

WHY IS THERE A SONG OF SONGS AND WHAT DOES IT DO TO YOU IF YOU READ IT?

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I have been wondering why there is a Hebrew Bible at all, and what the difference might be if it did not exist. But rather than wondering how already extant texts came to be formed into a collection of texts, and what would be lost if they did not all exist, I thought I would consider how an individual text happened to be created as a text in the first place and what the effect of its existence was. I thought I would start with the Song of Songs because these sounded quite difficult questions in regard to this particular book.

You could say that the first question, Why is There a Song of Songs?, is a historical one, about origins, and the second, What Does it Do to You?, is an interpretational one, about readers. But I am not sure how distinct those categories are, for I could imagine arguing that readers are always historically conditioned and that issues of reader response are therefore themselves essentially historical matters; and I could equally well imagine arguing that issues of 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 of readers.

But I did want to enquire about two things: the causes of the text and the effects of the text; and perhaps my two questions do roughly correspond to those two intentions.

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. But I did not 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 the 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 matrix the text implies; and not to try moving from the text to the actual author and his psyche, but rather to construct the kind of psyche implied by the text he authored.¹

Whether these sketches of the implied author and the implied social setting of the text are like or unlike historical actuality I have no way of knowing — but then neither does anyone else, so I am not greatly alarmed. 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 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.

Why is There a Song of Songs?

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.

We need to begin with the idea of the Song of Songs as a *text*. But 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, that most sophisticated of Canticles commentators, does not notice that his text is a *text*. 'Does the work

¹I believe that this is different from the traditional historical literary criticism. The Old Criticism interested itself in *real authors* (their names, when exactly they lived, and so on) but recognized only *ideal readers* (like scholars, or like subtle, observant and unforgetting readers); the New Criticism, on the other hand, is interested more in *ideal or implied authors*, while searching out the opinions of *real readers*, ancient and modern.

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 society, 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.²

What he does not seem to observe is that the Song is not poetry, but

²Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 5. Even when he asks, '[H]ow are we to understand the literary compilation and promulgation of the Song itself?' (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?) and with their 'pragmatic recognition of what contributed to ideal connubial bliss and marital fidelity' (99). 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], 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 poems about it? Like many others, Childs has no vision of the work as a text prior to its incorporation in a canon.

written poetry.³ 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 is the imitation of a song. It is 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.

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, 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

³The same is true of Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 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.

and against his or her wishes; but there is no reason in this case to suspect any unusual origins of the text.

The Song of Songs being a text, we need to ask, if we are interested in its origins, What author?, and What 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.⁴ And I think I can argue that the book's public is male, too. There is no evidence for female literacy in ancient Israel,⁵ so in all probability we can suppose a male readership. That is to say, the Song of Songs is a text written by an Israelite male to meet the desires and needs of other Israelites 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.

Since it is a text, we can then move on to ask, 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, is a claim made for any text that it is the best of its kind? The Book of Isaiah does not claim that it is 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

⁴So I take issue with Athalya Brenner, Fokkelen 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* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 28-37 (32); *eadem*, 'Women Poets and Authors', *ibid.*, 86-97 (87-91, 97); Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Fokkelen van Dijk, 'The Canon of the Old Testament and Women's Cultural Traditions', *ibid.*, 67-85; and cf. also S.D. Goitein, 'The Song of Songs: A Female Composition', *ibid.*, 58-66.

⁵At least, none that Alan R. Millard can mention in his article on 'Literacy (Israel)', *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1922), IV, 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' (338a).

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 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.⁶ 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*, not 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, 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).⁷ The economic context 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 soft pornography. It is much the same male public as Ezekiel depicts when the Lord tells him his audience will listen to him as to an entertainer, not as to a prophet

⁶The 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 19.35 (Heb 36) (Barzillai's), Eccl 2.8, 2 Chr 35.25, Ezra 2.65 = Neh 7.67, and perhaps also in Amos 8.3 (of the temple).

⁷Interestingly, 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"' (t. *Sanh.* 12.10; cf. b. *Sanh.* 101a). The 'tremulous voice' couldn't be of a male impersonating a female, could it?

whose words must be obeyed: ‘My people will come to you as to a public gathering (בְּקִבוּץ עָם) and sit before you. They will listen to your words but not do them. For they have a taste for erotica (כִּי־עֲגִבִים) ... 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!’⁸

What of the political context? All texts, according to Fredric Jameson,⁹ 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.¹⁰ Now we do not have to analyze 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 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 deeply pervasive social reality with pillow talk, to develop, in Jamesonian terminology, a strategy of containment for the social tension, to achieve

⁸Translation by Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 248.

⁹Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).

¹⁰For an application of this outlook to a biblical text, see David J.A. Clines, ‘Haggai’s Temple, Constructed, Deconstructed and Reconstructed’, forthcoming in *Second Temple Studies* (ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards; JSOT Supplement Series; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), and in *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 7 (1993), 51-77.

coherence and closure by shutting out the truth about history.¹¹ 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 a social, economic and 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.

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.

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 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 a text as a dream, its author's dream.¹² Although it is the product of the conscious mind, most authors

¹¹Cf. William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to the Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 77.

¹²Pope, in his commentary (*The Song of Songs*, 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 ...

are unconscious of the psychological needs and drives that their works arise from, and prefer to speak of their writings in terms of their conscious intentions and of their works' overt content. So it is possible, and perhaps necessary, to penetrate to the unconscious layer of the writing without the author's knowledge.

The author of the Song of Songs has dreamed a dream in which the lovers are perfectly and equally desirous of one another. To be sure, their love encounters some difficulties and hindrances from sources outside themselves: the watchmen beat the woman as she wanders through 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 cruelty, no rejection, no faithlessness, no agonizing 'He loves me, he loves me not'.

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.'¹³

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 are hers, 'Let him kiss me', and the closing words also, '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

in which there is frustration and punishment of forbidden desires'. Pope professes himself 'not convinced' (134), as does Harold Fisch (*Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], 98-99); but the point seems obvious to me.

¹³Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Bible and Literature Series, 7; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 69.

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?¹⁴ 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 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 nor 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 woman's dream, of a woman dreaming her male lover's words. It is a fetching ventriloquy, this voice that is doubly thrown.¹⁵ Can it be perhaps that this is the reason why it is the Song of Songs? Can it have earned its supremacy from 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 Kabuki 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.¹⁶ 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.

¹⁴With the kisses of his nose, thinks Fox (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 97), taking a lead from some allusions in Egyptian love songs; but I don't believe him.

¹⁵I 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.

¹⁶This is only one of the several places in this paper where Heather McKay gave me a welcome idea or bibliographic reference.

What sort of a dream is this Song of Songs? Self-evidently, it is a wish-fulfillment dream. The male author dreams a text about a woman who is forward in love, who initiates the love-making,¹⁷ who boasts about her lover to other women, who professes herself sick with love (2.5; 5.8),¹⁸ who does nothing all day but daydream and fantasize about him (even when she is out 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,¹⁹ turning tradition upside down by devising a *wasf* about *his* charms and the parts of *his* body,²⁰ imagining speeches for him in which he invites her 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 (7.11 Revised English Bible [Heb 12])—as brazen in her own way as the seductive wife 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.

¹⁷So Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), 30-48 (42).

¹⁸Lovesickness is a male complaint in Egypt, apparently; see Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 13, 38 (21F[C]), 55; though the woman's heart stands still in Pap. Harris, B12 (210), it leaps out of its place in Chester Beatty I, A, 34 (53), and she collapses from love (*ibid.*)

¹⁹Like the 'loud' woman of Prov 7.13.

²⁰I am assuming, perhaps wrongly, and certainly contrary to the textbooks, that the *wasf* is a male literary form, used by a man to compliment his woman lover. She 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 *wasfs* 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 *wasfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic', in A. Brenner(ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, 214-24(216 n.1) (originally in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 [1967], 183-90). But see Marcia Falk's comments, in 'The *wasf*', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, 225-33 (232).

She is a strange one, this woman in the Song of Songs.²¹ She is, literally, a strange woman, an אִשָּׁה זָרָה, 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-fulfillment dream. He dreams her up precisely because she does not exist. What we have we do not wish for. 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 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? That is to say, we cannot say anything 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.

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.²² 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.²³

²¹This domination by the woman may seem strange in a Near Eastern setting, allows Landy (*Paradoxes of Paradise*, 69).

²²As Qoheleth would say, 'Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness' (Eccl.2:13) — but it is nevertheless *hebel*.

²³I am grateful to Steve Fowl, whose paper first set me on this track ('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,

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.

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,²⁴ and, in relation to the Song of Songs, by Marvin Pope and Roland Murphy especially.²⁵ I have in mind, 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.²⁶ I

Steve E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter; JSOT Supplement Series, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990], 379-98). He has some criticisms to make of the important 1987 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ('The Ethics of Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *Journal of the Biblical Literature* 107 [1988], 101-15), but he shares her concern.

²⁴Systematically throughout his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, and specifically on the Song of Songs (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 and Scott, 1988); and J.F.A. Sawyer, 'Interpretation, History of', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden; London: SCM Press, 1990), 316-20.

²⁵Note 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 Instituto Biblico, 1989); and, from an earlier period, 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), 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), 727-30.

²⁶So 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*, 11-12). Who is to say what the 'primary

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 slavery or 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 serious and well-informed judgments than merely to acquire knowledge or 'understanding'.

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 cannot imagine anyone denying it. Most readers of former times that we 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 [Glasgow],

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' (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, to forgive all. But what has happened to critical evaluation?

1701).²⁷ And 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 Gloriousnesse 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 be aken away*²⁸; William Guild's *Loves entercours between the Lamb & His bride, Christ and His church. Or, A clear explication and application of the Song of Solomon*;²⁹ 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*.³⁰

My purpose here is not to unravel the causes for such egregious misreadings, strong misreadings indeed,³¹ though they certainly need unravelling, being not at all obvious. For the transmission of the Song within the context of the scriptural canon need not have constrained readers into an allegorical reading, any more than they were constrained into a mystical reading of tales and commands about warfare; and the fact that the Song was read largely by avowedly celibate clerics prior to the Reformation³² does not 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,³³ or for the

²⁷Cf. W.J. Cowper, 'A Gorbals Imprint of 1701, with Notes on Patrick Simson's "Spiritual Songs"', *Records of the Glasgow Bibliographical Society* 6 (1920), 1-13.

²⁸London, 1642.

²⁹London, 1658.

³⁰London, 1648.

³¹To use Harold Bloom's phrase, in *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³²Murphy 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*, 12).

³³A naturalistic reading goes back to Erasmus, Grotius and Bossuet in the seventeenth century, and to Lowth and Herder in the eighteenth.

tendencies to allegory even in intelligent critics of our own day.³⁴

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 1973³⁵). Not having researched the erotic literature, I am in no position to say whether the book has influenced authors in that genre; but what I do know is

³⁴See for example Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, chap. 6, 'Song of Songs: 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 (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' (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], 226).

³⁵I 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), 598-99. See thereafter J. Cheryl Exum, 'A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde des nachbiblischen Judentums* 85 (1973), 47-79. 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. Note also, from 1973, Phyllis Tribble's article 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), 30-48, in part concerned with the Song of Songs (42-48).

that the history of its interpretation is one of a massive repression of sexuality, of denial of the book's ostensible subject matter,³⁶ a testimony to male fear of female sexuality. Sexuality has been thought an unsuitable, unworthy, undignified subject for a work of this rank, for a work in this context. And that is not merely a harmless misunderstanding or a curious hermeneutical aberration. It is a refusal of 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 behavior, and especially their feelings about sex and themselves as sexual beings, has evidently been distorted by the existence of this canonical book whose referent the tradition authorizes them to repress.³⁷ And what has it done to women, I wonder, 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, 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 and legitimated a reading so against its own grain? I don't rightly know how to answer this question; but I have the suspicion that a work that came into the world as soft pornography proves ultimately to be irredeemable in polite society. It was of no use 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 candor 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,³⁸ it is infeasibly male — as we shall shortly further

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ I have seen such a view expressed only in one other place, by G.Lloyd Carr, in his *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 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.'

³⁸ We might compare, for example, the three focal points in biblical views

see.

The Effects of the Text on Contemporary Readers

To prepare this part of the paper, 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.³⁹ 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 analyze 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 even the politics of gender relations. Everything in its time and place, 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,⁴⁰ 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

of female sexuality that T. Drorah Setel has analyzed: 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], 86-95[88]; reprinted in Brenner [ed.], *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, 146). None of these elements figures in the Song of Songs.

³⁹I have done such a survey on the book of Job.

⁴⁰I refer of course to John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty'.

primeval garden ... we cannot live solely in the garden of eroticism.⁴¹ 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'.⁴² 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 Erehwon, 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 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

⁴¹Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', 47.

⁴²Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*, 183 (reprinted in Brenner [ed.], *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, 129). Cf. also Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), ch.5 'Love's Lyrics Redeemed' (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], 83).

what needs to be done in the real world, and so for Marx 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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,⁴⁵ as has commonly been claimed, we still can hardly put any improvement in their lot to the credit of 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*, 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 authorized and normative allegorical interpretation, that is, to its de-eroticization.⁴⁶

And it is by now no doubt too late for the Song to have any major

⁴³Cf. 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], 3-14).

⁴⁴See 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?' (1-6 [2-3]).

⁴⁵Tamara C. Eskenazi, 'Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era', *JOT* 54(1992), 25-43.

⁴⁶As 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*, 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], 16).

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) symbolic order which constructs our subjectivity, whether we are biologically male or female.'⁴⁷

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:

[Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men

⁴⁷Susan 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), 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', 45).

and women but also the relation of women to themselves.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

In the Song, the woman is everywhere constructed as the 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, 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), but complied with by the women.⁵⁰ To her male spectators, the readers of the poem, of course, she cannot say, 'Do not stare at me'; for she is 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. It is the very stuff of pornography.⁵¹

⁴⁸John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972), 47. On the matter of the male gaze in literature, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative* (JSOT Supplement Series 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 170-201; Mieke Bal, 'The Elders and Susanna', *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993), 1-19.

⁴⁹The language were 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* [London: Tavistock, 1977]).

⁵⁰As usual, the patriarchal norms set women against women.

⁵¹See Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography', 145. It is perhaps not a very

The man and the woman in the poem are by no means equal in this matter of the gaze. It is typical, though admittedly not universal, 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,⁵² and his instinct is to decorate her further, with ornaments of gold studded with silver (1.11). She is the subject of his objectifying *wasfs* (4.1-7; 6.3; 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 metaphor, 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 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 *wasf* to him (5.10-16), but there is something odd about it, and its significance remains a little elusive.⁵³

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 only comes to life when she speaks in her own voice, telling then of her nightly search for him (3.1-2; 5.6), her encounters

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.

⁵²So Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 134.

⁵³See Soulen, 'The *wasfs* 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 *wasfs* Genre)', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, 234-57; J. William Whedbee, 'Paradox and Parody in the Song of Solomon: Towards a Comic Reading of the Most Sublime Song', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, 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*, 80; cited by Whedbee, 'Paradox and Parody', 274).

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 getting 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 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.

ABSTRACT

This paper studies both the composition of the Song of Songs and its reception. 'Why is there?' addresses the origins of the text, 'What does it do to you?' addresses the effect on readers. In the first part I attempt to answer the question of the text's composition by way of a materialist criticism and a psychoanalytic criticism. I ask first what are the necessary conditions of the text's production, what material (social and economic) circumstances are implied by the text. I ask secondly what psychoanalytic implications may be drawn from the text about the author as producer of the text. I will not be reconstructing the historical setting of the text's origin or the author's psyche, but simply drawing inferences from the text. In the second part I propose answers to the question of effect both in a diachronic and a synchronic mode, first by analysing the effects of the text in the history of its interpretation, and secondly by suggesting the effects it may have upon contemporary readers. The emphasis will be on what ideology the text persuades readers to adopt, and what alternatives it persuades them to ignore.

撮要

本文旨在研究雅歌的組成及讀者的領受，討論「為何雅歌存在？」及「它與你何干？」兩個問題。前者是關乎經文的來源，後者是關乎對讀者的影響。在第一部分，作者嘗試用質料鑑別法和心理分析法來了解經文的組成。他首先探討在何種條件下促成經文的產生，及經文反映了何種物質（社會與經濟）的環境。其次他討論到經文所顯示出經文原作者在創造此經文時的心理情況。作者指出，他並非意欲復原一個經文原來的歷史背景，或作者原來的心理狀態；只是就經文本身作推敲。在第二部分，作者探討經文對受眾的影響，他採用跨時代與同時代的兩種模式來分析。就是說，先分析經文在歷代所引致的不同註釋，然後才探詢經文對當代讀者所可能產生的作用。作者關注的是，到底經文企圖傳遞甚麼觀念給讀者，又希望教他們忽略甚麼。