BIRDS OF A FEATHER:

GENDER RELATIONS IN *THE SONG OF SONGS*

by Casondra Sobieralski, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial Feminist Theory has taught us to look beyond the confines of narrow cultural lenses as we seek to understand the diversity of gendered experience. I believe it is even more empowering to go one step further and to look not only cross-culturally but also cross-temporally. In America, when the general population tries to articulate what traditional female gender roles were, it seems they often describe those prescriptions for being lady-like from the Victorian Era, 1950s post-war America, or maybe limited snapshots of the Middle Ages, like chivalry codes and chastity belts. Accordingly women were, supposedly and stereotypically, traditionally passive and acquiescent. Proper women spoke when spoken to, and then played merely a support role in conversation. They were to express virtue through chastity until marriage, and sexual reserve even within marriage. They were not supposed to ask for the date, lest they seem too forward. They found true fulfillment only in motherhood. They were physically delicate and timid. They were sexual objects instead of active subjects. They were more often written about than authors. They were defined in opposition to men.

Places such as the ancient Near East, for example, provide a wealth of information about gendered experience that blatantly contradicts the stereotypical gender-associated behaviors that we in the contemporary West tend to call traditional. Much of it is written by women themselves, such as Egyptian love poetry and Sumerian temple priestesses' administrative records. Because many arguments about the nature of the feminine versus the socialization of femininity look only to relatively recent stereotypes to assume their platforms, ancient Near Eastern women's history can dramatically shake any presuppositions on which these arguments are based. The Song of Songs is a work of unknown origins, perhaps written by women, which somehow landed in the Hebrew Bible. It is an egalitarian Near Eastern love poem that challenges virtually every description of traditional gender roles in romantic relationships, if one looks to stereotypes of womanhood in Medieval Europe, the Victorian Era, or the 1950s, for example, to define traditional.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

If we are to look at the Song of Songs as a document or documents that hold/s cultural or gender cues, it is useful to approach the work with some historical understanding about it. This is especially true because there has been and still is so much disagreement about the Song's origin, authorship, purpose--and even genre. Seeing that there is no clear consensus among the experts can liberate and empower the lay reader to feel that his or her own ideas are valid.

Traditionally, the Song of Songs was said to be allegorical. The only love poetry in the Bible, and certainly the only pro-woman erotica, it was justified as being representative of God's love for Israel. Many have speculated that its origins are older than the rest of the Bible, and lie in pagan fertility rites of the region: Was it a liturgy to Ishtar, or associated with the Adonis-Tammuz cult of ancient Palestine? Could it have been liturgy for the spring festival of the Canaanites, celebrating Astarte and Baal as the lovers? Most contemporary scholars now dismiss these ideas. Michael Fox does not see any connection between the Song and any of these rites. As a scholar of Egyptian love poetry, Fox believes that "the Song is a late offshoot of an ancient and continuous literary tradition, one whose roots we find, in part at least, in Egyptian love poetry" (Fox xxiv).

Who wrote the Song? Medieval Jewish scholars thought that King Solomon wrote it for his favorite wife (Gordis 10). This is still a popular assumption since the Hebrew title is the Song of Solomon. This title, however, was added later by someone other than the author/s. Falk deduces that the Song is probably several separate lyric poems authored by many different people over time, between 950 and 200 b.c.e., and complied between 500 and 200 b.c.e. (Falk, Song xii). Fox disagrees. He contends that the work is one single poem with one single author. "The repetends in the Song produce a degree of homogeneity that-judging from the Egyptian love poetry and even from the Sacred Marriage Songs [of Mesopotamia] with their common subject-is not characteristic of Near Eastern love songs" (Fox 226). Like Falk, he also dismisses the idea that Solomon had anything to do with authorship. Fox interprets the use of the word "king" within the Song as a term of affection: "The lovers are called kings, princes, queens because of the way the love makes them feel about each other and about themselves" (Fox 98). For reasons to be suggested through this essay, I think it entirely plausible that the author, or authors, of the Song was or were women.

Popular understanding of the Song also assumes that it is a wedding text. Neither Falk nor Fox accepts this. While Fox concedes that they were likely sung at weddings as entertainment because they pertained to love, he cites that the couple in the work "are not married or getting married as yet" (Fox 231). In fact, because the female persona clearly still lives with her family, Fox insists that the characters are likely the age of Romeo and Juliet, about 13-16. To Fox, the language of the speakers also suggests emotional youth (Fox xii).

Scholars have also debated as to whether the Song is even poetry at all. The Mosoretic text of 1008 c.e., the Hebrew source most interpreters use, looks like prose. The Song includes little punctuation, no stanzas, and no lines. However, Falk asserts that when the text is spoken, the rhythms of verse are obvious. She contends that the Song was probably first popular oral literature (Falk, Love 67 and Songs xv).

For consistency, in this essay I will abide by Falk's hypothesis that the Song is a poem since I am using her translation. For clarity in writing however, I will argue from the standpoint of Fox's position that the work is that of one author, is one cohesive poem, and represents one couple. I will also consider that the lovers are teenagers, and view them through that lens since I see no contradictions to this idea in the text.

BRIEF NOTES ABOUT TRANSLATION AND WHY I CHOSE THIS ONE

Because I am analyzing a work in translation, I believe it is important to acknowledge why I chose a particular translation, and to offer a few of that translator's own caveats so that the reader can be appropriately critical. The arguments in this essay are based on a well-known published translation by Marcia Falk. Falk approached this translation, her Stanford doctoral thesis, with a feminist consciousness; but the Song is inherently egalitarian in its expression. Falk recalled that her professor cautioned her to "separate myself as a feminist from myself as a translator. I replied that I was grateful not to have to do any such violence to myself, since the Song of Songs was not the sexist text he apparently took it to be" (Falk, Song xi). I also chose Falk's translation because she based her work on thorough linguistic and literary analyses, but she also sought to make choices that would make sense to a contemporary Western reader. For example, where the Hebrew names a particular mound that only a scholar would recognize, she translates the name as "the mound." There is dissention among scholars about precisely where stanzas in the Songs divide, so a reader may find alternative choices in other translations. As mentioned, the Mosoretic texts do not include stanzas; but Falk breaks her translation into stanzas to show shifts in speaker, time or tone. Falk took no license, however, in determining who is speaking; in the original Hebrew, parts of speech have number and gender. Therefore, it is clear in the original text whether a female, a male, or a group of males/females is speaking. Falk reminds us, however, that, "All translations are, by necessity, interpretations" (Falk, Song xx).

WHO IS SPEAKING and WHAT THAT IMPLIES

In her translation of this text, whose origins are veiled in mystery, is Falk giving contemporary voice to an ancient female author? This is contestable. Regardless, she does seem to be giving voice to powerful and complimentary ideas about what girls or women of ancient Israel were like in secular life. Whether the original expression is one of first-hand female experience, or a male author's observation of it, we can only hypothesize; but if the author was a man, today we would call him a feminist.

I did not count myself, but Falk notes that women speak half the lines in the Song. "Even more remarkably, they speak of their own experiences and imaginations, in words that do not seem to be filtered through the lenses of patriarchal consciousness" (Falk, Song xv). Who is speaking is an important question in contemporary discourse because, as sociolinguists Rebecca Freeman and Bonnie McElhinny point out:

Of central concern to many feminists is the question of agency (cf. Butler, 1992, p.13; Collins, 1990, p. 237) …Davies (1990) describes an agentive individual as one who speaks for himself or herself, accepts responsibilities for his or her thoughts, speech, and actions, and is recognizably separate from any particular collective…Poynton (1989) argues that the issue of power and powerlessness emerges clearly at the clause level in relation to the question of agency if the analyst investigates patterns in who causes actions and who is being acted upon.

Poynton lists the following as the most obvious issues to investigate: the frequency of women compared to men in the role of agent, the nature of the processes involved, what is at the receiving end of the agents' actions, and which kinds of agents in which kinds of processes get deleted (1989, p.62.) (Freeman and McElhinny 229).

In the Song girls/women have, or appear to have, agency because they voice themselves so frequently, freely, and without interruption. The female persona talks about her inner world. She talks with assertion and unimpeded to a chorus of other women. She talks to her lover as an equal, using an emphatic tense, rather than questioning as if seeking approval or permission.
Lines like those in verse 5 give voice to the girl's interior thoughts: "Between my breasts he'll lie--/Sachet of spices,/Spray of blossoms plucked/From the Oasis." Verse 8 is less clear. Is she narrating to the chorus, or daydreaming?

He brings me to the winehall,
Gazing at me with love
…
O for his arms around me,
Beneath me and above!

O women of the city,
Swear by the wild field doe

Not to wake or rouse us
Till we fulfill our love.

From a feminist perspective, either could be interesting. If she is addressing the women of the city, perhaps this indicates a leadership position or a public confidence. If she is daydreaming, the poem still celebrates female desire. Representations of the female character's interior world, plus the lack of representations of any male interior world, might suggest female authorship.
Whereas the social environment of verse 8 is unclear, in verse 19 the girl is obviously speaking to a group because of the call and response structure. The girl beseeches women in the city to help her find her lover, and they agree to do so. Again from a feminist perspective, I note that here is a depiction of women cooperating to help another woman. If we look to the 1950s to describe traditional gender roles, we might infer that the girl is a rebel (like Sandra Dee in Grease) in being so sexually forthright as to pursue a boy. However, her actions seem to be in perfect accordance with ancient Egyptian love poetry written by women.

I believe that the best examples of the girl's agency, however, are found in her dialogues with her boy lover. She sets her bold tone from the first verse: "Take me away to your room,/ Like a king to his rooms--/We'll rejoice there with wine." This is a girl who knows what she wants. This is a girl who is not an acquiescent 1950s June Cleaver. She is not domineering or bullying to him, either, though. There is a clear equality between them. Not only is there a general parallelism in how they address each other, but the boy addresses the girl as "sister" throughout the work, in verses 17, 18, 19. This term shows affection and looks across to her, rather than placing her on a lofty pedestal or claiming a dominant standing to her.

THE WASF-EQUALITY IN THE GAZE

The tone of equality is further established in the Song of Songs as both the male and female speakers praise each other's physical beauty. Feminist criticisms of recent decades have considered at length who is/was gazing at whom in Western patriarchal culture. Deconstructing centuries' worth of material, they found that the female is almost always served up as a sexual object to fulfill male fantasy or desire. Some feminists argue that this reinforces limiting, even physically dangerous (objectification leads to depersonalization leads to sexual violence against women) stereotypes of gender roles. Even more recent debates among feminists struggle over what role agency plays in the construction of sexual objects and subjects; i.e., when women "choose" to offer themselves as sexual objects, is this sexual empowerment, or an expression of having internalized patriarchal social norms? Countless people in my experience--ranging from mostly-men championing internet porn and strip clubs, to my own grandmother--defend that this is the natural order of things: women have always served as visual candy for men; it is natural and healthy and normal for men to ogle objectified women; and it is natural for women to assume the role of the objects to lure and to be looked at.

This is not simply so, according to the Song. It provides another model of gender relations in terms of the gaze, and thus suggests that the one we spend so much time critiquing in modern times is indeed a social construction that was not necessarily prevalent in all cultures at all times. Both the male and the female speakers respectfully appreciate the other's beauty, and in similar ways, without sexual stereotyping, fetishizing, or reducing anyone to just their sexual parts. The construction of this praise is common in Arabic literature by both men and women, but the Song is the only place it appears in Hebrew literature. It is called, in Arabic, the wasf. Meaning "description," a wasf is a poetic fragment that describes parts of the body, male or female, through images. The pattern is always top to bottom, or bottom to top, with each body part followed by a comparison to something unlike the human body (Falk, Love 80). Women are not shy, passive or coy when offering praise in the wasf, and men are not crass.

Through the wasfs in the Song, we witness that both the whole body of the girl and the whole body of the boy are electric. He says (verse 20):

Your hair-as black as goats
winding down the slopes
Your teeth-a flock of sheep
rising from the stream
in twos, each with its twin
A gleam of pomegranate-
Your forehead through your veil

She says (verse 19):

Eyes like doves, afloat
Upon the water,
Bathed in milk, at rest
On brimming pools.

Cheeks like beds of spices,
Banks of flowers,
Lips like lilies, sweet
And wet with dew.

Studded with jewels, his arms
Are rounded and golden,
His belly smooth as ivory,
Bright with gems.

One inequality I do notice, however, which other critics do not mention is that the boy speaks his wasfs directly to his lover using "you." The girl frequently offers direct praise to her lover and is not shy (Sweet fruit tree growing wild/.../I blossom in your shade/And taste your love."). However, she typically addresses her structured wasfs to the wind, or to the chorus, or to whomever is listening, using the third person "he" or "his." I am not sure how to interpret this feature of the text, or the fact that not even Falk mentions it.

Does it follow that all women in this culture openly maintained such agency over their own gaze because the wasfs of the female personae in this and other poetry of the region are forthright? If the female voice does indeed represent a female pen, we could ask for the sake of comparison, were American women of the 1980s typically as sexually assertive as the pop star Madonna? Some were, some were not, but there was enough hunger for her assertion that she sold a lot of recordings, and enough tolerance that no patriarchal authority censored her. This says something about the status of women's voices and sexual freedom in the culture. One might also argue, however, that Madonna provided a fantasy voice for girls/young women who did not feel empowered to express themselves as unabashedly. Likewise, could the Song have functioned as a socially sanctioned escape valve for female desire, rather than an accurate historical representation of it?

If men drafted the female voices, do they represent a male fantasy of a female gaze, and not an actual norm of such female assertiveness? This could be even more tell-tale in the nature-versus-socialization arguments surrounding tendencies in male and female sexual roles; it would suggest that even before the women's movement of the Twentieth Century, not all healthy heterosexual men "naturally" wanted silent dolls/1950s Vargas pinup girls to consume instead of partnerships with women filled with opinions and desires of their own. No matter what you think the implicit meanings of the mutual wasfs are, undeniably the Song offers "a thoroughly nonsexist view of heterosexual love." Women are assertive, men are gentle and vulnerable, both are sensual and beautiful to each other (Falk, Love 86).

ATTITUDES EXPRESSED ABOUT SEXUALITY/WOMEN & SEXUALITY

To the reader who thinks that women's freedom to express their sexual desire on their own terms is a modern notion, the idea that ancient women were sexually assertive might seem surprising. However, considering that the Song is a book in

the Bible, it contains much bigger surprises. According to Fox and Falk there is no talk or even suggestion that the lovers are married or even engaged. (Again, this is one reason Fox thinks that they did not originate from Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage liturgies.) However, I propose another, rather radical interpretation.

Verse 14 heralds a king's wedding procession via the chorus. In verse 20, the male voice speaks of "Sixty queens/eighty brides, endless numbers of women-One is my dove, my perfect one,/pure as an only child." This surely sounds like Solomon, or someone of wealth inflating his harem, to me. If you accept the one text/one author/one couple theory, then it is clear that the king's wedding is not the young couple's, and is instead a significant community event that creates an air of romance. Verses 28 and 30 support this. In verse 28, the girl speaks of "Those that think that wealth/Can buy them love/Only play the fool/And meet with scorn." In verse 30, the boy says "Have all your wealth Solomon!/Keep all your vineyards," for he has something more genuine.

What if, though, the girl has two lovers? What if the king is her socially sanctioned husband, and there is another boy, her more rural, down-to-earth lover to whom her heart belongs? I suggest this because in the verse that follows the wedding procession is the only place in which a male effuses a long list of the girl's beautiful traits without giving her a chance to speak, as if the speaker has more stature than she. This is not the typical structure of the couple's interactions anywhere else in the text. Then near the end of the poem, in verse 30, we already read what could be seen as the boy's bitterness about Solomon's wealth. Did King Solomon come between them? The text ends with verse 31, the boy seemingly asking in a gentle whisper, "Woman of the gardens,/of the voice friends listen for,/will you let me hear you?" And the girl tells him to go quickly, like a gazelle on the hills. I interpret that he will be back.

This tone of equality and friendship in verse 31 is more characteristic of the tone of the text up until the point of the king's procession. The two-lovers hypothesis could also provide one explanation as to why the love seems to be elicit at times, such as when the chorus spies the young couple coming out of the wilderness together, or when the boy knocks on the door and then is gone. (Their presumed young ages could account for these things, too, though.) If the Song is indeed one text, I think my theory could be a strong case for defending that the girl: 1) shows agency in defying what she is supposed to do in terms of her class obligations, 2) chooses to maintain a lover of her choice over submitting her heart to the husband that her social station demands, and 3) is quite a sexually free spirit.

All considerations of marriage aside, there is no mention of the couple's fertility, procreation, or hopes for children. (The couple talks some about their own mothers and of their own conceptions.) This seems curious for a Biblical text considering that many Western religious traditions condemn the idea of sex outside of religiously sanctioned marriage, and the most conservative even condemn sex for reasons other than procreation within marriage.

Some might find important distinction in that there is no explicit mention of sexual intercourse or any penetration in the Song. Some passages anticipate the promise of sex, but the promise is out of reach. (The girl says: "Come, love, let us go out to

the open fields/And spend the night lying where the henna blooms,/…/There among the blossom and vine I will give you my love.") Taken literally, the Song is for the most part more about the sensual experience of lovers delighting in each other. However, it is easy to read many metaphors within the Song as double entendre, and to suppose that the author's intent was tastefully veiled sex. Consider verse 18:

Enclosed and hidden, you are a garden,
A still pool, a fountain.

Stretching your limbs, you open-
A field of pomegranates bloom,

Verse 19 is even more suggestive. Again, this is the girl speaking:

My love thrusts his hand at the latch
And my heart leaps for him!

I rise to open for my love,
My hands dripping perfume on the lock-

Such word play lends a very charged tone to the text that takes it over the line from being merely
sensual throughout.

Those feminists who consider a focus on womb power, or suggestions that female fertility defines Womanhood, to be an essentialist position will be pleased to see that there is no such mention of either in the Song. The lovers address each other as they see each other, not as they hope the other will be.

WHAT THE SONG SUGGESTS ABOUT THE LARGER WORLD, AND HOW THE FEMALE PERSONA IN THE TEXT RESPONDS TO THESE SOCIETAL CONDITIONS

We have seen how certainly attitudes of gender equality and sexual freedom for the female persona prevail in the Song. Other clues in the text suggest, however, that females in the culture which the work describes, and presumably represents, did face other hurdles and subordinations. In the face of all of these, though, the female persona acts or responds in a manner that many critics would consider to be feminist by today's standards.

The first example of these indicators is actually my favorite verse (29) in the text because I see such grand visuals of the girl's strength, self worth and assertion in my mind's eye when I read it. Her brothers suggest that she is too young for suitors, or perhaps not curvaceous enough to be desirable, describing her breasts as "but flowers." They continue:

If she's a wall
We'll build turrets of silver;
But if she's a door

We'll plank her with cedar.

The girl retorts, in my mind jumping forward with the confidence of Joan of Arc:

I am a wall
And my breasts are towers!
So I have found peace
here with my lover.

Perhaps her brothers are just teasing her as contemporary brothers would. Perhaps, though, they are assuming an expected role of negotiating with whom and when she can court, instead of assuming that to be her right to determine. In either case, in no uncertain terms and without hesitation or self doubt, she refuses to let the boys denigrate her, doubt her, or choose for her.

The second such passage is trickier. In verse 19, the girl is sleeping and dreaming, hears her lover at the door, and rises to greet him; but he is gone. It is not clear to me if she is dreaming the whole event, or if his voice interrupts her dream. In any case, she speaks of running out in search of him.

The men who roam the streets,
Guarding the walls,
Beat me and tear away my robe.

Oh women of the city,
Swear to me!
If you find my lover
You will say
That I am sick with love.

If this verse represents actual action, then the girl acts with bravery and determination by running after her lover. If it represents a dream, then she acknowledges her fears but still constructs a lucid solution in her head to get what she wants, whereby she acts bravely and assertively instead of whining and pining. She also employs the help of "the sisterhood," as feminists said in the 1970s, by asking the women of the city to aid her. The troubling part is that, like today, like the European Middle Ages, and like the 1950s, the girl's movement through public space is limited in the night. Even if she is dreaming, she has the awareness that it is dangerous for her to go out alone.

I should specify, however, that I offer this critique from the position of Fox's suggestion that the couple in the poem is young. If the female character were an older woman, matured by experience, it might be just as feminist for her to exercise patience. It might be read as acquired wisdom rather than as pining. Thinking back to the high dramas of adolescence, though, I am willing to assert that any girl waiting by the phone for a boy she loves is probably passively pining.

Another suggestion of society's structure emerges through references to the girl's mother. In verse 2 she terms her brothers as her mother's sons. In verse 13 she anticipates bringing her lover to her mother's home. Verse 25 says, "I'd bring you to my mother's home/(My mother teaches me.") What does this mean? Is this

typical? It seems odd given the Song's positioning in a larger text that is highly patriarchal, the Bible. A sound conclusion requires further historical research on ancient Israel. However, these verses suggest to me that the perhaps the Song was composed either at an earlier, more matrifocal time than the rest of the Bible, or within a more matrifocal pocket of the Near East. As implied in the historical look at the Songs, there were many tribes and customs and cults stewing in a small geographic area. Women had varying degrees of freedom and status in these different cultures. Historically women have been typically more sexually free in societies, in the ancient Near East and elsewhere, in which wealth and lineage pass through the female line because paternity does not need to be insured. The fact that the Song both represents female sexual agency, and also refers to the mother's home rather than the father's, again raises interesting possibilities about the Song's authorship.

With a tone that seems to come from the perspective of a mother's daughter and female supporting characters, the Song does not articulate any relationship between the boy lover and society, or between the boy and any larger social sphere. We are privy, however, to the idea that the boy is often absent. Verse 13 says (of the boy) "The one I love is not here." Verse 5: "Until the king returns/I lie in fragrance,/Sweet anticipation/Of his entrance." Verse 19: "I run out after him, calling, but he is gone," and later, "My love has gone to walk/Within his garden." This serves as yet another point for arguing a claim of female authorship. Not only does it express a detailed knowledge of the female point of view and interior world, as we investigated earlier; it also suggests a lack of knowledge about--or interest in--the boy's world beyond the relationship.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this female point of view, we learn many things about women in the ancient Near East, or at least those females in this Near Eastern text. Women spoke their wants and needs with confidence, outspokenness, eloquence and agency. They cooperated with each other. They spoke with males as equals and friends. They were not passive sexual objects to be merely consumed. Rather, they did some gazing of their own. They maintained sexual freedom, and did not always tie sexuality with reproduction. Counter to the advice of "proper" 1950s mothers, they sometimes called upon the boys and made the first move. They exercised freedom of choice in selecting lovers. They knew confidence and positive body image. Unfortunately, though, they still had to be wary of violence on the streets.

Whether the ideas in the Song represent the real or imagined experiences of one woman author, several women authors, a proto-feminist male author or authors, or a combination thereof, we cannot know. We also cannot be sure if this text represents a realistic portrayal of women in the society, a prescribed ideal, or a rebellious alternative to what was. However, given the relationship of this work to similar and prevalent ancient Egyptian love poetry, I would defend that it represents norms for gender behavior typical to the society of the authors. These authors probably were not from patriarchal Hebrew tribes. The accuracy of historical facts, however, is not nearly so profound as what the text offers us in the present: a model of heterosexual relationships based on gender equality and

mutual respect. The Song also offers a challenge to the popular assumption that women were typically or "traditionally" subservient to men or dominated by men until modern times.

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