 'subsequent' task of 'judgment'. Murphy's own scintillating and penetrating analysis of the history of interpretation, for example, limps to the lame conclusion that 'shifting views in the history of the interpretation of the Song...tell the story of new generations becoming aware of the hermeneutical limitations of their predecessors. Hence it would be foolish to suppose that our methodology has resolved, once and for all, the issues of the Song's meaning that baffled our precritical forebears' (p. 41). That is his total critique. Nothing in the history of interpretation, apparently, is silly, far-fetched, excessive, wrong-headed, myopic, strained, implausible, impossible—or wrong. To understand all is, apparently, to forgive all. But what has happened to critical evaluation?

serious and well-informed judgments than merely to acquire knowledge or ‘understanding’.

It’s not just a practical question of our sponsors and our public getting the judgments and evaluations they need, though it is that, at least. It’s an ethical one—an ethical question for the professionals in biblical studies themselves.²⁸ The question is whether it is moral to restrict one’s scholarly concern to mere understanding when the subject matter is offensive or questionable to oneself. No one thinks an objective seminar on the feasibility of making lampshades out of human skin is an ethical possibility. So long as evaluation is not prejudice, is there anything that should not be evaluated? And if you ask, Evaluated according to what norm?, there is no special difficulty; for there are no absolutes, no universal standards, and so there is nothing wrong with using your own standards. Not only is there nothing wrong, nothing else would be right; for ‘ethical’ can only mean ‘ethical according to me and people who think like me’, and if I don’t make judgments according to my own standards, according to whose standards shall I be making them, and in what sense could those judgments be *mine*?

What it boils down to is this: To be truly academic, and worthy of its place in the academy, biblical studies has to be truly critical, critical not just about lower-order questions like the authorship of the biblical books or the historicity of the biblical narratives, but critical about the Bible’s contents, its theology, its ideology. And that is what biblical studies has notoriously not been critical about at all.²⁹ To be critical, you have to take up a

²⁸. On this question I found very stimulating the article by Stephen Fowl, ‘The Ethics of Interpretation; or, What’s Left over after the Elimination of Meaning’, in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield* (ed. David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 379-98. In my view he takes the discussion well beyond the point reached by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her important 1987 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address, ‘The Ethics of Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship’, published in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988), pp. 101-15.

²⁹. Nor literary critics who write about the Bible, for the most part. These days, they don’t write like J.H. Gardiner, assistant professor of

standard of reference outside the material you are critiquing;³⁰ but, traditionally, biblical scholars have been believers, ecclesiastics or, at the least, fellow-travellers and sympathizers with the ideology of the Bible. When the academy begins to view the Bible as a cultural artifact, and is not seduced or pressured by religious commitments, the hallmark of its criticism will be that it steps outside the ideology of the text.³¹

What has reading the Song done to its ancient readers?, I ask, then. The main thing is that it has persuaded them that it is not about the one thing that it is self-evidently about: human sexual love. I say self-evident when I mean evident to me, of course, because I find it hard to imagine anyone denying it. But I have to confess that most readers of former times whom I know about, in fact, have read the Song as celebrating the love of God, or of Christ, for the church, or for Israel, or for the individual believer, or for Mary. They cannot have failed to recognize that the Song gives a very strong impression of being about something altogether different, and at times they allude to a literal meaning that, collectively, they have not wished altogether to deny. But in their reading of the Song of Songs they have been able to evade almost entirely the sexual significance of the text. They have been able to read it, and to commend it, as a holy and religious work. I see, for example, in the Bibliography to Pope's commentary, a work by one P. Simson, *The Song of Solomon, called the Song of Songs. Fitter to be sung with any of the common tunes of the Psalms. Very necessary to be taught children at school (In the Gorbals*

English at Harvard in 1906, and author of *The Bible as English Literature* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906): 'It is obvious...that no literary criticism of the Bible could hope for success which was not reverent in tone. A critic who should approach it superciliously or arrogantly would miss all that has given the book its power as literature and its lasting and universal appeal' (p. vii). But they're all mightily respectful, Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Gabriel Josopovici, Robert Alter, and all.

³⁰. My colleague Philip Davies gave me this crucial idea.

³¹. I learned this important phrase, and what it stands for, from my colleague J. Cheryl Exum, who has developed her feminist criticism of the Hebrew Bible under its aegis (see, for example, her *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* [Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993]).

[Glasgow], 1701).³² Did those Scots school pupils never imagine, we wonder, that there might perhaps be another earthly, earthier, sense to the text beside the authorized interpretation? There was no shortage of commentaries, for example in the seventeenth century, with titles such as the following: John Cotton's *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles, or, Song of Solomon, Lively describing the Estate of the Church in all the Ages thereof, both Jewish and Christian, in this day: And Modestly pointing at the Gloriousness of the restored Estate of the Church of the Jewes, and the happy accesse of the Gentiles, in the approaching daies of Reformation, when the Wall of Partition shall bee taken away;*³³ William Guild's *Loves entercovrs between the Lamb & His bride, Christ and His church. Or, A clear explication and application of the Song of Solomon;*³⁴ and Richard Sibbes's *Bowels opened: or, A discovery of the near and dear love, union and communion betwixt Christ and the church, and consequently bewixt Him and every believing-soul. Delivered in divers sermons on the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of the Canticles.*³⁵

My purpose here is not to unravel the causes for such egregious misreadings, strong misreadings indeed,³⁶ though they certainly need unravelling, being not at all obvious. For the transmission of the Song within the context of the scriptural canon might not necessarily have constrained readers into an allegorical reading, any more than they were constrained into a mystical reading of tales and commands about warfare against Canaanites; and the fact that the Song was read largely by avowedly celibate clerics prior to the Reformation³⁷ does not

³². Cf. W.J. Cowper, 'A Gorbals Imprint of 1701, with Notes on Patrick Simson's "Spiritual Songs"', *Records of the Glasgow Bibliographical Society* 6 (1920), pp. 1-13.

³³. London, 1642.

³⁴. London, 1658.

³⁵. London, 1648.

³⁶. To use Harold Bloom's phrase, in *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³⁷. Murphy recognizes the importance of this social context of the Song's readers: 'When one realizes...that most of the Christian exegesis on the Song until the Reformation was produced by clerics and monks, it becomes understandable that a mystical interpretation thrived' (*The Song of Songs*, p. 12).

explain everything; it does not account for the allegorical reading prevalent in Jewish interpretation of all periods or in Protestant interpretation until the nineteenth century,³⁸ or for the tendencies to allegory even in uncloistered critics of our own day.³⁹

It is more to my point to observe the effect of the book upon its male readers and students (as far as I can discover, only one woman wrote on the Song of Songs prior to Cheryl Exum in 1973⁴⁰). Not having researched the erotic literature, I am in no

³⁸. A naturalistic reading goes back to Erasmus, Grotius and Bossuet in the seventeenth century, and to Lowth and Herder in the eighteenth.

³⁹. See for example Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, ch. 6 'Song of Song: The Allegorical Imperative', for whom the text is so overdetermined that it demands allegorical interpretation. 'If the ancients had not already taken this path, modern literary critics would certainly have felt obliged to do so', he writes (p. 95). 'Critics will be driven by the text itself to construct allegorical schemes of greater or lesser validity that will account for the hold that its strange and compelling language has upon us, to account also for the ineffable longing that this love song of a shepherd and a shepherdess calls forth. When so much metaphorical energy is expended on a shepherd and a shepherdess, they themselves become metaphorical' (p. 96). (Might they have stayed more real if they had been more aristocratic?, we wonder.) See also the view of Hans-Josef Heinevetter that the erotic in the Song of Songs is itself a metaphor for a different way of being in the world: 'Damit wird aber die Erotik selber zur Metapher: zur Metapher für eine andere Lebensweise, ein anderes gesellschaftliches Miteinander, für die Abkehr vom Leben gegen die Natur' ('Komm nun, mein Liebster, Dein Garten ruft Dich!' *Das Hohelied als programmatische Komposition* [Athenäum Monographien, 69; Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1988], p. 226).

⁴⁰. I refer to the work of the French quietist and mystic, Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Mothe Guyon (1648–1717), *Le cantique des cantiques* (1688), translated as *The Song of Songs of Solomon. With Explanations and Reflections Having Reference to the Interior Life* (tr. James W. Metcalf; New York: Dennett, 1865). For a less than generous notice of Mme Guyon, see F.L. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 598–99. Johanna Lürssen wrote a monograph on *Eine mittelniederdeutsche Paraphrase des Hohenliedes* (*Germanistische Abhandlungen*, 49; Breslau, 1917), and Pope mentions in the Bibliography to his *Song of Songs* a work by one Ann Francis, *A Poetical Translation of the Song of Solomon* (London, 1781), which I have not been able to trace. These two works are, however, not strictly studies of the Song itself. The work of J. Cheryl Exum referred to above is 'A Literary and Structural Analysis of the

position to say whether the book has influenced authors in that genre; but what I do know is that the history of its interpretation is one of a massive repression of sexuality,⁴¹ of denial of the book's ostensible subject matter, a testimony especially to male fear of female sexuality. Sexuality has been thought by such readers to be an unsuitable, unworthy, undignified subject for a work of this rank, for a work in this canonical scriptural context. And that is not merely a harmless misunderstanding or a curious hermeneutical aberration. It is witness to a refusal by its male readers over the centuries to come to terms with their own sexuality, to acknowledge its power and to recognize its acceptability. Their own sexual behaviour, and especially their feelings about sex and themselves as sexual beings, has evidently been distorted by the existence of the Song of Songs. The interpretational tradition of this book has authorized its male readers to repress its subject matter.⁴² And what has it done to women, I ask, if their men's scriptures have so consistently been read as teaching that in every legitimate and desirable expression of sexuality there is a transcendental signified (God, the church, and so on), which, whatever it is, is not *women*?

I find myself asking, Is the book to any degree responsible for the way it has been read? Can a book, indeed, be innocent of its reception? What is it about this book that has allowed, even legitimated, a reading so against its own grain? I don't rightly know how to answer this question; but I have the suspicion that

Song of Songs', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973), pp. 47-79. Note also, from 1973, Phyllis Trible's article, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), pp. 30-48, in part concerned with the Song of Songs (pp. 42-48).

⁴¹. But it can only have been a repression, for the drive that led commentators to pore over the book cannot have been suppressed by their allegorical interpretations.

⁴². I have seen such a view expressed only in one other place—a place I did not expect to find it—by G. Lloyd Carr, in his *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), pp. 50-51: 'The traditional allegorical and typical approaches assume that the Song is intended to teach something of the relationship between God and his people... Implicitly or explicitly, this approach denigrates the very physical beings we are by virtue of our creation.'

a work that came into the world as an erotic, perhaps pornographic, literature for the male taste proves ultimately to be irredeemable in polite society. It was of no use—I mean, on its own subject, sex—to the preachers and moralists of the patriarchal age (I mean, of all ages up to and including our own) because they could not handle its sexual candour and its challenge to patriarchal norms of female submission. In a feminist age too, it will not do, for it cannot shake off all traces of the needs it was created to serve, and, however refreshing it may be when compared to other productions of a male-oriented society,⁴³ it is indefeasibly male—as we shall shortly further see.

b. *The effects of the text on contemporary readers*

To prepare this part of the chapter, I should have liked to carry out a survey of contemporary readers of the Song of Songs, and to have elicited their reactions to the text and their views both of what the text encourages and what it ignores. In the absence of any quantifiable data or documentary evidence, I shall have to ask my readers to take my word for the effects of the text on this reader, and to consider whether their own experience offers any parallels. Except insofar as I deceive myself, the effects of the text on me are real effects; and while my experience might not be very interesting or very typical, it *is* my experience, and I believe it is possible to analyse some significant elements in it. Above all, I hope that such an analysis will help to legitimate the putting of reader effects on the agenda for critical study of our texts.

1. The book's whole-hearted concentration on love, and the experience of the two lovers, keeps other issues entirely off the agenda. It is hard for a reader of this book, I mean a serious and committed reader, a well-wishing and appreciative reader, to worry at the same time about global warming or the fate of whales, about even more important things like social injustice or

⁴³ We might compare, for example, the three focal points in biblical views of female sexuality that T. Drorah Setel has analysed: procreation, ritual purity, and possession ('Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea', in *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible* [ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], pp. 86-95 [88]; reprinted in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, p. 146). None of these elements figures in the Song of Songs.

even the politics of gender relations. Everything in its time and place, for goodness sake, one might respond—but the reality is that the book is so seductive that it is hard to keep its concerns constrained to their own time and place. It is hard to believe that the book is not saying, ‘That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know’, that it is not affirming that there is no truth but beauty,⁴⁴ no way of being in the world that matters apart from the erotic, no focus for existence but the personal Other. But, as Phyllis Tribble puts it so well, its silences portend its limits. ‘If we cannot return to the primeval garden...we cannot live solely in the garden of eroticism.’⁴⁵ However happy we are for the lovers, we cannot help observing that their world is a very narrow one, and we worry about what will happen to their love when they leave the garden, as they needs must, for the world of economic and social necessity.

2. The Song of Songs represents a return to Eden, an ‘inversion of the Genesis narrative’, as Francis Landy puts it; it is ‘not merely a commentary on the garden of Eden, but a reenactment, almost a hallucination of it’.⁴⁶ That makes it a very charming text, charming in the magical sense. It is not surprising that commentators are seduced by its vision of primal bliss, and never have a bad word to say about it. But the fact is that any text that proffers the possibility of a return to Eden is a Utopian text in the literal sense, a text about an Erewhon, a Nowhere. For the Garden of Eden does not exist, it never has; and even if it did, it was not paradise, and it was never the case that everything in the garden was lovely. In my opinion, no paradise worth the name has a snake in it, especially a theologian of a snake, nor the possibility of losing one’s immortality, nor a woman whose only purpose is to be a ‘helper’ to the man. I have

⁴⁴. I refer of course to John Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: ‘Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty’.

⁴⁵. Tribble, ‘Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation’, p. 47.

⁴⁶. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 183 (reprinted in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, p. 129). Cf. also Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), ch. 5 ‘Love’s Lyrics Redeemed’ (pp. 144-65). But note also Athalya Brenner’s insistence that ‘[b]eyond the structural framework...the attitudes and messages of the two texts are fundamentally different’ (*The Song of Songs* [Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989], p. 83).

no desire to return to the naivety and ignorance of childhood, to be at the mercy of an all-seeing father, or to be responsible for someone else's garden, which I did not even plant myself. And as for running around naked in a tropical jungle (we should refer to it as the Jungle of Eden, shouldn't we?), I think 'sunburn' and I think 'shoes'.

Deep down, and in its essence, the Song of Songs is fantasy, escapist literature, and its dream stuff signals that. Fantasy is no wickedness, but it does create an ambivalence about the text in the mind of this reader, an ambivalence that, interestingly enough, none of the textbooks encourages one to contemplate. Reality can be awful, and escaping from it into an imaginary world can at times be the only sensible thing to do. The downside of fantasy is that it can deflect attention from what needs to be done in the real world, and so for Marx, for example, it was counter-revolutionary, like utopianism in general. And there can be little doubt how well utopian literature can serve the purposes of social control.⁴⁷ The upside of fantasy, of course, is that it envisages an alternative reality, which can subvert or at least critique the real world of quotidian experience. It can even be argued that no change is possible without a prior fantasy, that fantasy is the precondition for social transformation.⁴⁸

As it happens, we do not have any evidence of the Song of Songs being used in the transformation of power relations between the sexes in ancient Israel. If Tamara Eskenazi is right in arguing that the status of women suffered no decline after the exile,⁴⁹ as has commonly been claimed, we still can hardly give much credit for their status to the Song of Songs' depiction of a sexually autonomous woman. One might have thought that the Song of Songs would have served as ancient Israel's *Joy of Sex*,

⁴⁷. Cf. James M. Kennedy's analysis of how Genesis 2-3 will have functioned as a legitimation of power in ancient Israel ('Peasants in Revolt: Political Allegory in Genesis 2-3', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 [1990], pp. 3-14).

⁴⁸. See Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1980), and George Aichele and Tina Pippin (eds.), *Fantasy and the Bible, Semeia* 60 (1992), and in particular their 'Introduction: Why the Fantastic?' (pp. 1-6 [2-3]).

⁴⁹. Tamara C. Eskenazi, 'Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 54 (1992), pp. 25-43.

and, like it, have functioned not so much as an instructional manual but as an opinion-forming and permission-granting tract. That does not seem to have been the case, and one can only suppose that patriarchy found the egalitarianism of the Song (such as it is) too hot to handle, and suppressed its subversiveness by recourse to an authorized and normative allegorical interpretation, that is, to its de-eroticization.⁵⁰

And it is by now no doubt too late for the Song to have any major impact on social change, since there are in existence already many other, more home-grown, models for the relations between the sexes. Only perhaps in communities that are both essentially patriarchal and committed to the authority of the Bible may the Song still have a liberating effect and be able to suggest a vision of an alternative style of being.

3. The final point on which I wish to report on the Song's effect on this reader is the matter of the representation of the woman in the book.

I start again here from the assumption that we are dealing with a male text, and I am interested in how that text constructs the woman. Even feminist critics sometimes ignore the fact that what we have in this book is not a woman, not the voice of a woman, not a woman's poem, not a portrayal of female experience from a woman's perspective, but always and only what a man imagines for a woman, his construction of femininity. But the situation is worse than that; it is not just that the text presents a male, patriarchally constituted view of a woman, or offers a male point of view on sexuality; it is, as Susan Durber puts it, that 'the very symbolic order of which [the text is] a part is subject to the "Law of the Father" [in the Lacanian sense] in which the "I" is always male... [The text is] part of the (patriarchal)

⁵⁰ As Fisch puts it, '[H]owever far back we go, we cannot discern any traces of an earlier "literal" interpretation of the Song such as we can with Homer. Gerson D. Cohen has indeed argued very plausibly that "allegorizing activity took place not long after the Song itself was compiled"' (*Poetry with a Purpose*, p. 97; the reference is to Cohen's article, 'The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality', in *The Samuel Friedland Lectures 1960-1966* [New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966], p. 16).

symbolic order which constructs our subjectivity, whether we are biologically male or female.’⁵¹

Typically, the symbolic order in which we all operate constructs the woman as the other, as the object to the male subject, and as the object of the male look; ‘woman’ connotes ‘to be looked at’. John Berger writes that a woman is someone who has been taught that she is to be watched:

[M]en act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.⁵²

So the reader of the Song of Songs is assumed to be a male, an anonymous bystander who shares the author’s perspective on the watched woman—as on David’s rooftop: ‘Is this not Bathsheba?’ (2 Sam. 11.3). The woman, for her part, is offered the subject position as the focus of male gaze, and not unwillingly (for she knows no alternative) she adopts that subject and subjected position, misrecognizing herself.⁵³

In the Song, the woman is everywhere constructed as the

⁵¹. Susan Durber, ‘The Female Reader of the Parables of the Lost’, in *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (ed. George J. Brooke; Studies in Women and Religion, 31; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 187-207 (194). The following paragraph owes much to her excellent article. It cannot possibly be true, given these observations, that ‘Canticles affirms mutuality of the sexes. There is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex’ (Trible, ‘Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation’, p. 45).

⁵². John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972), p. 47. On the matter of the male gaze in biblical literature, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 170-201; Mieke Bal, ‘The Elders and Susanna’, *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993), pp. 1-19.

⁵³. The language here derives from Louis Althusser’s view of the human subject as constructed within the discourses and practices of culture, which are developed on the basis of ideology (*Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* [London: New Left Books, 1977]). Jacques Lacan speaks of the subject as misrecognizing itself as the producer of meaning, when the truth is rather that the subject is itself the product of discourse (*Ecrits: A Selection* [trans. Alan Sheridan; London: Tavistock, 1977]).

object of male gaze. In the opening lines she is made, by the male author, to describe herself as 'black, but beautiful' (1.6), 'black' because she has been forced to work in the vineyards under the sun, but 'black' also because she has been forced by the male gaze—and by patriarchal binary thinking—to construct 'white' as beautiful and any other shade as its complete opposite. 'Do not stare at me', she says to the Jerusalem women, for she feels their scorn at having offended (though she had no say in the matter) against the norms for female beauty, complied with by women,⁵⁴ but instituted by men, no doubt as a symbol of female alterity (the brothers in the vineyard must be equally sunburnt, but there is no shame in that for them). To her male spectators, the readers of the poem, of course, she cannot say, 'Do not stare at me'; for she has been brought into existence precisely to be stared at, and the veil she would willingly cover herself with is disallowed by the poet's gaze. She has been the victim of male violence and anger (1.6), and she bears the marks of it on her face; and now the poet invites his readers to share his sight of the woman's humiliation. That is the very stuff of pornography.⁵⁵

The man and the woman in the poem are by no means equal in this matter of the gaze. It is typical of the poem, though admittedly not universal in it, that he describes her in physical terms whereas she speaks of him in symbolic and metaphorical language. He compares her to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots (1.9), no doubt for her beauty and ornaments,⁵⁶ and his instinct is to decorate her further, with ornaments of gold studded with silver (1.11). She is the subject of his objectifying *waš fs* (4.1-7; 6.3-7; 7.1-7), fragmented into her bodily parts, each in turn the object of his gaze. She may be all fair, with no flaw in her (4.7), but she hardly moves; his vision fixes her, like a photographic image.

She, on the other hand, images her lover with metaphors, as a sachet of myrrh lying between her breasts (1.13), as an apple tree among the trees of the wood, as a gazelle leaping over the

⁵⁴. As usual, the patriarchal norms set women against women.

⁵⁵. See Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography', p. 145. It is perhaps not a very severe humiliation she has undergone, and she has not come to feel that she is no longer beautiful; but it is nevertheless very powerful symbolically.

⁵⁶. So Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, p. 134.

mountains (2.8-9, 17; 8.14), as Solomon carried in his palanquin (3.6-11), as a prince in a chariot (6.12). She does address a *waṣ f* to him (5.10-16), but there is something odd about it, and its significance remains a little elusive.⁵⁷

He is all action, in her eyes, kissing and drawing her (1.2, 4), lying with her (1.12-14), taking her into the wine-garden (2.4), holding her in his arms (2.6), bounding over the mountains (2.8-9), peering in at the windows (2.9), bidding her rise up and come away (2.10-14), grazing his flock among the lilies (2.16), and so on and so on. She in his eyes is more of a statue; she comes to life only when she speaks in her own voice, telling then of her nightly search for him (3.1-2; 5.6), her encounters with the watchmen (3.3; 5.7), her conjuring up of the north wind (4.16), her desperate addresses to the Jerusalem women (5.8), her pledges of love in the vineyards (7.11-13).

So the male author is not incapable of constructing a vital woman, but he does not choose to do so, on the whole. The woman he creates remains caught in her domestic setting, interminably waiting for her lover to arrive, seeking him but finding him not, calling and gaining no answer (3.1; 5.6). He has the transport (3.6-10), and he has the freedom. She longs for him (1.2; 2.6), but he is mostly disturbed by her (4.9; 7.5). Above all, he insists on constructing her; the keynote is 4.1: 'Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful'. That repeated 'behold' (הִנֵּה) says it all: she is to behold herself, herself as seen by him. She is to have no vision of herself; he will impose that upon her. And he will be content with nothing less than her

⁵⁷. See Soulen, 'The *waṣ fs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic'; Athalya Brenner, "'Come Back, Come Back the Shulammitte'" (Song of Songs 7.1-10): A Parody of the *waṣ f* Genre', in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 234-57; J. William Whedbee, 'Paradox and Parody in the Song of Solomon: Towards a Comic Reading of the Most Sublime Song', in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 266-78 ('the male who appears as bigger-than-life, standing somewhat awkwardly as a gargantuan, immobile, distant figure' [274]). Landy most perceptively observes, '[O]n his face, the expressive articulate part of his body, we find animate images of the woman; whereas the rest of his body, though appropriately formidable, is coldly metallic and disjointed. By a curious paradox that which is alive in him and relates to her is feminine' (*Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 80; cited by Whedbee, 'Paradox and Parody', p. 274).

acceptance of the subject position he is offering. She is to see herself as he sees her; otherwise she has no identity.

This is a dangerous text, not a gross one. A more blatantly sexist text would do less damage than one that beguiles. On the other hand, once you see its programme, perhaps you sharpen up your reflexes. 'What does it do to you?' depends a lot on how you have already constructed *yourself*.⁵⁸

⁵⁸. Francis Landy wrote some detailed comments on this chapter for me, which I have gratefully used.