The attempts of ancient and medieval commentators on the Song of Songs to evade the carnal embrace of its female lover through allegorical exposition merely had the effect of plunging them instead into the arms of another lover, a male lover, God or Christ. With astonishing ease, these austere male interpreters were seduced by the Song into whispering Shulamith’s white-hot words of passion into the ear of the divine male personage in whose muscular arms they had eagerly taken refuge. Allegorical exegesis of the Song thereby became a sanctioned space, or stage, for some decidedly queer performances.¹

Like a man who awakes bleary-eyed and hungover one overcast morning, however, to discover to his horror that he is in another man’s bed, entwined in its owner’s arms, commentary on the Song eventually began to recoil from allegory. Reformed and newly sober, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century exegetes labored to straighten out the queer reading to which the Song had so long been subjected, a task arguably made imperative by the recent invention and rapid dissemination of heterosexuality, which, like electricity, photography, and automotive engineering, was becoming an indispensable appurtenance of modernity. Thus it was that the Song was transformed into a celebration of, indeed a warrant for, heterosexuality. As early as 1875, Franz Delitzsch was able to announce: “The Song transfigures natural but holy love. Whatever in the sphere of the divinely-ordered marriage relation makes love the happiest, firmest bond uniting two souls

¹ Detailed in Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 21-89, of which the first two paragraphs of the present article are a précis.
together, is presented to us here in living pictures.”\(^2\) Similar assertions proliferated in the decades that followed. This new homiletics of heteronormativity in Song of Songs interpretation found especially succinct expression in a mid-twentieth century endorsement of its erotics by the distinguished Old Testament scholar, H.H. Rowley. “The Church has always consecrated the union of man and woman in matrimony, and taught that marriage is a divine ordinance,” he wrote, “and it is not unfitting that a book which expressed the spiritual and physical emotions on which matrimony rests should be given a place in the Canon of Scripture.”\(^3\)

But it was not only from within the bosom of the Church that the conjugal interpretation of the Song issued forth. It also found expression in Julia Kristeva’s 1983 essay on the lovers of the Song, which nestles snugly in her *Histoires d’amour*, side-by-side with similar essays on other notable lovers, not least Don Juan and Romeo and Juliet. With regard to the interpretation of the Song, argues Kristeva, “It is probably of prime importance that we are dealing with conjugal love.”\(^4\) Her conjugal exposition of the Song achieves full expression in “A Wife Speaks,” the concluding section of her essay:

She, the wife, for the first time ever, begins to speak before her king, husband, or God; to submit to him, granted. But as an amorous loved one. It is she who speaks and sets herself up as equal, in her legal, named, unguilty love, to the other’s sovereignty. The amorous Shulamite is the first woman to be sovereign before her loved one. Through such hymn to the love of the married couple, Judaism asserts itself as a first liberation of women. By virtue of being subjects: loving and speaking. The Shulamite, by virtue of her lyrical, dancing, theatrical language, and by the adventure that conjugates a submission to legality and the violence of passion, is the prototype of the modern individual. Without being queen, she is sovereign through her love and the discourse that causes it to be. Limpid, intense, divided, quick, upright, suffering, hoping, the wife—a woman—is the first

\(^2\) Franz Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (trans. M.G. Easton; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980; German 1875), p. 5. Assertions such as Delitzsch’s went hand-in-glove with the interpretation of the Song as a series of ancient Hebrew wedding songs, which also made its appearance in the late nineteenth century.


common individual who, on account of her love, become the first Subject in the modern sense of the term.\(^5\)

The popular perception of Kristeva as a doyenne of “French feminist theory” is doubtless partly misleading, given the complexity of her relationship to feminism as ordinarily understood, a complexity spectacularly in evidence in the passage just quoted. For what the sentiments expressed therein seem to amount to—sentiments accentuated more than masked by Kristeva’s soaring style and penchant for hyperbole—is a version of “love patriarchalism,” lightly secularized: legally subject to her husband, the wife is nonetheless equal to him in love—and that is all the “liberation” she requires. Swimming blithely against the current of two decades of feminist criticism and activism, Kristeva here implicitly extols heterosexual marriage as the generative matrix of emancipated female subjectivity.

Kristeva is also defiant, or perhaps merely innocent, of the scholarly consensus that, by the time she writes, has stripped the Song of its traditional matrimonial framework and reconstrued it instead as a paean to unmarried love and lust, with no wedding veil in sight and no apparent intent to procreate. The feminist trajectory in this general swerve in critical discourse on the Song is furthermore characterized by an intense emphasis on the essential equality of its male and female protagonists—an unqualified equality, not hedged in by hierarchy, and hence distinct from the kind celebrated by Kristeva. Alicia Ostriker, indeed, in a footnote to her contribution to the second Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs, chastises Kristeva roundly for her “palpable misreadings” of the Song, which seem “dependent not only on Kristeva’s view of the lover as ‘king, husband, or God,’ but on her assumption that an amatory relationship is necessarily a submissive one.”\(^6\) For Ostriker, in contrast, “What is extraordinary in the Song is precisely the absence of structural and systemic hierarchy, sovereignty, authority, control, superiority, submission, in the relation of the lovers ...”\(^7\) And again: “the Song is, in effect, the quintessence of the non-patriarchal ... It includes no representation of hierarchy or rule,

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no relationship of dominance and submission, and (almost) no violence." Ostriker’s claims are by no means unique; rather, they echo a refrain that has resounded through decades of feminist commentary on the Song, beginning, it seems, with Phyllis Trible’s contention that in the Song “there is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex.”

What assumptions regarding sex and sexuality undergird this and similar assertions in Trible’s “Love’s Lyrics Redeemed,” her celebrated essay on the Song? Trible’s curiously ambiguous stance on the marital status of the lovers of the Song provides a promising point of departure for our reflections. On the one hand, Trible explicitly represents the lovers as an unmarried couple: “Never is this woman called a wife, nor is she required to bear children. In fact, to the issues of marriage and procreation the Song does not speak.” On the other hand, Trible implicitly represents the lovers of the Song as being in a relationship that exemplifies marriage as it was meant to be—an effect of her primary strategy of reading the Song against the backdrop of Genesis 2–3. “[T]he Song of Songs redeems a love story gone awry,” she argues, namely, that of the second Genesis creation account. In consequence, she repeatedly represents the lovers of the Song as a prelapsarian Adam and Eve:

Born to mutuality and harmony, a man and a woman live in a garden where nature and history unite to celebrate the one flesh of sexuality. Naked without shame or fear ... this couple treat each other with tenderness and respect. Neither escaping nor exploiting sex, they embrace and enjoy it. Their love is truly bone of bone and flesh of flesh, and this image of God male and female is indeed very good ... Testifying to the goodness of creation, then, eroticism becomes worship in the context of grace.

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And again:

In the end she [the woman of the Song] speaks directly and only to her lover, the bone of her bone and the flesh of her flesh. The man of Genesis 2 once left his father and mother to cleave to his woman (v. 24); now the woman of the Song bids her lover to make haste, and in this bidding all others are left behind. The circle of intimacy closes in exclusion when two become one.\(^{12}\)

Similar sentiments continue to echo in feminist commentary. Introducing the first *Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, a collection that included “Love Lyrics Redeemed,” Athalya Brenner announces matter-of-factly, “The primary subject matter of the SoS is earthy enough—heterosexual love and its erotic manifestations.”\(^{13}\) A decade or more of queer theory might be thought to have rendered such assertions problematic.\(^{14}\) Yet, even in the second *Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, which appeared in 2000, seven years after the first volume, the Song continues to be read unselfconsciously through the prism of an unproblematized heterosexuality. “I first sat down to read the Song of Songs as a teenager, for a high school English class,” Alicia Ostriker recalls, in an essay written specially for the second volume. “I had no trouble understanding it. The unutterably sweet words seemed to come not from outside but from within myself, as if my most intimate truth were projected onto the screen of the page.”\(^{15}\) Here and in the longer passage from which this quotation is extracted, the Song is construed as a series of erotic love lyrics in which a man and a woman give spontaneous expression to an innate sexual orientation that encapsulates the essence, indeed the truth, of

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\(^{14}\) The term “queer theory” designates a huge and heterogeneous body of work that has emerged from the field(s) of literary studies, largely during the 1990s. This work has tended overwhelmingly to be social constructionist in thrust, arguing that neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality are transhistorical essences, but instead are historical formations of relatively recent vintage. See further Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities; differences* 3.2 (1991); and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?” *PMLA* 110 (1995), pp. 343-49. For biblical incursions, see Robert E. Goss and Mona West (eds.), *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000); Ken Stone (ed.), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001); and Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor*.

\(^{15}\) Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies,” p. 36.
their inmost identities as gendered subjects—which is simply another way of saying that the Song is here assumed to be a consummate expression of heterosexual love and desire, and that heterosexuality itself is correspondingly assumed to be a transhistorical constant rather than a historical construct, a constructedness that Ostriker’s essay fails to register: although the adult Ostriker marks her distance from the adolescent Ostriker by noting the “rapt innocence” of the latter’s reading of the Song, the mature reading that she proceeds to offer is scarcely less affirming of a timeless and idealized heterosexuality than the adolescent reading. Trible’s take on the Song invites a similar critique. Like Ostriker, Trible does not explicitly employ the terms “heterosexual” or heterosexuality” in her essay; one might well argue nonetheless that what the essay implicitly celebrates is heterosexual love epitomized by marriage—argue, moreover, that Trible tacitly represents the Song as the charter document of heterosexuality, by shuffling it with the myth of sexual origins in Genesis 2–3, and enabling it to trump and displace the latter.

In the wider domain of feminist theory and criticism, heterosexuality has long been suspected of enshrining an eroticization of gender inequality. In light of such concerns, what are we to make of the efforts, not just of Trible, but of an entire “school” of feminist commentary on the Song, to read it, from within the unproblematic horizon of a transhistorical heterosexuality, as

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17 So strong is the perceived link between heterosexuality and sexism that much so-called “second wave” feminism has been characterized by a theoretical and political tendency to equate (some version of) lesbianism and feminism. Consider, for example, the proclamation of “radicallesbians,” “The Woman-Identified Woman,” in Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (eds.), Feminist Theory: A Reader (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 195-98, that “the essence of being a ‘woman’ is to get fucked by men” and the consequent call to refuse “femininity” as an irretrievably patriarchal construction in favor of a woman-centered sociality and identity. See also Monique Wittig, The Straight Mind and Other Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 32: “‘Woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.” Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in Adrienne Rich, Blood, Bread, and Poetry (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984) pp. 23-25, coins the phrase “lesbian continuum,” by which she means “to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (p. 51). The rather more “ascetic” anti-porn position of Catharine MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), stridently equates heterosex with gender oppression, without, however, envisioning the possibility of a “lesbian” escape.
the model expression of an erotics of gender equality? What else but an attempted redemption, if not an outright reinvention, of heterosexual sex? Implicit is a scathing critique of “unredeemed” heterosexual sex, which is to say of eroticized gender inequality—or of sex as ordinarily understood. Here, too, feminist scholarship on the Song reflects broader trends in feminist theory and criticism—for instance, Luce Irigaray’s bold (and controversial) attempts, now spanning several decades and many books, at a radical reconception, both theoretical and practical, of “the encounter between woman and man, between women and men.” Yet there are hints of trouble in paradise. Introducing the second Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs, Carole Fontaine, in between noting how feminist biblical scholars have “appropriated this book as peculiarly their own” and asserting that “it would be hard to find a feminist scholar who does not share, cross-culturally and cross-every other way, some of our collective delight in reading this book,” urges that we “allow ourselves the pleasures of reading as women on a topic that revels in sexuality (however dismal the literal realities may be).” If the phrase “reading as women” evokes an essentialism that is strategically deployed (if often also implicitly deconstructed) in feminist interventions that seek to open up a specifically “feminine” realm of culture or textuality, the parenthetical remark, with its evocation of a constrainingly bleak realm of “literal” sex, hints at the inherent difficulty and consequent fragility of a feminist heteroerotics centered on disciplined opposition to patriarchy and hierarchy. “There is a big secret about sex,” queer critic Leo Bersani quips; “most people don’t like it.” And, stereotypically, feminists are among those who like it least.

Now, pornography epitomizes the kind of sex that most people, feminist or not, claim to like least of all. The egalitarian erotics attributed to the Song by successive feminist critics has permitted a frankly literal reading of its sexual innuendos, while simulta-

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18 Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in Douglas Crimp (ed.), AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 215, discusses and critiques “the redemptive reinvention of sex” that underlies the agenda not only of most feminist (whether “lesbian” or “straight”) but also of much gay male theorizing about sex. As will become clear, we take his challenge seriously.


neously preserving it from charges of being pornographic. Contrast the awkward predicament of a mainstream historical-critical exegete, such as Michael Goulder, who, traversing the Song without the benefit of this guardrail, worries audibly in his 1986 book, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, that the details of his thoroughly sexual translations and interpretations reveal the Sublime Song to be nothing more “than a piece of high-class pornography.”22 By the mid-1990s, however, David Clines is able to propose, without any apparent qualms, that pornography is precisely what the Song of Songs amounts to, emboldened as he is by the critical sensibility dubbed “ideological criticism” that by then has crystallized in Anglo-American biblical studies, so that unsightly aspects of a biblical text that hitherto might have occasioned embarrassed apologetics now become occasions for unabashed uncoverings:

I start again here from the assumption that we are dealing with a male text, and I am interested in how that text constructs the woman ... In the Song, the woman is everywhere constructed as the object of the male gaze ... To her male spectators, the readers of the poem, of course, she cannot say, “Do not stare at me”; for she has been brought into existence precisely to be stared at, and the veil she would willingly cover herself with is disallowed by the poet’s gaze. She has been the victim of male violence and anger (1.6), and she bears the marks of it on her face; and now the poet invites his readers to share his sight of the woman’s humiliation. That is the very stuff of pornography.23

At first, or even second, glance, Clines’s reading of the Song, which, in effect, imputes an *exploitative* erotics to it, might seem to be worlds apart from the readings of Trible and other feminist interpreters who, with equal certainty, attribute an *egalitarian* erotics to it—and, to a degree that should not be simply elided, these readings *are* thoroughly at odds with each other. What they

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23 David J.A. Clines, “Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?” in David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 117-19. See also Donald Polaski, “What Will Ye See in the Shulamite: Women, Power, and Panopticism in the Song of Songs,” *BibInt 5* (1997), pp. 64-81. While Polaski does not explicitly label the Song “pornography,” he does follow Clines in thoroughly depicting the woman as a construction of the male gaze. He goes beyond Clines, however, via Foucault, to argue that the woman has fully internalized the male gaze, that she “glories” in it, even (p. 74), and that she thereby becomes the agent of her own subjection: “The Shulammite has become her *own* watchman” (p. 79).
seem to share, however, is an unstated yet palpable set of assumptions about what constitutes “good sex,” on the one hand, and “bad sex,” on the other. “I have the suspicion,” muses Clines,

that a work that came into the world as an erotic, perhaps pornographic, literature for the male taste proves ultimately to be irredeemable in polite society ... In a feminist age too, it will not do, for it cannot shake off all traces of the needs it was created to serve ...24

It is perhaps not surprising that “the strongest critique of sexual relations in the Song ... comes from men,” as Cheryl Exum has remarked, whereas female commentators—elsewhere quick to denounce pornographic strains in the Hebrew Bible—have been markedly reluctant to pronounce “irredeemable” what “appears to be [the] final refuge” for readers who desire “to have an ancient book”—best of all a biblical book?—”that celebrates woman’s equality and whose protagonist is an active, desiring autonomous [female] subject.”25 Exum cannily advises women not only to be willing to join men in the feminist critique of what may after all turn out to be yet another androcentric and misogynistic biblical text but also to continue to insist on their right to appropriate it positively, even through positive “misreadings.”26 But that “a feminist age” might actually have uses for the pornographic, even positive uses, is a possibility that apparently has not occurred to Exum any more than to Clines.

Indeed, it may well be that aversion to the pornographic reading, along with attraction to the heteronormative reading, is a virtually “irredeemable” feature of the modern interpretive tradition. Whereas the denial of carnality provided the condition for the queerly spiritualized eroticism of pre-modern readings, the represssion of pornography is inherent to the frank “sexuality” of modern readings of the Song—feminist and otherwise. This is merely another way of saying that contemporary commentary is part of the pivotal phenomenon that Michel Foucault locates in the late nineteenth century: a colossal “incitement to discourse” on sex, resulting in a veritable discursive explosion, but all under the cover of a rhetoric of prohibition. What emerges is “a censorship of sex” that is at the same time “an apparatus for producing an even
greater quantity of discourse about sex.”

Through a proliferation of disciplines, technologies, and regimes of knowledge and power (not least among them, psychoanalysis), the modern individual is produced as a sexual subject, possessor of a “truth” about desire that remains nonetheless hidden, buried, in need of discovery, confession, release—or “liberation.”

Thus, “censorship” and “sexuality” are two sides of the same coin, and movements of “sexual liberation” frequently prove surprisingly continuous with the repressive discourses they claim to supersede—for, one way or another, sexuality has always been “liberating” itself.

“Sexuality” as Foucault understands it is furthermore at the root of notions of sexual “identity” or “orientation,” defined by the fundamental binary of hetero-versus homosexuality. As Jonathan Katz argues, the “invention” of heterosexuality builds upon an earlier marital ideal of “true love” in such a way as to articulate the notion of a “sexual instinct” that is neither reducible to, nor altogether detachable from, the carnal instinct to reproduce, on the one hand, or the spiritual purity of disembodied love, on the other. The contradictions entailed in this irretrievably heteronormative notion of “sexuality” become particularly visible at the point of its perpetuation of a complementary, gendered division of sexual labor, in which woman is aligned with spirituality and ethics, man with fleshly desire. In this unstable context, the very existence of female desire is made tenuous, while sexuality itself remains shadowed by moral doubt.

We are suggesting that feminist interpretation of the Song of Songs has successfully disrupted, but by no means cleanly “liberated” itself from, the modern ideology of heteronormativity, with its distinctive inflection of the ideal of “true love” as “an intense spiritual feeling powerful enough to justify marriage, reproduc-

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28 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 17-35. Cf. David Carr, “Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs,” *JBL* 119 (2000), p. 235: “In place of general sexual repression, we have the specific story of the repression of the original erotic meaning of the Song. In place of more general sexual liberation, we have scholarly recovery of the original erotic meaning of the Song.”

29 This perspective is developed more fully in David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton/Penguin, 1995).


tion, and an otherwise unhallowed sensuality.” Earlier, we noted the intense gravitational pull that the ideology of heterosexual marriage exerts in Trible’s pioneering feminist reading of the Song, notwithstanding her certainty that the relationship celebrated in the Song is not (yet?) a matrimonial one. In retrospect, Kristeva’s take on the Song now seems less exceptional than it did at first glance, merely giving overt expression to the heterosexism that, potentially at least, finds covert expression in celebratory feminist readings of the Song.

But what of pornography? In relation to heterosexuality, pornography can be said to constitute a double sign. On the one hand, it is the sign of what is excluded by heterosexuality (epitomized by heteronormativity, with its teleologies of matrimony and/or monogamy). On the other hand, it is the sign for what is just barely included in heterosexuality—an “unhallowed sensuality.” If pornography is a particular and extreme instance of the incitement to sexual discourse, liberating what is only constituted in the first place by repression, resistance to pornographic readings will undeniably remain crucial to feminist strategy. Paradoxically, however, outright censorship of the pornographic may also prove problematic for feminist interpretations. This is especially the case for any feminism that seeks not to “reinvent” heterosexuality but rather to subvert or evade it—for example, by retrieving the eroticism of an ancient text, such as the Song of Songs, that predates both (modern) “sexuality” and (an equally modern) “pornography,” that is other than heterosexual, yet also not homosexual, thereby eluding the hamfisted clutches of those dualistic categories altogether. Such is the interest motivating the current essay.

Only one contemporary commentator that we know of has seemed willing to disrupt the sexual orthodoxy (which is the orthodoxy of “sexuality” itself) that has dominated feminist scholarship on the Song. To his work we now turn.

The Pleasures of Perversity

Roland Boer’s twin essays on the Song of Songs veer between erudite expositions of arcane theory (Lacanian, mainly) and X-

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32 Katz, The Invention of Heterosexuality, p. 44.
33 Cf. Jean Baudrillard, Forget Foucault (New York: Semiotext[e], 1987), p. 22: “Pornography is only the paradoxical limit of the sexual.”
rated exegesis.\textsuperscript{34} For a typical blast of Boer’s X-egesis (or should that be sexegesis?), consider his paraphrase of Song 2:8-17:

Beth Rabbim and Leb Bannon make their appearance here. (I haven’t heard of them, but both of them have kinky reputations.) It begins with a long tongue darting over Beth’s very ample breasts, “leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills” (2:8). As the camera pans out, somewhat shakily, the large pink nose and muzzle of a “gazelle” (2:9) come into view. Beth has her eyes closed and groans, enjoying the rough tongue of the animal. But now a “young stag” (2:9) walks over, sniffs Beth’s face and then her cunt. Its huge cock is distended as it gazes at Beth’s mons venus, pondering her interwoven pubes: “Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking in at the lattice” (2:9). (Oh my God, I think, he’s not going to fuck her, is he?)\textsuperscript{35}

Yes, he is, as it happens, although not as a stag but as a satyr, together with the gazelle, which has now undergone a similar metamorphosis; and the reader is spared no detail of their multi-positional \textit{ménage à trois}. Throughout this essay, indeed, scholars of the Song are afforded a rare opportunity to further expand their interdisciplinary expertise by acquainting themselves with the \textit{termini technici} of the pornographic film industry—“the meat shot,” “the money shot” (“Do we not also find the money shot in the Song?”),\textsuperscript{36} “getting wood,” “the stunt cock,” etc.—an opportunity that, however, will not be relished by all. Accustomed as we are to the vast vat of vanilla pudding that is conventional biblical scholarship, Boer’s spicy sexegetical romp will send many of us scrambling for the disciplinary spittoon. Yet Boer’s experiment should not be dismissed too quickly. Among other things, it constitutes a productive provocation for close reflection on feminism’s relationship to the erotic in general, and the erotics of the Song of Songs in particular—a labor of reflection that Boer himself never really undertakes, however: he is particularly silent on the feminist trajectory of Song of Songs interpretation and the relationship of his own reading to it.

Boer’s reading is distinguished not merely by the claim that the

\textsuperscript{34} Roland Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s): Pornography and the Song of Songs,” in Roland Boer, \textit{Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door: The Bible and Popular Culture} (Biblical Limits; New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 53-70; and Roland Boer, “The Second Coming: Repetition and Insatiable Desire in the Song of Songs,” \textit{BibInt} 8 (2000), pp. 276-301. See also his “King Solomon Meets Annie Sprinkle,” \textit{Semeia} 82 (1998), pp. 151-82, which, while it does not deal directly with the Song of Songs, is nevertheless closely aligned thematically with the other two essays.

\textsuperscript{35} Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” p. 66 his emphasis.

\textsuperscript{36} Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” p. 60.
Song is pornographic (a position he shares with Clines), nor even solely by the extravagant terms in which he claims it (“the Song ... is part of the invention of pornography”), but by his positive assessment of the Song as a pornographic text. Boer is presumably aware that his pro-porn reading invites double censorship from at least some feminist biblical scholars, first for denying them scarce biblical resources for a kinder, gentler sexuality, and second for enjoying it so much; but he is also aware that pornography—together with sadomasochism and other “perverse” sexual practices—has produced fierce public debates not only with but also (and perhaps more significantly) within feminism itself. At least since the “sex wars” of the 1980s, anti-porn feminists who favor censorship have been knocking heads with sex radicals of various stripes, many also strongly aligned with feminism. Feminism—scarcely a monolith as either a political or an intellectual phenomenon—has thus produced not only some of the toughest critiques of pornography but also some of the toughest critiques of censorship. “One would think,” notes Lynda Hart wryly (echoing the sentiments of Gayle Rubin), “that women didn’t join the feminist movement in order to have their sexual practices policed by feminists themselves.”

So it is that Boer can legitimately infer a feminist alliance for his own unabashedly pornographic exegetical project by citing feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s critique of the position that pornography, like rape, is based on domination, and that all domination-based sexuality is inherently oppressive. That Butler herself is not only far from the positions of anti-porn feminists as diverse as Catharine MacKinnon and Monique Wittig, but is also herself critiqued by feminist proponents of (queer) s/m for having pathologized sadomasochistic practices even while opposing cen-

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37 Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” p. 56.
40 Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” pp. 54-55 and “King Solomon Meets Annie Sprinkle,” p. 53.
41 See n. 17 above.
sorship,\textsuperscript{42} reminds us how complex, heterogeneous, and unstable are the recent discourses of feminism and sexuality, not least at their points of overlap and interaction. Among the important contributions of Boer’s work on the Song is that it brings scholarship on the eroticism of this text for the first time to the perimeter of the contested and messy territory of feminist discourses on sex and sexuality, where purity proves elusive and pleasure is ever mingled with danger. As this is just the territory we wish to explore further, let us stay with Boer’s commentary a little longer.

Upon the Song, Boer performs an analysis that is strategically pornographic, indeed hyper-pornographic, the pornographic, for him, being the privileged form of political opposition to censorship.\textsuperscript{43} Enacted at the edge of excess and beyond, Boer’s whimsical X-egetical antics may, in the end, however, deliver not merely a “hyper-” but also a “failed” pornography, as Karmen MacKendrick describes the Marquis de Sade’s extravagant textual acts—and for many of the same honorable reasons.\textsuperscript{44} Just as Boer’s text shuttles between the numbing expanses of high theory and the eye-popping intimacy of the pornographic film loop, so too does Sade’s text shuttle between scenes of graphic—well, sadism—and rambling, frequently numbing, discourses on philosophy and politics. “The philosophical reflections that intersperse [Sade’s text] would make for very slow one-handed reading,” MacKendrick drily notes. Sade’s text, read as pornography, is “self-subverting” because of the element of interruption, but also because of the element of repetition: “Sade’s narrative climaxes are immediately irrelevant (it is only the next that matters).”\textsuperscript{45} Boer’s text, too, may be read as effectively disrupting the alternating sequence of frenzied build-up and orgasmic release typical of pornography. Boer’s text, like Sade’s, is itself an exceedingly slow one-handed read, not only

\textsuperscript{42} Hart, Between the Body and the Flesh, pp. 104-105.
\textsuperscript{43} Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” p. 55; Boer, “King Solomon Meets Annie Sprinkle,” p. 153.
\textsuperscript{44} Sade, mediated by Lacan, features briefly in Boer’s discussion of the relation of pain to sexual perversity in the Song; see Boer, “The Second Coming,” p. 283. In a more recent essay by Boer (which does not, however, deal with the Song of Songs), Sade—along with Masoch, Deleuze, Freud, and Lacan—plays a leading role in a decidedly queer symposium hosted by Yahweh himself: “Yahweh as Top: A Lost Targum,” in Stone (ed.), Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible, pp. 75-105.
because of the regular intrusion of dense theoretical interludes, but also because it comes so often and so fast, endlessly inventive yet relentlessly repetitious, peppered with itemized lists and logical permutations, and all so utterly undercontextualized as to leave even the Divine Marquis, himself possessed of scant patience in matters of contextualization, wholly in the shade. The taxonomic thrust of Boer’s exegetical extravagances comes to a minimalistic climax—or rather a vertiginous series of successive mini-climaxes, enacted with machine-gun rapidity—near the conclusion of “The Second Coming”:

Apart from [its] incessant terminology of sex, the whole Song may also be read allegorically as a series of sexual episodes, a poetic porn text: group sex in 1:2-4; a male-female combination with some extras, including shepherds and a bestial phantasy, in 1:5-2:7; animals and humans in 2:8-17; a man with a dildo in 3:1-5; an ode to the phallus and a gay scene in 3:6-11; water sports, especially piss and ejaculate, between two females in 4:1-15; a female-male SM sequence in 4:16-5:9; queer savouring of a grotesque male body in 5:10-16; swinging in 6:1-3; a lesbian sequence in 6:4-12; group female scopophilia in 7:7/6-10/9; and an orgy in 8:1-14.46

In Boer’s text, “too much happens too often,” breeding not contempt so much as sheer exhaustion, as MacKendrick says of Sade’s text,47 even when Boer’s text does not read like the subject index of a sexological monograph. Boer’s most draining sequence, perhaps, is the “Schlong of Schlongs” section of “Night Sprinkle(s),” an orgiastic XXX-travaganza that extends through a full seven pages, working its way tirelessly and schematically through every imaginable sexual act (with a couple of unimaginable acts tossed in for good measure).48

Is this “authorial misstep,” as feminist biblical scholar Alice Bach dubs the parallel sequence in Boer’s “King Solomon Meets Annie Sprinkle,” really “self-serving and icky”?49 True, Boer’s eroticism is excessive and nonteleological, and as such inefficient, not to say pointless—but that precisely is the point, we might answer Bach on Boer’s behalf (although without denying that she, too, has a point). Calculated misstep is the technique by which Boer’s text begins to exceed and thereby escape the repressive regime of heteronormative sexuality—of which pornography is a notable, but

47 MacKendrick, Counterpleasures, p. 54.
48 Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” pp. 64-70.
by no means necessarily subversive, byproduct, we would argue (at that point arguing both with and against Boer). In other words, by taking the pornographic reading to the point of “failure,” Boer begins to succeed at productive perversity: ceasing merely to react, his commentary begins effectively to resist the Censor and the near-ubiquitous ideological apparatus that is ever at the latter’s disposal.

Performing a “strong,” even violent, reading of the Song as hyper-erotic literature, Boer tops the biblical text. Like all good tops, he is a persuasive as well as a forceful partner. Like all good bottoms, the Song resists even as it surrenders to his will. The Song of Songs is indeed a perverse text, it seems to us. Its excessive eroticism, like that of Boer’s commentary, runs counter to the conventionally pornographic—yet it does so differently. If in Boer’s pornographic rescripting of the Song “too much happens too often,” in the Song itself, one might say, “nothing ever happens at all, leaving the reader in a constant ... state of suspense”—as MacKendrick describes Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s languid erotic opus Venus in Furs. “The point is not merely to avoid climax,” she continues; “Masoch’s characters ... deliberately arouse their desires and delight in this arousal,” but only the better to “enjoy their own frustration.” They are thus “at a significant remove” from the gratification-greedy individuals conjured up by antiporn polemic, “who cannot tolerate ... the frustration of being told no.” Looked at from the bottom, indeed, the Song of Songs begins to seem surprisingly akin to Masoch’s magnum opus: presenting a slowly shifting, subtly repetitious series of elaborately described scenes that fire anticipation, the Song ... narrative momentum and frustrates the readerly desire for narrative consummation, saturating the text instead with the

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50 Elsewhere he seems to prefer to play the bottom; see Boer, “Yahweh as Top,” p. 80 n. 1.
51 Cf. MacKendrick, Counterpleasures, p. 129: “Intensity requires making others want the pain imposed on them, without its ceasing to be painful.”
52 Cf. MacKendrick, Counterpleasures, pp. 101, 128: For the masochist, pain and restraint “entail an exceptionally forceful enhancement of the always unexpected resistant power of the body, specifically a resistance to the seemingly irresistible disciplinary power of contemporary culture.” Conversely,” to (try to) top to no response is to expend one’s force into a void.”
pervasive pleasure of prolonged suspense. That the Song goes nowhere, ultimately, has been recognized by numerous commentators, including some as ideologically at odds as Julia Kristeva and Alicia Ostriker. Kristeva observes how the lovers of the Song “do not merge but are in love with the other’s absence,” 54 while Ostriker notes that, “Notwithstanding the efforts of generations of commentators to impose a coherent narrative plot on the Song, it goes nowhere and ends without closure.” 55 Carey Ellen Walsh argues, “The Song’s importance as a book is in its voicing of desires unconsummated ... Not having this couple consummate is the point and the power of this book.” 56 Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, for their part, remark that, “Despite the brothers and watchmen, the Song has none of the dark complication of many familiar love stories. For Romeo and Juliet, love is wedded to loss and death; for Tristan and Isolde, or for Heathcliff and Catherine, love itself is a form of suffering ... But ... the lovers in the Song exhibit few of the usual symptoms. They don’t suffer love, they savor it.” 57 Or perhaps they merely savor suffering.

Ceasing to react either with or against pornography, our reading thus sets foot in the slippery territory that MacKendrick dubs the “counterpleasures.” These pleasures, which resist rather than oppose, she defines as ones “that queer our notion of pleasure, consisting in or coming through pain, frustration, refusal. They are pleasures of exceptional intensity, refusing to make sense while still demanding a philosophical unfolding ... They are pleasures that refuse the sturdy subjective center, defying one’s own survival, promising the death not of the body but, for an impossible moment, of the subject ...” 58 What possible spaces might feminism occupy in the death of the subject achieved through complex and subtle practices of perversity? This is a question we must ask and ask again. The answers will necessarily be partial, and partly unsatisfying, for the counterpleasures by their very nature pursue their goals—political as well as erotic—only by indirect routes; their structure is such as to thwart teleology at every turn. They

56 Walsh, Exquisite Desire, pp. 34-35.
58 MacKendrick, Counterpleasures, pp. 8-19.
cannot, in other words, simply be a feminist tool, but they may be a feminist ally. For feminists, there can be no replacement for (supersession of) the opposition to patriarchy or (hetero)sexism. But opposition has its limits, its entrapments even. Allied to feminism, the counterpleasures may enable it to resist, not only its own internal orthodoxies (the inevitable by-product of opposition), but also the multiple hierarchies that—diversely—constrain female subjects from without. As performative or ritual practices (overlapping complexly with liturgy and asceticism), the counterpleasures may serve feminist ends by exposing, intensifying, parodying, displacing, and dislodging obdurate relations of power inscribed within gender (but not only gender)—techniques akin to the “consciousness-raising” and cathartic therapies long familiar to feminism, but a feminism here driven to acknowledge more deeply the inevitable and inextricable entanglement of all human relationality in asymmetrical dynamics of power.

The feminist trajectory of Song of Songs interpretation that can be said to stem from Phyllis Trible’s “Loves Lyrics Redeemed” represents, in essence, a denial of these dynamics—a denial, that is, of the ubiquity of power relations in human transactions—through a utopian reinvention of sex itself as characterized by absolute equality and mutuality. That the blueprint for such a reinvention should turn up in the Bible, of all places, is a tribute to Trible’s exegetical ingenuity. But how might the Song appear were it read as a text of counterpleasure instead?

The Wounds of Love

The Song of Songs bottoms out at 5:6-7: “I opened to my beloved but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those watchmen of the walls.” This sequence reopens and repeats 3:2-4, but whereas the earlier scene ended with a meeting (“scarcely had I passed [the watchmen] when I found him whom I love”—3:4), the later scene ends with a beating. Nowhere has this beating received more sustained scrutiny than in Fiona Black and Cheryl Exum’s “Semiotics in Stained Glass: Edward Burne-
Jones’s Song of Songs.” The stained glass of the title, which constituted the visual incitement for their reflections, is a window depicting the Song of Songs designed by the British Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, which they discovered in the medieval church of Saint Helen in Derbyshire. Burne-Jones selected twelve scenes from the Song to represent it, one of which is the beating scene: a burly watchman has gripped the woman roughly by the wrist and forced her to the ground (alternatively, he has already flattened her and is now dragging her to her feet); clenched in his other fist is a lantern, which he has thrust into her face—although the lantern is not readily visible to the viewer, as Black and Exum note, so that at first glance his fist rather seems raised to smash her in the face. Black and Exum observe how critical commentators on the Song have long been stumped by this seemingly gratuitous beating; either they pass it over in silence, or else offer unconvincing explanations for its presence. Black and Exum do not attempt to conceal their own disquiet at Burne-Jones’s representation of the scene, barely ameliorated by the fact that, in their view, the artist has balked at depicting the scene in all its bloody brutality: in the stained-glass panel the woman is not “wounded,” nor is she in any immediate danger from her attacker’s fists, one of which grips her wrist, as we said, while the other clutches the lantern. Yet their assessment of the window’s impact—its punch, if you will—is, in the end, an ambiguously positive one.

Burne-Jones’s window has sent us back to the source text with a heightened sense of the disruptive power of these details for traditional sanguine readings of this text. What would happen to the place of honour held by the biblical Song of Songs if, rather than suppressing these recalcitrant details, we foregrounded them?

What, indeed? “What Burne-Jones’s window has most impressed upon us is the importance of a counterreading of the biblical text,” they continue—and they carry us to the brink of such a counterreading, although it is perhaps more ours than theirs.

“Song 3.1-5 and 5.2-8 are commonly referred to as dream sequences,” they earlier noted, “because they both begin with the woman in her bed at night; but the text never states that she is dreaming and it is quite possible to imagine that she is lying in bed awake, thinking about her lover.” She is fantasizing, then. But what is she fantasizing about? “[W]hy would the woman’s fantasy about her lover’s approach and her response, already aborted when her lover disappears, continue to the point of violence to the dreamer? Is this a woman’s fantasy, the kind of dream a woman would have ... ?” The implied answer is no, one suspects. They continue: “or is it—and the entire biblical Song—a male fantasy representing what a male author might like to think a woman dreams about?” One similarly suspects that, for Black and Exum, this is the more likely option. But what sort of man might be disposed to suppose or imagine that a woman dreams or fantasizes about being beaten by men? Black and Exum do not feel a need to be specific. Instead, they conclude with a telling question. “Is our inability to account for this scene a result of our unwillingness to consider what is most disturbing about it?” What precisely is it that haunts the shadows of Black and Exum’s text, and, by extension, the margins of their Song of Songs, a text they resolutely refuse to reduce to a light-filled tale of romantic love? “[T]his picture of a man attacking a woman is difficult to negotiate,” they remark at one point. Would it be doubly difficult to negotiate—all but impossible, indeed, within the dominant feminist trajectory of Song of Songs interpretation—were the picture

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61 Black and Exum, “Semiotics in Stained Glass,” p. 339 n. 57. Walsh, Exquisite Desire, p. 113, takes this line of speculation to its logical climax: “This passage, in essence, is a biblical wet dream of a woman. It is also an allusion to autoeroticism, the Bible’s sole scene of masturbation, with the woman’s hand and fingers involved, dripping with her own wetness, and the man vanishing. This copious moistness and repeated opening is the woman’s desire and probable climax. The description of dripping fingers, followed by still silence, is a not-too-cloaked reference to a woman’s orgasm.”
to be construed instead, through a blissful act of willful misreading, to be the oblique representation of a specific woman’s insistent desire to suffer physical pain at the hands of a man (or another woman)? Would it be any less difficult to negotiate if, through a further act of interpretive violence, impelled by desire, it were somehow transmuted so as to become a still more oblique representation of a specific man’s desire to suffer physical agony at the hands of a woman (or another man)—or, rather, under her (or his) heel, preferably stiletto and tipped with steel?

Again, Roland Boer rushes in where biblical feminists (sensibly?) fear to tread. In the “Schlong of Schlong’s” section of “Night Sprinkle(s),” Boer rewrites the Song as a screenplay for a porn video, as we noted earlier. As it happens, he represents Song 5:2-7 as an s/m scene, helpfully providing the bondage ropes that the text apparently omitted to mention: “the sentinels found’ her, tied her up, ‘beat’ her and ‘wounded’ her, leaving her without her ‘mantle’” (5:7). “The S/M of fisting [‘he thrust his hand into the hole’–5:5] has given way to that of bondage, beating and pain”—all of which elicits a parenthetical question from Boer: “Is this coerced domination or the desired and pleasurable dynamic of power? It is hard to tell.” Yet the beating is only one of two elements that, in Boer’s mind, seemingly, qualify this scene for the X-rated s/m sticker. The denial of the object of desire is, apparently, the other element. Following Sue Lammith’s fisting by Frank Incense—“his hand moving back and forth inside her” stimulates “an ecstasy reminiscent of the ultimate orgasm of childbirth”—we read: “The S/M tendency of this scene develops further, for as she ‘opened to [her] beloved’ he ‘turned and was gone,’ eliciting a further parenthetical aside from Boer: “OK, I was mentally leafing through my Lacan, finding the place on the insatiability of desire.”

This second element—the indefinite withholding of the object of desire—is especially important, it seems to us, for the scene in question, encapsulating a theme that, arguably, permeates the entire Song, and concludes it although without concluding: as we have already noted, the Song goes nowhere, ultimately, and ends without closure. Arguably, too, this theme itself encapsulates the erotic economy of s/m, which is actually a counter-economy: s/m sub-

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65 Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” p. 69, his emphasis.
66 Boer, “Night Sprinkle(s),” p. 69, his emphasis. Insatiability, compulsive repetition, and nonclosure are themes that Boer develops further in “The Second Coming.”
verts heteronormative lack-based economies of desire, as the point is no longer to “get” what you “lack”—whether it be the phallus, a baby, or even your orgasm—not to “get” anything or anywhere, in fact, but rather to continue to want, ever more intensely, ever more insistently, and hence ever more pleasurably.67

Boer’s (passing) construal of the second watchmen scene in terms of an erotics of denial is, however, not unprecedented—and not because some other postmodernist chanced upon the reading before him. One needs to backtrack a little farther than that. At least one notable fourth-century interpreter seems to have actively enjoyed this scene from the bottom. For Gregory of Nyssa, the “sadomasochistic” moment in the text becomes an interpretive key to the Song’s larger meaning, unlocking the infinite mysteries of divine eros. Like the smitten woman (or so he imagines), Gregory knows that pain and ecstasy coincide in desire, and that the only true goal for a lover is found in love’s unending detours and deferrals; thus the most violent frustration of desire—the searching “bride’s” stripping, beating, and wounding—is conceived by him as the source of the soul’s deepest pleasure. Gregory not only rejoices in the agony of his own unfulfilled desire, he actively wills that the pain be intensified.

Perhaps these may seem to some to be the words of one who grieves rather than of one who rejoices—‘they beat’ and ‘they wounded’ and ‘they took away my veil’; but if you consider the meaning of the words carefully, you will see that these are utterances of one who glories greatly in the most beautiful things (Hom. 12.1359).68

With her veil removed, the soul can at last see clearly, and the beating, in the course of which she is stripped of her obscuring veil, is thus “a good thing,” he assures us (going on to compile a list of biblical beatings that might make Sade himself salivate) (Hom. 12.1361-1362). “The soul that looks up towards God and

67 Cf. MacKendrick, Counterpleasures, p.126: “In the everyday (nonecstatic) economy of investment, expenditure is loss (and desire is lack, founded upon the need to fill what is empty, replace what is lost). This is precisely the economy of productivity, the teleological economy found in the security of the center.”

68 Our readings of Gregory’s homilies on the Song of Songs are based on the following Greek text: Gregor von Nyssa, In Canticum Canticorum homiliae. Homilien zum Hohenlied (ed. and trans. Franz Dünzl; Fontes Christiani; Freiburg: Herder, 1994). Where available, we have followed the English translations of selected passages of these homilies in Gregory of Nyssa, From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings (ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961).
conceives that good desire for his eternal beauty constantly experiences an ever new yearning for that which lies ahead, and her desire is never given its full satisfaction” (Hom. 12.1366), he declares serenely, thereby leaving the yearning woman to wander the dark streets and alleyways _ad infinitum_, confident that the watchmen, like stern guardian angels, will find her and whip her, again and again—and this too is “a good thing.” “In this way she is, in a certain sense, wounded and beaten because of the frustration of what she desires.” But “the veil of her grief is removed when she learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on with her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire continually generates another desire for the transcendent” (Hom 12.1369-70).

The erotics of deferral are by no means confined, however, to the second watchmen scene in Gregory’s reading of the Song. They feature still more intensely in Song 2, as he interprets it (Hom. 4). “Stay me with sweet oils, fill me with apples: for I am wounded by love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me,” chants the woman (Song 2:5-6). Gregory takes this to mean that the bride has been wounded by the divine groom’s dart of desire. “O beautiful wound and sweet beating!” she exclaims. Pricked by the potent arrow and infected with insatiable desire, she herself _becomes_ an arrow: the divine archer’s right hand draws her near to him, while his left hand directs her head toward the heavenly target (Hom. 4.127-129). Making his way to the end of Song 2, Gregory notes that the bride seeks a place of repose “in the cleft of the rock” (Hom. 6.178; cf. Song 2:14). This image merges with an earlier one in the same chapter of the bridegroom as an apple tree into whose shade the bride has entered (v. 3), evoking for Gregory Moses’s theophanic climax in “the cleft of the rock” (Exod. 33:22; cf. Exod. 20:21), which in turn facilitates his rescripting of the apple-tree scene as wedding-night lovemaking, replayed and thereby prolonged (on his reading) in the first watchmen scene of Song 3:1-4: “thinking to achieve that more perfect participation in her union with the divine Spouse,” she finds herself, “just as Moses” did, enveloped in the secret inner space of a sacred darkness (Hom. 6.181).69 Subtle gender

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69 This is not the only time that Gregory invokes the cleft in the rock of Exod. 33:22 to supplement his reading of Moses’s entry into the “darkness” of God in Exod. 20:21; cf. his _Life of Moses_ 2.230, discussed in Virginia Burrus, “Begotten, not
ambiguities and reversals (the bride as arrow resting in the bridegroom’s cleft) are thus overlain by a queer image of Moses penetrating God’s cleft, which then renders the original exchange (between bride and bridegroom) queerer still, as Gregory interprets the bride’s experience “in the cleft” as a surprise honeymoon encounter with an unexpectedly feminine lover who teasingly leaves her ravenous for yet more heavenly delights. “Far from attaining perfection, she has not even begun to approach it,” Gregory asserts (Hom. 6.181), in seeming admiration at the divine top’s consummate skills. Immortality, for Gregory, is undying desire; and so the desire that suffuses the Song, on his reading of it, can only be the kind that does not admit of satiation. Ultimately, Gregory traces out the dim contours of a theological reading of the Song from the bottom, a mode of reading to which we shall return in our final section.

For now, however, we need to come to terms with the fact that even with Gregory’s bottom-hugging reinscription of the Song’s erotics, we are, admittedly, still within the realm of “a male fantasy representing what a male author might like to think a woman dreams about” (to echo Black and Exum’s qualm about the Song itself, specifically its beating scene). But it is a “male” fantasy radically destabilized in its maleness. For Gregory, “Shulamith, c’est moi”: her violent dreams or fantasies (if that indeed is what they are) are his own, and he imagines himself not on the giving but on the receiving end of the watchman’s stick—even as he also imagines that he, however feminized, may subsequently become an arrow directed toward a male lover’s “cleft.” Not bad for a “Church Father,” perhaps, yet Black and Exum’s question, originally addressed to the Song’s beating scene, still presses insistently: “Is this a woman’s fantasy, the kind of dream a woman would have?” They mean a “real” woman, presumably.\footnote{Made”: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity (Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 127-28, 130.} For if, as we have already noted, the implied answer is no, this is surely not because Black and Exum are ignorant of the fact that certain women do fantasize about being physically overpowered, and even about being beaten, but rather because they think it would be better if they didn’t. Nevertheless, it is worth asking back: Why shouldn’t

\footnote{ Cf. the critique of Leo Bersani’s appropriation of the feminine for the purposes of the privileged inscription (or rather of the privileged “shattering”) of a (gay) male subjectivity, in Hart, Between the Body and the Flesh, pp. 87-91.}
the text become less, not more, disturbing when the beating is represented as a fantasy, and a woman’s fantasy as that (or even a queerly femme Father’s)?

If it may be argued that the feminist policing of women’s daydreams seems even more bizarre than the feminist policing of female sexuality more generally, it must also be acknowledged that Black and Exum are in good company in worrying about the insidious psychological effects of graphic images of male domination and female submission. Women who take pleasure in fantasies of erotic violence, whether such women be casual consumers of bodice-ripping romances or serious practitioners of sadomasochistic sex, have consistently concerned and scandalized liberal feminism. Actively enjoying what, some argue, are “internalized renditions of their own abjectness under patriarchy,” such women have appeared to be perpetrators of patriarchy as well as its victims. Yet the power of fantasy not only to affect but even to constitute reality should not be underestimated. By taking female fantasies of erotic violence seriously, we may come less to fear their potential for passively shoring up an oppressive sexual status quo than to acknowledge their capacity to subvert it actively from within. The patriarchal sexual order is, arguably, already disrupted when a woman constructs herself as an actively desiring subject, even if—perhaps especially if—what she desires is a good beating. Within the terms of a Freudian psychoanalytic theory suspiciously complicit in the formation of heterosexuality, a girl accomplishes the difficult process of becoming a “woman” in part by sublimating fantasies of violence into fantasies of tender affection, thereby accepting her culturally prescribed role as guardian of the hearth of civilization. Should feminism not, then, have some place for “girls” who refuse to become “real women”—that is, “women” the way men like to imagine them? At issue here is the potential, indeed the propensity, of erotic fantasy not merely to resemble but also dissemble, and thereby reassemble, reality, engaging in a transgressive mimicry rather than a compliant mimesis.

And yet the line between the female masochist and the battered

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73 Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, p. 86, invokes “mimicry,” as articulated (differently) by both feminist theorist Luce Irigaray and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, to describe the “dissonant displacements” of oppressive models effected by s/m eroticism.
woman may continue to blur troublingly—as though it were actually impossible to distinguish in the end between a woman whose rapist claims “she asked for it” and a woman who quite literally asks for it, in the “contractual” context of s/m eroticism. This is not only because within s/m practice itself, “the mantra ‘safe, sane, and consensual’ is an ideal” none of the terms of which “can be easily accessed”;

more than that, it is because s/m is characterized by a subtle play of resemblance and dissimilarity, a structure of risk, that, for its practitioners, accounts for much of its seductive appeal—and, indeed, lends it much of its subversive potential. As MacKendrick puts it, “both [pain and restraint] entail an exceptionally forceful enhancement of the always unexpected resistant power of the body, specifically a resistance to the seemingly irresistible disciplinary power of contemporary culture.”

Or, to put it another way, s/m marks the difference between an intricate transaction, on the one hand, in which the power and overpowering of resistance delicately collide, each deriving its pleasure from the other; and a sheerly oppositional imposition of will, on the other hand, that is at once repressive and oppressive.

Above our entire discussion of the beating scene in the Song, therefore, a crucial question looms: how to distinguish ultimately between the pain-filled pleasure of a bottom and the pleasureless pain of a battered woman? Both readings of the scene are valid and, indeed, for feminists, indispensable, we would contend. Here as elsewhere, feminist and queer politics can ill afford to ignore each other. An adequately theorized feminist erotics may require that we both continue to denounce, and dare to celebrate, the beating of the woman in the Song; that we let genders oscillate and eroticisms queer; that we both remain within, and subversively exceed, the normative enclosure of modern “sexuality.” Resisting subjectification—not least, sexual subjectification—may well be the act that necessarily underlies all political resistance, above all feminist resistance—as well as all approaches to the “sacred.”

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74 Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, p. 75.
77 Georges Bataille notes that “all eroticism has a sacramental character” and that “the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives”; his construal of the “sacred” follows mysticism’s path of negative theology, steadfastly resisting the notion of a discrete, personal “God.” *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (trans. Mary Dalwood; San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 15-17, 22-23.
Missing God

For some contemporary readers of the Song, as for some ancient readers, the violent assault of the watchmen may be an indispensable fantasy. (For others, it may not.) One cannot exercise power in the absence of resistance, or resistance in the absence of power; and one cannot transgress, or transcend, one’s own boundaries alone. “That is why one needs an other: reader, god, top, bottom.”

We’ve had much to say about readers in these pages, and no little about tops and bottoms. But God? God has gone missing from readings of the Song since the ascent of “sexuality” and the demise of allegory (the latter two developments being intimately interlinked, as we began this article by noting). And in the meantime, of course, God has gone missing more generally. This might seem an unlikely stage on which to perform the return of the repressed divine. And yet, as we attempt to nudge our own reading of the Song around yet another bend, to turn it further toward counterpleasurable perversity, what could possibly be queerer than ... a theological reading? It might be argued, indeed, that the counterpleasures, through violently willing transgression between and beyond human subjects, open up upon the “sacred” or even the “divine.” “One might say that God is still love, but love has changed,” muses MacKendrick. How, then, has God changed as a consequence?

“I miss God. I miss the company of someone utterly loyal,” confesses the female protagonist of Jeanette Winterson’s novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.

I miss God who was my friend. I don’t even know if God exists, but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it. I have an idea that one day it might be possible, I thought once it had become possible ... As it is, I can’t settle, I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that love is as strong as death, and be on my side for ever and ever. I want someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me. There are many forms of love and affection, some people can spend their whole lives together without knowing each other’s names. Naming is a difficult and time-consuming process; it concerns essences, and it means power. But on the wild nights who can call you home? Only the one who knows your name. Romantic love has been diluted into paperback form and has sold thousands and millions of copies. Somewhere it is still in the original, written on tablets of stone. I

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78 MacKendrick, Counterpleasures, p. 156.
would cross seas and suffer sunstroke and give away all I have, but not for a man, because they want to be the destroyer and never the destroyed. That is why they are unfit for romantic love. There are exceptions and I hope they are happy.  

The God whom Winterson’s protagonist misses seems at first glance to be the very God whom feminists have censured, and censored, in their readings of the Hebrew prophets (Hosea and Ezekiel in particular), precisely because he is said to function as a transcendental role model for wife abusers and other men who find violence against women to be erotically exciting and/or socially justifiable. And, indeed, Winterson’s God is not unlike the “pornoprophetic” God; yet he is also not identical to him. For starters, is he really a “he”? Winterson’s character has, after all, been compelled to leave her home and church for loving “the wrong sort of people,” namely, women. In the passage that we have quoted, too, the divine “friend” whom she misses so intensely subtly transmutes, as the passage unfolds, into one for whom she would cross seas, suffer sunstroke, and gladly relinquish all that she possesses—but who is not, and must not be, male: a divine girlfriend, then? And one willing—eager, indeed—not only “to destroy” but also “to be destroyed.”

The God whom Winterson so misses might well be the God who has been missing from the Song of Songs as the modern critical tradition has constructed it. Against a scholarly consensus that (to quote Brenner again) affirms, or rather assumes, that “[t]he primary subject matter of the SoS is ... heterosexual love and its erotic manifestations,” the task of queering the Song asserts its urgency. The “literal” tradition of Song of Songs interpretation, which has become synonymous with the critical tradition, was built on the ruins of the allegorical tradition, which is to say that the modern heterosexual construal of the Song—which constantly risks relaps-

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82 Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, p. 127.
ing into a heterosexist construal, as we have argued—was predi-
cated on the banishment of God from the Song. How better, then,
to counter the heterosexist reading of the Song than by staging a
return of the divine repressed? Yet the God who returns to the
Song cannot simply be identical to the God who long ago exited
the Song, queer though the latter undoubtedly was. The God who
returns will need to be queerer still, an infinitely malleable lover,
embracing and exceeding all imaginable “positions” (gendered or
otherwise), equally at home on the contemporary altars of sado-
masochistic ritual as in the prayer closets of ancient and medieval
monks. This God, who is now nowhere in the Song, would, once
again, be everywhere in the Song, in command and under com-
mand by turns.

Abstract

How should the Song of Songs be read? As that rarest of biblical texts, one
that gives voice to female desire in the context of a sexual relationship charac-
terized by equality and mutuality rather than domination and submission? Or as
yet another vehicle for male pornographic fantasy and sexual aggression? At-
ttempting to shift the (dualistic) terms of this burgeoning debate on the Song,
this article explicitly situates itself at the intersection of feminist and queer theo-
ries, focusing especially on s/m eroticism as a site where these theories force-
fully collide and delicately collude, and arguing that feminist and queer politics
can ill-afford to exclude each other.

84 Cf. the call of Marcella Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions
in Sex, Gender, and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 95: “Then indecent
theologians must say: ‘God, the Faggot; God, the Drag Queen; God, the Lesbian;
God, the heterosexual woman who does not accept the constructions of ideal
heterosexuality; God, the ambivalent, not easily classified sexuality.’” In chapter
subsections entitled “Systematic Theology From the Margins of Sexuality” and
“Black Leather: Doing Theology in Corset and laced Boots,” Althaus-Reid con-
siders both pornography and (s/m) fetishism as theological resources (pp. 144-
51). Still more recently, historical theologian Mark D. Jordan, The Ethics of Sex
(New Dimensions to Religious Ethics; Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 163-70, like-
wise pushes the envelope of theological reflection to include the sadomasochis-
tic.