INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI®

Ambiguity in the Song of Songs

Grace Rostig

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Theological Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 2000

©Grace Rostig, 2000

National Library of Canada

Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Acquisitions et services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-47791-6

Canadä

Abstract

Ambiguity in the Song of Songs

Grace Elise Rostig

This thesis will explore the ambiguous nature of the Song of Songs, as it manifests itself in the narrative, the structure, the imagery, and the language of the Song. It will also propose the new interpretative possibilites that this ambiguity leads to, when it is approached asking the question "What does this poem do?" as opposed to "What does it say or mean?"

The Song of Songs, whether through the eyes and minds of ancient or modern commentators, has been seen as portraying a mutual and exclusive love relationship, whether it was a relationship between God and his people, Israel, or Jesus and his Church, as was generally believed to be the case up until the middle of this century, or a relationship between two people, as has most often been the case since. Thus, any questions about the Song have principally centered on who the two main characters in the Song represent, or whether they represent anyone other than themselves. Unasked has been the initial question to be explored in this thesis: is the relationship depicted in the Song really mutual and exclusive or does it contain certain aspects that make it more ambiguous than that? This initial question will lead to an even less traditional one: is the relationship between what has been thought to be one couple in the Song, really multiple relationships between different people? Through the examination of these main questions, on the different levels of the Song, new insight will be gained into the spiritual nature of the Song.

Acknowledgements

With my heart full of love for them, I would like to thank the following people:

Sean McEvenue, my thesis advisor, who taught me the rich, organic, authentic and exciting method of exegesis used in this thesis, and much much more. Our frequent and animated discussions were among the great joys of my life over the past few years. I really miss him since he has moved away.

Dr. Pamela Bright, who first welcomed me into the Master's program in Theology and has since encouraged me and prayed for me whenever I needed it--with great results. For the gift of what I have always felt is something of a shared sensibility between us, I am also infinitely grateful, for it has meant that I have had both a mirror to look into and a role model to look "forward" to--she wouldn't like it if I said "look up" to.

Léon Coupal, who is my lover, my friend, my intellectual and emotional sparring partner. He has held me tight, supported me, listened to me go on about my latest discovery in the Song and argued with me about what it meant; without him not only would this thesis never have been written, I would probably have gone crazy. He is also the other parent of the greatest baby on earth, Maurice Elliot Coupal, who is 14 months old and whose presence forced me to write this thesis in very sane increments of time, to stop and eat at regular hours and to go to bed at decent hours.

Dale, Nadège, Jean-Jacques and Thérèse, Madeleine who all baby-sat Mo for the fun of it and for the love of him, Léon and me.

May God bless you all at least as richly as I have been blessed through you.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction .... p. 1

2. Methodological Considerations .... p. 5

2.1 A Philosophical Issue .... p. 5

2.2 Practical Issues .... p. 7

2.2.1 Questions of Translation .... p. 7

2.2.1.1 Use of the English Translation .... p. 7

2.2.1.2 Which English Translation? .... p. 8

2.2.2 Methodology Used in the Analysis of the Song .... p. 8

2.2.3 Definition of Ambiguity as a Literary Term .... p. 9

3. History of the Question .... p. 10

3.1 Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century .... p. 11

3.2 The Twentieth Century .... p. 20

4. Statement of the Question .... p. 36

5. Ambiguity on the Different Levels of the Song .... p. 44

5.1 Narrative Ambiguity .... p. 44

5.2 Structural Ambiguity .... p. 67

5.3 Ambiguity in the Imagery and Language .... p. 71

5.4 Ambiguity at the Linguistic Level .... p. 106

6. Conclusion .... p. 109

7. Bibliography .... p. 113

"I was sleeping but my heart was awake." (Song of Songs, 5:2)

C'est là sans appui

Je ne suis pas bien du tout assis sur cette chaise
Et mon pire malheur est un fauteuil où l'on reste
Immanquablement je m'endors et j'y meurs.

Mais laissez-moi traverser le torrent sur les roches
Par bonds quitter cette chose pour celle-là
Je trouve l'équilibre impondérable entre les deux
C'est là sans appui que je me repose.

Saint-Denys Garneau

Taken from the CD Musique sur Saint-Denys Garneau, 1998, by the group *Villeray*, which is made up of Éric Senécal and Stéphane Tremblay. Garneau (June 3, 1912-October 24, 1943) was a Québecois poet and painter.

Comment

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medly of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Roumania

Dorothy Parker

Taken from: The Portable Dorothy Parker. Eds. Lillian Hellman and editors of the Viking Press. London: Penguin Books, 1981

1. Introduction

The literary critic, Stanley Fish, asks the question: Why do literary criticism? He claims he cannot *say* why but that he can *show* why and proceeds to do so using a line from Milton's Paradise Lost, "And Devils to adore for Deities." He points out that while the sense of the line makes Devils very different from Deities, the:

> sound-pattern of the line...is blurring the difference and making it hard to tell them apart...What then is the line finally saying: that there is a huge difference between devils and deities or that there is practically...no difference between them. The answer...is that the line is saying both: the difference is huge; the difference is very small and there is no paradox because the largeness and the smallness exist on different levels. The difference is small if we think to discern it with the physical eye or ear. Devils can make themselves up to look or sound like deities any time...True discernment requires an *inner* eye capable of penetrating to essences, an eye that does not rest on surfaces, but quite literally sees through them, the eye, in short, of faith, famously defined in Hebrews II as the 'evidence of things not seen.' The inner eye has only God as its object; and the difference between God and anything else looms large and immediately; if the gaze wanders, if the eye is distracted by some glittering simulacru, the difference is blurred and becomes difficult to 'tell.' Those who mistake devils for deities do not experience an empirical failure; they experience the failure that is empiricism, the failure to distinguish between things that are made and the maker, who is, of course, invisible. (Professional 108-9)

For the purposes of this thesis, what is relevant about Fish's statement is that it draws attention both to the paradoxical meanings that can exist on different levels in a text, and to the effect that the discovery and interpretation of those different meanings have on the reader. There is nothing like the sensation that, with each reading of the text, deeper and different layers of meaning, whose relationships to each other wait eagerly to be uncovered, are being revealed/discerned! Such was, and continues to be, this reader's experience with the Song of Songs.

It is Fish's idea that Milton intentionally created paradoxical layers in his poems. Why? Because:

> rather than pointing the reader to something beyond itself, Milton's language...calls attention to itself, to the relationship between its components...The intention is to make the verse of the poem into a set of exercises in which the reader is forced to confront the difficulty of interpretive choices that nonetheless must be made. In relation to this intention the last thing Milton wants us to do is feel through his words to something else; rather he wants to *arrest* our attention, to slow down the reading experience to the extent that *its* problems become its content...If 'passages have to be read through several times before one can see how they go' , it is because the cognitive acts such readings and rereadings involve are the acts Milton wants us to perform. (111-12)

While this reader cannot, with Fish's confidence, say that the author of the Song of Songs had the same intention, there is no question that the outcome is the same: if one is possessed of the "inner eye" Fish refers to, the poem confronts the reader with so many paradoxes and ambiguities that it is impossible not to question what the author's intention was in presenting the readership of the poem with such an intriguingly beautiful[1] and difficult to understand text. Equally intriguing is the fact that, despite what was almost immediately apparent to this reader as a prevailing ambiguity, on many levels of the text, the meaning of the Song was, for most of the poem's interpretative history, seen as crystal clear, the male lover being seen as an allegorical representation of God for the Jews and of Christ for the Christians, and the woman representing either the people of Israel, the Church or individual Christians.

More recently, while scholars have explored the literal sense of the poem for its own sake, when the question of the Song's theological meaning has arisen, they have most often turned outside of the poem, "pointing the reader to something beyond itself," as Fish says,

---

[1] The beauty of the poem's images will not be the principal focus of this thesis, but this reader can only encourage her readers to enjoy that "by-product" of this thesis, as she did.

in the case of the Song, to abstract ideas about how the human love relationship in the Song calls up in the mind of the reader the love of God. This conclusion was also come to by this reader. It is understandable for two reasons. First, the Song is, after all, a book in the Bible and must be saying something about God, or so the interpreter cannot help but think. But since the one possible mention of God[2] in the Song provides little, though rich, food for a theological statement, the reader in search of a message "discovers" one in it that both "makes sense" in the context of the rest of the poem and whose validity it is difficult to deny. The second reason that the "human love reflects God's love" conclusion is both understandable and its validity obvious is: there is an indisputable feeling of the presence of God in the poem, which is as difficult to define as it is undeniably manifest. As this reader worked with the Song over time, it became clear to her that this feeling did not come solely from any connection, made in her mind, between the human love in the Song and the love of God. While this reader cannot claim to have found the definitive source of the ineffable sense of God's presence in the Song, when she[3] has touched upon this source, however briefly and perhaps only with a part of her conscience comparable in size to her little toe, it has been through a literary experiencing of the essentially ambiguous nature of the text itself, as well as its content. Thus, it is this aspect of the multi-dimensional adventure of the interpretation of the Song of Songs that will be explored in this thesis.

This ambiguity was first discerned in the relationship(s) between the lovers in the poem, at the narrative level of the poem, where events sometimes seemed to contradict each other, rendering the idea of one interpretation of them unthinkable. It was then discovered at the structural level, where the abrupt and seemingly random changes from section to section,

---

[2]8:6: "Strong as death is love; Intense as Sheol is ardor. Its shafts are shafts of fire, flames of Yah"
[3]The pronoun "she" has been used throughout this text, even when this reader is not the person being referred to, except of course when that person is a man. This choice will prevent wooden he/she constructions, and will also give the readers of this thesis a break from the more traditional usage of the masculine to designate all human beings.

in speaker or location, leave the reader not knowing at all where she stands, while the repetitions that occur between these sections make it obvious that both their content and their location in the text have been very carefully selected. Lastly, and most profoundly, through many rereadings of the poem, as the reader moved deeper and deeper into the valley of the text, ambiguity was perceived in two ways at the level of the language in the Song: first, the images, like the narrative events, tell an ambiguous story of love. Second, many of the images are "from" other books in the Bible[4], which has the effect of creating a constant question about how those images are to be interpreted, in the "sacred" sense in which they appear in earlier biblical texts, in the "secular" sense in which they appear in the Song, or both, as Fish suggests about the paradoxes in the Milton text. On all of these levels--less on the narrative level, and most of all at the level of the images and language--this reader experienced the feeling of the presence of God. How? While there are surely multiple answers to this question, the one that is important for this thesis is the one created by the presence of ambiguity at different levels of the Song, that is the phenomenon, described by Fish, of how "language...calls attention to itself, to the relationship between its components." This quality in the Song, which is present to lesser or greater degrees on different levels of the Song, inexorably draws, leads, submerges, forces the reader into a heightened sense of being totally in the present moment, which is accompanied by an awareness of her physical body. These two sensations together are what humbly constitute, for this reader, a feeling of wholeness or the presence of God.

This thesis will begin with a brief discussion of methodological considerations, which will be followed by an overview of the history of the interpretation of the Song, including a more in-depth look at a very recent commentary. The "Statement of the Question" will

---

[4]That is to say that sometimes the images, events or words used in the Song are clearly being used with those same images, events or words from other biblical texts in mind.

then lead into the main chapter of this thesis, in which the different elements of ambiguity will be examined, preparing the reader for the modest conclusion.

2. Methodological Considerations

2.1 A Philosophical Issue

Roland Murphy writes: "Moreover, the course of this history (of the interpretation of the Song) underscores an important lesson: the effect of theological assumptions on the work of every interpreter, even a contemporary one who may take pride in a strictly literal and historical-critical approach." (41)

Paul Ricoeur writes that it is possible for contemporary critics to give the Song an erotic reading because "We do not find it difficult today to celebrate sexual pleasure for its own sake, without any reference to the matrimonial setting...This was exactly the situation as regards the lovers in the Song of Songs. No allusion is made there to marriage or to fecundity." (294)

Throughout the writing of this thesis, especially when it involved any discussion of the work of previous commentators, the question frequently arose of interpreters' conscious or unconscious biases (Lonergan). It is these personal biases that explain how Brevard Childs, and others, sees the Song as depicting the love story of a married couple when there is no evidence in the text to support that idea, how André LaCocque sees the Song's intertextuality as intentionally ironic and subversive, while this reader attributes a feeling of sacredness to the same phenomenon .

It is not a question of "How can I rid myself of these biases?" or that "My biases are better than yours!" since these biases are, of course, part of who each interpreter is, part of why we are attracted to the Song, part of how and why of we understand the poem in ways that differ from each other[5]. More important is an awareness of one's biases, which enabled this reader to both hear the voices in the text louder than the voices of her own biases, and each time she returned to the text, prepared her to be surprised, to hear something new, to see an oft-seen image in a different light. It is also an awareness of these biases that leads to humbling awareness that it is impossible for any interpreter to claim that her interpretation is THE interpretation.

This awareness of one's biases prepares the reader to partake, with as much of her consciousness as possible, in the work of biblical exegesis, which Sean McEvenue writes of in the following way:

> The tedious labour of exegetes aims finally at this sort of understanding of the biblical text--certainly not a paraphrase of the text, but at a pre-conceptual insight into the elemental meaning of a work of art. There may be some doctrinal statements in the bible, but they are the very rare exception. Most of the bible is stories, songs, poems, rhetoric. One has to work to understand it, and when one succeeds, it is an opening of the eyes so that they see, and the ears so that finally they hear. It is not a message in the sense of an easily articulated truth or exhortation. One can attempt to conceive it, and explain it, but one's words sound hollow, and they would follow logic on the wrong plane of experience...Elemental meaning is pointed at, not articulated; it is not quite communicable and yet is contagious. (10-11)

---

[5]One of this reader's biases has importance for this thesis since it has meant that her range of "acceptable" sexual activity is wider than most other commentators' have been. Through monthly full moon rituals that she created and performed with sex-trade workers over a period of two years (1996-8), this reader has been lead to the realization that this profession, so often seen, at worst, as immoral, and at best, as "bad for the girls," is one that, without denying the enormous difficulties experienced by its practitioners, many of which are due to its present illegal status in this country, is better paid and more convenient than many others. Thus, for this reader, the idea that among the love relationships depicted in the Song, some might be those of prostitutes is not particularly shocking, and not necessarily impossible in the context of the Bible. However, this idea, likely impossible to prove, has not been greatly expanded upon in this thesis.

With this thesis, another voice has been added to the plurality of those that have, over time, sung the interpretations of the Song that the society in which they lived, and the sensibility in their hearts, dictated. These voices, like those in the Song, sometimes contradict each other, or at least seem to be astonishingly different, yet in the Song, they find a common theme and a common love, and together they continue to make not only the body of work written about the Song, but the Song itself, an ever-growing, and an ever-enriched text.

2.2 Practical Issues

2.2.1 Questions of Translation

2.2.1.1 Use of the English Translation

I have had to rely on the English translation of the poem because I do not know anywhere near enough Hebrew to explore the poem in its original language. I have, however, been lucky to have been able to question Dr. Sean McEvenue concerning different words in the Song and their reoccurrence elsewhere in the Bible. It was not feasible to research all the Hebrew words under discussion in this thesis, especially in the third section of the main chapter. While this unfortunate fact has doubtlessly occasioned certain errors of interpretation on my part, I believe that most of the examples I've cited would stand up under scrutiny, at least partly because I have not been arguing intricate linguistic questions to do with word plays or puns, but have been examining individual words, for the most part.

2.2.1.2 Which Translation?

I have chosen to work with Roland Murphy's translation, both since it is among the most recent, and also because the extensive and comprehensive research Murphy has done in the preparation of his translation takes into account other recent and important translations.

2.2.2 Methodology Used in the Analysis of the Song

Essentially, my methodology consisted of simply going through the text over and over again, hearing it, seeing it, feeling it, getting an idea of what was happening on the different levels of the text, getting to know the text through noticing where the breaks were, when the subject matter or the speaker of the location shifted, what the units within the poem were, which images were being used, what the Song seemed to be saying and what it seemed to be meaning.[6] During this process, I noticed that there were many recurring words and using the Quick Verse Library CD-ROM to help me expedite my research, I first explored which words recurred within the text, and subsequently turned to words in the text that seemed to present problems of interpretation. I then looked up the recurrences of both of these types of words in the Old Testament. It was with this latter step that I began to become aware of the way in which words that are used in sacred contexts, and thus have a sacred sense, in other OT texts are used in a secular sense in the Song.

While it had to come to an end for the purposes of this thesis, this method of biblical research is without an end, for it is its nature to continually yield new ideas, new insights,

---

[6] I was taught this rich and thorough method of biblical study by Sean McEvenue; his teaching was supplemented by readings in the Reader-Response school of literary theory.

to cause new questions to be posed, to ceaselessly bring about the transformation of interpretations.

2.2.3 Definition of ambiguity as a literary term

The following definition of ambiguity, taken from Literary Terms: A Dictionary, has been used for the purposes of this thesis:

> In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1938; rev. ed., 1947), William Epsom uses this word to refer not to carelessness that produces two or more meanings where a single one is intended but to the richness of poetic speech which can be brought about by 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language. (11)

3. History of the Question

The following overview of the history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs is, for the most part, based on Roland Murphy's comprehensive The Song of Songs, which was chosen both because it is recent and because of the depth and breadth of its analysis and research.

A few additions from other authors have been included, the most notable one being the discussion of André LaCocque's book, Romance She Wrote, at the end of the section on the twentieth century.

As Roland Murphy points out at the very beginning of his section "History of Interpretation",[7] while the poem has, through the centuries, been the object of much interpretation[8], the history of that interpretation, at least up until the present century, has been largely one dimensional. The vast majority of exegetes have seen the Song as allegorically depicting "the bond of mutual love between God and the people of God" (Murphy, 11) whether that bond was between God and Israel, or Jesus and his Church. Throughout time, there have always been scholars whose interpretations of the Song have departed from this idea, yet even today, popular opinion[9] and certain well-known scholars[10] continue to earnestly attempt to fit the round curves of the Song into the square

---

[7]In this chapter he proposes to offer the reader, not "a detailed survey of this history of interpretation," many of which already exist, but rather a "representative sounding in major periods of the Song's exegetical history, in order to help the reader to grasp the broad shape of this history as well as to become acquainted with some of the most outstanding interpreters." (11)

[8]Especially during the later patristic period and the rest of the Middle Ages, when, Murphy points out, "Christian interpreters wrote more works on the Song of Songs than on any other individual book of the Old Testament." (21)

[9]Informal discussions with both a few classmates and some members of the Trinity United Church here in Montréal supported the idea that the allegorical school continues to hold sway in the minds and hearts of those who do not have the pleasure and honour of having access to the scholarly literature written on the Song.

[10]Both Murphy and LaCocque cite Raymond Jacques Tournay, André Feuillet and André Robert as the leading exponents, at the present time, of the allegorical school. Ricoeur points out an important difference

holes of their allegorical idea about what the Song is about. And modern scholars do this despite the fact that they, unlike the Song's interpreters up until the Reformation, are not quasi-forced into the "entrenched hermeneutical position--that the Old Testament must have a specifically Christian meaning and that the scriptural word of God should deal directly with the religious aspirations of the individual believer and the community of faith--(which) made the spiritual interpretation of the Song in patristic and medieval Christian exposition virtually inevitable." (Murphy, 12)

The clearly untenable nature of the allegorical interpretation--which sometimes involved even changing the speaker to whom certain words were attributed, not to mention the words themselves--has led most modern day scholars to dismiss, out of hand, the work of the allegorical school of old as a method devised by mystics who were embarrassed by the sexual themes and imagery of the Song, and to depict their work as denying the "plain sense" meaning of the Song[11].

3.1 Antiquity to the End of the Nineteenth Century

It has most often been assumed, according to Murphy, that the allegorical or spiritualizing interpretation of the Song was prevalent among the earliest Jewish exegetes, and that the early Christian church simply took over this idea. He shows this assumption to be largely false, and concludes his discussion on this topic in the following way: "In short, the classical Jewish interpretation of the Song came to be 'allegorical,' but we are unable to trace the roots of this interpretation with any certainty or even to be sure that it began in

---

between modern day and more ancient allegorists: for the latter the Song played "the role of an interpretant in regard to an interpreted believing attitude (see as e.g.. that of baptism and role of Song in this ceremony). Instead it has become (for modern commentators) the object of explication, the allegorical meaning being taken to be the true meaning intended by the presumed author, himself or herself inspired by the Holy Spirit." (286)

[11]As for the modern day allegorists, while their work is treated with respect, it is not given much credence.

pre-Christian times." (14) The earliest Christian exposition of the Song was written by Hippolytus in the third century, and while the approach it uses is certainly allegorical, he sees the Song as a "Solomonic prophecy of the end of the 'old' convenant and the beginning of the 'new': Israel is replaced by the church as the object of God's love." (Murphy, 15)

It is in the work of Origen[12], writing a few decades after Hippolytus, that the allegorical method of interpretation of the Song first sees the woman in the Song as representing the Church and her lover God. Only the first three volumes (and a few homilies) of what was originally a ten-volume commentary on the Song survived, in Latin translation, the destruction of all of Origen's writings; they include Origen's riveting Prologue and his consecutive exposition of 1:1-2:15. In these documents is contained the beginnings of his both logical and inspired development of the Song's human love songs into a drama portraying

> the nuptial relationship between Christ and the church: here the female figure is only rarely identified as the individual human soul espoused to Christ. The commentary gives much closer scrutiny to details of the biblical text and presents Origen's complex soteriological analysis at length, expounding both the ecclesial and the psychic (individual soul) interpretations of 'the Bride.' (Murphy, 17)

Origen's interpretation, and his hermeneutical method, remain the most influential in the Song's history, as Murphy point out. In response to modern commentators who depict Origen as ignoring the human love story in the Song in favour of a love story between God and his people, he writes: "On the contrary, the ostensible character of the text on a mundane literary level was the foundation for Origen's analysis." (18) Later, on the same

---

[12]Origen's work is, in this reader's opinion, largely underestimated, even by Murphy, who gives it a more fair hearing than most commentators. Due to considerations of space, it has not been possible in this thesis to devote to Origen's work the consideration it deserves.

page, he continues: "Throughout the extant sections of the commentary, he gives constant attention to supposed aspects of dramatic structure and plot, often venturing to suggest specific scenarios only implied at best in the biblical script." On the next page, he explains how Origen then goes on to give the events in the Song a spiritual meaning:

> Appropriately understood as a part of scripture, the Song should address the spiritual needs of its audience. His chief concern is for theological relevance. Nevertheless, the allegorical method which enables him to pursue this goal is not arbitrarily adopted but rather proceeds from a conscientious assessment of the literary character of the text. (19)

The intellectual and spiritual force of Origen's work is attested to by the fact that, throughout the centuries of the Middle Ages, most Christian interpretations consisted of "variations on Origenist themes." (Murphy, 21) Among those who "played" these variations were Gregory the Great (540-604), who used the first eight verses of the Song in two homilies, the Venerable Bede (d.735) who based his exposition of the whole Song on the work of Gregory the Great and "produced a thorough and coherent commentary, albeit one that broke little new ground." (Murphy, 24) Rupert Deutz (d. 1129) identified the woman in the Song with the Virgin Mary, following an idea already established in the writings of Ambrose. As time went on, the idea that the woman in the Song represented the individual Christian, as opposed to the Church, became less and less current. Murphy writes:

> The Song thus came to serve increasingly as scriptural warrant for viewing the church as the actualization of a sort of platonic ideal, the pristine bride of Christ garbed in spiritual splendour...(and) it was all to easy for Christians to become enraptured by the vision which the Song was supposed to project. (24)

Resistance to the allegorical method of interpreting the Song did, of course, exist, as in the work of Theodore, bishop of Mospsuestia in Cilicia from 392-428, who denied both that

the Song was a work of Solomonic prophecy and that it depicted the love between God and his people. Instead, he believed that it was simply a love poem, written by Solomon "in response to popular criticism of his marriage to the dark-skinned daughter of pharaoh." (Murphy, 22) In the later Middle Ages, William of Auvergne deplored the ecclesial situation that was partly due to an idealized vision of the Church, inspired by the allegorical interpretation of the Song.

By the late Middle Ages, there is a clear difference between the "academic approach known as *sacra pagina*, which understood scripture to be the inspired repository of doctrinal and ethical wisdom..." and the "monastic devotion to *lectio divina*, in which the Song is much less a source of revealed knowledge about the relationship between Christ and the church than an instrument for spiritual illumination." (Murphy, 25) Bernard de Clairvaux[13]'s 86 *Sermones in Canticum*, based mostly on verses and themes from the first two chapters of the Song, are a superb example both of the latter approach to the Song as well as its allegorical interpretation. In these homilies, while his knowledge of the Old and New Testaments is frequently evident, he is clearly not concerned with semantic issues, unlike Origen and certain other predecessors. In one of the homilies he even says, somewhat apologetically, that "'it is not so much my desire to explain words as it is to influence hearts.'" (quoted in Murphy, 26) He uses the Song, not to explain theological questions, but to try and bring about a conversion to God's love; in order to do so, he often calls upon his audience to verify what he is saying in their own experience.

---

[13]For me, Clairvaux is something of an "âme soeur." While neither our vision of the relationship depicted in the Song--he sees it as ideal, I see it as portraying a vast range of experiences, none of them particularly ideal--nor our method of interpretation--his is allegorical, mine is literary--have much in common, our emotional and spiritual experience of the Song is similar. We may have travelled by two different routes, but we arrive at the same destination: apart from the love we both obviously have for the Song as a work of spiritual literature and art, it awakens, in both our hearts and souls, the same kind of epiphany about the constant presence of God in our lives.

He sees the words the lovers speak to each other in the Song as both reflecting and giving expression to the "inner-most emotions and desires of the human soul" (27); and because, for Clairvaux, it depicts the love relationship between God and the individual soul in the beautiful terms of human love it puts the reader constantly in contact with the divine origin of all human love as she experiences it inside herself, and at the same time, with the human, lived, dimension of the love of God. He writes:

> 'Certainly honor and glory are due to God, and to Him alone; but neither of these will he receive, if they be not, as it were seasoned with the honey of love. Love is alone sufficient by itself; it pleases by itself, and for its own sake. It is itself a merit, and itself its own recompense. It seeks neither cause, nor consequences, beyond itself. It is its own fruit, its own object and usefulness. I love, because I love; I love, that I may love. Love, then, is a great reality, and very precious, provided that it recurs to the principle on which it rests, that it is kept in continual relation with Him who is its origin, and draws from that pure source waters that flow continually in greater abundance...When God loves us, He desires nothing less than to be loved, because He loves us that He may be loved by us knowing that those who love Him become blessed by their love itself.' (quoted in Murphy, 29)

The history of Jewish interpretation of the Song in the Middle Ages begins with the "diverse comments and short sermons" (Murphy, 29) believed to be spoken by amoraic sages during the third and fourth centuries. Although no direct influence can be established in either direction, these comments apparently bear a close resemblance to those of the patristic fathers, in that they interpret the Song figuratively. Yet Murphy points out what is, at least, an interesting coincidence: one of the most often cited amoraic authorities on the Song, Rabbi Yohanan of Tiberias, was a contemporary of Origen. The earliest extant midrash on the Song, dated at the beginning of the seventh century, is the *Canticles Rabbah*, in which comments by Yohanan and other amoraim are cited. Murphy says of the hermeneutical approach[14] extensively described in its introduction:

---

[14]This approach bears a few striking resemblances to the one used by André LaCocque in his 1998 book Romance She Wrote, to be discussed below.

> Solomon's literary creations attest that he was a diligent student of scripture and a preeminently sagacious teacher whose proverbs and parables '...penetrated to the finest nuances of the Torah.' Prior to Solomon '...no one was able to understand properly the words of the Torah, but as soon as Solomon arose all began to comprehend the Torah.' In short, the three canonical books attributed to Solomon (the Song, Proverbs and Qohelet) are to be understood as comprised of revealed and artful commentary on the central truths of Mosaic scripture. (29)

In this, the *Canticles Rabbah* differ in approach from the writings of Origen and the Christian allegorists who:

> sought to see beyond the mundane meaning of the Song, supposing its concrete imagery and dramatic structure to provide a comprehensive guide to spiritual mysteries, (whereas) classical Jewish exposition suggests that the Solomonic text in its literal sense is a sort of poetic prism, intentionally designed to refract the light of Torah already revealed and enabling its spectrum of hues to be more clearly perceived and appreciated by diligent interpreters. (29)

The *Canticles Rabbah* again resemble the work of LaCocque and differ from that of the Christian allegorists in that they did not attempt to provide a consecutive exposition of the Song, but instead are made up the comments and ideas of various rabbis who "explored connections between the language of the Song and other scriptural texts."[15] (29) Yet, the *Canticles Rabbah*, like the only extant Aramaic Targum to the Song, dating to the late seventh or early eighth century, do resemble the work of the allegorists in one key aspect: they allegorize. The *Canticles* most often see the male protagonist in the Song as representing God, and the female as representing God's people. The Targum sees in the Song an elaborate historical allegory depicting Israel's exodus from Egypt, and this interpretation continued to be the one most commonly held through the twelfth century, by such notable Jewish commentators as Sa'adya (d. 942), Solomon ben Issac or "Rashi" (d. about 1150) and his grandson, Samuel ben Meir or "Rashbam" (d. about 1155). There

[15]LaCocque speaks of "intertextuality."

were, however, significant individual differences between the interpretations concerning which events in Israel's history were being referred to in verses in the Song.

Just as Bernard de Clairvaux was among the first known Christian exponents of a mystical interpretation of the Song, so the illustrious Maimonides (1135-1204), was the first known Jewish scholar to suggest that the Song portrayed the individual human soul yearning to reunite with God; he was followed in this spiritual line of interpretation by many scholars in subsequent generations. Don Issac Abrabanel (1437-1508) also departed from the mainstream of allegorical thinking with his idea that the Bride represented Wisdom and the bridegroom Solomon.

The beginnings of the movement toward the type of "critical," "text-based" interpretations of the Song we see today began during the Reformation and the European Renaissance. Yet, while from this time on Jewish and Christian scholars began to pay more attention both to the "literal" sense of the poem and to Hebrew text itself, it was still generally believed that the meaning of the Song was being conveyed in figurative language that needed interpretation by biblical scholars. Despite his intention, following Erasmus, to " '...get at the simplest sense and the real character of this book,'" (quoted in Murphy, 34), Luther's consecutive exposition is an example of this tendency: it "gives attention to the literal development and mood of the text, but his explanation of the thematic content is consistently allegorical. Thus the Song's male protagonist is a figure of God or the divine Work, whose chosen spouse is the populace of the Solomonic kingdom." p. 34. With the exception of Calvin's young associate, Sebastian Castellion[16], the Genevan wing of the Reformation and John Calvin, followed by Théodore de Bèze, did not heed Luther's call for a new approach to the Song, continuing instead with the conventional medieval view

---

[16]Castellion, who was dismissed by the Geneva church, at least in part over this question, saw the Song as a "profane and lascivious work, of dubious canonical value." (Murphy, 35)

and expanding upon it, "in baroque fashion": expositions were produced " that supposed the Song to offer minutely detailed allegory of the church's history that culminated in the triumph of evangelical Protestantism over papal Christianity." p. 36

During the sixteenth century and beyond, while Protestantism remained closed to all ideas that might see the "bride" in the Song as representative of the Virgin Mary, this interpretation became more and more popular in Roman Catholic circles, through the writings of such scholars as Clarius, Bishop of Foligno and Gilbert Genebrard, who also paid close attention to the Hebrew text and made extensive reference to the work of medieval Jewish commentators. "In defense of coherent Catholic orthodoxy," (Murphy, 37) a synthesis of this work, with that of later sixteenth-century mystics such as the Spanish Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross (who saw the Song as representing the "'spiritual marriage' of the individual soul with Christ," (Murphy, 37), and the other current and traditional Catholic interpretations of the Song, was attempted in Cornelius à Lapide's commentary, which was circulated widely.

In the seventeenth century, the idea that the Song, whatever its figurative meaning, was, on a literal level, a love poem "celebrating the marriage of Solomon to an Egyptian princess" (Murphy, 37), became widespread quickly. Hugo Grotius, a Dutch layman, writing in the early part of the century, saw the Song as a collection of profane love poems, and wrote about the parallels between them and the Greek love poetry; his work would be echoed, in the early part of the nineteenth century by the commentary of the German philosopher, Herder, whose "analysis of the biblical work as a collection of pleasingly erotic love-poetry sounded the keynote that a host of commentators were to elaborate throughout the nineteenth century, shaping what has become the prevailing viewpoint among contemporary critics." (39). Bishop Bossuet's influential commentary, written at the end of the eighteenth century and concentrating on the Song's literary construction and its literal

sense, discerns a seven-part structure in the poetic text, which he saw as depicting a Jewish wedding liturgy.

This "transition...that occurred in the history of the Song's interpretation during the eighteenth century," (Murphy, 37) was exemplified by the mid-century work of Robert Lowth, which "focused attention on the Song's literary genre, stylistic character, and bucolic themes, all in light of Greek and Roman sources." (Murphy, 38), while at the same time it revived the Origenian idea that the Song was loosely written in dramatic form, portraying the mutual love between Christ and the Church. Therefore, Murphy writes: "Although Lowth presented a cogent critique of allegorical and prophetical-historical extravagance, he nonetheless continued to affirm that the Song had parabolic significance as a portrait of the mutual love between Christ and the church." (38)

Lowth's idea of the Song as a drama remained popular with commentators until the end of the nineteenth century. Among the first of his "followers" was Johann Friedrich Jacobi, in whose "version" of the play the hand of the maiden is being competed for by two lovers, one a king, the other a shepherd. Each of the commentators divided the Song into sections and assigned dialogue to characters according to their interpretation of the Song. The lack of a plot in the text, the lack of consensus, among commentators, as to the number and identities of the characters in the Song, as well as the fact that no evidence exists that drama as a literary form existed before the Greeks were all factors that contributed to this too-easily manipulated method of interpretation losing most of its adherents by the end of the nineteenth century. The same time saw the reappearance of an idea also originally propounded by Origen, and later reformulated by Bossuet and Lowth: that of the Song as "a collection of lyrical poetry related to ancient Hebrew marriage rites" (39) Based largely on J.G. Wetzstein's study of modern Syrian wedding customs, this idea found favour with well-known biblical scholars such as Franz Delitzsch and Karl Budde, who developed it.

The Twentieth Century

The beginning of the twentieth century, with the retrieval and study of ancient Near Eastern lore, saw the Song lead commentators to the myths and rites of ancient Near Eastern texts in their search for the sources of the Song. Following in the footsteps of Grotius, Lowth and Herder, these twentieth century commentators saw the portrayal of the woman in the Song as being based on examples from either Egyptian (Adolf Ermann, Alfred Hermann, and more recently Michael Fox) or Mesopotamian (Samuel Noah Kramer and Theophile Meek) sacred love poetry. In this poetry, the woman is seen as a goddess, the man as a god, and the poem as a whole as describing a sacred marriage between them; this "formula" was grafted onto the Song. While none of these interpretations were well enough grounded in the text, nor in Jewish tradition[17], to gain long-term credibility[18], "the study of the Song's language, structure and themes in light of non-canonical literary sources is the single most important factor in discerning the ascension of modern critical views." (Murphy, 41), a fact that is attested to by the thorough and interesting account Murphy gives of these views, the study of which have recently lead, he points out, to a consensus among contemporary critical scholars as to the literal sense of the Song.

These "literal" interpreters explain the presence of the "secular" love poetry of the Song in the Bible by arguing that the theological meaning is extrapolated from the text--the beauty of the human love in the Song somehow "leads" the reader to also reflect on the beauty of the love between God and human beings[19].) This type of interpretation understands

---

[17]There are no other existing examples of love poetry of this sort in Hebrew.
[18]According to Murphy. LaCocque disagrees: "In my opinion, the Egyptian influence on the Song is definitely established. There are too many traits common to both literatures to be ignored. I am thus willing to believe that the country on the Nile, with its more liberal conception of women in general, served as a model for the Song's poet--although we should not diminish the importance of the differences." (242, Thinking)
[19]I do not deny that this "sublation" may be an aspect of the theological import of the Song. Yet, like Bernard de Clairvaux, I also see that there is a theological significance to be garnered in the "simple" experiencing of the poem, especially when it is studied over a period of time, which while it may not precede or supplant any

scripture in basically the same way as did the proponents (mentioned above) of the medieval "academic approach known as *sacra pagina*, which understood scripture to be the inspired repository of doctrinal and ethical wisdom". As Elliott puts it :

> The poet of the Canticle respects and affirms the beauty and order placed by God within all creation. He savors the natural beauty of all creatures--plants, animals, and particularly human beings. There is a total lack of any dichotomy between the 'religious' and 'profane' spheres of human life. God, his wisdom, order, and presence can be found in all things. A relationship of passionate, committed love, in fact, easily opens to knowing 'the very flame of Yah!'(8,7) (264)

Murphy writes: "In the final analysis, then, what links the literal sense of the Song to the expository visions of synagogue and church is an exquisite insight: the love that forms human partnership and community, and that sustains the whole of creation, is a gift of God's own self." (105)

With the work of Friedrich Horst, early in this century, began the discussion, still going on today, about the different literary genres of the poetry in the Song: are they wedding songs, "'songs' of yearning, self-descriptions, tease, admiration, description of experience, description of the beloved's physical charms, boasting and the like" (Murphy, 60)? According to Horst, the Song contains many of these genres and Murphy, following Horst, divides the Song into different sections, identifying and describing each section according to such categories.[20]

---

process of interpretation, at least accompanies, and certainly enriches and makes more pleasurable, that process. I put the word "simple" in quotation marks because, while the experiencing of the poem is, in and of itself, simple, all that needs to be learned about biblical writing and literary criticism in order to do that experiencing, is not. Like André LaCocque, it is also clear to me that the very language of the Song is filled with sacred references from elsewhere in the Bible, so that any reader of the Song, who also knows the Bible, cannot help but feel an inherent sacredness. Both of these points will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

[20] I have not quoted any of Murphy's fascinating "sketch" because the amount of text I would have had to quote in order for the reader to get a good idea of how Murphy has written and structured it would not have been reasonable in a thesis of this length.

The structural integrity of the Song is another question that has preoccupied commentators in this century. While the breaks in the text, the absence of a narrative plot, and indications that the different sections of the poem may have been written at different times by different poets all point to the idea that the Song is not a unit, the dialogue between the two main "characters," the unique thematic content of the Song, certain grammatical features[21] and, especially significant to this reader, the multiple literary and stylistic similarities discernable in different parts of the poem, as well as the literary and thematic movement and "discussion" between the parts of the poem on these levels, suggest convincingly that the poem is very much a unit. Both ideas continue to have supporters, though the most recent consensus seems to be coming down on the side of the Song's unity. Commentators, such as Gunter Krinetzki and Marcia Falk, who have seen the Song as a loose collection of love poems have divided it up into twenty-five or more units, while those who understand the Song as a unit usually divide it into a limited and varied number of scenes, if they see it as a drama, or, like Cheryl Exum and Timothea Elliott, into between six and eight larger poetic units making up a whole. Elliott's minute literary analysis of the Song leaves little doubt as to the unity of the Song as a poem, and commentators of renown, such as Murphy and LaCocque, writing recently, concur.

Lastly, the dating and the authorship of the Song remain points of contention, both being complicated by the question of the unity of the poem. Murphy summarizes the question in the following way: "This apparent critical impasse (concerning the dating) exists because of conflicting and uncertain positions taken on three fundamental issues: the connection of the work with Solomon or his period; the import of certain geographical references within the Song; and the assessment of the Song's linguistic profile." (3) It is no longer believed, as Origen expounded, that Solomon wrote the Song as a part of a Wisdom

[21] Discussed by Murphy pp. 74-76

"trilogy" consisting of Qohelet, Proverbs and the Song. It has been argued that the spirit and style in which the Song is written, its amorous theme and its similarities to Egyptian love lyrics (Israel was under Egyptian cultural influence at the time) place it very neatly in the era of Solomonic humanism. Yet there is no decisive evidence to support this view, and other dates, based on times when Israel was under the influence of other cultures, could just as easily be suggested.

As for dating the Song according to the geographical sites mentioned in it, this strategy too proves faulty since the mere mention of a town or area, without it also being given some political significance--and this is never the case in the Song--makes it just as plausible to assume that the name of the site has been used, for example, "because of its sound and semantic connotation." (Murphy, 4) It is equally impossible to date the Song based on "lexical, grammatical and literary parallels" (Murphy, 4) between the Song and other languages: there are, undeniably some parallels between the Song and Ugaritic texts, which would place the dating of the Song in the preexilic period; at the same time, the presence of certain alleged Aramaisms and late foreign loan words would indicate that the Song's author wrote in postexilic times. It seems safest, and it is probably most accurate, to say that parts of the Song are almost certainly quite old, but that others are likely postexilic, which would, in turn, of course, mean that the person who was the final editor also lived during this latter period.

It is only in the past few decades that the question of the gender of the author of the Song has come into question. Throughout the history of the interpretation of the Song, that person was assumed to be male, but with the revolution in biblical exegesis occasioned by the feminist movement, assumptions of many different kinds have been questioned. Writing in 1985, Athalya Brenner, feels obliged to admit:

> ...we are still in no position to determine with confidence which portions of the Song of Songs express typical female attitudes with such fidelity that they can be regarded as original compositions by women. My personal guess is that passages such as 1.2-6, 3.1-4, 5.1-7 and 5.10-16 are so essentially feminine that a male could hardly imitate their tone and texture successfully. After all, there is no reason to maintain that women were not recognized as great poets in ancient Israel. (Isrealite, 50)

Writing in 1998, in Thinking Biblically, André LaCocque gives a brief, but thorough, history, which he begins in 1963 with the work of AS Herbert, of the idea that the author of the Song might be a woman. He summarizes by saying, with confidence:

> Thus, it is after all not too surprising that the author of the song be a woman. It is a woman's song from beginning to end and it puts the heroine center-stage. 'All events are narrated from her point of view, though not always in her voice, whereas from the boy's angle of vision we know little besides how he sees her,' says Michael Fox (The Song of Songs, p. 309). He adds that the apparent absence of the author is deceptive, for she stands everywhere 'behind the scenes, communicating to us attitudes about the personae...and setting many of the norms by which we are to understand and evaluate the characters.' (243-44)

In writing about the Song, both Roland Murphy and Timothea Elliott continue to take the Song's male authorship for granted[22], using the male pronoun when referring to the Song's author.

* * *

This section will outline André LaCocque's argument[23] in Romance She Wrote[24] and this reader's various reservations with it. This book has been singled out for a much more

---

[22]Though Murphy writes: "So strongly marked is the Song's perspective in comparison with views attested elsewhere in the scripture that one is pressed to ask if the author may have been a woman; and surely she was, at least in part." (70) While this thesis relies more heavily on their work than it does on the work of any other commentator, this reader will part company with them on this question and will follow instead Brenner, LaCocque and her own intuition.

[23]I am afraid I do not have the room to begin to really do justice to the many nuances of LaCocque's argument. Nor do I have the luxury of calling attention to the aspects of his argument where I met him as a

lengthy treatment than any of the other commentaries on the Song for two reasons. First, as the most recent treatment of the Song this reader is aware of, it has made use of the very latest in the scholarship about the Song; in the depth of its historical analysis, though not the breadth, it is comparable to Murphy's book. Second, the hermeneutical method LaCocque proposes in it represents a new way of looking at the Song[25], one that also coincides with this reader's approach to the Song.

In the Preface to his book, LaCocque asks the question: "If the Canticle is a love-song between a woman and a man; if it is a poem devoid of any reference to God, to Israel, to the *Heilsgeschichte*, to the cult; if, as someone said, Canticle is the 'most unbiblical book in the Bible,' can there still be a bridge of sorts between the modern 'naturalist' understanding and the traditional spiritualizing interpretation?' (xi) He answers this question in his challenging and engagingly written introductory chapter, "Methodical

---

kindred soul. Among these is his "active reader" idea. He writes: "The composer-writer is thus herself a reader; we as readers of the Canticle read the work of a reader: 'The writer's interlocutor, then, is the writer himself, but as reader of another text. The one who writes is the same as the one who reads. Since his interlocutor is a text, he himself is no more than a text rereading itself as it rewrites itself. The dialogical structure, therefore, appears only in light of the text elaborating itself as ambivalent in relation to another text.' (quote from Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 86-87) The dialogical quality of the work is eminent. True, the readers are never overtly addressed by the Canticle as 'you,' but the address is never covert either: the 'you' is implied in the third person of the narrator. Furthermore, the poet has multiplied the dialogical devices: the lover speaks to the beloved; the beloved to the lover; they both speak to 'companions,' to 'daughters of Jerusalem.' This way, the reader is not permitted to stay out as an onlooker (a Peeping Tom?). The reader is among the male friends, among the female chorus, and is exhorted not to precipitate the action ('do not stir love...'), not to hide the lover from the beloved, but to participate in their mutual quest. The reader is eminently active." (Romance, 56-6). I hope to write a full-blown critique of his book in which I will be able to discuss it in the systematic and in-depth fashion his work warrants.

[24]This book, recommended to me by a colleague, came into my work on this thesis at exactly the right moment. From my work with the English translation, I had had an intuition about the fact that while there is no direct use of the language of the sacred in the Song, much of the language used in the Song is language that is, elsewhere in the OT, used in "sacred" contexts. This is LaCocque's thesis too, though, as will be explained below, I strongly disagree with certain of LaCocque's conclusions about the ends to which the author of the Song uses these sacred terms. However, both the fact that a scholar of his stature should have had the same idea as I did (one that I would have had a lot of trouble investigating, let along proving, given my present lack of knowledge of Hebrew), and his extensive biblical research, which gives example after example of "sacred" language in the Song, have proven to be an invaluable support in the writing of this thesis.

[25]At least in modern times. It was pointed out above that LaCocque's method has some resemblances to those used by the writers of the Canticles Rabbah.

Suppositions"[26], when he writes that "while squarely endorsing the naturalistic approach," to the Song, he sees his intertextual method as a "bridge to the traditional Midrashic and allegorical interpretation," (6) It is this method that leads him to describe the Song as "fundamentally a critique of the mores of conformist societies and of the dualism between the body and soul prevalent in sophisticated as well as in popular mentalities." (7), and as "a defiant, irreverent, subversive discourse, which at times constitutes a satirical pastiche of prophetic metaphors and similes." (12) His argument is that the author of the Song has taken texts, images and metaphors from various biblical literature, but most particularly from the Prophets, and has "purposely disfigured" (27) them; "they are reused defiantly. They are demoralized, desacralized, decanonized. Here, irony is on the verge of banter. For the purpose of praising Eros, the poet dares adopt a language that prophets and priests had traditionally used to describe metaphorically the intimate relations between God and his people." (27). Yet to claim that this is the Song's final word on love would be to commit an error of the same order as those of the "naturalist" school, whose interpretation, he points out, "flippantly bypasses levels of meaning that Judaism and Christianity have acknowledged as legitimate."(6).

Instead, it is LaCocque's idea that:

> The very use of prophetic metaphors for the singing of the loves between a man and a woman reflects back upon the prophetic sources, shedding new light on them. Prophets insisted upon the relationship between God and Israel as metaphorically nuptial. No sooner has that metaphor traveled back down to characterize the relationship between a man and the woman in the Song than it ricochets again and human Eros is endowed with a vertical dimension that ennobles it and makes it the prime translation in life of the *imago Dei*. When

[26]This first chapter in LaCocque's book is 68 pages long; his analysis of the Song covers only double that number of pages: 123, from p. 69-191! The subjects he deals with in this chapter are: "A Hermeneutical Problem," "Thesis," "Excursus: Origen's Reading of the Song of Songs," "Plain Sense, Allegory and Midrash," "Eros and Society," "Metaphor and Intertextuality," "Song of Songs and Prophetic Literature," "The Enigma of Sexuality Seen by a Female Author," "Irreverence and Defiance" and "Summary and Conclusion."

> this is realized, it becomes clear why prophets chose *that* metaphor in the first place...It is this back-and-forth movement between two generically unrelated semantic fields, God and love, that succeeds in transcending their mutual otherness and tallies them so closely as to change them from a trope to an equation, 'God is love.' (66)

With the many examples given by LaCocque in his essay on the Song, a few of which will be given in the next chapter, the intertextuality of the Song with other biblical texts becomes nothing short of an obvious fact. What remains as a question is: Why did the author of the Song use this device? LaCocque's answer is briefly outlined above. Does it stand up under scrutiny?

LaCocque argues that there are two steps to be made in the reading of the Song:

> To wit, the 'trajectory' of the Canticle, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, might be retraced as follows: first, the author of the Song defigurativizes, one might say, the language the prophets accredited for the description of the vertical relationship between Israel and God. Thus, in a fashion, the Song restores the language to its first, original, nonfigurative meaning and makes that language once again available for the horizontal description of the love between a man and a woman...A second step takes the author even further. In her poem, she magnifies luxury, nature, courtship, eroticism, all things that prophets and sages found objectionable...In summary, language has come full circle, from the horizontal to the vertical through metaphorization and to horizontal again through poetic defigurativation and refigurativation." (56)

In LaCocque's first step, the reader sees that the Song uses sacred texts from elsewhere in the Bible as images in its seemingly secular love poem, thus "emptying" them of their "sacred" content, as a parody and subversion of the views on love held by the society in which it was written. A few examples illustrating this step include:

1) "Just as 'Solomon' is used ironically in the book as if the author was putting out her tongue at the 'establishment,' so do the formulas of conjuration parody the religious

language and make fun of it...What the poet is doing here is shedding her societal chains; she is shouting her freedom from gender stereotypes. She is daringly mocking consecrated definitions and formulas." (64);

2) "Israel's theologians had considered this miraculous encounter of the divine as the worthiest cause for singing the praise of YHWH. Paradoxically and scandalously, the Canticle adopts a similar wording to celebrate the coming together of the male and the female...Clearly[27], this constant parallelism between vastly different objects emphasizes the point that they are indeed comparable--not the characters themselves, however, but the types of relationship they initiate. What is similar between the relation of God with Israel (according to the Psalms and the Prophets) and the relation of male with female (according to the Canticle) is love." (90-91)

3)"The exclusivity of the relationship between God and his people, so strongly emphasized by the Law and Prophets, is now transformed into the delightful encounter of man and woman." (113)

4)" The conclusion to the analysis of this discrete section (6:13b: "'Why do you gaze upon the Shulammite as upon the dance of the two camps?'") is also valid for the whole of the poem. We are again in full irreverence. By using a language that is 'sacred' within a Yahwistic context, the singer reverses the prophetic process of metaphorization." (147)

5) Concerning 8:2 in which the woman says she will give her lover "spiced wine to drink, my pomegranate juice," LaCocque writes that "once again the erotic supplants the religious." (164)

---

[27]As will be seen below, this reader does not see as clear at all LaCocque's attempt to bring together the "scandalous" and the "sacred" in the Song.

6) "There was present in Egyptian literature a feminine aggressiveness the Jewess put to better use by turning it into a sort of sarcastic carnival of manners." (253)

7) And, in his conclusion: "We are in a setting of total irreverence." (262)

The second step involves then "recharging" these same images with their "sacred" content. Some examples[28] representing this aspect of his argument are:

1) When, in giving his explanation for what seems to be promiscuous behaviour on the part of the man, he writes: "The fact of the matter is that the Song of Songs sees the man as epitomizing all the lovers; he is the lover. As to the woman, she also is all women, the whole of womanhood; their mutual love summarizes and surpasses all other loves. Therefore, all women around the woman praise her beauty, in which they recognize a paradigm of their own; all the males participate in the lover's quest, desire and wonder. He has become all his companions (cf. 5:1b; 8:13); she, all her cohorts (cf. 6:8-9); their love includes the totality of love in the whole world; and the poem of their encounter is the song of all songs." (128)

2) "The Canticle is not an apocalyptic work. It finds a large part of its inspiration in prophetic oracles, which it transforms to fit its own purposes, but without rejecting their subversive sharpness. Like the prophets, the poet wants to subvert the world. To do so, she claims for love absolute rights, using prophetic discourse that claimed God's absolute ownership over the human. There is thereby a promiscuity of sorts established by the Canticle between claims that might be construed as conflicting. Evidently, one way open before love's advocate was to deify Love and thus oppose this sweet goddess to the stern

---

[28] If these examples are fewer and less evenly distributed throughout the text, it is because LaCocque discusses this "second step" largely toward the end of his book.

God of the prophets of doom. This is not, though, the path trodden by the author of the Song of Songs. On the contrary, if the Song takes exception with prophetic oracles of doom in particular, in the name of a fundamental optimism based on faith in the transformative power of Eros, it does, however, follow suit to the ultimate valorization of love among the prophets of Israel." (206)

3) "In the process, she (the poet) showed that there was an opposite face to prophetic condemnation, namely, the lyric expression of love, for 'love is strong as death'! This is why, in this least 'biblical' book of the Bible, the message hidden behind the poetic aesthetics is decidedly theological. Love, 'pure and simple,' love faithful and wholly integrated, love that is eros as much as it is agape, is a reflection of the covenant between the divine and the human." (208)

4) " For as we just saw (in LaCocque's book), the Canticle stands in a relation of intertextuality with Israel's narrative and prophecy; it sings the same power of love as proclaimed and praised by prophets and psalmists, even if applied by the ones and the other to objects differently understood than in the Canticle. Chana Bloch writes that 'the prophets look forward to a peaceable kingdom at the End of Days. The Song of Songs locates that kingdom in human love, in the habitable present, and for the space of our attention, allows us to enter it.'[29] It is that love that the Song of Song magnifies in terms of erotic love between a man and a woman, in substitution for an agape-vertical relationship sung by its traditional predecessors. It is that fondness and fidelity that the poet elevates to the point that it becomes paradigmatic for all authentic love, and more particularly, for the love of God for his people[30]. (209)

---

[29]I couldn't agree more, especially with the idea of "the habitable present," since I believe that this is one of the ways in which the Song talks about love, human or godly: in terms of being present in the moment.
[30]Isn't love that is "paradigmatic for all authentic love, and more particularly, for the love of God for his people" dangerously close to an allegorical interpretation?

It is with the first "step" that this reader is in disagreement[31]: it is the element of irony or parody that is contestable, though this is not to say that irony is totally absent from the Song[32]. LaCocque's vision is disputable on two grounds. First, this reader does not believe that LaCocque shows convincingly how the second step proceeds from the first: how does a text that he sees as ironic and politically subversive suddenly become "decidedly theological"? It is not that these two are incompatible. One need only look at the lives of Jesus, Ghandi, Martin Luther King or Dorothy Day to see that the co-existence, in one being (or for the purposes of the discussion here, in one text), of the politically radical and the spiritually aware can make for a world-changing combination. Yet reading LaCocque's book, one has the impression that he is talking about two Songs; it feels as though the text has two personalities: the reader meets the political Song most of the time, but occasionally, mostly toward the end of the book, the theological Song peeks out from behind the TRASH THE WORLD placard. And, if in the end, "nothing precludes the 'mystic' reading of the Song." (209), as LaCocque says in the closing lines of his essay, then what purpose did the irony in the text really serve? Why, if the poet is ultimately writing about the supremacy of love, would she go about it in such a roundabout way? At the very least, LaCocque needs to have addressed the difficult to understand (not to say, perhaps...ambiguous) relationship between what he perceives as the ironic style of the poem and its theological conclusions. Finally, not only are the irony, and the political subversion it was supposed to serve, left dangling in LaCocque's argument, but the theological message gives the impression of being "tacked on".

---

[31] As for the second step, this reader is in agreement with it: in the next chapter's section on images, examples have been provided in which it is shown that the reader is being asked both to allow the sacred meaning from the earlier text "speak" to the Song text and to allow the "secular" meaning from the Song "speak" to the earlier text.

[32] Much as it might be interesting to explore this idea, time and space make it impossible in the context of this thesis.

It could be argued that the way in which LaCocque has structured his book somewhat mirrors the Song; that he, like the Song's poet, waits until the end of his text to "get" really theological, giving only hints along the way. In this reader's opinion, the poet of the Song artfully leads her reader through what is her own lived and/or observed experience of love, while LaCocque's conclusions about how the sacredness of human love is ultimately a reflection of divine love in the Song, because they are based on arguments about irony and political subversion, instead of on arguments that would somehow lead the reader toward God and/or love, human or divine, seem contrived: they lack a grounding in LaCocque's own text. This reader believes that the Song "demands" a theological interpretation, and that it was this "demand," not only the discomfort with the sexual content of the poem, that led the allegorists to their interpretations. LaCocque clearly felt this "demand" too, but he makes something of the same error, though not to the same degree, as the allegorists he criticizes: just as they undertook their exegesis of the Song with the idea in mind that the Song was an allegory depicting the relationship between God and Israel or God and the Christian church, so LaCocque approaches the Song with the idea that it is an ironic and subversive text. The allegorists' preconceived spiritual idea about the meaning of the Song leaves the reader feeling embarrassed at how they have left out any discussion of the human love story(ies) being told. LaCocque's political interpretation of the Song does not make the error of precluding a spiritual interpretation, but the reader feels something of the same embarrassment: the spiritual aspect may be present, but it is not embodied in LaCocque's text, just as the human is not embodied in the allegorists' texts.

It is possible that some of the reservations just mentioned would take no more than a 15 minute discussion with LaCocque to iron out, if it weren't for a much more fundamental disagreement: this reader just does not or read or see (through the images) or experience the text as ironic. LaCocque's argument is not without its convincing moments, as, for

example, in his discussion of the adjuration refrain, in which the woman swears by the "gazelles and the hinds of the fields"[33]:

> The defiance by our author reaches its summit when sacrosanct formulas, oaths for example, are ironically parodied. Although here also asseverating phrases appear using the phraseology of conjurations, these are shockingly 'secular,' invoking wild animals of the field, a totally blasphemous utterance. The ancient world took it for granted that an oath is sworn in the name of the gods. In this respect, the homophony between the poet-selected terms, on the one hand, and genuinely religious expressions of oaths, on the other, must be emphasized. Cant 2.7 (repeated in 3.5; c.f. 8.4; 5.8) says, ' I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field.' The Hebrew has (trans. words)[34] hiseba'ot 'o be'ayelot hassadeh. Clearly, (trans. word) sega'ot is the same word as in the well-known Yahwistic expression YHWH (trans. word) (seba'ot), except that the term there designates the 'armies' in heaven (and on earth?). As to the (trans. word) 'ayelot, it looks both morphologically and etymologically like (trans. word) 'el, 'eloah, God. Finally, (trans. word) sadeh is in assonance with (trans. word) sadday; (trans. words) 'ayelot hassadeh evokes 'el sadday, 'God Almighty.'...
>
> I claim that no one in the Isrealite audience of the poem could have missed such transparent allusions. The formulation could not be construed as a slip of the tongue or as a mere poetic substitute for the customary religious content of an oath; besides, the occasion is neither casual nor perfunctory. The shift was too substantial; it readily raised the issue of intent or, if you will, of tone. The answer to which is provided by the general atmosphere of the poem. Just as 'Solomon' is used ironically in the book as if the author was putting out her tongue at the 'establishment,' so do the formulas of conjuration parody the religious language and make fun of it. The same satiric spirit applies to most everything handled by the author..." (62-64)

---

[33]Concerning this refrain, Elliott writes: The best explanation for this expression is that trans. words are circumlocutions for the titles of God. The first stands for (trans. word) (YHWH is armies) and the second (trans. word) (El Shadday). Gazelles and hinds are mentioned primarily because of the sound of the words, but also because they are beautiful and graceful (Prov 5,19).

[34]In this preliminary version of the thesis it was not possible to adequately transcribe either Hebrew words using the Hebrew alphabet (Hebrew), nor the transcribed Hebrew words (trans. word). Adequate transcriptions of both, which will faithfully reflect how the words are pronounced in English, will be present in the final version of this thesis.

To LaCocque these words make the Song a parody; to this reader, they are making sacred the natural[35]. Lacocque bases his idea of the intentionally subversive nature of the Song on certain passages, and to this reader, though the poet may intend to be ironic when she has the woman swear by gazelles and hinds, and when she uses "Solomon," these instances of are not numerous enough to make irony or irreverence the overall tone of the poem. Moreover, there is something, both in the immediacy of the experiences described, and in the very artistry of the poem that, for this reader, preclude irony. No one who is going out and getting beaten up by guards in the city as she searches frantically for her lover is going to write ironically about love: her despair is too present. It is as if LaCocque forgets that the Song is telling the love story(ies) of people who are in love, here and now. Also, if one sees the poem only as a text with a purpose, whether political or theological, instead of foremost (or at least also) as a work of art, whose purpose, as it tells of different aspects of the experience of love, is nothing more than its very existence, as a work of art, then it is possible to impose many different interpretations. If, on the other hand, the reader stays with beauty of the images in the text, and with the "now" of the text, in the presence of the lovers who are breathlessly living their love, irony, as the overriding tone, let alone theme, of the poem, just doesn't make any sense[36].

On the narrative and metaphoric levels, the events and the imagery are so touching, interesting and compelling, and the reader is so carried away into the very moment in which the event being narrated is actually happening, all of which leaves her so much with a sense of breath-taken awe, that irony seems as out of place as it turning on the weather

---

[35]There is also Gordis's neutral interpretation, quoted in Pope: "The best suggestion has been made by Gordis (28): that there is a deliberate reluctance to use the divine name. The speaker 'replaces such customary oaths as (trans. words) be'lohei sebha'oth or be'el saddai by a similarly sounding phrase (trans. words) bisebha'oth 'o be'ayeloth hassadeh "by the gazelles or hinds of the field,"' choosing animals, which symbolize love, for the substitutions." (quoted in Murphy, 133)

[36]This is at least partly due to the fact that, in this reader's opinion, irony is not much of a "turn on": it happens too much in the head. In Ricoeur's view: "...derision and subversion seem to me to stem from the genre of pleading , which, unlike irony, does not fit well with that of free and joyous celebration." (275)

report would in the middle of making love. I agree that the "plain sense" level, as LaCocque calls it, is certainly not the only level at which or from which the poem can be, must be studied, has been studied in this thesis. Nor is the poetic. However, as LaCocque sets out to show that the words used in the Song are evidence of the ironic intent of the author, he ignores both the events these words describe and the images they make up, neither of which are ironic, at least not most of the time.

A question remains: if this writer has left out the use of directly "sacred" words, and has instead used indirectly "sacred" words in the sexual and amourous context, what **has** been her purpose, if LaCocque's analysis has been shown reflect, at most, a partial reality in the Song? While any speculation about purpose or intent can never be proven, this reader would tend to speculate on the side of art (which is the side she feels the poem itself has called her to be on) and say that the poet did not consciously set out to write a secular love poem that used sacred language. Isn't it possible that, instead, she was surprised to discover or, more likely, to have someone else point out to her, all the sacred language in her "secular" love poem, just as poets, novelists, visual artists and musicians have always been surprised by what the interpreters of their work have seen in them? Isn't it possible that her experience of love was so close to her experience of the sacred that it came "naturally" to her to use the same words to describe it as she would have used to describe her experience of God? And once she saw what she had done, that she would have chosen, for the sake of the beauty and seamlessness of the poem's depiction of the two "realities" made one, to risk leaving intact even those verses, such as the adjuration refrains, which might have been seen as blasphemous?

4. Statement of the Question

The various issues outlined in the "History of the Question" have preoccupied commentators, yet the equally important question about the nature of relationship of the two main characters in the Song remains to be explored. In fact, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, the narrative events, the structure, the imagery and the language (particularly its intertextuality with other biblical books) of the Song all demand that the very assumption that the Song depicts one relationship between two people be called into question. Modern interpreters who have seen the Song as a collection of love poems (as opposed to one poem made up of different sections), such as Athalya Brenner, have, quite naturally, proposed this idea, but commentators who have seen it as a unit have tended to speak of the Song's different sections as depicting the story of one couple, despite the fact that, otherwise, their interpretations may be as diverse as those of Origen and Brenner.

Up until very recently, it also went without saying that this perfect relationship--and what else could it be since it was always seen as being an allegory for the love between God or Christ and his people--took place within the institution of marriage. Brevard Childs sees the Song in this way: "'The Song is wisdom's reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage.'" (quoted in Murphy, 122) Elliott writes about 3:6-5:11 that it "opens with a description of the wedding cortege, includes a song praising the beauty of the bride, and concludes with references to the consummation of conjugal union" when in fact the words, which describe Solomon's carriage, nowhere referred to as a part of a wedding cortege, say merely that "its interior (was) woven with love." (83) However, while most modern commentators no longer insist on the untenable idea that the couple in the Song are married, they do continue to affirm that the relationship is mutual or reciprocal and exclusive.

Examples of commentators who see the relationship as being mutual or reciprocal include: Roland Murphy, who writes: "The Canticle considered in its totality, portraying fresh young love against a new creation (Springtime), a generous and faithful love that was completely reciprocal, lent itself well to the early developments of ecclesiology. Prophetic spousal imagery, on the other hand, is filled with accounts of infidelity, adultery, "forgetting" the spouse of one's youth, where as the Canticle presents a thoroughly positive image." (266);

Paul Ricoeur, who writes:

> Is the love relationship between God and human beings that the rabbis and the Greek fathers assumed to be metaphorically projected by the Song of Songs really akin to the one celebrated by the Prophets: Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and even the Deuteronomist? What is at issue here is the fusional and totally reciprocal character of the love celebrated by the Song of Songs...The Prophets, these exegetes have observed, never risked speaking of a mutual love, a mutual possession between God and human beings, in that the reverence for the god of the Torah and the Covenant imposed a vertical distance at the very heart of the covenantal bond. (291-92)

and:

> If the prophetic reading of the Song of Songs--conjoined, it is true, with the exegesis of Genesis 2--brings out the so-to-speak sacred innocence of the erotic bond, the reinterpretation of the prophetic texts tends, in return, to inflect the Covenant relation in the direction of a mutual belonging of equal partners to each other...Therefore it is important to allow each series of texts its own setting. Here, the reverential love of the Yahwehist believer for his god; there, the mutual sharing of lovers placed on a plane of equality by their mutual exchange of desire and pleasure. (302);

Timothea Elliott, who writes: "Lover and Beloved, totally engaged in mutual discovery, continually name one another and delight in the loved one's name." (253) and "With these repetitions of experiences there is a gradual development of the love relationship. The

searching becomes a mutual search; the finding leads to a mutual possession, the songs of contemplative praise reveal a mirroring dynamic indicative of growing union and communion between the lovers." (262);

Carol Meyers who writes: "The mutuality of love in this book makes its representation of gender relationships stand apart from the impression of male dominance that permeates much of the Hebrew Bible" (176)

Examples describing the relationship as exclusive come from the same commentators: Murphy writes: "The point of 'garden enclosed' is that the woman belongs to the man alone. One is moving in the same world of thought as Prov 5:15-19." (161);

André Lacocque writes: "We should say here of the Shulamite what must be said of these heroines. What they all advocate is not the loosening of morals, still less so-called free love (yet Lacocque himself says earlier that "the entire Song strums on the chord of "free love," neither recognized, nor institutionalized." [238] and later: "It is an exaltation of eros; it speaks of free love, untamed and even, to a certain degree, clandestine [cf. Song 8:1-3], between a man and a woman. The language of the author is naturalistic and thus exposed to censorship by 'men of the cloth,' and parodylike, as it imitates in a mode of mockery the jargon of the fundamentalists." [262]. The Shulamite is, indeed, a free woman, but her freedom consists in remaining unswervingly true to the one she loves. She is faithful to him outside matrimonial bonds and social demands." (245) However, he then goes on to say: "The Song is diametrically opposed to the bourgeois praises of feminine loyalty (cf. Deuteronomy 22:13-29) or of a woman as wife and mother (cf. Proverbs 31), for example." He also writes: "That the Song considers true love as an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman opens a wide perspective." (246)

Phyllis Tribble writes: "The second couple (the one of the Song) affirm their oneness through eroticism." p. 207

Timothea Elliott writes: "The significance of these enclosed images is an absolute unavailability to anyone except the Lover. The door, the seal, the battlements do not represent her will against his desire so much as a fidelity that opens and surrenders to him alone." (252) and "The unfolding paradigm of enclosed images signifies the exclusivity proper to this spousal love." (262)

Roland Murphy recognizes the ambiguity of certain events or images, yet this recognition does not lead him to question the harmony of the relationship; instead he affirms that what seems ambiguous must, in fact, have a positive connotation: "The reply of the girl in 5:3 might suggest that she is bothered by her lover's request. But the context shows that this is not the case. Her remonstrations are to be interpreted as a tease, not as a refusal. His reactions in vv 4-5 show this: he attempts to open the door and she rises to let him in. This does not suggest a refusal." (170) Yet farther down in the same paragraph, Murphy himself points out that "The man's departure means, at the least, that he had interpreted the "tease" of v 3 as a refusal, and he leaves after putting his hand to the lock, apparently unsuccessful in gaining entrance," though he can't help but add: "(Is his departure also to be taken as a tease in response to her words in v 3?)" Writing about 7:5(4), he says: "The nose is compared to something that is simply unknown, and unclear in itself: is it a tower built on Lebanon, or a formation of the terrain that resembles a tower? Either is possible. From such an uncertain comparison one can hardly conclude anything about her nose, although it is doubtless a compliment." (186) Why doubtless? For the simple reason that because Murphy assumes it must be so, it has never crossed his mind that it might be otherwise.

Similarly, even when Murphy sees individual instances of displeasure or dissatisfaction on the part of the lovers in the Song, he does not give these instances any weight in his interpretation of the Song as a whole; he cites individual moments when all is not well between the two lovers, yet, as was pointed out above, when he refers to the relationship, it is always in positive terms. Some examples of instances where he points out difficult moments in the relationship include: "She has just (3:1-5) described her own anguish over the absence of the beloved, followed by her possession of him. Now she tells the Daughters that love is not to be trifled with; its arousal drives one into unanticipated and even unknown experiences." (147); "The ravishing of his heart is paradoxically the danger which he wants to endure, just as when the woman calls out that she is love-sick, it is a sickness that she cannot do without." (160); "The masculine form of (Hebrew) (awe-inspiring) is used in Hab 1:7 of the fearsome Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians); the noun (Hebrew) is associated with war (Deut 32:25), and with theophany (Gen 15:12). This is clearly a bold description of the woman, in view of the tenderness which is elsewhere expressed. The content (v 5) supports the disquieting effect which the sight of the woman produces." p. (175); re 6:4, he writes:

> The lover feels the dangerous and threatening aspect of the woman. This is a well-known topos in love literature. The imagery may have mythological overtones, suggesting goddesses who inspire terror. A prime candidate among the latter is 'Anat, the Ugaritic goddess of love and war, with whom Inanna, Ishtar, Isis and others are also to be associated. It is reasonable to conclude that such a model has influenced the growth of the theme of the dangerous woman. This does not mean, however, that the poem in 6:4 refers to the goddess; it is simply that the love language may have been influenced by this concept of deity. It is perhaps difficult for the modern to hold together the traits of love and war in the beloved but this was apparently no problem to the ancient. The description in v 4 is meant as a compliment to the woman and as a testimony to the attractive but frightening mystery which the male finds in her. The poet obviously sees no conflict between attraction and fear; they can coexist. Both 4:1-2 and 6:4-5 are alike in that they begin with a compliment concerning the woman's beauty and end with a remark about her hair. Within this envelope, her eyes are characterized as doves (4:1), and also seen as upsetting. The mystery and danger of the woman's eyes remain, paradoxically, what the man wishes to experience. (177);

and re 6:5a: "The theme of fear instilled by the woman is continued in v 5. The power of her eyes over the man has already been expressed in 4:9. Now he pleads that she avert her gaze from him because of the tumult he feels. But no matter how disturbing be the effect of her eyes upon him, he still yearns for her, to gaze upon her, as the entire Song makes evident." (173) In his commentary on this verse, Murphy writes: "In v 1 they (the Daughters of Jerusalem) imply that her description of the man has caught their fancy--hence their offer to help her find him." In his commentary on v 2, he writes: "The woman's response cuts off any hope the Daughters may have had concerning a possible relationship with the man. The point of vv 2-3 is that the lover was never really lost to her, even though he was absent according to the story she related in 5:2-7." (173) Yet the fact that Murphy even mentions the idea that the Daughters might have hoped to have had a relationship with the man is an indication that he has entertained the idea of the love between the man and woman not being the perfect mutual love he then goes on to affirm once again it is in his commentary on v 3: "One can conclude that the function of the Daughters has been to provide the woman with the opportunity of describing her lover's charms and affirming their mutual union."

Timothea Elliott, on several occasions, is aware of the ambiguity of the language used by the poet. Referring to 3:6 and the fact that the question in the text is "Who is that coming up from the desert?" but the answer responds to the question "What is that coming up from the desert?" says: "Yet, the text appears to be deliberately ambiguous." (84) About 8:12: "Then I have become in his eyes as one who finds peace" she writes:

> There can be no doubt that the poet used the expression trans. word motsè et shalom (in the final version of the thesis, the Hebrew words will be transcribed correctly) for the very reason that it is open to more than one meaning. The communion of the lovers was described by their mutual reflection in one another's eyes. The Beloved's saying that she found shalom in his eyes is another way of saying that she found herself, hashshulamit, reflected there, even as he would find himself, shelomoh, reflected in hers. (203)

Yet she does not ask what this ambiguity might mean, either about the relationship depicted in the Song or for the overall interpretation of the Song. Her goal is to demonstrate the unity of the Song, and she accomplishes it in a thesis that is also beautifully written, yet she makes her point at the expense of ignoring the inconsistencies, the ambiguities in the Song, as if she believed that any such paradox would disprove the overall validity of her thesis. She writes, for example: "There is absolute consistency in the poet's presentation of the Beloved as 'enclosed' and 'enclosing'." (251) This is just not true, as even a quick glance at the poem makes clear: how is "a mare of Pharoah's chariots" (1:9) or "a flower of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (2:1) "enclosing" or "enclosed"?

This thesis will explore the idea that the Song portrays love relationship(s) that are more ambiguous than the ideal relationship most commentators, whether ancient and modern, usually describe in their discussions of the poem. It is an idea that says, yes, there are moments of mutual love, but there are also moments when mutual and exclusive love is called into question. These moments have, in the past, been overlooked or explained away, perhaps because commentators were reluctant to hear dissonant notes in the beautiful love music of the poem. In this thesis, those dissonant notes will be heard, making the Song into a still fuller symphony on love than even its most fervent fans have ever heard in their ardent ears. Thus, the question that will be asked is: "Is the Song of Songs really a poem about one, mutual and exclusive love relationship or is there evidence of ambiguity, about the number and the nature of the relationships, on different levels of the text?"

To answer this question, the next chapter will first look at how there is ambiguity in the relationship(s) in the poem at the level of the narrative. Then, a brief look will be taken at how that ambiguity is reflected in the structure of the poem, in that it has something of the same form as a collage. Finally, the ambiguous nature of the relationship(s) in the Song, as

it is experienced at the level of the images, and the ambiguous nature of the language in the Song, as it is encountered through the intertextuality of the language with other biblical books, and through the "gender consistencies" in the language, will be considered.

5. Ambiguity on the Different Levels of the Song

5.1 Narrative ambiguity

The Song of Songs is not a narrative "story" with a beginning, middle and end, like Kings. Nor is it an expository text, like Job, that moves, if not logically, then at least understandably, from one aspect of the question of suffering to another; yet there are aspects of both the narrative--a good many--and the expository--very few--in the Song. At the same time, following Elliott and others[37], it is equally obvious that the Song is not simply a collection of individual poems, compiled in one book, such as the Psalms seem to be: in her published doctoral thesis, The Literary Unity of the Canticle, Elliott shows clearly that the Song is a unit, that there is a Prologue to the poem, in which the characters, images and themes the reader will later come upon are introduced, and an Epilogue in which the prinicpal themes are recapitulated. She does not see, in the rest of the text, a story with a plot and says instead:

> The Canticle is a lyric poem. Its structure of six parts is not equivalent to six acts in a drama or even six stages in the unfolding of a story where characters and plot develop with a certain logic. Instead, the Canticle sings about the mystery of human love with the type of logic typical of love itself. Love's logic requires that certain situations or motifs be continuously repeated...With these repetitions of experiences there is a gradual development of the love relationship." (261-2)

However, since Elliott's principal concern is with a minute analysis of the stylistic and formal unity of the poem, she devotes little time to an elucidation of the nature of the development of this love relationship. If she had, she might have been led to the conclusion, as this reader was, that not only is it difficult to discern any such development, no matter how promising certain parts of the narrative seem to be, but also that the idea that the Song is only telling the story of one relationship just does not seem probable. Using the opening verses of the Song as a spring board, this section will examine certain

---

[37]Roland Murphy and André LaCocque, to mention only two.

narrative events in the poem. Through this exploration, it will first become evident that the love relationship portrayed is less mutual and exclusive than most commentators have thought: there are ambiguous feelings and actions on the part of both the man and the woman. Then, as the assumption that there is some kind of sustained development in the relationship is shown to be faulty, the idea will be proposed that various love relationships, happening between perhaps quite numerous individuals[38], are being told about. The section will finish with an examination of the important question: Does this vision of the Song as being made up of a series of love stories, as opposed to one love story that develops from the beginning to the end, necessarily mean that the Song is not a unit?

The Song opens with what can only be called a "sex scene." Yet it is less clear who is having sex with whom: what do the frequent changes in pronouns mean in 1:2-4[39]? Murphy writes: "The pronominal shift in v 2 with reference to the male lover, from third to second person, does not require emendation in the interest of consistency; such shifts (enallage) are well attested in Hebrew poetry." (125) He cites Ps 23:1-3, 4-5, 6; and Song 2:4 as other examples of such shifts. However, when the pronoun changes in Ps 23, it is also obvious that the person being addressed changes. In vv 1-3 and 6 of the Psalm, God is being talked about, perhaps to the faith community; in vv 4-5, God is being talked to. In Song 2:4, the third person masculine singular is used, as was the case in 2:3; in 2:5, the woman speaks, instead, directly to someone, in the imperative[40]; in 2:6 the third person masculine singular is returned to and 2:7 is an adjuration refrain addressed to the

---

[38]I will propose the idea and show why I propose it, but I have not yet tackled the formidable job of discerning which relationships are being told in which sections or verses; even if I had I would not have had room, in this thesis, to go through all of the possibilities and the proofs to back them up.
[39]In order to facilitate readers of this thesis, and also because I am using a translation not readily available, I have decided to quote, in footnotes, the verses of the Song I discuss. 1:2-4: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! Truly, more pleasing is your love than wine. The fragrance of your perfume is pleasing, flowing perfume, your name; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you! Let us run! The king has brought me to his chambers. Let us exult and rejoice in you! Let us extol your love beyond wine! Rightly do they love you."
[40]She says: "Strengthen me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love."

Daughters of Jerusalem. That the last lines of this speech are addressed to the Daughters leads the reader to postulate that the whole speech be assigned to them, especially since this is the case elsewhere in the Song[41]. In 1:2-4, however, it is far less clear that the change in pronouns necessarily indicate a change in the addressee. What if the "him" in v 2 refers to Solomon, which would make sense, since he was just mentioned in the previous verse as the author of the poem. And what if the line is spoken with defiance? Thus, the woman would be saying to her lover: "Let him (i.e., Solomon or the king) kiss me with the kisses of his mouth..." i.e.. Let him do what he will, but no matter what he does, "Truly, more pleasing is your love than wine..." In other words: No matter what the king does, I prefer to make love with you[42]. This defiance would form an "inclusion" with the woman's defiant attitude in 8:12, where she says[43]: "My own vineyard is at my disposal--the thousand (pieces) for you, Solomon, and two hundred for the keepers of its fruit."

In 1:4a, she exhorts her lover to take her away: "Draw me after you! Let us run!" Who are they running from? Is it the king? She says in v 4b: "The king has brought me to his chambers." Does she mean that now is a good time to get away, since she has already been to visit the king, i.e., her duties, as the concubine or wife of the king, have been performed? And when she says, "Let us exult and rejoice in you!" might she not be putting the emphasis on the "us", with her intention being to distinguish between her relations with the king[44] and those with her lover?

---

[41] See, for example, 3:1-5, 5:2-8; both are speeches the woman addresses to the Daughters of Jerusalem, in which she names them only at the end of the speech.

[42] The idea that there is a sort of "competition" between the king and the shepherd is not new. Murphy, for example, cites the nineteenth century German interpreter Heinrich Ewald as proposing that, in the Song, "there are three main characters who interact in something like an ancient soap-opera: King Solomon and a humble shepherd vie for the hand of the simple Shulammite girl; though initially beguiled by the royal blandishments, she eventually rejects Solomon in favor of her true love." (58)

[43] All commentators do not agree that it is the woman speaking.

[44] Commentators, among them Elliot (46, 57, 84, 170), have tended to see these references to the king as the woman referring to her lover as a king; yet nowhere in this text so ripe with metaphor, does she say, for

Thus, right from the beginning of the Song, it is not clear with whom the woman is in relationship: with whom does she have sex, the king or her lover...or both? The king is mentioned again in v 12 where the woman says: "While the king was in his enclosure my nard gave forth its fragrance." In the verses immediately following, vv 13-14, she speaks of her lover: "A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me; between my breasts he lies. A cluster of henna is my lover to me, in the vineyards of Engedi." Is she making some kind of comparison between the two men, one with whom her nard gives forth its fragrance, the other who is like a sachet of myrrh or a cluster of henna? The word Murphy translates as "enclosure" is often translated as "couch"[45] Another word for "couch" occurs in 1:16, when the woman says to her lover: "Our couch is verdant." Is this couch meant to be compared to the couch in v 12, just as she might be comparing the two men in vv 12-14? There is another possibility for v 12: she might also be saying that while the king was "in his enclosure" or "on his couch", that is, while he was away from her, she was with her lover, and that is what set her nard to giving forth its fragrance...

An examination of the other instances of "the king" and "Solomon" may help to clarify the situation. In all, they are mentioned six other times in the Song: in 3:7, 9, 11, 7:5, 8:11, 12. The first three of these references are in one of the many sections (3:6-11) of the Song that have puzzled commentators. In it, what is thought to be a wedding procession is described, or at least commentators who believe that the Song was used as liturgy for a wedding cite this passage; neither the historical nor the literary evidence have convinced this reader. There is no agreement as to the speaker in this passage, and while sudden changes in subject matter, speaker and scene is a structural device frequently employed in the poem, there are, of course, also occasions when there is, instead, continuity in any or

---

example, "my lover is my king," the way she says of herself "I am a flower of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (2:1) or of him "My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag." (2:9)

[45] Murphy acknowledges that it might have this sense too. (131)

all of these three areas. This seems to be the case between 3:1-5 and 3:6-11, just as it is the case between 2:3-7 and 2:8-10[46]; there are also other similarities between the two sections. In both cases, the first part of the woman's speech (2:7 and 3:5) ends with the adjuration refrain [47] spoken to the Daughters of Jerusalem; also in both cases, the woman has just finished giving an account of an encounter with her "beloved," "him whom my soul loves". Again in both cases, the adjuration refrain is followed by the arrival of someone or something[48]: in 2:8, she hears the voice of her beloved, and then sees him coming, and in 3:6 it is the "litter of Solomon"[49]. Again it is as if these two texts are asking the reader to make a comparison between the beloved who comes "springing over the mountains, leaping over the hills" (2:8) and "the litter of Solomon," which is "like a column of smoke" (3:6), and while it may be "perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all kinds of exotic powders," (3:6) it also has around it "sixty warriors...all of then skilled with the sword, trained for war; Each with his sword ready against the terrors of the night[50]" (3:7-8). There certainly is no question that this procession is impressive, but depending on one's taste in men, it could also be less appealing than the other lover who is said to be "like a gazelle or a young stag" (2:9), who calls her to come away with him, using such lovely words: "My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the recesses of the cliff, Let me see your face and hear your voice, for your voice is pleasant and your face lovely." (2:14). Isn't

---

[46]In this latter example, it could even be argued that it is the woman speaking right through to 2:15, since 2:10-15 is a speech spoken to the woman by the man, but quoted by the woman.

[47] "I adjure you O Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields: do not arouse, do not stir up love, until it be ready." Exactly the same refrain is spoken in 3:5 and 8:4 (in this latter case she does not adjure by the gazelles and hinds); another adjuration is addressed to the Daughters of Jerusalem in 5:8.

[48]According to Murphy, the text literally reads "who is this?" in 3:6, but the identity of the person being hailed is left open, unlike in 8:5 when the same question is asked, with the feminine participle, indicating that the woman is meant. (149)

[49]Basing her translation on the use of the feminine gender of the participle and the use of the interrogative (trans.), as well as on the fact that the two other occasions (6:10, 8:5) on which this question is asked it clearly refers to the woman, Elliott advances the idea that the woman is in the litter. (83)

[50]What are these "terrors of the night?" The only other references to night in the Song are in 3:1 and 5:2: they introduce the two scenes in which the woman goes out looking for her lover. In the first instance, which precedes this show of finery and strength by Solomon, the watchmen are kind to her; in the second, which follows it, they beat her up and tear off her mantle. Could it be that, for the king, the "terrors of the night" are that his woman will leave him for another?

also almost possible to hear the ironic tone in the woman's voice as she, with the Daughters of Jerusalem, in attendance, comments on this huge show put on by the king.

Murphy translates 6:13 in the following way: speaker undetermined: "Turn, turn O Shulammite; turn, turn, that we may gaze upon you!" woman: "Why do you gaze upon the Shulammite as upon the dance of the two camps!" In Elliott's translation no comparative is used: to the first part of the verse, the woman replies: "What will you see in the Shulammite?" and the Chorus replies: "Of course, the dance of the two camps." Who make up these two camps? Could it be that one is the "camp" of the king and the other the "camp" of the woman's other lover? And that when the woman says in 8:3 "Then I have become in his eyes as one who finds peace," what she means is that she has made a choice of one camp over the other, of one lover over the other: there is no more war, for a winner has been declared.

The next reference to the king is in another passage that translators have had trouble with. It occurs at the end of a verse in which the man praises the beauty of the woman's hair: "On you, your head is like Carmel, and the hair of your head, like purple--a king is caught in tresses." (7:5). This whole passage (7:1-9) is a *wasf*[51] sung by the man to the woman; he extols not only her beauty, but her majesty too: "Your head crowns you..." (v 5a). Could this enigmatic verse, in which the woman is said to have a king caught in her tresses, not be yet another boast that the lover makes about his beloved, something along the lines of: My beloved is so beautiful that even a king loves her? If this is the case, the clandestine nature of her relationship with her lover, described in 8:1 and perhaps attested to throughout the poem by the fact that the lovers so often meet outside, far away from the

[51] *Wasf* is a term borrowed from the Arabic; it means love song or love poem.

center of the town, would also be explained, although, of course, her "husband" need not be a king for her to have to hide extra-marital relationships.

Solomon is mentioned on two other occasions: in 8:11, which reads almost like a parable or a riddle, and 8:12[52]. There is no clear indication of who the speaker is in 8:11, yet because of the fact that the words, "my own vineyard" in 8:12 are the very same ones used by the woman in 1:6, Elliott takes it for granted that it is the woman speaking is also speaking in 8:11. Yet, as Murphy points out, it might also be the man, comparing his beloved, his vineyard, to the vineyard of Solomon. In this case, the man would here be echoing the woman's words from 1:6, just as he does when he says "As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens." (2:2) to her "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." (2:1), or as he does when he repeats, in 4:6, the very words she used in 2:17: "Until the day breathes and the shadows flee." In 8:12, the lover would be saying that the fruit of Solomon's vineyard may be worth a lot of money, a thousand pieces of silver but as long as he has his beloved, Solomon and the keepers of his vineyard can have all the money in the world. These words echo the idea expressed by the woman in 8:7: "...Were one to give all his wealth for love, he would be thoroughly despised."

This analysis of the narrative events in which "the king" or "Solomon" play a role seems to lead to the conclusion that at least the woman is having more than one relationship. What of the man in the Song? Does he love only his beloved? What do the beginning verses of the Song reveal on this subject? What does "...therefore the maidens love you" in 1:3 and "Rightly do they love you" in 1:4 mean? They love him because, as the verse says: "Truly, more pleasing is your love than wine. The fragrance of your perfumes is pleasing, flowing

---

[52] 8:11-12: "Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-hamon. He gave the vineyard to the keepers; one would pay for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My own vineyard is at my disposal--the thousand (pieces) for you, Solomon, and two hundred for the keepers of its fruit."

perfume, your name; therefore the maidens love you." Is it likely that the word "love"[53] here has anything but a sexual connotation? There are many ambiguous verses in the Song, but this does not seem to be one of them: maidens loving a man is nothing more or less than maidens loving a man.

When the woman next addresses her lover, she too speaks of other members of the opposite sex. She asks him: "Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you rest at midday, lest I become as one who covers herself near the herds of your companions." (1:7) Murphy writes:

> The literal translation of (Hebrew) is 'one who covers one's self'...but the meaning is not obvious in the context. Commentators have interpreted the covering as a sign of mourning (2Sam 15:30) or as a sign of a harlot (Gen 38:14-15). These references are not helpful in explaining the context of v 7, and in neither of the instances is the word (Hebrew) used. She seems rather to refer to some kind of covering or disguise she will be forced to use unless she knows where to find him. One can infer that the disguise will enable her to avoid being identified by his 'companions,' but no reason is given (perhaps she does not want them to know about the rendez-vous)."[54] (131)

How can it be determined which meaning is, at the very least, the most likely one? If the context is the criterion on which the decision is based, the notion of mourning would likely be discarded, while that of "harlotry" might be considered more seriously. If the woman does have more than one lover (which does not mean, of course, that she is a harlot), then her words could even be interpreted ironically, as if she were saying, with an arched tone in her voice, à la Mae West, "God forbid that I, of all women, should be taken for a someone who sleeps around!" However, by deciding for one or the other meaning, the

---

[53]In section three of this chapter, this question will be asked again, and a different answer proposed...
[54]Elliott is among those who interpret these words to mean that the woman "does not wish to be mistaken for one of the women who covered or veiled themselves so as to be identified as prostitutes in places frequented by shepherds." (52)

richness of the two different meanings of a "covered" woman, when seen together, is diminished. Are not her words to her lover all the more interesting, both to him and to the reader, because of the ambiguity of their meaning?

Nowhere in the Song does the man affirm anything like the slightly changing refrain of the woman: 2:16: "My beloved is mine and I am his"; 6:3: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine"; 7:10: "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me." While this refrain does not necessarily mean that the woman has only this man as a lover, these refrains do indicate how strongly she feels attached to him and, that at least in the first two of the three refrains, she believes him to be equally attached to her. This is in contrast to the man who, while he often addresses the woman as "my love" and makes many comments on her physical beauty, and on the sweetness of her love, tells us very little about how he feels. In 4:9, he says: "You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride! You have ravished my heart with one (glance) of your eyes." In 6:5, it is again her eyes that elicit from him an expression of how he feels: "Turn your eyes away from me for they disturb me." Thus, the few feelings he does express about the woman are not necessarily positive. To him, her beauty is striking and her love sweet, but he is overwhelmed by her, and nowhere does he speak of her being the "one whom (his) soul loves," let alone of loving only her.

The obvious protest is: Perhaps he does not say he loves her, but maybe he shows it with his actions. The opposite is true: if you loved one woman and only one woman, would you have her running around the streets of your city at night, searching for you? On two occasions, 3:1-4 and 5:2-7, the woman tells the story of how she does not find her lover where she expects to find him, in her bed in the first instance, at her door in the second. When, in the latter case, he has come calling, his "head wet with dew", she has hesitated to open the door to him, thus demonstrating curious behaviour for someone who is as

besotted with love as the woman claims to be[55]: "I have taken off my clothes; am I then to put them on? I have washed my feet; am I then to soil them?" (5:3) When she does finally get up to open the door for him, he is gone. He hasn't even taken the time to be insistent. She rushes out into the city to look for him. This time (unlike in 3:1-4 when she also goes looking for him), not only does she not find him but the watchmen on the walls beat her and tear off her mantle. She is beside herself, crying to the Daughters of Jerusalem: "If you find my lover, what shall you say to him? That I am sick with love." (5:8)

The Daughters of Jerusalem reply coquettishly: "How does your lover differ from any lover, O most beautiful of women? How does your lover differ from any lover, that you adjure us so?"[56] (5:9) The woman's reply is a poem describing his physical beauty. The answer seems to satisfy the Daughters, who then ask, "Where has your lover gone, O most beautiful of women? Where has your lover turned, that we may seek him with you?" (6:1) Her reply is: "My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spice; To browse in the garden and to gather lilies. I am my lover's and he is mine; he browses among the lilies." (6:2-3). Her reply is often seen as an affirmation of the mutuality of the love between the woman and her lover; it has been taken to mean that she has never really wondered, for a second, where he was, just as her question in 1:7: "Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you rest at midday...", has been seen as a rhetorical question. It is true that anything is possible when it comes to love, but it does really seem unlikely that a woman would say her lover was gone if he was there, that she would say she was "sick with love" if he was with her, that she would ask the Daughters to give him a message in

---

[55]Another example of ambiguous behaviour on the part of the woman can be seen in the words of the adjuration refrain: 1:5 and 5:8 she says that she is "sick with love." Now, while this woman is not the first, and certainly not the last, person in whom being in love and feeling sick occur concurrently, this very phenomenon speaks of how lovers experience ambiguity about their love, even at a physical level. It is going a little far, it seems to me, to suggest, as Murphy does, that the woman "proclaims her love-sickness." (136) as if it were something she is proud of.

[56]The Daughters' question, with its repetition, reads less like a real question than a "set up" for this *wasf*.

the case that they find him if she knows where he is? Might not her answer be, instead, a sad acknowledgement that he has gone to a garden other than herself, to another's bed of spice; that while she wishes their love were mutual, the fact is that he is off browsing among other lilies?[57]

Is it a coincidence that in the next passage, which is a *wasf* spoken by the man to the woman, while he begins by complimenting her beauty as usual, he also says that she is "awe-inspiring as visions" (6:4) in Murphy's translation, "terrible as an army with banners" in the NRSV? He continues: "Turn your eyes away from me, for they disturb me." (6:5). Is it possible that he has been confronted with an irate lover, with "a woman scorned"? In the next verses, is he doing what lovers who have displeased their lovers often do, that is endeavour to appease them with tried and true formulas? Vv 5-7 are exactly the ones he spoke in 4:1-3. His attempt to appease her seems to have failed at first, for in 6:11, she is alone in the nut-garden, for the first time in the poem; but something happens in vv 12-13, two verses that have posed considerable difficulty for both translators and interpreters. They are translated by Murphy as "Before I knew it, my heart made me (the blessed one) of the prince's people. Turn, turn, O Shulammite; turn, turn, that we may gaze upon you! Why do you gaze upon the Shulammite as upon the dance of the two camps." and the NRSV as "Before I was aware, my fancy set me in a chariot beside my prince. Return, return, O Shulammite! Return, return that we may look upon you. Why should you look upon the Shulammite, as upon a dance before two armies?"

Bound by a lack of knowledge of Hebrew, it is impossible to comment on the accuracy of one translation over the other: neither seems to "make much sense" when looked at by itself. However, if one looks at what precedes them (as has been done above) and takes

---

[57]In the third section of this chapter, on ambiguity at the level of the imagery of the Song, this example will be examined more closely.

place after them (as will now be done), then it may be possible to say something about at least the type of event that may have occurred in the enigmatic verses. They are followed by another *wasf*, on the part of the man, in which he describes her beauty and then says, for the first time in the Song, what it inspires him to do: "I will climb the palm tree (he has just said that her "stature is like a palm tree" and her "breasts, clusters"), I will take hold of its branches; Let your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your breath like apples; Your mouth like the best wine..." (vv 8-9) and here Murphy's translation interrupts the man in mid-sentence, and has the woman continue: "Flowing smoothly for my lover, spreading over (my lips and teeth)." With these words, she then enjoins her lover, for the first time since 1:4 when she said "Draw me after you! Let us run!" Now she says: "Come, my lover, let us away to the field; let us spend the night in the villages. Let us be off early to the vineyards, let us see if the vines have budded, if the blossoms have opened, if the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love." (7:12-13) This is the first time she actually speaks of giving her love. Does this mean that finally she is "hooked", even to the extent that she would make her love for him public, wishing even that he were her brother--and she does not have an easy relationship with her brothers--so that she could kiss him in public and noone would despise her (8:1)? In any case, while it is not possible to actually say what the enigmatic lines (6:13-7:1) mean, what somehow seems to have happened in them is that the woman, alone in the nut garden before them, is after them, making love and declaring her love as never before in the Song.

If there have been any lingering doubts, with Chapter 7 the Song gives the reader another push toward abandoning the idea that the relationship being portrayed in the poem is a monogamous one; also to be forsaken is the assumption, present in this discussion thus far, that while the Song may not portray the story of a monogamous relationship, still there is only one main male character and only one main female character engaged in relationship(s) with other(s), relationship(s) in which there might have been some kind of

development. In 1:2 the woman has said: "Truly, more pleasing is your love than wine," an affirmation which would seem to indicate that they have already made love; otherwise, how would the woman know how pleasing her lover's love is? 1:12 further supports this view: "A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me; between my breasts he lies.": if they're not making love as he lies between her breasts, what are they doing? The following verses also lend credence to the same view: 1:16, when the man says to the woman: "*Our* couch is green;" (italics mine); 2:4, spoken by the woman: "He has brought me to the wine house, and his banner over me is love."; the adjuration refrain in 2:6-7, parts of which are repeated in 3:4-5 and 8:3-4: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields: Do not arouse, do not stir up love, until it be ready." In the case of 3:4, while the words are very different from 2:6 and 8:3, the basic idea seems to be the same: "I had hardly left them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held on to him and would not let him go until I brought him to the house of my mother, to the room of her who bore me."; 3:1: "Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves:" if she is looking for him in her bed, it must be because she expects to find him there; 5:16: when the woman tells the Daughters of Jerusalem: "His mouth is sweetness; he is all delight."

Before Chapter 7, therefore, there seems to be no question that the two lovers have been sexually intimate. However, having spent 7:1-7 extolling the beauty of the woman in very intimate terms, the man then goes on to say in 7:8: "Let your breasts be like the clusters of the vine and the fragrance of your breath like apples;" as if he did not know what her breasts and the fragrance of her breath were like. In 7:11-12, the woman replies: "Come, my lover, let us away to the field; let us spend the night in the villages. Let us be off early to the vineyards, let us see if the vines have budded; If the blossoms have opened, if the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love." The "there" in this case rings as if it means: "There I will give you my love, whereas elsewhere I haven't wanted to."

The woman goes on to say: "Would that you were my brother, nursed at my mother's breasts! Were I to find you in public, I would kiss you and no one would despise me. I would lead you, bring you, to my mother's house (where) you would teach me." (8:1-2) Why is the woman speaking in the conditional here, when she has already taken her lover to her mother's house in 3:4? Suddenly, the reader feels as if she is being taken backwards in time.

Then, in 8:5, either the man or the woman[58] says: "Under the apple tree I aroused you." Whoever the arouser is, arousing has gone on, for the last time in the Song. This verse is followed by what is often seen as the climax of the Song, in which the woman says to the man: "Place me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm." (8:6) She then speaks her view of what love is: "Strong as Death is love; Intense as Sheol is ardor. Its shafts are shafts of fire; flames of Yah. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away. Were one to give all his wealth for love, he would be thoroughly despised." (8:6-7) What does the reader expect at this point of the poem? Some kind of denouement, perhaps in the form of an answer to the woman's request to be placed as a seal on the man's heart and arm, or a response to her passionate exclamation about love. Instead, there is the appearance of the brothers, who have not spoken throughout the poem (though we are told in 1:6: "The sons of my mother were angry with me; they assigned me as keeper of the vineyards...."), and who now ask their riddle-like question about their sister: "We have a little sister and she has no breasts" (they say, to which the reader must protest something along the lines of: What do you mean? We've just heard her lover go on and on about the beauty of her breasts!) They continue: "What shall we do for our sister, on the day she will be spoken for?" Again the reader wants to protest: What do you mean? She is already spoken for! Only two verses ago she was arousing or being aroused! Go out to buy a copy

---

[58]According to Murphy (191), it might be either the man or the woman speaking: there is grammatical and textual evidence to support both options.

of the Song of Songs and read up on the sex life of your sister! They go on: "If she is a wall, we shall build upon her a silver turret. If she is a door, we shall board her up with a cedar plank." Here the protest is the loudest of all: What do you mean? A wall or a door? The man in the Song has used so many complex and/or beautiful images to describe the woman, from "a lily among thorns" (1:2) to "a garden fountain, a well of fresh water" (4:15) that the simple plainness, if not the unattractiveness, of the metaphors the brothers use is shocking.

More shocking even than that is the way in which they speak about her: throughout the Song, the reader has become accustomed to the woman doing largely what she wants, or to the man most often lovingly coaxing her to do what he wants, and now suddenly these brothers appear with their authoritarian talk and draconian measures?! The beginning and the end of the poem seem to be invades: at the beginning of the Song, the woman already speaks of herself as a sexual being, while at the end, suddenly there are her brothers not only referring to her as their "little sister" who "has no breasts" but also talking as if they have the right to decide her future!

The shock does not subside when the woman responds to them on their own terms: "I am a wall, and my breasts like towers. Then I have become in his eyes as one who finds peace." (8:10). Why doesn't she speak up and tell them to go to...? But the reader's curiosity is peaked too, by the riddle: what happened to change her from a wall with towers to "one who finds peace?" And what is happening in the next two verses, 8:11-12, which read like a parable, in which there is an affirmation (by either the woman or the man) that he or she in possession of his or her own vineyard, with in juxtaposition, a statement saying that Solomon will get a thousand pieces and that his keepers will get two hundred[59]?

---

[59]In one reading of these two verses it struck me that it sounded as if the man was buying the woman from "Solomon", giving him a thousand pieces of silver, as well as giving a tip of a couple of hundred "bucks" to

Finally, what of the last few lines of the poem where not only the brothers but also all the eloquent words about love from 8:6-7 seem to be forgotten? The man calls: "You who dwell in the garden, friends are listening: let me hear your voice!" (8:13) and the woman replies: "Flee, my lover; be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spice." (8:14) It is as if the reader is again taken right back into the body of the poem. But how can that be? The poem is over.

The reader is left with a sense of confusion: narrative "facts" from Chapters 7 and 8 seem to contradict all that has gone before, and now, with the absence of a "real" ending, something that leaves the reader satisfied that a clear message has been clearly communicated, suddenly makes the whole poem seem incomprehensible. At this point, frustration with the unwillingness of the poem to act in the way that is expected of it forces the reader to chose between two options: either the reader's need to have the Song tell one love story about one couple is abandoned, along with the idea that the poem should be taking some moral stance, since it is, after all, part of the Bible, or the reader does violence to the text by forcing it to tell the story of the ideal love relationship many of us would give our eye teeth to live. If the reader chooses the former, the poem appears in a new light: it dawns on the reader that it is possible that the chronological timeline she has "naturally"[60] imposed on the poem, along with the preconceived idea that the Song portrays the love experiences of only one couple, is inappropriate. With this insight, the poem is freed from the age-old shackles that have bound it: no longer is it a poem whose beautifully varied experiences and images commentators try to force to tell one love story; instead it has become a poem that is made up many different love stories, each of which tells a piece of THE love story.

---

the men who have guarded the woman.

[60] I put naturally in quotation marks because while reading chronologically may be natural, it is also certainly the way we are taught to read.

This is not to say that the poem is an anthology of love poems, as some interpreters have ventured. Timothea Elliott has demonstrated that the poem is stylistically and formally a unit. In the section "The Search for Unity," she writes:

> The two principal reasons given for denying the literary integrity of the Canticle are that it lacks plot or logical sequence, and that there is no overall structure. These objections are based upon Aristotle's discussion of unity in the Poetics, where he defines plot as the most essential ingredient of tragedy. Unity or wholeness, is the result of a structure that has a beginning, middle, and end, and in which events are related to one another by necessity or consequence.
>
> It is of paramount importance to remember that in the Poetics Aristotle was concerned primarily with tragedy and epic poetry. The Canticle is essentially lyric poetry, and as such, plot or linear progression in the Aristotelian sense does not apply. While the standards for judging drama or epic do not pertain, an analogous criterion that would apply to a "poetics of the lyric" can be found in the model of "organic unity." In an organic unity each of the parts functions in virtue of the whole and, without each part, the whole lacks either integral or essential unity...
>
> Using the organic model as the criterion for poetic unity, this dissertation attempts a close literary reading of the Canticle, examining it as an artistic work (poiema (bar over e)) in all its particularity. It seeks to illuminate from within the text itself the dynamic principles of organization which account for every detail in terms of a comprehensive whole, and to demonstrate the way in which meaning results from poetic structure and content working together. (32-34)

She goes on to prove her thesis with a beautiful and methodical precision that leaves little doubt in the mind of the reader as to the literary unity of the Song.

Yet, while she disavows the presence of a plot in the Song, as was pointed out earlier, at the same time, she imposes one on it by affirming throughout the major chapter of her work, "The Poetic Structure of the Canticle," that there is a relationship developing between the two lovers.[61] Why does she assert this belief? The answer is found at the

---

[61] For example, of 7:12-13 she writes: "However, the sense conveyed by 7:12-13 is beyond that of 2:10-13. In the earlier passage (2:10-13) the description of nature's spring-awakening forms the background for love's

beginning of her thesis, in the section entitled "State of the Question," in the "Critique of the Lyrical Position" where her views concerning love relationships are revealed:

> Among those who recognize a literary unity, there is a general consensus that the Canticle deals with a single couple in a relationship of mutual love and fidelity. This relationship is particularly in harmony with the vision of man and woman *proposed* in Gen 2,18-25, and *counseled* in Prov 5,15-20. Considered against the background of the whole of the Sacred Scripture, the Canticle presents a vision of the goodness of all creation and the wonder of human love that leads to the transcendent experience of God who is Love (Cant. 8, 6-7; 1 John 4,7-8) The anthology approach, on the contrary, often encounters serious hermeneutical problems...The songs (in the Song) become merely an expression of the various emotions of love, and since there is no context of commitment through betrothal or marriage, a framework of Israelite law and custom, they appear to condone pre-marital sexual relationships." (32) (Italics mine; they are there to underline how Elliott has a tendency to see biblical texts as prescriptive).

Therefore, because Ms. Elliott does not approve of interpretations that might "condone pre-marital sexual relationships", she **cannot** believe that a book in the Bible would portray, let alone celebrate such relationships. Yet is it true that "Because neither a single relationship nor a single author is envisioned, the overall meaning of the Canticle tends to become blurred" (32) or that an affirmation of the literary unity of the Song goes hand in hand with the idea that the poem portrays one relationship between one man and one woman?

As was pointed out in the "History of the Question" of this thesis, it is difficult to date the Song with any accuracy. It seems both most sensible and most accurate, at least until there

---

timid awakening. In the latter passage (7:12-13) it is the budding and blooming taking place in the field and vineyard that have moved to the foreground, and become the very image of their own love which has been awakened. This shift has occurred gradually through the various parts of the poem. First, by means of analogies, the Lover of the Beloved is likened to an element in nature (e.g., "lily" or "apple tree", 2;1-2); then various elements of creation are discovered in the other (e.g. "your eyes are doves", 4:1, "his cheeks are beds of spices", 5:13); and finally, an aspect of creation becomes the means of expressing themselves and their love (e.g., the field of 7:12-14) (180; and of 8:13-14: "She is telling him to go off quickly, but implies that his going is a way of coming again; that absence is a way of presence; that their love is never static and meant to linger long in one embrace, but dynamic and continuously developing." (211)

is new evidence, to agree on a compromise that says: in its final form, the poem is likely post-exilic, though certain parts of it are probably ancient. The idea that one poet-editor may have collected different poems together and then modified them so that the poem took on a homogeneous style, is not impossible, but whether it is true does not, in and of itself, render the meaning of the Song any less clear[62]. There seems to be no solid evidence either for or against the poet-editor idea, and thus it is a waste of time to even speculate since, either way, what the reader has to work with is the text. Does the text permit the reader to see the Song as other than the portrayal of a monogamous relationship without, at the same time, throwing into question its literary unity? The proofs Elliott puts forth concerning recurring vocabulary, imagery and stylistic devices, as well as her arguments concerning how the unity of the Song is reflected in its structure remain relevant even if more than one love story is posited. In a sense, they take on an even greater significance, since they show the connections between different love stories, whereas such connections might be less expected there than they would be in a story told about two lovers. An example from the text will make this point clear.

In 3:1-5 and in 5:2-8, similar situations are described. In the first case, the woman searches for her lover in her bed and doesn't find him. She goes out to look for him on the streets, is met by the sentinels who she questions about her lover's whereabouts; shortly thereafter she finds her lover and takes him to her mother's[63] house. She adjures the Daughters of

---

[62]If the meaning of the Song were so crystal-clear, would it have spawned and be continuing to spawn so many interpretations and translations over the centuries?

[63]The frequent use of the word "mother" in the Song is one of its many distinguishing features, especially since there is no parallel mention of the father. The most basic of the many questions occasioned by this unusual situation is: Where is her father? If she doesn't mention him, it is likely she doesn't have one. Is he dead or did she never have one? The answer is impossible to know, yet the fact that he is absent and that even the house where the woman takes her lover is referred to as her mother's house (if the father were dead, would the house not still be in his name?) might lead the reader to speculate that the mother is a single woman, not a widow. In a poem where there might be references, as will be seen below, to "sacred prostitution," might the fact that the woman/one of the women does not have a father be a further indication both of her profession and that of her mother, though, of course, I am not saying that all single women, either in biblical times or in the present day, are prostitutes. If the idea that the stories of multiple relationships are being told in the Song

Jerusalem not to awaken love until it is ready. In the second case, the lover is at her door, which she hesitates to open for him. When she decides she will open it, she finds him gone and goes out after him. Again she is met by the sentinels, but they beat her up this time, and she adjures the Daughters of Jerusalem to tell her lover that she is faint with love. Elliott says about these two passages in which the sentinels appear:

> Exactly the same words introduce the guards in both places...But that is where the similarities between the two encounters end. The Beloved interrogated the guards in 3,3:...("Have you seen the one whom my soul loves?). Here (in the latter incident) she is silent. The guards are approachable in the first case, invited to participate in the search. Here they appear hostile. The behaviour of the guards is difficult to comprehend and to place in context. (131-32)[64]

She goes on to explain that:

> The role of the guards then, as guardians of the walls, seems to parallel that of the warriors in 3,7. Both of these sequences are nocturnal. Just as the locked house forms part of the paradigm of enclosed images which are symbolic of the Beloved (vineyard, litter of Solomon, garden, house, etc.), so too the (trans. word) soerim belong to the parallel paradigm of protection: (trans. words) noterâ (1,6d) noterîm (8,11b), gibborîm (3,7b) somerîm (5,7)...The guards' precise function would then appear to be that of preventing the Beloved herself from going out in search...Hence, she must turn to a third party, the Daughters of Jerusalem, to continue her search. (132-3)

Complex though this attempted explanation may be, it fails to really explain anything at all: if the Beloved must now turn to the Daughters of Jerusalem to "continue her search," why now? What has happened to bring about this change? And why do the same Daughters

---

is accepted, it too might lead the reader to speculate about a side-profession of the author, or at least about the people she "hung out" with: who but a sex-trade worker might see so many love stories; who but a sex-trade worker might be better placed to write about love?...I use so many "might"s because I have yet to even begin to research this probably impossible-to-prove idea, which it is, in any case, beyond the scope of this thesis to examine.

[64]Murphy makes little attempt to explain why the two passages differ, or to what the harsh reaction of the sentinels might be due, saying only that "The usual interpretation of this incident is that the guards presume from her behaviour that she is a harlot and they treat her accordingly." (132)

of Jerusalem then call on the woman to join them in their search for her lover in 6:1: "Where has your lover gone, O most beautiful of women? Where has your lover turned, that we may seek him with you?" If, on the other hand, we look at the two sequences as belonging to two different stories, both of which are episodes in the great Love Story that began and will end with the beginning and the ending of loving beings, then the intellectual gymnastics required to explain the cause of the differences between the two passages are no longer needed. Instead, the differences between the two can be examined, as well as the similarities, without any pressure to make both passages fit into one paradigm. If one approaches them with the idea in mind that the second must somehow logically or sequentially follow the first, or show some development in the relationship between the man and the woman, then the range of possible meanings is limited by this predetermined idea. There is no question that when one reads the second passage, one recalls the first, and while the ways in which the two passages "speak" to one another need to be explored, it would enrich any interpretation of the Song to do so with the idea in mind that their similarities might be there for reasons other than to show some development in a monogamous relationship. The reader, given the use of exactly the same opening words in the second passage, is expecting exactly the same outcome as in the earlier passage. The fact that the outcome is very different confronts the reader with her own expectations, showing them to be short-sighted[65], and in doing so, surprises her into remembering that, in love, nothing can be taken for granted, since even situations that seem the same may turn out differently at different times or for different people.

---

[65]This type of device, where a section begins in the same way and then suddenly changes, is used too often and to too great effect in the Song to be unintentional. This is also true of how the Song takes words, images and events from elsewhere in the Bible and, by the way in which they are used in the Song, brings the meaning of the other stories into the Song, at the same time lending a new meaning to the older stories. Examples of this latter device will be given in the third section of this chapter.

There is a quality of immediacy in the Song, due to the way in which the events are recounted in the poem, that also seems to this reader to also support the notion of multiple love stories in the Song. As well, it may provide a key to understanding the feeling of ambiguity that seems to prevail to the very last line of the Song. It is as if the events in the Song are happening right now, at the moment they are being told, as if the Song was written by an author who made herself invisible or hid herself somewhere near the lovers, was watching their stories unfold and telling them to the reader, as they were happening before her very eyes. With this device, the writer communicates perfectly the confused, ambiguous, paradoxical, and even sometimes contradictory nature of the powerful experience of love, where the heady joy of being with another person and the fear that one's feelings for one's lover will too easily give her or him power over one, are two paradoxical feelings (among a slew of others) that follow quickly one upon the other. Were it not for the fact that not only the feelings, but also the places in which they occur, change with a dizzying rapidity, this idea might apply just as easily to the notion that there is only one couple in the Song. As it stands, however, the immediacy of the emotions and events, set in the context of the collage-like structure of the Song, which will be briefly examined in the next section of this chapter, really give the impression that the author is flitting from one couple to another. At the risk of indulging in undue speculation, it seems to this reader that if the author had wanted to tell the story of only one couple[66], she would have been more likely to use a traditional narrative form, since the story of one couple has happened in chronological time, one event following another. It would then have been implausible to tell each event in the present tense, and the reader would have been presented with a story in which all the emotions and paradoxes of love might have been recounted compellingly,

[66]It is only very late in the writing of this thesis that it occurred to this reader that the question: Why would the poet want to write about more than one relationship, as opposed to one relationship? A good question to be considered as a part of her doctoral thesis.

but she would no longer have been embroiled right in the middle of it, lurching from one couple and feeling or event to another, as she is when she reads the Song.

Does this mean that, as Elliott was quoted as saying above: "The songs become merely an expression of the various emotions of love"? Perhaps, but to this reader there is nothing "mere" about this expression, especially not when one takes into account the rich and exciting way it is communicated in the Song. But what, then, does it "mean" that there are all these relationships in the Song? Is the reader being lead to some kind of relativism that says that one relationship equals another? The characters in the text are too passionately alive for this reader to believe that the poet intended her poem to lead to such a dead, not to mention boring, conclusion. Instead, perhaps the poet has set out to share with the reader the different faces of love she has experienced or seen, because, in ways that are not explicable in rational terms, they have somehow, as she says in 8:6-7, led her to the felt understanding that "Strong as Death is love; intense as Sheol is ardor. Its shafts are shafts of fire, a flame of Yah. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away. Were one to give all his wealth for love, he would be thoroughly despised." There is a feeling of awe, beyond explanation, that can only be given proper expression, as it is in the Song, in some form of artistic expression through which its many paradoxical aspects are all given voice. This feeling, called up in her by her experience and/or observation of love, is comparable to the way in which there is an inkling of the existence of a being greater than ourselves when we are positioned near the edge of the Grand Canyon and look out and across, when we stand on an empty beach with the sun setting into the ocean, and, sometimes, when we hold our babies in our arms or have an enlightening conversation with a friend, or even when we really see a tree or the pink shadow on a blanket of newly-fallen snow .

5.2 Structural Ambiguity

Having looked at how the narrative events in the Song lead the reader to an awareness that there are many experiences of love being told in the poem, this thesis will now briefly explore how that ambiguity, which might also be seen as a multi-vocality, manifests itself on the structural level of the Song. To begin an examination of this question, it will be fruitful to return, once again, to the Prologue of the Song, which, as Elliott points out[67], holds the key to the Song as a whole, both thematically and on the level of the images. Structurally too, the Prologue sets the scene for the rest of the poem. In it, there are lovers in the king's chambers, there is a woman whose brothers are angry with her because she has not kept her own vineyard; a shepherd is the beloved of a shepherdess; a woman is compared to a mare. The Song begins in this way, dragging the reader, without warning or transition, from one location, event or image, and so it continues, shifting from luxurious interior scenes scented with perfume to rustic scenes where the lover leaps over the mountains like a gazelle, from a frantic woman racing after her lover on the streets of the city to a woman being surrounded by sixty queens, eighty concubines and maidens without number[68].

There are different scenes, most of which the reader participates in first hand, and the reader is led from one to the other, as if the text were a collage on the wall, and the artist is saying to the viewer: Look, for example, at this image of a woman in a king's chambers,

---

[67] She writes: "The poetic prologue to (trans. word) sir hassirim resembles an overture to a musical masterpiece in many ways. Major themes come briefly to the ear, enter one's consciousness and pass. One melody blends easily into another; nothing is developed in depth. The mood is set, and thus the auditors are prepared to better hear all that is to come." (43)

[68] Paul Ricoeur writes: "These reflections...lead us to a series of comments concerning the primacy of the 'movements' of love over the individual identities of the lover and the beloved. I borrow this expression, 'movements of love,' from Origen, one of the initiators of allegorical interpretation. This phrase from the most important of the witnesses to the allegorism of the Fathers of the Church should make us attentive to what in the Song of Songs has to do with love as a kind of 'movement.'" (271)

then at this one of a mare among Pharaoh's chariots, then at this one of a bag of myrrh lying between the breasts of a woman, etc. If any doubts remain as to whether there is more than one couple being portrayed in the Song, the structure of the Song, which structurally resembles a collage--which tells its "story" by juxtaposing different images--more than it does a narrative film--which, through the use of chronologically arranged images and words, tells its story--eventually serves to dispel any such final doubts. With all the locations and situations described in the Song, it seems almost impossible that the same two people, in the one relationship, are being described.

Yet at first, the many repetitions in the Song and the similarities between the different sections of the poem refused to allow the reader to abandon the idea that the poem is about one couple. While the reader is eventually forced to put aside this pre-conceived assumption for the more plausible idea that there are, in fact, multiple relationships, the tension between these two ways of seeing the Song, between these two "forces," remains[69], because of the very ambiguity of the structure of the poem. What effect does this have on the reader? What is the poet trying to tell the reader by keeping her between first "they are lovers" and "they are not lovers", then between "they are only two of them, a couple seen in different ways, from different angles, through different lenses" and "there are different couples: city folks, country folks, couples who are happy with each other, others who aren't"[70]? Does this tension, at least partly due to the collage-like structure of the poem, contribute to the creation or understanding, in the reader's mind, of one of the

---

[69]This will be clear in the rest of this thesis, where, upon rereading it I noticed that though I toe the "multiple relationships" line in theory, in the heat of analysis it often sounds like I'm talking about one relationship. I do not believe that this proves that either theory is right or wrong, simply that the tension from the Song has been transferred to this thesis written on the subject of the Song.

[70]In asking this question, I am following the method of Cleanth Brooks and his work on paradox in the Well-wrought Urn. The same type of tension is present in the paradoxical nature of Keats' Grecian Urn, where the two lovers are both hot and panting after each other in the moment and at the same time cold and unable to move, within inches of each other, on a Grecian urn, for the rest of eternity.

paradoxical main "themes"[71] in the Song: each individual love story is imbued with significance since it flows from the source of the great story of Love, which, in turn, would become a stagnant pool, nothing but theory about love, were it not for the replenishing energy of each new story flowing into it?

What other effect do the tension and the rapidly changing image sequences of the collage produce? They require that the reader really be on her toes, totally attentive. Nor will the Song, with its many sensual delights that make the reader very much aware of her body, let her stay "in her head"[72]. And what is synonymous with being totally attentive to the task one is performing in the moment, as well as being present in and aware of one's body? Is this not being in the presence of God? This too is one of the principal "themes" of the Song.

Another effect that the collage-like structure of the Song has on the reader, with the feelings of ambiguity it occasions, is to inspire in her the desire to try and understand what this enigmatic text is really all about. The straightforward narratives of the Bible, while many are as rich in images as the Song and have inspired many questions and reflections in the minds of certain readers, also permit a reader who doesn't want to question or reflect, to "get away" with reading them "only for the story." The Song permits no such "laziness." Either the reader puts the poem down with disgust because it offers neither a story nor a clear message, or she reads and rereads and rereads it, at first with the hope that she will

---

[71] I put theme in quotation marks because I am not here referring to a theme that can be discerned at any other level than one where the reader's mind puts together what is being said and what is happening narratively in the poem with what is happening structurally or at other "indirect" levels, and comes up with a felt understanding that, while it is deep and true, has none of the cocky confidence of an understanding come to through intellectual reasoning.

[72] It is as if the Song forces upon the reader the methods of reader-response criticism, since, by making her aware of her body, of what she is experiencing, the questions, What does each of the images "do" to you? And what does the ensemble of these images "do" to you? seem to come almost naturally, whereas other texts tend to lead their readers more toward more intellectually based questions of meaning.

figure it out, but after a while returning to it for the sensual pleasure, the intellectual satisfaction, and the spiritual fulfillment that she experiences when she reads it. Did Origen have an inkling of the almost addictive quality of the Song when he warned, about it, that

> ...anyone not yet knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are urging and egging him on to fleshy lust." (quoted in Murphy, 20)

Was it because of this quality that Rabbi Aqiba said: "All the world is not worth the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All the (trans. word) ketûbîm are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies." (quoted in Elliott, 1)?

5.3 Ambiguity in the Imagery and Language

Having looked at the narrative, at the "stor(ies)" told in the poem, as seen through its events, at the structure of poem and at the "stor(ies)" that tells, a few of the images and some of the language in the Song will now be focussed upon, to see what "stor(ies)" are being told there.

If the reader decides to respond to the sensual call of the Song, and to "live" at the level of the images in the text, that is, to hear, see, smell, taste and feel the text only through its images, at least for a time setting aside all need to make logical or rational sense of the poem, a delightfully varied sensual experience awaits her[73]. To be set aside during this time, are all questions about where an image should be taken literally and where it should be taken figuratively[74]. Each occurrence of each of the images will be cited, and the

---

[73]I am not saying that the poet consciously intended the reader to see the poem in this way. Rather, I am looking below or beyond the level of the poet's conscious intention to what is being expressed on a "purely" creative or "imag"inative level. Following the idea that structurally the Song resembles a collage, in this section I am looking at the poem almost as if it were a series of pictures that tell the story of one woman's experience and/or series of observations of love. Also, in a sense, I am doing something that resembles what the medieval allegorists did, in that I am saying that there is the story being told at the literal level of the text, and another story, to be discovered, under or over or beyond or in conjunction the literal lever, that is, at the level of the text's images. E. Ann Matter writes about the interpreters of the Song in the Middle Ages: "To medieval scholars, the Bible...was the map of divine reality and therefore the means through which that reality was revealed to human consciousness. That this revelation was more cryptic than straightforward would not be surprising to western medieval thinkers...That *veritas* is found hidden *sub umbra et figura* is an essential concept of medieval hermeneutics in general...In this tradition the Word of God, as an artifact of ever-present revelation preserved in time, needs clarification and elaboration. This is the fundamental task of medieval exegesis, a form of literature developed to interpret the Bible...by making explicit the visions of eternal truth shimmering behind the veil of the words of the text." (7)

[74]It may sometimes seem as though I am arbitrarily attributing a figurative meaning to what clearly seems to be a literal use of an image. That is, in a sense, what I am doing, though I prefer to look at it as allowing the figurative side of every occurrence of an image speak. I also do not deny that every figurative image may also have a literal side; in this thesis, my goal is simply not to explore that side. Also, my decision to say that, once the figurative meaning of an image has been established, it "preserves" that figurative meaning throughout the text, does not, however, seem any less arbitrary than other commentators decisions to attribute a literal sense to one occurrence of the image, and a figurative sense to another. For example, Elliott writes, of the occurrences of "vineyard" in 1:6: "The first use of (trans. word) kerem (vineyard) is literal, and the second figurative. This play, of the literal and the figurative senses of "vineyard", continues throughout the Canticle." (49) This arbitrary designation is not accompanied by any sort of justification.

figurative meanings, *as they have been shown to me*[75] through my close work with the text, commented upon. Two images have been chosen of which the depths will be sounded, and while this brief examination could never pretend to be an exhaustive discussion of the imagery in the Song, it will, nonetheless, provide an idea of how, on the level of its images, too, the Song beautifully tells[76] the story(ies) of love. The first, the "vine-vineyard-wine"complex, was chosen because it is unique in the Song as a set of connected images, all of the components of which occur both frequently and in different parts of the poem. The second, "lily(ies)," was selected because of the very contrasting contexts in which it appears in the poem[77].

Since it proved impossible, at times, to even guess at the metaphoric meaning of certain words in the text, this reader was lead to examine the contexts in which these words were used elsewhere in the Bible, in the hopes that she might discover there some kind of hint as to what the meaning of the word might be in the Song. This practice lead to the very interesting observation that, with a surprising frequency, words that were used in a "secular" context in the Song, were elsewhere, used only or most often in "sacred" contexts. This is André LaCocque's thesis too, and when he has commented on the same

---

[75]The ambiguous multi-vocality of the Song is received by the many ears and minds of its readers; thus, no one reader can ever pretend that her interpretation is "right," especially since, often, the interpretation of one person changes and grows with each reading of the Song. What I have tried most of all to do is to show how submerging oneself totally in the images of this poem often lead to surprising, if not definitive, new interpretations.

[76]As I began to write about the images in the Song, I was confronted with the question of what sort of language I wanted to use to describe what the images in the text seemed to be saying. In keeping with the delicacy, playfulness and beauty of the text, I have chosen to use language that, while it leaves no doubt as to what I am referring to, does not have the precision of anatomical terms, a decision I feel is justified by the fact that I am, after all, writing about a poem, not a surgical operation.

[77]While the occurrences of the "vineyard complex" of images are many more numerous than those of "lily(ies)" my discussion of the latter is much more in-depth than that of the former. I have no explanation for this, apart from the fact that it might be due to the inevitable phenomenon that the more you practice something, the better you get at it: I wrote about the "vineyard complex" first.

verses under discussion here, his analysis of them will be quoted at length[78]. On the Song as a whole, LaCocque writes:

> The Canticle sets itself as an anti-Genesis.[79] In hindsight, the poet judges the early human couple as too submissive, too diffident, too quickly convinced of the sadness of sexuality... 'Let us go to the fields, my love'--let's go back to the garden where our ancestors blundered so badly, and let's start everything from the beginning-- 'There I will give you my love.' (Romance, 159)

And:

> As indeed 'his desire is for her' (7.10 [11]), the whole of the Song can be seen as an explication of Gen. 3.16 (her desire is for her man), barring the theme of male domination over the female. For she is rousing him under an apple tree. In Genesis 2, God was the one who, implicitly, awakened Adam, as he was also the one who caused him to sleep in the first place. Once more, in the Canticle the woman's role replaces God's. (Romance, 167)

While this reader agrees with LaCocque's analysis of the intertextuality of the images in the Song, she does not agree with his vision of the poet's purpose in using this device. He sees her aim as ironic and subversive. This reader sees it as imbuing the human love relationships portrayed in the Song with a sacredness that does not rely on, nor is reflective of, as many commentators have argued, their resemblance to the love between God and humans, or vice versa, but is "built into" the very language used to describe them.

---

[78]Since I have outlined his argument above, and due to considerations of space, I have left out the parts where he argues for the ironic or subversive intent of the Song, though I am not sure that this is entirely fair.
[79]Carole Meyer, in her book Discovering Eve also sees at least parts of the Song as a "revisiting" of Genesis. She makes a particular parallel between the refrains of mutual possession in the Song and Genesis 3:16, which she retranslates and reinterprets. In God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, pioneer feminist theologian Phyllis Tribble, writing before Meyer, calls her chapter on the Song "Love Lyrics Redeemed"--the love lyrics that are being redeemed are those that were "damned" in Genesis. I have chosen to use the examples given in the work of LaCocque instead of those from Tribble and Meyer simply because the subject of his book is specifically the Song and its intertextuality with the rest of the Bible, which is exactly what I am interested in showing, whereas Tribble and Meyer's subject is a more wide-reaching reinterpretation of the way women are depicted in the OT, and it uses the Song as one example.

Wine and vine(s) and vineyard(s): These three images have been chosen to be looked at together for the obvious reason that wine is produced from the grapes[80] that grow on vines, which are cultivated in vineyards.

1) "Do not stare at me because I am blackish, for the sun has burned me. The sons of my mother were angry with me; they assigned me as keeper of the vineyards--my own vineyard I have not kept." (1:6) Woman speaking.

What is this vineyard? Concerning 1:6, LaCocque writes:

> The black girl confesses, 'my own vineyard I have not kept" (v. 6). The association of vineyard and Israel in Hebrew Scriptures does not need demonstration (one thinks of Isaiah 5; Psalm 80)...Similarly, the verb (trans word) atar, 'to keep,' say André Robert, Raymond Tournay and André Feuillet, 'is only used for speaking of God: He keeps his anger forever [sic].'...
>
> At this point, however, we must call attention to a 'source text' of great importance for the Canticle, namely Hosea 2. Here also vineyards are featured: the wild animals devour Israel's vineyards as a result of being abandoned by her husband, YHWH (v. 14). This motif need be remembered when we turn to Cant 2.15 (the 'little foxes'[81]). After a while, however, the vineyards are restored by God's grace; he again becomes Israel's husband (Hos 2.16-19). So it is clear that the theme of vineyards is metaphorically referring to loving relationships. Even for that matter the poetic choice of setting the dramatis personnae in a pastoral environment and of depicting them as shepherd and vineyard keeper is not foreign to the author's general purpose of imitating the traditional metaphoric roles of God vis-à-vis his people Israel. (Romance, 73)

Murphy says of this verse:

---

[80] 7:12 in the NRSV reads: "whether the grape blossoms have opened." This is the only place in the Song where the word "grape" occurs. I have not included it in my discussion because Murphy's translation simply reads "blossoms."

[81] LaCocque makes no reference to the foxes from the Judges passage discussed earlier. There Samson uses wild animals to destroy the vineyards and stocks of the Philistines because the father of his wife gave her to another man, though he also says he did it because he thought Samson had abandoned her.

> The effect of the sun upon the woman's body is an adequate explanation of her statement that she had failed to watch over her own vineyard, namely her own self...There seems to be a clear play on the word, which refers to the woman. This is also suggested by the emphatic (trans. word) sellî ("which is mine") in 1:6 and 8:12. One can detect two levels of meaning here. The woman has not protected herself from the sun, and neither has she kept her vineyard (herself) from her lover. She has given herself freely and responsibly to her lover. (128)

Elliot says of this verse: "They (the brothers) made her a keeper of the vineyards...Her own vineyard, i.e., herself, her own feminine needs, she has neglected. (49) Again, in a footnote to this passage, she says: "Vineyard, like garden, stands for the girl as a whole person." (294)

What does the poem look like if we interpret the image in this way every time it is used? If the one vineyard denotes a woman who is sexually active, then might not the other vineyards, referred to in 1:6, of which the first woman is "the keeper," denote other sexually active women? Thus, it would seem that one woman is placed among other women as their keeper...perhaps as some kind of "madame"? The saying "The punishment fits the crime" comes to mind: the woman's brothers, scandalized by the sexual freedom the woman has permitted herself, are trying to teach her a lesson by forcing her to act as the administrator of a brothel!

2) "A cluster of henna is my lover to me, in the vineyards of Engedi." (1:14) Woman speaking.

What is henna doing in the vineyard?

> Engedi is a place name meaning 'place of the young goat.'[82] The springs of Engedi are full... Both biblical and extra-biblical sources describe Engedi as a

---

[82]Sean McEvenue pointed out to me that Engedi also means the "place of the eye" and the "place of the

> source of fine dates, aromatic plants used in perfumes, and medicinal plants...It was a chief source of balsam, an important plant used for perfumes...In the tribal allotments, it was given to Judah and was in the district of Judah known as the wilderness district. (Josh. 15:61) [83]

This metaphor likens the male lover to a plant growing in a fertile vineyard, the woman. What a beautiful and accurate depiction of what happens during the love act between a man and a woman! Is this interpretation excessively sexual? It does not seem so, especially considering that the verse just preceding this one reads: "A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me; between my breasts he lies." (1:13): the man is first likened to a sachet of myrrh lying between a woman's breasts: he smells good there, but the myrrh is no longer a living plant. It isn't long, however, before that changes and the image becomes one of a live henna plant growing in a vineyard.

3) "The fig tree yields its figs; the vines, in bloom, give forth fragrance. Arise, my friend, my beautiful one, and come!" (2:13) Man speaking.

If the vineyard is the whole woman, then what might be a "vine in bloom"? The verses in this passage (2:10-13) use different images to tell one story: the passing of winter and the arrival of spring are heralded in images that evoke fertility. The blossoms have appeared and it is time to prune them; the song of the turtle dove, one of the most "affectionate" species on earth, is present; the fig trees are bearing fruit. If we were to carry this theme of fertility from the natural world, which the man calls the woman to visit with him, to the woman herself, would it not be likely that a "vine in bloom" refers to the part of a

---

source." Lack of time prevents me from exploring the fascinating avenues presented by the various meanings of this word.

[83]Taken from note on Engedi Quick Verse Library CD-ROM. Interestingly, this description of Engedi echoes two sets of verses from the Song: the wilderness in 3:6 and 8:5, and the young goats to which the woman's hair is compared in 4:1 and 6:5; it is not within the scope of this thesis to explore the possible connections between these verses and 1:14.

woman's body that is fertile, i.e., the part or parts of her she "loves" with. And if that is the case, then would it not follow that just as wine is the "juice" produced by the fruit of the vines, so the figurative meaning of wine would be the "juices" or liquids that wet (whet) our bodies when we are sexually aroused?

Now that some of the wider metaphoric implications of the "vineyard complex" of images have begun to find some solid (not to say fertile) ground, it is time to look at its first two occurrences in the Song, as well as another instance of the word "wine". Without the groundwork that has been laid, it might have seemed jarring, if not implausible, to suggest that the wine being referring to in the following verses is a liquid produced by the "squeezing" and other "handling," not of grapes, but, on a figurative level, of the "vines in blossom" of the lovers' sexual beings: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! Truly, more pleasing is your love than wine. Rightly do they love you."(1:2) Woman speaking; "Draw me after you! Let us run! The king has brought me to his chambers. Let us exult and rejoice in you! Let us extol your love beyond wine;" (1:4)[84] Woman speaking; "How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfumes than any spices." (4:10) Man speaking.

If in fact the wine being referred is meant to designate "love juices[85]," then why, in each of the instances cited here, is there a comparison that says, in one way or another, that love is better than wine, that is, that love is better than the "juices" of love? What kind of love could that be? Is this something of an indication that, perhaps at least in some cases, the

---

[84]Concerning 1:4, "Let us exult and rejoice in you! Let us extol your love beyond wine!" André LaCocque writes: "... 'exultation' and 'rejoicing' in the Bible designate almost always cultic responses to the proclamation of salvation. A similar situation obtains with the mention of 'remembrance' (NRSV: 'extol'), generally in celebration of the acts of YWHH." (Romance, 70)

[85]These "love juices" include the saliva produced in our mouths when we kiss, the sweat our bodies shine with as passion heats them up, and the various liquids that flow and shoot from our genital organs as we engage in the various acts of making love.

love being spoken of in the Song is other than sexual, that when the woman speaks of "he whom her soul loves" (1:7, 3:1, 2, 3, 4), the love she is alluding to is a spiritual one[86]?

To come to this conclusion about what "wine" "means" in the Song through an extension of the metaphoric meanings of "vineyard" and "vine" is perhaps new, but the idea that wine and love are partners in the Song, is, of course, not. In 2:4, the woman says: "He brought me to the wine house, and his banner over me is love." What is this wine house? It is not known what people normally did there. Did they "just" eat and drink or did it also regularly serve as a "trysting place" (49) as Murphy puts it? Suffice it to say that whether or not "house of wine" refers metaphorically here to a house where the "wine of love" flows freely, this seems to be one of the instances where the love being referred to in the phrase "his banner over me is love"[87] is sexual love[88]. The man says, later in the poem: "I said 'I will climb the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches; Let your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your breath like apples; Your mouth like the best wine...' and the woman replies: 'Flowing smoothly for my lover, spreading over (my lips and my teeth).' (7:8-9). In this verse it is clear that wine is a "liquid" produced by lovemaking: it flows from the woman's mouth. The same idea can be seen in the parallelism between spiced wine and pomegranate juice in the next section of the poem, where the woman says to her lover: "I would lead you, bring you, to my mother's house (where) you would teach me.[89] I would give you spiced wine to drink, my pomegranate

---

[86]I am, of course, not saying that all the sexual activity in the Song is really all about spiritual love. I am saying that a close and critical look at the images in the Song opens up the way to all kinds of possibilities that are worthy, at least, of some consideration, no matter how far-fetched they might seem, especially given the weight of the centuries of almost solely spiritual interpretation under which the Song is still staggering. This insight came to this reader late in the writing of this thesis and there has not been time to explore it.
[87]Murphy writes about this verse: "The choice of such trysting places is suggested by the natural and effective symbolism of wine (cf. 1:2; 4:10; 7:10)" (136)
[88]At least two other examples are 2:5 when the woman says, "Sustain me with raisin cakes and refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love." and 5:8 when she says something along the same lines: "I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem: If you find my love, what shall you say to him? That I am sick with love."
[89]Murphy writes: "(Hebrew) in M is ambiguous. In context, it could also be rendered '(the house of my mother) who taught me' (L. Krinetzki, 232)." (184) This would seem to be more in keeping with the Song,

juice." (8:2) If, elsewhere, the woman's cheek behind her veil is compared to "a cut of pomegranate" (4:3; 6:7), then is it really too far-fetched to extrapolate that the juice of those pomegranates is the "juice" that is being produced in the mouths, behind the cheeks, of two beings making love?

Concerning 8:2, LaCocque writes:

> As a reward for his 'teaching,' she is ready to give him to drink 'spiced wine, the juice of my pomegranate.'...Besides, the use of the first person possessive pronoun in 'my pomegranate' leaves no doubt as to the sensual drift of the text. The pomegranate was a symbol of fecundity; it is used here as an aphrodisiac. But this is not what "spiced wine" and "pomegranate" first evoke within Israel's tradition. Both words are associated with the temple, its ornamentation, its utensils, and its personnel." (Romance, 164)

4) "Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that damage the vineyards when our vineyards are in bloom." (2:15) Woman speaking.

Nothing in the Song gives any indication of what foxes might be a metaphor for, so the reader turned to the other books in the Bible to see how the word is used there. The only other occurrence of "foxes"[90] in the OT is in Judges 15:4-5 where Samson's men find 300 hundred foxes, line them up, place a torch between the tails of every second fox, light those torches and send the foxes "into the standing grain of the Philistines, where they burn up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves." Where does Samson go to hide after he has committed this terrible crime against the Philistines?

---

where the woman(en) seem to be more in charge. But then again, if the Song is made up of different love stories, it is at least bordering on the possible that the man in one of them could teach the woman about love.

[90] "Fox", in the singular occurs once in the OT, Neh 4:3: "Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "That stone wall they are building--any fox going up on it would break it down!" He is referring to the wall around Jerusalem that Nehemiah and other Jews are rebuilding. Though there may well be some connection between this passage and the Song of Songs passage, it is far from immediately obvious, unlike the case of the Judges passage, thus I have declined, at this time, to explore it.

"In the cleft of the rock of Etam." (Judg 5:8,11) In the Song, where does the man say he wants to see the face and hear the voice of this beloved, just preceding the "foxes" verse? "In the clefts of the rock." (2:14) And, it is "upon the mountains of Bether", as translated by Murphy[91], or "on the cleft mountains" as translated in the NSRV, that the woman calls to the man to "Turn, my lover; be like a gazelle or young stag," in 2:17, just following the "foxes" verse.

It is difficult to imagine that, in reading of this enigmatic verse, the reader is not meant to hear an echo of the foxes story from Judges: in both passages, foxes end up in vineyards and people find themselves in the clefts of rocks, which is not true of any other situation in the Bible.

What is the result if the Song passage is read in the light of the Judges passage? In the Samson story, the foxes, acting as carriers for the torches destroy the food and drink supplies of the Philistines. Why does Samson do this? The very short answer is: Because he has had his wife taken away from him. In the Song of Songs, if we accept "vineyard" as a metaphor for a sexually active woman, the foxes are damaging the "vineyards"/women when they are "in bloom." Who are these foxes and why are they damaging the "vineyards" in the Song; what have they got against the women "in bloom"? It is difficult even to begin to guess[92].

---

[91]Concerning this verse, Murphy writes: "Bether as a proper name is otherwise unknown...The etymology of (Hebrew) suggests 'mountains of separation.' Another possibility is to understand (Hebrew) in the light of 8:14, where (Hebrew) ("spices") occurs in its place. The "mountains of Bether" seem to be a symbol of the woman herself." (139)

[92]Neither Murphy, nor Elliott have much to say about these foxes. It is one of those passages that Murphy cites as having what I have called "gender inconsistencies": though it is generally thought that the woman is speaking this in this verse, Murphy points out that "catch" is conjugated in the plural imperative masculine (139). Elliott says about the verse: "The continuity of animal imagery...and reference to the vines in blossom...tie the passage to all that has preceded..." (74)

Are there any thematic relationships between the Judges story and the Song? The most obvious question that comes to mind is: Does anyone have their wife taken away from them in the Song? Not directly perhaps, but, as has been shown above, depending on how one interprets the different stories in the Song, some of them may portray a women with more than one lover, though there is no evidence of any woman betraying her husband or lover in the Song, as Samson's first wife and his second wife, Delilah, have both been seen traditionally as doing. Why is this biblical "voice," in which there is never a moment's tenderness between Samson and his wives, making itself heard in the Song, which tells the diverse stories of different love relationships? Is it meant to add yet another experience of love to the ones already being told in the Song? What impact does the image of the burned vineyards from the Judges story have on the vineyard-as- sexually-active-woman in the Song? Still, while it may not as yet be clear what it is, it seems likely that there is some significance to the fact that the complex story of Samson is "hanging over" the Song.

5) "I have come to my garden, my sister, bride! I gather my myrrh with my spices. I eat my honeycomb with my honey; I drink my wine with my milk." Man speaking. 'Eat, friends, drink! Drink deeply of love!'" Speaker unknown (5:1).

Concerning 5:1, LaCoque writes:

> These 'merisms' (honeycomb/honey; wine/milk) sound strange. One does not eat the honeycomb, and one does not mix wine with milk. The term correspondence is not horizontal, but vertical, so to speak: honeycomb and wine, honey and milk. While the latter pair has already been met above (Cant. 4.11), the other pair clearly alludes to...1 Samuel 14:25-27 (the story of Jonathan, son of the king who ate (trans. words) debas and ya'ar, not knowing about Saul's vow). After Jonathan ate, his "eyes were enlightened" (trans. words wa-taro'enah 'eynayw), as in Gen 3.7 we had (trans. words) wa-tipaqah enah 'eyney seneyhem (the eyes of both were opened) after eating the "forbidden fruit." In both texts (1 Samuel and Genesis) are the violation of a taboo and an impending punishment by death...

Another literary parallel is drawn with the combination of wine and milk in Isa 55.1; they represent abundance in the produce of agriculture and nomadism. In the texts of Isaiah and the Canticle, the evocation is heavenly. Everyone is invited to enjoy fully and without restriction this new 'Eden' (cf. Isaiah 55.2), even to the point of drunkenness.

Adrianus van Selms finds another parallel in Hos 2.5: 'my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink." He writes:

'Probably in the text [of the Canticle] the gifts are mentioned as metaphorical indications of erotic pleasure, but even so it is evident that the imagery has been borrowed from the lovers' custom of exchanging presents...It is remarkable that in both passages [Hosea and the Canticle] six gifts are enumerated; that in both instances the gifts are paired; that all the gifts carry the suffix of the first person singular. And that the background in reality is always the exchanging of gifts among lovers.' (Romance, 114-15)

This single verse contains so many images, both from elsewhere in the Song and from elsewhere in the Bible that it is worthwhile to look at the images in each line separately after making a few comments about the relationships between the first four lines. Are they parallel stichs? It seems clear that the second, third and fourth are, but what about the first? At first glance, it would seem not, just as when one first reads the first line, one reads it as if the man is saying to his sister, his bride, that he has come to his garden. But it is clear from a previous usage of this same series of images in 4:12[93] that "garden" is another name he calls the woman, like "sister" or "bride", and thus the three images in the first line are parallel. Seeing these three images as parallel leads one to take a new look at the parallelism of the different stichs in the verse, which results in seeing the first stich as part of the parallels continued in stichs 2, 3, and 4: thus the man comes to his garden, then he gathers, then he eats and then drinks. Seeing the first verse as one of parallels makes the whole verse, already so rich[94], seem more complete.

---

93 "A garden enclosed, my sister, my bride, a (garden) enclosed..."

94 5:1 is like the consummation of all that he has said about her in the latter verses (4:10-16, in which he refers to "sister," "bride," "wine," "spices," "honey," "milk," "garden," "myrrh" (and the names of many other spices), all of which occur in 5:1) of the *wasf* that lasts from 4:1-16. In 4:17, the woman says to the man: "Let my lover come to his garden and eat its choice fruits." He replies with 5:1:at her invitation, moving from

Once the parallelism of the first four lines of 5:1 has been established, the reader is left with the more intriguing task of understanding what each of the lines means individually, what they all mean as a unit, and what relationship they have to the last line of the verse. The first line in which the man comes to the woman, at her invitation, seems straightforward enough, but the ideas proposed with each subsequent line become less and less easy to understand. Gathering one's myrrh with one's spice still makes sense, eating one's honeycomb with one's honey[95] less so, while the thought of drinking one's wine with one's milk turns the stomach[96]; nowhere else in the OT is there mention of them being drunk together. What is going on in these verses? Could it not be that just as the three images in the first line of the verse can be seen as three ways in which the man sees the woman, the three parallel stichs that follow might be seen as three ways in which the man sees his relationship with the woman. The four lines might be paraphrased as follows: One comes to one's garden, one's sister, one's bride, that is one enters into a relationship; sometimes it's like gathering myrrh with other spices, that is, it is a delight among delights, other times it's like eating the honeycomb with the honey, that is, it means taking the not-so-edible, the not-so-great, with the deliciously sweet, and at other times it is like drinking wine with milk, that is, sometimes the two people in the relationship make a disgusting mixture. The man says this in response to the woman's invitation and it sounds almost like part of the vows said at Christian wedding ceremonies: "For better or worse..." What of the last line of the verse? While her interpretation of the first four lines of the verse differ from the one proposed above, Elliott writes of the last line:

---

describing her, as he did in 4:1-16, to experiencing her.

[95]Two other verses in the Bible refer to the honeycomb, not only its drippings, as being sweet: Prov 16:24; Sira 24:20, but the intention is clearly figurative. Given the presence of the Samson story (due to the "foxes" story connected to Song 2:15) in the Song, the references to honey in that story (Judges 14:8-9) also come to mind.

[96]This device, in which the last line of a set of parallel stichs, is really jarring, is frequently used in Wisdom literature, and particularly in the Proverbs, to force the reader to really examine what she is reading.

> Since this line occurs at the climactic center of the Canticle, it may be suggested that it represents something like an admonition in the wisdom tradition on the goodness and riches of human love offered by way of a salute, a toast, or an exclamation to the Bride and Groom. Or, addressed to the universal audience of all Spouses everywhere, at all times, it would be similar to the one offered by Qoheleth, 'Enjoy life with the wife you love, all the days of your life.' (9:9) (119)

A brief comment on "honey and milk" in the *wasf* in Chapter 4. In 4:11, the man says: "Your lips drip honey, O bride; honey and milk are under your tongue."[97] Considering that of the 26 times "milk" and "honey" occur in the same verses in the OT, apart from the two references in the Song, only twice, in Isa 7:22[98], and Sira 39:26, is it not in the context of the phrase "land flowing with milk and honey," it seems clear that this reference to "honey and milk," was meant to call up this phrase. Why are the two reversed here, something that is seen nowhere else in the Bible[99]? Perhaps for the same reason that in 5:1, though the two words occur in the same verse, they are paired with other words, "honey" with the "honeycomb" and "milk" with "wine": with these unexpected uses of these familiar words, the poet is again forcing her readers to stop, to be aware of what they are reading, to perhaps ask themselves why she has turned this familiar saying upside-down[100], or to shift out of the "automatic mode," the habitual way most of us have of reading and existing, into a way of reading, and by extension, a way of living, in which everything is new, in which everything is now, which is a life lived in the presence of God.

---

[97] Is this verse perhaps also meant to recall and/or comment on Prov 5:3: "For the lips of a loose woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil."

[98] The Isaiah verse does not use the exact phrase but the sentiment expressed is similar: "On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey." Isa 7:21-22.

[99] They are also reversed in 5:1, with honey coming in the stich before the one in which milk occurs.

[100] It is André LaCocque's idea that such devices in the Song are subversive in that they are meant to call into question the validity of the original concept, in this case, the "land of milk and honey." LaCocque does not actually discuss this example, but if he had, he might have said something along the lines of how it would have lead readers to reflect on whether dreaming about some future land flowing with milk and honey was really such a good idea when they might instead be working hard to make the actual land in which they lived a better place.

6) "Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-hamon. He gave the vineyard to the keepers; one would pay for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My own vineyard is at my disposal--the thousand (pieces) for you, Solomon, and two hundred for the keepers of its fruit." (8:11-12) Speaker unknown.

This is the last occurrence of the "vineyard complex" of metaphors in the Song. More than any of the other sometimes enigmatic lines of the Song, these verses read like a riddle. They recall both the "keepers" and "my own vineyard" from the beginning of the Song (1:6[101]). Elliott writes:

> In 1:6, she said (trans. words) karmî sellî lo' natartî ("my own vineyard I did not keep). Here (8:12) she declares, (trans. words) karmî sellî lepanay: ("my own vineyard is before me i.e., mine to dispose of). Paradoxically the experience of Love has given her possession of herself; to be possessed (trans. words anî ledôdî wealay tesûqatô, 7:11) has meant self possession." (207-8)

Yet there is nothing in 1:6 to indicate that her vineyard was not at her own disposal; rather the woman simply indicates that she has not disposed of it as her brothers would have liked, since they punish her for the way in which she did dispose of it by making her the keeper of other vineyards. In fact, in order for her to dispose of it in ways that did not seem appropriate to her brothers, she must have had it at her own disposal. Thus the progression that Elliott and others have seen from 1:6 to 8:12, is not necessarily a progression after all. Yet there is no question that these two verses, the one coming in the Prologue and the other in the Epilogue, mirror each other.

Who are the keepers of the vineyard in 8:11-12? This word is used only in one other place in the Song, in 1:6, where it refers to the woman herself. Why would it not refer to her

---

[101] "The sons of my mother were angry with me; they assigned me as keeper of the vineyards--my own vineyard I have not kept."

again here? Then the verse would read: Solomon gave the vineyard to the keepers, i.e. to the women themselves, vineyards that are worth a thousand pieces of silver! The jealous Solomon who tried to impress his love with a great show of pomp and ceremony (3:6-11) comes to mind--he has not been referred to by name since those verses, and only in 7:5 has "king" been mentioned: he is caught in the woman's tresses. In these, the closing verses of the Song, has this great king finally decided to give up on "owning" "his" women and set them free[102]? And while it is not yet clear what relationship this conclusion has with the "brother" verses that immediately precede it, the images in the verse that immediately follows it, in which the man calls to the woman "who dwell(s) in the garden" (8:13), echo the vision of the woman who is the keeper of her own vineyard. Elsewhere[103] in the Song, the woman is compared to a garden, and here the woman dwells in the garden, in herself: the woman is self-possessed. The use of the word "dwell" here is not without echos either: of the 104 times that this word, in its different forms, occurs in the OT, 73 times it refers to God, or the Lord, who dwells or has his holy dwelling place among the people of Israel, in Zion or other variations. Of the 31 other occurrences, only in 2 of these cases is the verb (as opposed to the noun "dwelling") "dwell" used; in other words, with 2 exceptions--and the one in the Song--this verb refers to God. Thus, the woman can be seen to dwell in her garden much as God dwells among Israelites or in the high and holy place: when the latter is true, all is right in the world, and so it is, the Song is telling us, in the former case, as well.

---

[102]This interpretation may seem anachronistic--a twentieth-century feminist imposing her beliefs on a poem written at least 2000 years ago-- but it is the interpretation that this reader has felt to be imposed upon her by the text.

[103]4:12, 15, 16; 5:1, 6:2

Lily, lilies.

1) "I am a flower of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." (2:1) Woman speaking. "As a lily among thorns, so is my friend among women." (2:2) Man speaking.[104]

Elliott points out that, throughout the Song, the lovers often pick up on and then reuse terms that the other has used to describe either herself or the other[105]: this is one such case, yet, if the two lines are closely examined, they show, in fact, that the two lovers, while they may be using some of the same words, the different images they bestow upon the woman reveal different visions of her, and "do" different things to the reader. The woman calls herself "a flower of Sharon." Sharon means "flat land" or "wetlands" and it refers to

> A coastal plain which runs from near modern Tel Aviv to just south of Mount Carmel. The area had abundant marshes, forests, and sand dunes, but few settlements during biblical days. Because of its fertility and low risk of flooding, the plain was used more by migrant herdsmen than settled farmers.[106]

---

[104]This occurrence of "lily" is the first of two occurrences when the word is used in two consecutive verses. The other occurrence is in 6:2-3: "My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spice; To browse in the garden and to gather lilies." (6:2) "I am my lover's and he is mine; he browses among the lilies." (6:3) Woman speaking in both verses. Lilies and this "refrain of 'mutual belonging" (taken from Murphy, (139, who borrowed the phrase from Feuillet) come together again in 2:16: "My lover is mine and I am his who browses among the lilies." (2:16) Woman speaking.

[105]Elliot writes: "Identical images are attributed first to one, and later to the other, of the young lovers...These repetitions of image and motif are more than mere echoes, repetitions or parallels at a formal level. It is significant that they generally occur at some distance from one another in the poem, eliminating the possibility that they are simply returning a compliment by way of repartee. Instead, the poet has creatively used this device of 'mirroring' to suggest the transforming power of love whereby one changes and begins to resemble the person loved, to assume similar values, desires, feelings and in time, even physical characteristics...A variation on the mirroring dynamic is a particular mobility which the poet gives to the images of the lily...The images combine and recombine in intimately suggestive ways, creating a type of 'constellation' that extends across the poem. By identifying the image first of all with the lovers, and then with their physical bodies, the poet establishes the bonds of union between them more effectively than explicit descriptions ever could." (247-251)

[106]Taken from the Quick Verse Library CD-ROM.

The woman is clearly saying with this comparison that she, like the fertile "wetlands" of Sharon is fertile, is "green" as Hildegard of Bingen might say, and also that, like a flower, she is beautiful. With "a lily of the valleys" that follows, she is reiterating the same idea, valleys quite likely to be green, fertile places. In her vision of herself, she is a fertile being flourishing in fertile places. At the same time, she does not see herself in relationship to anyone, as she does later, when she proclaims: "My lover is mine and I am his..." (2:16; see also the other two instances of the "refrain of mutual possession": 6:3, 7:11)

What does the man respond? That "his friend among women" is "as a lily among thorns." By this comparison the man would seem to be saying that his friend is both rare and somehow greatly superior to other women: she is a colourful, fragrant, green-stemmed lily compared to prickly, grey thorns that, at best, smell of the dust in which they grow. On the surface, therefore, the images evoked by both the man and the woman are saying the same thing: that the woman is as beautiful as a flower. At the same time, the image the man creates puts the woman in surroundings that would make access to her difficult: the thorns would prick anyone who would try and get close to her. Also, the surroundings are unfriendly to her: how long would a lily survive in a landscape where thorns grow? Wouldn't she die pretty quickly just from loneliness?

Then, he refers to her as "his friend among women," which immediately puts her in relationship both to himself and to other women. Thus, this line, which on the surface exalts the woman, when it is further explored, has the opposite effect: the reader feels sorry for the woman, who in the preceding line, lives in a harmonious atmosphere, confident in her description of herself as a beautiful flower, and in this line becomes both a lone lily among thorns, and a woman to be compared to others.

Concerning 2:1-2, André LaCocque writes:

> The terms (trans. words) habaelet and saron of Cant 2.1 appear in Isa 35.-2! Let us also note that there the verb (trans. word) yesusum that the Canticle transposes through alliteration into (trans. word) sosanna. The eighth-century prophet was speaking of the blossoming of the desert ("[They] shall be glad...The desert...shall blossom as the rose...The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.) (Romance, 83)

2) "My lover is mine and I am his who browses among the lilies." (2:16) Woman speaking.

Murphy says of the verb he translates as "browses"[107]: "(Hebrew) (browses) is understood here intransitively, in the sense of "to feed oneself on," rather than transitively, in the sense of "pasture" (a flock). Both interpretations are possible." (139) and then later:

> The lover is described as one "who browses among the lilies"...The meaning is not clear. As indicated in the Notes, there is an ambiguity in the word browse (Hebrew). The translation understands him to be feeding on the lilies, which are presumably a symbol for the woman herself (2:1)." (141)

Yet in 2:1, neither the woman, nor the man has compared the woman to "lilies", but to a "lily": if the woman is one lily, then are not several women meant by "lilies", just as one vineyard meant one woman, and vineyards (in the plural) more than one woman? This interpretation of this verse completely changes its meaning: traditionally it has been seen as a "refrain of mutual belonging", in which the woman exalts in her exclusive relationship with the man. With this interpretation, the woman is saying instead that while he might be her man, he "browses among the lilies" too. Especially with the way in which Murphy formulates the sentence, "...his, who browses..." it almost sounds as if it is the man's job. Yet, her statement is matter of fact, in neither the verses that precede or follow this one does she seem to feel hurt about it; she might as well be saying, "...and I am his who works

---

[107]The NRSV translates this verse as: "My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flocks among the lilies."

with copper." Is the man's job to make love with women, just as the woman's (from the analysis of 1:6) is the "keeper of vineyards," or the keeper of a brothel?
When this verse, interpreted in this way, is looked at in the context of the verses that perched and follow it, the verses may mutually shed light on each other: in 2:15, it was unclear who the "little foxes" were that were damaging the vineyards. If the man browsing among the lilies is a metaphor for a man who "feeds upon" or makes love with women, then might not the foxes be symbolic of something of the same order? Whether the "foxes" verse is spoken by the woman, as is generally believed, or by a group of men, which is what the conjugation of the verb "catch" indicates, might not the "little foxes" be men who, rendered over-enthusiastic by the awakening winds of springtime, are perhaps leading to cases of "burn-out" on the part of the women in the brothel?

And the verse that follows? "Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, Turn, my lover; be like a gazelle or a young stag, upon the mountains of Bether." (2:17) Is the woman telling him to "turn", that is to change what he is doing, to take a break from browsing and spend the night up on the mountains instead, free as a gazelle? Is that perhaps where he is when, in 3:1, she seeks him on her bed at night? No, this time he is out and about in the city instead...

3) "Your breasts are like two fawns, the twins of a gazelle, browsing among the lilies." (4:5) Man speaking.

What does this image convey about the woman's breasts? Fawns are soft to the touch, and they are young, so they are not yet likely to have experienced any of the events in the life of an animal that might cause blemishes. In this verse they are also twins[108], in other

---

[108]Of the 6 times "twins" ("twin" in the singular does not occur) are mentioned in the OT, the first (Gen 25:24: "When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.") refers to Rebekah, Issac's

words, they resemble each other--there is a certain beauty in symmetry. And they must be contented fawns too, since what more could a fawn want than to feed himself, to browse among the lilies? The breasts-as-fawns then are "happy" to be where they are, or in other words, the woman is at ease in her own body, just as she was at ease in her environment when she proclaimed, in 2:1, in reference to herself, "I am a flower of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."

How can a consistency of meaning be postulated for this word that has so many different referents? Or is the reader meant to allow the images to inform one another? If this is the case, then the man is comparing the woman's breasts to an image he creates of himself from two images that the woman has previously[109] used to describe him: in 2:16 the woman says he "browses among the lilies," in 2:17, she calls upon him to "be like a gazelle or a young stag" and what is a fawn if not a young stag in the making? In doing so, he not only brings information from those former instances of the images to the present instance, he also somewhat modifies the original uses of the images. He is saying, then, "Those breasts are like me," or, more precisely, "like two of me." What could he mean by this? This is where the connotations from the image in 4:5 come to add their information to those from the previous verses: the softness of the fawns and their youth, as well as the general feeling of contentedness and naturalness the image exudes, softens the very virile

---

wife, giving birth to Esau and Jacob, and the second (Gen 38:27: "When the of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb.") to Tamar, who "tricked" Judah, her father-in-law, into sleeping with her by posing as a "sex trade worker." (I use this phrase because the more usual "prostitute" and to an even greater extent, "whore" are both words too laden with negative connotations and value judgements about this type of work.) The other four occurrences of the word are in the Song: the one cited above is the second occurrence. It is preceded by 4:2, which Murphy translates as: "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep to be shorn, that comes up from the washing, All of them in pairs, and none of them missing." It is followed by an almost identical occurrence in 6:6, which Murphy translates as: "Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that come up from the washing, All of them in pairs and none of them missing." and 7:3, a shortened version of 4:5: "Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle."

[109] When I say "previously" here, I refer to words that were used earlier in the text of the poem, not necessarily "previously" in a chronological sense. I do not even mean to say that the same people are using the images as used them in the other instances, just that the author has a woman and a man use them.

image the woman gave of the man in 2:16-17: any man who is going to use the image of a fawn to compare himself to a breast is quite sure of endearing himself to a woman! With this comparison is he saying that the breasts are as eager as he is to go "browsing," that is, to make love?

"Browsing among the lilies" in 4:5 is thus an exact repetition of the words used in 2:16. In 4:6, "Until the day breathes and the shadows flee," is also a repetition of the words used in 2:17, and while in 2:17, the woman then calls on the man to be "like a gazelle or young stag, upon the mountains of Bether," in 4:6, the man continues instead with: "I shall go to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of incense." The topic in the two verses may not be the same mountain, but they are both mountains: the man is echoing the woman's words, is saying that he will do what she has asked him to do. Apart from the 7 times "myrrh" is mentioned in the Song, it is mentioned 5 times in the OT[110], always in connection with either a holy and/or ritual or a sexual activity or both[111]. Of the 104 instances of "incense" in the OT[112], all have to do with some holy activity. Mountains too, in the Bible, are often symbolic of a holy place or holy activity.[113] Is this verse giving the reader some new

---

[110]Exo 30:23, Est 2:12, Psa 45:8, Prov 7:17, Sira 24:15.

[111]This is true of three of the verses: Est 2:12: "The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women."; Psa 45:8: In this Psalm, the woman, who of whom it is said in v 8: "your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad" will offer herself to the king, for her God; and Sira 24:15: "Like cassia and camel's thorn I gave forth perfume, and like choice myrrh I spread my fragrance, like galbanum, onycha, and stacte, and like the odor of incense in the tent." This is Wisdom speaking, who tells of how she was created by God and who offers herself, saying: "'Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more. Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin.'" Sira 14:19-22.

[112]The sheer number of times the reader of the Song, with its many "holy" substances is called back into the Pentateuch is worth noting: that fact alone somehow gives the Song something of a holy aura.

[113]On this subject, the Quick Verse Library CD-ROM explains: "Many important events in the Bible take place on or near mountains. God called Moses to His work at Mount Horeb, sometimes called 'the mountain of God.' A part of God's call was the promise that the Israelite people would worship there upon their escape from Egypt (Ex. 3:1-12)...The term *mountain* is also used symbolically in the Bible. It is a natural image for stability (Ps 30:7), obstacles (Zech. 4:7), and God's power (Ps 121:1-2)...Mountains often have been called

information about the "browsing among the lilies" that the man does: is it somehow a holy activity[114]? Also, it is not only in connection with the man that the woman speaks of gazelles; she also uses them as part of her adjuration to the Daughters of Jerusalem in 2:7 and 3:5: "I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and the hinds of the fields: Do not arouse, do not stir up love, until it be ready." Thus, she employs the image of the gazelle, the same image she also uses to refer to the man, in the same way another person might call upon God. Is she showing her reader, as opposed to telling her, that she equates the beauty of a gazelle with the beauty of her man with the beauty of God?

There is yet another level to the imagery in this rich verse: the breasts are compared to fawns feeding on lilies. At the same time, the proximity of the word "breast" with the image of fawns nibbling on flowers cannot help but also conjure up another image: that of a what a lover's mouth does when fondling his or her lover's breasts. Thus, not only does this verse say something about the woman's breasts, as well as about the man and how he sees himself, it also conjures up the act of love-making.

4) "His cheeks, like beds of spice that put forth aromatic blossoms. His lips, lilies that drip flowing myrrh." (5:13) Woman speaking.

Of the 27 times "spice(s)" are mentioned in the OT, it is only in 2 of the 7 times it is used in the Song that it is in conjunction with "beds", and in both of these verses, lilies are also present. Nowhere else in the OT are spices mentioned in their living, growing form, still in

---

'holy places.'"

[114]It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the whole question of the Song's origins in or resemblance to Ancient Near Eastern love poetry, a question Murphy deals with: pp. 41-57. Nowhere, however, does he mention the possibility of that one of the many love "topics" discussed in the Song may be that of the "sacred" or "temple" female or male prostitution, a controversial question that is also a far way beyond the scope of this thesis; it is, however, a question that, given the fruit of the analyses of these few images, must not any longer be overlooked by scholars.

the earth, in their "beds". Beautiful though the image of a garden of growing spices is, it is, at first, difficult to see how a lover's cheeks could resemble such a garden. Some light is shed on this question when the reader encounters the "beds of spice" again only a few verses "later" in 6:2, where the woman says her lover has "gone down to his garden, to the beds of spice". In vv. 4:12-16, the woman is clearly, not to mention repeatedly, defined by the man as a garden:

> A garden enclosed, my sister, my bride, a (garden) enclosed, a fountain sealed! Your shoots, a paradise of pomegranates with choice fruits: Henna with nard, nard and saffron; cane and cinnamon, with all scented woods; myrrh and aloes, with all finest spices. A garden, a well of fresh water, flowing from Lebanon! Arise, north wind, and come south wind! Blow upon my garden that its spices may flow[115]. Let my lover come to his garden and eat its choice fruits.

In 6:3, then, the "garden" and the "beds of spice" are shown to be parallel terms: both are metaphors for the woman, just as "bride," and "sister" also both refer to the woman. Thus in 5:13, the woman is comparing the man's cheeks[116] to herself, just as he compares her breasts to himself, above[117]: she is a "bed of spice that puts forth aromatic blossoms" and the man's cheeks are somehow like her: perhaps his beautiful "ruddy" (5:10), brown (like the earth, or the bed in which the spices grow?) cheeks blush, so that they resemble little

---

[115]This time it is not myrrh that is flowing but the garden's, the woman's spices, of which myrrh is one. In 4:15, it was the whole fountain of the garden that was flowing: it is regretful that, due to considerations of time and space, I was unable, in this thesis, to look into the symbolic use of water in the Song, water as the basic and primary liquid, out of which both the world, according to Genesis, and every baby is born; also water as one of the many "love liquids" in the Song.

[116]"Cheek(s)," which occurs only 14 times in the OT, occurs 4 of those times in Song: 1:10, which reads: "Lovely are your cheeks in pendants, your neck in beads;" 4:3, which reads: "Like a scarlet thread, your lips, and your mouth, lovely; Like a cut of pomegranate, your cheek behind your veil." The last occurrence in the Song is in 7:3, an exact repetition of the latter part (from "Like" on) of 4:3. All of these references are made to the woman's cheeks, by the man.

[117]This type of comparison is another instance of what Elliot calls the "mirroring dynamic": he likens himself, a fawn browsing among the lilies, to her breasts, she compares his lips to herself as a lily dripping flowing myrrh; this device serves to underline, in yet another way, how the other lover in a relationship becomes, at least in one's own eyes, like oneself.

red[118] blossoms, when the man sees the woman? Perhaps the "aroma" is the man's own "scent"[119]?

At first, it is just as unclear how his lips could be "lilies that drip flowing myrrh." Only in one other place in the OT is myrrh liquid, in 5:5 of the Song when the woman describes her hands as dripping myrrh, her fingers as flowing myrrh. That the very same words "drip" and "flowing" are used in both verses to describe the myrrh demands that the reader use one to enlighten her on the meaning of the other. When one does so, it becomes clear that here the woman is putting together two images that have previously been used to describe both women and a part of her[120] to create a metaphor about a specific part of the anatomy of the man, in this case his lips. She is saying that his lips are like "lilies," in other words, like women who "drip flowing myrrh." Among the various sexually "explicit" passages[121] in the Song is the brief description given in 5:4-5: "My lover put his hand through the hole and my heart trembled on account of him. I got up to open to my lover, and my hands dripped myrrh; My fingers, flowing myrrh." While the reader is told, in 5:6, that the woman had opened to her lover, only to find that he was gone, the images in 5:4-5 certainly "feel" like he didn't go without the two lovers first making some love: if that's not what's going on in those verses, then...So, when the woman says that the man's lips are

---

[118]That the blossoms might be red is pure speculation: I have no idea what colours the blossoms of different spices might be. This metaphor is one that I don't really "get", probably at least partly because I have not chosen to do a thorough analysis of what would be a very rich investigation into the "spices" in the Song.
[119]This may be possible, but it seems to me that it's rare that a person's "scent" emanates from their cheeks.
[120]In both cases it is the woman who "defined" the man as a gazelle and as "browsing among the lilies" in 2:16-17, and who "defines" herself as a lily in 2:1, and by extension, women as lilies in 2:16 and herself as having hands that drip myrrh in 5:5.
[121]Another one is 7:8-10: "Your very stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts, clusters. I said, 'I will climb the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches; Let your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your breath like apples; Your mouth like the best wine...' Flowing smoothly for my lover, spreading over my (lips and my teeth)." Again we encounter the word "flowing," but what is flowing this time? Wine. What did the analysis above of the "vineyard complex" show "wine" to be a metaphor for, but "love juices," just as myrrh is clearly here a metaphor for another type of "love juice."

"lilies that drip flowing myrrh," could she be saying that his lips are as ready for love as a woman's whose "myrrh" is flowing?

(5) "My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spice; To browse in the garden and to gather lilies. (6:2) I am my lover's and he is mine; he browses among the lilies." (6:3) Woman speaking in both verses.

LaCocque writes:

> The recurrent use of the word (trans. word) 'sosannim,' 'lilies' or 'lotuses,' in this short section (6:1-3) emphasizes still more the author's predilection for that metaphor...Most commentators pass it by, seeing in it a charming poetic term to be classified among the numerous natural metaphors of the booklet...But there is more to this metaphor. The word lily/lilies is not frequent in the Hebrew Bible, where it is used in the description of the temple's column capitals...and its bronze basin's brim, whose shape is said to have been 'like the flower of a lily' (1 KGB 7.26 NRSV=2 Chr 4.5). In Hos 14.6, the term is a figure for Israel...The heroine is compared to lilies, as the temple's column capitals and the 'molten sea' are shaped like lilies." (Romance, 128)

In these verses, quite a few of the different contexts in which "lily" has been used thus far in the Song are brought together. The first verse might be seen as being made up of four parallel verses, all of which connote the man making love with the woman or women: the first part of the verse presents little that is new: the man has "come" to "his garden" in 5:1; in 6:2 "garden" and "beds of spice" seem to be parallel terms for the woman. Here the man "goes down" to his garden, and while Murphy writes: "Of itself (Hebrew) ("go down") need not denote a descent to Sheol, as interpreted by the cultic school of thought (e.g. Meek, 131; cf. Ringgren, 26)." (167), the man is moving in a downward direction, unlike in 4:6, when he says he "shall go to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of incense," or 8:14, when the woman calls him to "be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices," these two instances being the only other times in the Song when any spice is

mentioned in connection with any movement. In the second part of the verse, while to "browse" is not new, the man browsing in the garden, as opposed to "among the lilies" is; this is also the first time the lilies are being gathered, instead of being "browsed among." 6:3 is almost an exact repetition of 2:16: the major difference[122] is that in 2:16, the woman has said "My lover is mine and I am his," and in 6:3, she says "I am my lover's and he is mine." These differences may seem trivial, and they might well be in a text that is constructed in a less complex way, but the intricate artistry of this text demands that they be explored.

Thus, the man has "gone down" to his garden, to "the beds of spice," to his woman. This sentence poses no interpretative problems. It is when the poet gives the reason for his going down that the reader begins to ask questions: he has gone down to browse in the garden, and to gather lilies, that is, he has not gone to see her for the same reasons that he usually goes. She calls him to come to his garden to "eat its choice fruits" (4:16). His reply is: "I have come to my garden, my sister, bride! I gather my myrrh with my spices. I eat my honeycomb with my honey; I drink my wine with my milk." (5:1) When the woman's invitation and the man's response to it are closely examined, it is clear that he does not do what she asks him to do, i.e. instead of eating the "choice fruits," he gathers myrrh and spices, eats his honeycomb and honey and drinks his wine and milk. But either way, he has not come to browse, which is something he usually does "among the lilies", i.e. with the other women he sleeps with...until this verse, that is. The woman also tells us he has gone down to the garden to "gather lilies": the only other time in the Song that the verb "gather" is used is in 5:1 when the man speaks of gathering his "myrrh with his spices" and it is after this verse that the whole tone of the Song changes from one in which the woman is

---

[122]There is another "slight" difference in Murphy's translation; in the NRSV this difference does not exist: Murphy translates the rest of 2:16 as "...I am his who browses among the lilies," while he renders the rest of 6:3 as: "...and he is mine; he browses among the lilies." He does not say to what this difference is due.

successfully pursued, to one in which she pursues, largely unsuccessfully[123]. When she says that he has come to "gather lilies," does she mean that he has begun to take her for one of those "other" women[124], that he wants her to be just another woman among women, a lily among lilies, no longer "a lily among thorns"?

The grounds for making such interpretative statements may seem quite shaky when these verses are looked at in isolation, and this reader would, of course, never claim that they are the correct or the only interpretations possible. Yet when the verses are looked at the context of the whole Song, the interpretations made here continue to make sense.[125] In 5:6, after some hesitation, the woman has opened her door to her lover only to find him gone. She has, in subsequent verses, searched for him in the city, and not found him; she has been wounded and had her mantle torn off. In 5:8, she has adjured the Daughters of Jerusalem with a new adjuration refrain: for the first and last time, instead of saying: "I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields: Do not arouse, do not stir up love, until it be ready." (2:7, 3:5, 8:4; in the last instance, the "gazelles and hinds of the fields" are left out), she says " I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem: If you find my lover, what shall you say to him? That I am sick with love."[126] 5:9-6:2 constitute a conversation between the Daughters of Jerusalem and the woman in which the Daughters ask: "How does your lover differ from any lover..." and the woman

---

[123]This change of tone is reflected in the difference between 2:17 and 6:3: in the earlier verse, her first assertion is that her lover is hers, she is totally confident in that knowledge, while in 6:3 she is more confident about the fact that she is his.

[124]At the same time, has she ever really been anything else? The other women are lilies, she is a lily too. Maybe she just thought herself to be different.

[125]It was only in rereading the following section, that I realized the quick overview of the large lines of the "action" in the Song I have undertaken here makes it look an awful lot as if there is plot development from section to section in the Song, whereas I have criticized Elliott for wrongly attempting to impose such a development on the poem. My criticism of her is perhaps somewhat "saved" by the fact that I am not saying that there is plot development between two people in one relationship, but instead that there is, in particular, one significant shift in the Song's tone, after 5:1, that has to do with who, the women or the men, are the dominant or powerful ones in the relationships described.

[126]This verse recalls 2:5, which is almost immediately followed by an adjuration refrain in 2:7: "Strengthen me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love."

replies with the only long *wasf* she speaks about him in the whole poem. When she is done, the Daughters ask her, in 6:1 "Where has your lover gone..." and they offer to help her look for him. It is at this point that she replies with the verses under study here, which are then followed by a *wasf* (6:4-10) spoken about the woman by the man, some of the lines of which are identical to those found in the *wasf* he speaks of her in 4:1-11[127], though in 6:4-10 the *wasf* reads almost as if it is spoken out of fear or out of a need to reassure. In the first section of this chapter, it was pointed out that perhaps in 6:2-3, instead of joyfully affirming the mutual love relationship she is in with the man, as is usually thought, the woman is, in fact, sadly admitting that while she wishes her lover were hers, and she her lover's, he is not with her, but "browsing" among other lilies.

Whether this is the case, or whether the woman speaking here is not even the same one who spoke the almost identical words in 2:16[128], something has changed. Chapter 2 is full of images in which the man is coming toward the woman, and when she does not find him in her bed at night in 3:1, and goes out into the city looking for him, her quest is successful. Chapter 4 is, almost in its entirety, a poem of praise to the woman's beauty, and in 5:1 the lover comes to the woman, as she has called upon him to do in the last verse of 4:16. It is after the latter part of 5:1, "'Eat my friends, drink! Drink deeply of love!'" that the change comes about. In Chapter 5, the lover is no longer calling upon the woman to come; he is instead so impatient that he does not even wait for her to open the door, and when she goes looking for him in the city, the outcome is the opposite of what it was earlier: the guards beat her up and she does not find the man. The "fear" *wasf* (6:4-10) is followed by the woman "going down" to the nut-garden, alone--this is one of the few times the reader sees the woman alone--"to see if the vines are budding." (6:11) The enigmatic

---

[127]The *wasf* actually continues to v.16, vv 12-16 making up the extraordinarily rich and beautiful "garden metaphor" passage.
[128] "My lover is mine and I am his who browses among the lilies."

verses 6:12-13 are followed by a renewal in the man's interest in the woman, which he expresses in a *wasf* that describes not only the woman, which has been the case with his *wasfs* up until now, but also, for the first time, how he would like to make love with her. She joins in with him, proclaiming that "I am my lover's and towards me is his desire" (7:11)[129], but by 8:1, she is lamenting that she cannot kiss her lover in public, and in 8:2 is telling him that she'd take him to her mother's house where she'd give him her "spiced wine" to drink. This is exactly what she has already done in 3:4 and there, when the act was realized, and here where it isn't, the adjuration refrain follows, as does the appearance of something (3:6) or someone (8:5) from the desert. The Solomon "procession" passage from 3:6-10 is replaced in Chapter 8 by what Elliot points out is "often referred to as the climax or 'summa' of the Canticle." (194) In 8:1-2, the woman has expressed what she would do if she could have her way with the man, and now, in 8:6-7, she goes one step farther. For the first and only time in the Song, she says what she wants to be to the man, and she also speaks, in a few powerful and succinct words, her experience of what love is[130].

LaCocque writes:

> ...consistent with Roland Murphy's reaction against the idea that love in the Song is deified, the fact that it is described as 'a flame of Yah' indicates precisely that human love can only be described with terms commonly used for divine love. They are the only fitting terms of comparison. Human love is a 'flame of Yah' in its consuming intensity, and its ardor is on a par with death swallowing up people, as says Prov 1.12." (Romance, 171)

---

[129]The refrains of mutual possession in 2:16 and 6:3, have now become an affirmation of only his desire being for her; he, in his entirety, is no longer hers, if he ever was, though she is still his.
[130]It is important to note that she is not talking about what love should or could be, but what it is, what her experience or her observation of it is. In other words, this is not some abstract treatise on love: this text confronts the reader with love first hand, at the same time as the character who speaks of them is experiencing them.

It might be easier for interpreters if the Song ended with these words, but it doesn't. It goes on, instead, to give voice to a series of short, difficult to connect passages: the "exchange"[131] between the woman and her brothers, the Solomon "riddle," a last exchange between the two lovers, in which the man returns to the attitude he had in the earlier part of the Song (before 5:1): he calls after her, he wants to hear her voice, just as he did in 2:14: "My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the recesses of the cliff, Let me see your face and hear your voice, for your voice is pleasant and your face is lovely." In 8:13, he calls, "You who dwell in the gardens, friends are listening: let me hear your voice." The woman replies with words very similar to the ones she spoke in 2:16: then she told him: "Turn, my lover; be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Bether." Now, in 8:14, she calls upon him to "Flee, my lover; be like a gazelle or a young stag, upon the mountains of spices." Murphy and Elliot see "the mountains of spices" as a metaphor for the woman, and so either see in her words the opposite of what she is saying[132] or at least detect something of a tension[133] in them. In none of the 4 occurrences of mountain(s) in the Song[134], does this reader find any indication that this word is a metaphor for the woman: on the contrary, mountains are places away from the woman: he comes to her from them (2:8) or he leaves her to go to them (2:17, 4:6[135]). In 8:14, she is beseeching him to do the same thing as in 2:17, except that now she uses a stronger word: she no

---

[131] I put the word in brackets because while the woman's response clearly makes reference to the words of her brothers, it is not really a direct reply to them.

[132] "(Hebrew) ('flee') is not to be understood as a rejection, but in the same sense of (Hebrew) ('turn'), as in 2:17. Here she invites him to the (Hebrew) ('mountains of spice'), apparently to be identified with the obscure 'mountains of Bether' mentioned in 2:17. In both cases, of course, the mountains are a metaphor for the woman." (Murphy 194)

[133] "The Beloved's response to his plea is a surprising (trans. word) "flee away, my Love." The verb (trans. word) does mean simply, "hurry" or "make haste". It always indicates a quick movement away from something, a leaving, even if the place is not specified...However, the final phrase (trans. words) (c.f. 4:6) seems to be an invitation to come to herself rather than a separation as (trans. word) in 2:17e indicated. There is a tension between 'go away' and 'come' in the Beloved's words...She is telling him to go off quickly, but implies that his going off is a way of coming again; that absence is a way of presence..." (Elliott 209-10)

[134] 2:8, 17; 4:6, 8; 8:14

[135] In 4:8, the man calls to the woman: "With me from Lebanon, O bride, with me from Lebanon shall you come! Come down from the top of Amanah, from the top of Senir and Hermon; From dens of lions, from ramparts of leopards."

longer tells him to merely "turn" but to "flee". Is it the "friends" she believes he needs to get away from? The word translated as "friends" is the same one used by the woman in 1:7 where it is translated as "companions": "Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you rest at midday, lest I become as one who covers herself near the herds of your companions." In the earlier verse, the idea of becoming "as one who covers herself near the herds of" her lover's "companions" is one that she seems to be afraid of, or at least sees as something that is not well-viewed. In the later verse, is it the same fear that prompts her to tell him to flee those companions, flee to the mountains of spices, to a high place where holy scents linger? Is this, then, what she also meant in the earlier verse?

6) "Your valley, a round bowl that is not to lack mixed wine. Your belly, a heap of wheat, surrounded by lilies." (7:3) Man speaking. This verse finds itself close to the beginning of a *wasf* that is unique among the *wasfs* spoken by the man to the woman: as mentioned in the discussion of 6:2-3, the *wasfs* in 4:1-11(16) and 6:4-10 describe the woman's many attributes, but only in 7:1-10 does the man tell us of the amourous actions that her beautiful body inspires in him. Those explicit words come later in the wasf, yet when he says that her "valley" is not to lack "mixed wine," he is already intimating that someone has got to fill it. Are there echos from elsewhere in the Song in this verse? Of course, the woman describes herself as a "lily of the valleys" in 2:1: what do those "valleys" have to say about this "valley" or vice versa? While in his notes to the text (182) Murphy gives an overview of the various possible body parts to which this image may refer, in the text itself he writes: "... 'valley' is meant as a euphemism for the pudenda. The presence of 'mixed wine' in this anatomical vessel has been understood as a reference to fecundation, or even to 'love water." (185) If this is what "valley" means in this context, which seems likely, since it is located, in the description, between the woman's thighs and her belly, then when one rereads the earlier usage of the image, the "lily of the valleys" becomes "the lily of the pudendas". As will be remembered, when the woman speaks these words of herself in 2:1,

a feeling of well-being is evoked: she is a lily growing in a place where lilies grow well. In a parallel stich, she is a "flower of Sharon", a flower growing in a fertile land. This verse was preceded by one in which the woman has proclaimed: "Indeed our couch is verdant. The beams of our house, cedars; our rafters, cypresses." (1:16-17); in other words, these verses are brimming over with images of a green, fertile land that is friendly to its inhabitants, the two lovers. These images come to join their voice to the meaning of "valley" in 7:3, and at the same time, the image of valley-as-pudenda adds yet another image of fertility, that of the womb[136], to the already fertile valley of 2:1. If the "valley" recalls her pudenda, then her pudenda also recalls the valley, and so when the poet says that the woman's valley is not to lack "mixed wine", not only is the image evoked of the woman's "valley" being full of either the different "love juices" of one person--her own or those of another person--or the different "love juices" of various people, but the reader also sees a valley, full of the vines of different grapes, growing, flourishing, and while the former image alone might seem excessive, difficult as it still is for most of people to welcome sex in our lives, let alone in our sacred texts, the naturalness of the latter image goes a long way to dispel that feeling: if it's okay for that valley to be brimming over with grapevines, why shouldn't the woman's pudenda be brimming over with all kinds of love juices?!

This beautiful image is followed by another: the man says that the woman's belly is a "heap of wheat surrounded with lilies." Murphy points out:

> The sense of the comparison of the woman's abdomen (Hebrew) ("your belly') to (Hebrew) ('a heap of wheat') is obscure; shape or color could be meant...Some commentators...interpret the likeness as a symbol of fertility...There

---

[136] And let me tell you, I know something about the womb's fertility: not only did I have one baby as I worked on this thesis and my Master's courses, but I am pregnant again, due to have my second baby shortly after I graduate!

is no other reference in ancient sources to surrounding wheat with lilies. Perhaps the metaphor is prompted by a garment or decoration worn by the woman." (182)

A survey of the 38 references to "wheat" in the OT yields a relatively uniform picture: as Sirach says (39:26): "The basic necessities of human life are water and fire and iron and salt and wheat flour and milk and honey, the blood of the grape and oil and clothing." What does this idea yield when it is applied to the image under discussion? A heap of wheat, of this substance necessary to the survival of human beings, surrounded by lilies, by women. Suddenly, the image springs to life. A heap of wheat is one that has been harvested, and here it is surrounded by women: does not some kind of harvest dance come to mind? Perhaps, but how is the woman's belly like this harvest dance? Is the man saying that the sight of her belly fills him with the same joy and excitement as the occasion of a harvest dance performed by some lovely "lilies"? It has been shown above that the image that follows, "Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle," (4:5, 7:4) is one that exudes a certain eagerness; that eagerness is well lead into by the excitement of the "wheat" image. This man is thrilled by the sight of the woman before him!

What of the other OT occurrences of the word "lily"? It occurs rarely, only 15 times and eight of those references are in the Song. The other occurrences are: four in Kings and Chronicles[137], in which the references are to the "lily-work" done by Hiram of Tyre, "an artisan in bronze" as part of the construction of the temple commissioned by Solomon[138]; two in Sirach[139]: "Send out fragrance like incense, and put forth blossoms like a lily.

---

[137] "Now the capitals that were on the tops of the pillars in the vestibule were of lily-work, four cubits high." (Ki 7:19, 22) "Its thickness was a handbreadth; its brim was made like the brim of a cup, like the flower of a lily; it held two thousand baths." (Ki 7:26; 2 Chr 4:5, except the Chr text reads "three" instead of "two thousand baths.")

[138] In the Chr example, Hiram is not mentioned.

[139] I have included the Sirach reference though it was certainly written after the Song, and thus could not have been consciously or unconsciously by the writer of the Song, because people reading the two texts today might not know when they were written, and therefore the meaning of a word from one text could inform the meaning in the other.

Scatter the fragrance, and sing a hymn of praise; bless the Lord for all his works." (Sira 39:14), where the verse is the third line in a song of praise to God; and "like roses in the days of first fruits, like lilies by a spring of water, like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day;" (Sira 50:8), where the verse is part of a long description of the high priest, Simon, son of Onias, which is introduced with: "The leader of his brothers and the pride of his people... who in his life repaired the house, and in his time fortified the temple. (Sira 50:1); and one in Hosea: "I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily, he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon." (Hosea 14:5) where the verse is part of an admonition that Hosea makes to the people of Israel; the "he" here refers to what Israel will become when "he" returns to the Lord. Thus, all of the references to lilies are connected with either a holy place, the temple, a holy song of praise, a holy man, Simon, or a people made holy by their surrender to God. Nowhere is there any explicit indication in the Song that the woman is somehow holy, yet the fact that "lily" is only ever used in holy contexts in the rest of the Bible[140], make holiness "inherent"[141] to the lily, just as its beauty is, and when the woman is referred to as a "lily" in the Song, she too becomes both "inherently" holy and beautiful.

---

[140] Still today, lilies are used to symbolize, for Christians, that most holy of occurrences: the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday.

[141] Inherent, that is, in the minds of those people versed in these texts, or literary traditions.

5.4 Ambiguity at the Linguistic Level

This section will provide a listing of the "gender inconsistencies"[142] in the Song as pointed out by Murphy in the notes to his translation: they reinforce the feeling of pervasive ambiguity in the Song, in this case on a linguistic level. When available, Elliott's comments have also been provided.

On 1:6, Murphy writes: "Although the woman presumably addresses the Daughters, the verb (Hebrew) ('stare') is masculine plural in form; the second person feminine plural ending is rare and never is used before a pronominal suffix; cf. GHB 63a, 150a. this indifference to gender occurs several times in the Song (3[143]:5,15; etc.)." (126)

On 2:5, Murphy writes: "(Hebrew) ('strengthen') is in the second-person masculine plural, but possibly without any gender intended (cf. 2:15 and possibly 5:8); in context it can be considered as an appeal to the Daughters, who are addressed with masculine gender in v. 7." (132)

On 2:5, Elliot writes: "The two masculine imperatives, (trans words) sammekûnî (trans word) and rappedûnî (trans), are addressed to the banquet guests in general(cf. 5:1ef)." (62

On 2:7, Murphy writes: "The adjuration is certainly addressed to the Daughters despite the masculine pronominal suffix (Hebrew). The use of the masculine for the feminine is frequent in the Song (4:2; 5:8; 6:6, 8)." (133)

---

[142]By this term I mean instances where, for example, the gender of a noun would seem to suggest that the woman is speaking, but the conjugation of the word suggests that it is a man.
[143]3 should read 2 here.

On 2:7, Elliott writes: "...it is not clear who speaks 2:7. The message, however, is directed to the Daughters of Jerusalem." (64)

On 2:15, which is usually attributed to the woman, Murphy writes: "'Foxes...foxes' is an example of 'repetitive parallelism of the single-word type' (Albright Survivals," 3). The form (Hebrew) ('catch') is plural imperative masculine, and the line seems to be spoken by a group ('us' is the indirect object)." (139)

On 2:15, Elliott writes: "There is considerable disagreement over who the speaker is in 2:15 as is well attested by the various commentators and versions" (73) and:

> The masculine plural imperative ehezû (trans. word) and the indirect object lanû (trans. word) do not require a speaker other than the Beloved. She uses the masculine plural imperative also at 2:5 where it would appear that she is addressing the Daughters of Jerusalem, or the guest. In 2:15 it is likely that she is quoting a familiar song or refrain. Lanû (trans word) in context may refer to the Beloved and her Lover, and it is used as naturally as arsenû (trans word) in 2:12c. (299 n.75)

On 3:6, Murphy writes: "(Hebrew) is literally 'who is this?' The feminine (Hebrew) can be construed as neuter, and (Hebrew) can be translated as 'what?' (GHB (sign) 142; (sign) 148b). This leaves open the identity of the person or thing being hailed by the speaker(s). The identical question occurs again in 8:5a, where the feminine participle (Hebrew) indicates that the woman is meant, although no answer is given." (149)

On 3:6, Elliott writes: "The feminine gender of the participle (trans. word) and the use off the interrogative (trans.word) leads one to presume that 3,6a refers to the Beloved or Bride in this case. Supporting this assumption is the fact that the same question refers to her unequivocally in 6,10 and 8,5." (83)

On 4: 2, Murphy writes: "As often in the Song, there is disagreement in gender: the pronominal suffixes (Hebrew) do not agree with their feminine antecedents; cf GHG 135o.)." (155)

On 4:9, Murphy writes about the "grammatical disparity between the masculine numeral and the feminine "eyes". (156)

On 6:5, Murphy writes: "The masculine pronoun, (Hebrew) refers back to 'eyes,' which are feminine; the fluctuation of gender occurs through out the Song; cf. (Hebrew) in 6:8, and the verbs in 6:9b." (175)

On 6:8, Murphy writes: "The masculine pronoun, (Hebrew) is used as the copula with the feminine plural noun (Hebrew word) ('queens')." (175)

On 6:8, Elliott writes: "For use of the masculine plural pronoun as standing for the feminine, see GKC, 32n..." (318, n.229)

6. Conclusion

There remain a last few words to bring to an end the wonderful journey that this thesis on the ship of the Song of Songs has been. In this conclusion, this reader will cast her mind, like a net, back over the words that have been written in it and she will pull out of those vast waters a few of the select fish that have been bred along the way, to present to her readers as a parting gift, a souvenir of their time on this voyage.

Has it been clear from this thesis how alive this poem is? Have its words of deep love and fierce rebellion, wild passion and stubborn self-affirmation, joy, determination and perseverance been heard? What about its images, so touching, beautiful, rich and expressive, sometimes surprising, have they been encountered in all their depth, complexity and splendour? Has all the mystery, sometimes confusion, enigma at least been pointed out, if not made clear? Has it been felt how this poem inspires such curiosity and occasionally a feeling of déjà-vu? How good it smells, all that frankincense and myrrh, tastes so good, all that wine, all those juicy fruits? Has a sense been conveyed of how much there is to experience and see: such fertility and virility and such opulence? Have the occasional moments of silliness and violence and loneliness in the poem been pointed out? Or how the poem is so pastoral and so "metropolitan"; so physical, so sensual, so sexual; how the language abounds in superlatives, beginning with the opening superscription?

No, sadly, there has not been time for all that. Instead, what this thesis has done is look closely at the different facets of one aspect of this "huge" poem, its ambiguity; it has described the thoughts, ideas, impressions, intuitions--artistic, intellectual, spiritual, and even a few emotional--that were called up in the mind of this reader during her extended and intense period of study of the Song.

When this thesis was undertaken, this reader hoped to be able to say, at the end of it all, full of self-satisfaction: Look now, **this** is what the Song is all about, **this** is what a secular love poem is doing in the Bible, **this** is where God is to be found, **this** is the spiritual message being communicated.

Again, sadly that is not the case; there have been no loud, definitive revelations. Instead, working with the Song, this reader has had to learn to be contented with tentative, not to say, meek, glimpses into what might be the essentially spiritual nature of the Song. And while it is not the intention of this reader to invalidate all the theological statements made about the Song, including the ones made in this thesis, in the end it seems to her that they are mostly futile attempts to nail down a truth that is too fluid even be captured properly in words. In the end, it is not what this poem *says*, or even what it *means* that makes it the "holy of holies," as Rabbi Aquiba called it. It is what the poem *does*, in Stanley Fish's words(?)[144].

What does it *do*, at least *to* or *for* a reader who decides to really delve into it?

Through the ambiguity of the nature and the number of the love relationships portrayed in it, which propels the reader into a desperate state of trying to understand what is going on, and then forces her to see that the things being told of in the Song are not to be understood by coming to any one conclusion;

Through its collage-like structure, whose inherently ambiguous nature puts another nail in the coffin of the idea that whatever the Song is trying to say, it can be summed up in one neat sentence;

---

[144]Please note that the few missing bibliographic references will be found in the final version of this thesis.

Through its images, so rich in variety and complexity that by the time the reader reaches the last instance of any one recurring image, the sheer number of connotations has her reeling;

Through the intertextuality of its language with the rest of the Bible, which makes the poem sacred, in the same way that synagogues were made into sacred places through their association with elements of the destroyed Temple[145], while at the same it remains secular;

Lastly through the gender inconsistencies at the grammatical level of the Song;

Through all of these elements, and through its artistry and its beauty, which have only been indirectly touched upon in this thesis, the Song wakes the reader up. It won't allow her to rest for a minute on any single comfy idea, but is constantly, irresistibly, taking her by the hand, dragging her off the sofa, to show her another new idea, a fresh insight, a different way of looking at an image. In other words, the Song prompts the reader to keep learning from it, about it, about love, and in the process, about herself too, and especially about her preconceived notions of what a text should be doing.

Is not knowledge, and in particular self-knowledge a quality that brings us closer to God? Does not this quality alone warrant that the Song be called the "holy of holies," as Rabbi Aqiba called it?

Yet the Song, at the same time as its ambiguity and its beauty lead the reader to be constantly on her intellectual toes, the immediacy of the events in the poem, as well as the sensuality of the images delightfully cajole the reader into being joyfully being aware of

---

[145] I thank Julie Laffond and the class in Ritual Space for this insight into the sacralizing of synagogues.

herself as a physical being. These two ambiguous "calls" together, the one to the mind and the other to the body of the reader, constitute what, for this reader, the poem *does*.

Certainly, this is no great theological insight. Are you as disappointed as I was, at first, not to find the specter of some bearded God with puffy pink cheeks, as if he's had too much communion wine to drink, breathing down your necks as this thesis draws to a close? In fact, it is no theological insight at all: it is just that the Song demands that its reader really look both at it and at herself, and insists that she be in herself as she does it. And ultimately, that makes her breathe more calmly, laugh more easily, love more generously, both herself and others. Aren't all of those things that an awareness of the presence of God usually does for people?

"Arise, my beautiful one and come!" calls the Song to her reader. "My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the recesses of the cliff, Let me see your face and hear your voice. For your voice is pleasant and your face lovely," (2:13-14) she coaxes. Such is the lovely and compelling call of the Song. Difficult to resist, isn't it? The Song may not be the good, efficient, thrifty wife from Proverbs, nor the wise man from Qohelet, though those two have their love of ambiguity in common, but it's a great joy to spend an afternoon or a few years with her; even a brief contact with her can make you feel just...divine.

7. Works Cited

Contemporary Sources

The Holy Bible. New Standard Revised Version. London: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Brenner, Athalya. The Isrealite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative. Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985.

Brenner, Athalya and Van Dijk-Hemmes, Fokkelien. On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Bible. New York: Brill, 1993.

Brenner, Athalya, ed. A Feminist Companion to the Bible, vol. 1 A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.

Brenner, Athalya. The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1997.

Boadt, Lawrence. Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

Bright, Pamela. "Biblical Ambiguity in African Exegesis." ? (?): 25-32.

Brooks, Cleanth. The Well-Wrought Urn. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947.

Childs, Brevard S. Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979.

Elliott, Timothea. The Literary Unity of the Canticle. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989.

Exum, J. Cheryl. 1973. "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs." Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 85: 47-79.

Fish, Stanley. Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Gaudreau, Lorraine. "The Role of the Woman as Disclosed in the Song of Songs." Master's Thesis. Université de Montréal, 1993.

Lacocque, André. Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on the Song of Songs. Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1998.

Lacocque, André and Ricoeur, Paul. Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Landy, Francis. "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden." Journal of Biblical Literature 98 (1971): 513-528.

__________ Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs. Bible and Literature Series; Sheffield: Almond, 1983.

Lys, Daniel. "Le Cantique des cantiques: Pour une sexualité non-ambiguë." Lumière et vie (1979): 39-53.

Matter, E. Ann. The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity. Philedelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

McEvenue, Sean. Paper on Lonergan given at the Boston College Lonergan Workshop, 1999.

Meyers, Carol. Discovering Eve. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Morrison, Toni. Song of Solomon. New York: Knopf, 1977.

Murphy, Roland E. The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990.

Nadeau, Jean-Guy. La Prostitution, une affaire de sens. Montréal: Fidès, 1987.

Pope, Marvin H. Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Garden City: Doubleday, 1977.

Quick Verse 4.0 Deluxe Bible Reference Collection. CD-ROM Hiawatha, Iowa: Parson's Technology, 1996.

Tompkins, Jane, ed. Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Bleich, David. "Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response."

Culler, Jonathan. "Literary Competence."

Fish, Stanley. "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics."

__________ "Interpreting the *Variorium*"

Gibson, Walker. "Authors, Speakers, Readers and Mock Readers."

Holland, Norman N. "Unity Identity Text Self."

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Proces: A Phenomenological Approach."

Michaels, Walter Benn. "The Interpreter's Self: Peirce on the Cartesian 'Subject.'

Poulet, Georges. "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority."

Prince, Gerald. "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee."

Riffaterre, Michael. "Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's 'Les Chats'."

Tompkins, Jane. "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism."

____________ "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response."

Tribble, Phyllis. God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

Ullendorf, E. The Bawdy Bible. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1978.

Ancient Sources

Bernard of Clairvaux. Sermones in Canticum in Canticum Canticorum: Eighty-six Sermons on the Song of Songs by Saint Bernard. tr. S.J. Eales; London: Stock, 1895.

Origen in Origen: The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies. tr. R.P. Lawson; London: Longman/Green, 1957.