

THE SEVERN FORUM

*“Love and Romance in the Song of Songs,
the Bible’s Only Love Poem”*

by

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My topic this evening is a unique biblical book—a book that deals with two things of fundamental concern to all of us: love and death. The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is arguably the Bible’s most beautiful poetry, but it is an unusual book to find in the Bible, because its subject is not religion but love and sexual desire. It is the only love poem in the Bible, and in it a woman plays a major role. This is also a unique feature of the Song: its female protagonist is unlike any other women in the Bible. She is more independent, she has a greater degree of subjectivity, and she does not behave in the way we expect biblical women to behave. She initiates sexual encounters; she roams the streets looking for her lover; she speaks openly about her desire; and there is no indication that she is married—at least not yet—to the man she loves. It is not surprising, then, that feminist scholars have been very positive about this biblical book, praising it for its gender equality, and the absence of sexism.

For example, Phyllis Trible: In this setting, there is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex.

And Carol Meyers: The society depicted in the Bible is portrayed primarily from a male perspective, in terms of male accomplishments and in relation to a God for whom andromorphic imagery predominates. Yet in the Song, such characteristics disappear and in fact the opposite may be true; that is, a gynocentric mode predominates.

Marcia Falk says: Remarkably, the Song seems to describe a nonsexist world, and thus it can act for us as an antidote to some of the themes of biblical patriarchy.

Athalya Brenner writes this about women in the Song of Songs: They come across as articulate, loud, clear, culturally and socially undeniably effective—even within the confines and inner circle of their patriarchal society.

A role model to identify with?

Renita Weems declares: The Song of Songs advocates balance in female and male relationships, urging mutuality not dominance, interdependence not enmity, sexual fulfilment not mere procreation, uninhibited love not bigoted emotions.

Similarly, Ariel and Chana Bloch, in their commentary, say: In this book of the Bible, the woman is certainly the equal of the man. Indeed, she often seems more than his equal.

And, finally, a glowing evaluation from an influential critic outside the field of biblical scholarship, Julia Kristeva: 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.

More recently there have been some dissenting voices. My colleague, David Clines, sees the Song of Songs as a male fantasy about his ideal ‘dream woman’:

...feminist critics sometimes ignore the fact that what we have in this book is not a woman, not the voice of a woman, not a woman’s poem, not a portrayal of female experience from a woman’s perspective, but always and only what a man imagines for a woman, his construction of femininity.

Donald Polaski similarly argues that the woman’s subjectivity is constructed by the man; in other words, she can only see herself as the man sees her: The Shulamite is...the object of a male gaze from which she cannot escape, unlike the male figure...While the female figure is the Subject of the Song, this status does not mean that the Song must be heard as liberating for women. Indeed, just the opposite may be true.

Fiona Black wonders if: ...the Song of Songs is yet another victim of patriarchy. We might expect the descriptions of the woman to flatter her, but really they ridicule or, worse, are repulsive, and as such they indicate something of the lover’s unease about his love’s body and her sexuality.

Clearly scholars are becoming more critical of the portrayal of gender relations in the Song, and the question of how the lovers are presented in the poem requires closer scrutiny. In this lecture I want to enter the debate somewhat obliquely, by looking at the vision of love in the Song, first, in terms of *what that vision is* and how it is presented to us by the poet, and then, in terms of how love-talk in the Song is, in fact, gendered. Although I will be treating these issues separately for the purposes of this presentation, obviously the vision of love and the way the lovers talk about it are intimately related.

Let us begin with the only statement made about love itself in the Song of Songs 8:6-7.

These verses are, in the view of many scholars, the climax of the book, its ‘message’ so to speak. They stand out as the only didactic statement in the Song of Songs, the only time in this love poem that we are told anything about the nature of love in general. The poet places these words, like everything else that is said in the Song, in the mouth of one of the characters in the poem, for our poet is too good a poet, too subtle and too sophisticated, to preach to us

directly about love. Here in these verses, near the poem's end, the female protagonist speaks to her lover not, as she has up till now, about their love, but about love itself. The significance of these verses in the context of the Song of Songs far exceeds any meaning they have on their own, for they hold, in my view, the key to the poem's *raison-d'être*. It is the poet's desire to immortalize a particular vision of love that gives rise to the poem. The proof that love is strong as death is the poem itself—a lasting testimony to the poet's vision of love, addressed to its readers throughout time, and preserved for us thanks to its inclusion in the Bible—the circumstances of which we know little. Real lovers die, but the love that is celebrated here lives on so long as the poem is read.

It is not quite right, then, to say that the message of the poem is found in the climactic affirmation of these few verses. If we can speak at all of a message, then the medium is the message. The message is the poem itself, the work of art, a literary creation by which the poet strives to make present, through language, what cannot be captured on the page, the lovers themselves—who represent all lovers, and ultimately love itself. So how, then, does the poem immortalize love? How does it show us, and not just tell us, that love is strong as death?

The illusion of immediacy

First and foremost by showing us love as always already in progress. The Song of Songs presents us with a vision of love not in the abstract but in the concrete, through showing us what lovers do, or, more precisely, by telling us what they say. Through the exclusive use of direct speech, the poet creates an illusion of immediacy: the impression that, far from being simply reported, the action is taking place in the present, unfolding before us. Unlike other biblical texts, there is no narrative description, only dialogue. We learn about love exclusively through what lovers say about it. For example: 1:15-16; 2:2-3; 2:13-15; 4:9; 6:5; 7:11-12 [12-13H])

Voices of lovers seem to reach us directly—unmediated. But this is an illusion, for the voices are created for us by the poet. By presenting the lovers in the act of addressing each other, the poem gives us the impression that we are overhearing them and observing their love as it unfolds.

To the illusion of immediacy in the Song we might compare the situation John Keats describes upon observing figures on a Grecian urn:

*Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

Like Keats's lovers, the Song's lovers are captured in language as on the brink of attaining their bliss. Unlike Keats's lovers, they also achieve their heart's desire by means of the indirection of language—through metaphor, sexual innuendo, and *double entendre*.

The love that unfolds before us in the Song as the lovers speak is a love that is being celebrated in the present. The lovers are always taking their pleasure or just about to do so. The erotic imperative—the call to love by means of grammatical forms that suggest present time—imperatives, jussives, and cohortatives in Hebrew—lends urgency to the moment.

- 'draw me after you', 'let us run' (1:4),
- 'tell me' (1:7),
- 'rise up', 'come away' (2:10, 13),
- 'turn' (2:17),
- 'open to me' (5:2),
- 'let me see you' (2:14), 'let me hear' (2:14; 8:13), and so on.

The Song begins and ends with the erotic imperative. Suddenly, without introduction, a voice urges, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!'

- In the final verse of the Song urgency is conveyed by two imperatives. The woman seems to be sending her lover away—'Take flight, my love'—and, through *double entendre*, calling him to her in the same breath: '... be like a gazelle or young deer upon the mountains of spices!' (This is assuming the spice mountains are a *double entendre*; that is, on the one hand, we can understand them as mountains and, on the other hand, that they refer to the woman herself.)
- Not least, the climactic affirmation of love as strong as death is grounded in the erotic imperative. The woman wants to be a seal upon her lover's heart—a sign of the permanence of love—*because* love is strong as death.

Coupled with imperatives, vocatives (forms of direct address) strengthen the impression of the lovers' presence at the moment of utterance:

- my soul's beloved
- most beautiful of women
- my love
- my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one

The woman presents a vivid picture of her lover as he comes courting: see 2:8 - 9. 'Listen!' and 'Look!' focus our attention on the action in progress before us. The present moment is vividly captured by participles: the man is approaching, bounding over hills, standing, looking—his activity arrested in time and space.

Conjuring

A related poetic technique for immortalizing love is what I call conjuring. By 'conjuring' I refer to the way that, through seductively beautiful poetry, the lovers materialize and dematerialize—come into being and disappear—in a continual play of seeking and finding. Conjuring seeks to make present through language what is absent, the lovers. There aren't any real lovers, only a poem about lovers. By means of conjuring the poet brings them to life on the page before us. The man conjures his lover up repeatedly by describing her in densely metaphorical language until she materializes before us, a body clothed in metaphor. See 4:1-5.

I'll return to these metaphoric descriptions later. For now, notice how the man builds up a picture of the woman, part by part—how the poet conjures her up through language: her eyes like doves in v. 1; her hair like a flock of goats winding down Mount Gilead; her teeth (v. 2), white like newly washed sheep, and evenly paired; in v. 3, red lips and a lovely mouth; cheeks behind her veil like a slice of pomegranate, and in v. 4, her neck like a tower adorned with shields.

She, too, calls her lover forth through her poetic powers of representation—only to let him disappear so that she can conjure him up again. A striking example of this is Song 5:2–6:3. In these verses, she is telling us a story, and in her story, she conjures her lover up as a suitor begging entry to her chamber. See 5:2-5.

(Let me mention the presence of *double entendre* here. The verb 'open' never has an object in these verses; there is no door, as some translations have it. And so 'open to me' [v. 2], 'I rose to open to my lover' [v. 5], and 'I opened to my lover' [v. 6] clearly have sexual overtones.)

In v. 3 she responds to his invitation by claiming that she does not want to get up again—to get dressed and dirty her feet. Her excuse is not to be taken any more seriously than the reason he gives for wanting her to let him in: because he is wet. This is lovers' banter. All of a sudden he disappears into the night, as suddenly as he had appeared (v. 6) 'I opened to my lover, but my lover had turned and gone.'

She searches for him in the streets and is found and beaten by the city watchmen. This is a distressing event to encounter in the poem. But she is not deterred...v.8.

Without further ado, she turns to the women of Jerusalem to enlist their aid in finding her lover. They ask her what is so special about him. And she answers with a description that would not help anyone trying to pick him out in a crowd: she describes him metaphorically from head to foot. See vs 9 – 16.

Like his descriptions of her, her description of him, part by part, serves to conjure him up again before us on the page. This technique has aptly been described as 'finding-by-praise'. Thus when the women of Jerusalem ask her where her lover is, it should come as no surprise that she knows: he has gone to his garden of spices to graze among the lilies. See 6:2 - 3

This is another *double entendre*. He is with her, and we are meant to recognize this because this is not the only place in the Song where she is described as a lily and as a pleasure garden of choice spices where her lover grazes or browses.

The invitation to the reader

For the poet's vision of love to live on, the poem must be read. It needs us, its readers, in order to be actualized here and now in the present, in the acts of reading and of appreciation. Indeed, having an audience is so important that the poet provides one within the poem itself. In addition to the voices of the lovers, there is a third speaking voice, that of the women of Jerusalem. These women function as an audience, and their presence facilitates the reader's entry into the lovers' seemingly private world of erotic intimacy. The women of Jerusalem are especially important because, for readers, there is, I think, a certain element of voyeurism involved in overhearing the intimate exchanges of lovers. (Try to imagine the poem without the women of Jerusalem.) Presenting the lovers as aware of and in conversation with an audience is a poetic strategy that

makes the relationship between the lovers less private, less closed (and the Song less voyeuristic). The women's presence is always a reminder that what seems to be a closed dialogue between two perpetually desiring lovers is addressed to us, the readers, for our pleasure and possibly our enlightenment. By showing us how marvellous it is to be in love, the Song of Songs invites us to become lovers too.

And this leads me to another way the Song involves its readers so that its vision of love may live on: by encouraging readers to identify with the lovers. The Song is not about 'real' lovers or 'historical' lovers. The lovers are not identified either by name or by association with any particular time or place (except for the vaguest connections to Solomon and Jerusalem). The Song's lovers are archetypal lovers, types of lovers rather than any specific lovers. In the course of the poem, they take on various guises or personalities and assume different roles. The man is a king and a shepherd; the woman is a member of the royal court and an outsider who tends vineyards or keeps sheep. She is black, as well as like the white moon and radiant sun, with a neck like an ivory tower.

By providing access to only the voices of the lovers, to what they say not who they are, the poet is able to identify them with all lovers. This, in turn, makes it easier for readers to relate the lovers' experience to their own experience of love, real or fantasized. This strategy has been very successful, as can be seen in the way readers over the centuries have responded to the vision of love they find here as a description of human love or divine love or both. (I doubt that allegorical interpretation, which was the dominant approach to the Song for centuries, would have been so widespread and influential if the poem were about specific lovers of the past, say, Solomon and the queen of Sheba.)

Blurring distinctions between desire and fulfilment

In the Song, desire is always on the brink of fulfilment, it has an urgency about it (come!, tell me!, make haste!). Fulfilment is simultaneously assured, deferred, and, on a figurative level, enjoyed. There is assurance because love is mutual; each seeks the other, and there is never any doubt about their mutual desire and devotion. There is no 'he loves me, he loves me not'. For the Song there is only 'my lover is mine and I am his'. Fulfilment may be deferred. For example, the woman invites her beloved to come out to the countryside, where she will give him her love, but this is something yet to take place. He takes her to the house of wine; she brings him to her mother's chamber. But do they consummate their love there? Or anywhere else in the poem? Yes, on the figurative level. Sexual union is represented in the poem through the indirection of language, through innuendo, double entendre, and metaphor. The man is an apple tree whose fruit is sweet to his lover's taste. The woman is a lily and a garden, and her beloved goes down to his garden to feed among the lilies. Honey and milk are under her tongue, and her body is a pleasure garden of choice fruits and spices. She invites him to come to his garden and eat its choice fruits, and he responds by laying claim to the garden—spices, honey, milk, and all. See 5:1.

The slippage in the Song from one mode to another, the blurring of distinctions between the more literal level of wishing and desiring and the figurative level of consummation is also a blurring between past, present, and future. By merging past, future and present, the poem immortalizes its vision of love in progress. Since love is always in progress, the poem, not surprisingly, does not progress in a linear fashion. It meanders. It surges forward and circles back upon itself. Over and over again it repeats its acts of conjuring and again and again it issues its invitation to the reader. Just as the harmony of the male and female voices represents, on the poetic plane, their sexual union, so the poetic rhythm of the Song, ever forward and then returning, reflects the repetitive pattern of seeking and finding in which the lovers engage, which is the basic pattern of sexual love: longing—satisfaction—renewed longing—and so on. Significantly, there is no closure to this poem about desire.

Resistance to closure

The concluding verses of the Song have perplexed, and often disappointed, commentators. See 6:13 – 14.

To object (as some scholars do) that the ending is 'abrupt' or 'an odd way to end a poem' or 'a peculiar ending for a love song' is to fail to recognize what the poet is trying to show us about love.

The Song's resistance to closure—its refusal to reach what we might call an 'end'—is perhaps its most important means of immortalizing love. Closure would mean the end of desiring, the silence of the text, the death of love. Resistance to closure is an attempt to keep love always in progress on the page before us. Moreover, not only does the Song end without closure; it begins *in medias res*, 'let him kiss me'. Without setting the stage in any way, the poet plunges us into a love affair already in progress. This design, in effect, makes the Song a poem without beginning or end. Like the love it celebrates, the Song of Songs seeks to be ongoing, never-ending, always in progress. As an analogy, we might consider the activity captured in time on a Grecian urn, like that described by Keats, that we looked at earlier. Where does the urn's 'story' begin and end?

We could name a particular point as the beginning, but the movement portrayed circles back upon itself. Even if we perceive an end to the activity portrayed, it begins again where it left off. We might think of the Song as something like a verbal Grecian urn.

At the end, the man speaks to his beloved, 'You who dwell in the gardens, companions are listening for your voice. Let me hear it!' She answers, 'Take flight, my love, and be like a gazelle or young deer upon the mountains of spices'. She seems to be sending him away ('take flight') and calling him to her in the same breath: he as a gazelle and she as the mountains of spices where he will cavort. Her answer, because it signals both the lovers' separation and their union, brings the poem round full circle to desire's first articulation, 'let him kiss me', desire that is never sated because it folds back upon itself.

And what about the companions, listening for the voice? We are among them, and the voice for which we listen is the voice of the poet—a voice we hear through the voices of the lovers.

Exploring Love from a Man's and a Woman's Point of View

I turn now to the second aspect of love that I want to consider: the way love-talk in the Song is gendered; that is, the way the woman and the man look at love differently, or, to put it another way, the way the poet portrays being in love from both points of view, a woman's and a man's. There are only three clearly identifiable speaking voices in the Song (a man's, a woman's, and a group of women called 'daughters of Jerusalem'). The women of Jerusalem have only a few speeches; most of the speeches belong to a female voice and a male voice. The Song offers no clue that these male and female speaking voices belong to different men and women. Although, as I said earlier, the lovers have multiple personalities—that is, they are representatives of all lovers rather than identifiable individuals—they nevertheless seem to take on distinct personalities as we get to know them. And for this reason, I speak of them in the singular, as 'the woman' and 'the man'. They are consistent in the way they each talk about their love and in the way love makes them behave—and this encourages us to feel we know them and enables us to build a picture of them.

The dialogue format of the Song serves two functions: it enables the poet to create the impression of immediacy that makes the lovers seem to come to life on the page before us, and it allows the poet to explore the nature of love and longing from both a woman's and a man's point of view. On the one hand, the female and male voices are in harmony, both desirous and both rejoicing in the pleasures of sexual intimacy. On the other hand, the poet has given the lovers distinct perspectives. (This is, of course, no less than we would expect from any good writer, but these differences have gone unnoticed by commentators.) The differences in the way the poet portrays the female and male lovers reveal the poet's remarkable sensitivity to differences between women and men—differences that, in turn, reflect cultural assumptions about gender differences and roles (which is not to say the poem does not challenge certain of these assumptions as well).

There are differences in emphasis in the way the male and female lovers talk about love. They do not look at love or at each other in quite the same way. She expresses her desire and explores her feelings for him, and his for her, through stories, stories in which she and he are characters. They both play roles, as themselves or in fantasy guises (for example, when they imagine each other as royal figures or shepherds). Her stories have a narrative movement and a sense of closure, a tension and a resolution. They are the only parts of the Song that display narrative development, or what we might call a plot. For example, she tells two stories in which her lover comes courting. In one, he invites her to join him outside to enjoy the springtime (2:8-17), and in the other, which we've looked at, he wants to join her, inside, at night (5:2-8). Twice she recounts how she goes out in the city streets searching for him: the first time, she is immediately successful in finding him; the second, she encounters a distressing setback before achieving her goal. See 5:2 – 6.

Here is one of her stories (or rather part of it), which we've looked at already. Notice how she and he are characters in a story told by her. As narrator of the story, she puts words in his mouth—'open to me, my sister, my friend ...'—and in her own mouth—'I have taken off my robe, am I to put it on again?' This creates the illusion of immediacy, as if the conversation were taking place in the present. Then, v. 4, the story continues (in the past tense).

The man does not tell stories. He has a different way of talking about love. He looks at her, tells her what he sees, and how it affects him. Here is an example very much like the one we looked at earlier: 6:4 – 7.

He describes what he sees metaphorically, and its effect on him. He finds her awesome ('You are beautiful, my friend, like Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, as awesome in splendour as they'), and, when her gaze meets his, he is overwhelmed ('Turn your eyes away from me, for they overwhelm me').

The difference in the way the man and woman talk about love extends to a contrast on the poetic level between sight and speech. The man constructs the woman, he creates a picture of her for us, through the gaze, through seeing. We follow his gaze as he progressively builds up a metaphorical picture of her, bit by bit, until she materializes before us. The woman constructs the man primarily through the voice. She quotes him speaking to her, but he never quotes her. See 2:10 – 14; 5:2.

Through putting words in his mouth when she tells stories in which he courts her, she controls the way we view him. We see him as a lover who comes courting by day (as in the first example, where he invites her outside to enjoy the springtime) and by night (in the second), a lover who woos her with sweet words—and as a somewhat elusive lover she must seek, but one who is never difficult to find. She looks at him too, but when she describes him—and we'll look at this example shortly—she pictures his body differently from the way he pictures hers.

The lovers describe differently what it is like to be in love. The difference is subtle, for both feel wondrously overwhelmed by the other. The woman speaks about *being* in love and how she experiences it: 'I am faint with love' or 'I am lovesick'. See 2:4-5; 5:8.

Her condition, lovesickness, is a malady to which lovers are prone, a state of intense longing that feeds on love and leaves one languid and in need of the sustenance only love can bring. In this first example, she is lovesick when he is with her. He has brought her to the house of wine, which is also the house of love. She calls for raisin-cakes and apples (as if they would help), because she is lovesick. She is also lovesick when they are apart (the last citation here). After a missed encounter, when she goes seeking him in the streets at night, she calls on the women of Jerusalem to tell him of her condition, since he is both the cause and the cure: 'if you find my lover, tell him that I am lovesick' (5:8).

The woman tells others, the women of Jerusalem, **what love does to her**; the man, in contrast, speaks to her about **what she does to him**. See 4:9; 6:5.

He thinks in terms of conquest, of power relations: '*you* have captured my heart'. Unlike the woman, who expresses her feelings subjectively, he does not say 'I am overwhelmed' but rather describes the way *he* feels as something *she* has done to him: '*You* have captured my heart'; 'Turn *your eyes* away from me, for *they* overwhelm me'. As a man, he is used to feeling in control. But love makes him feel as though he is losing control. He is powerless to resist; his autonomy is challenged. He welcomes this, to be sure, but these feelings are disconcerting. He is—and he admits it—awestruck: 'You are beautiful, my friend, like Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, as awesome in splendour as they'.

He is awestruck; she is lovesick. As a woman, she is used to a world in which men are in control, and to a version of love according to which women surrender to men. Her autonomy is not challenged because she does not have the kind of autonomy a man has (even though she is the most autonomous of all biblical women). She is not in awe of him; she is in need of him. She longs passionately for him and cannot do without him.

It's interesting to note that *she* doesn't think of him as being in awe of her. *She* thinks that *he* thinks of her as shy and reticent. See 2:13 – 14; 4:8

When she puts words in his mouth (the first citation), he calls her 'my dove in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff'. But when he speaks for himself, he imagines her as dwelling on remote mountaintops among lions and leopards. He does not associate her with the domestic security of the house, as she had presented him doing, but rather with powerful, untamed animals whose abode in dangerous places she shares. Both these images convey the idea that he perceives her as inaccessible, but her inaccessibility seems vastly more daunting in his version.

The Song shows us these and other differences between men and women in the poet's society; for example, love is something a woman gives and a man takes—in the Song he takes only by invitation. The differences also extend to the different ways the lovers have of speaking metaphorically about the body of the other. There are in the Song four descriptions that construct the lovers' sexuality through a series of metaphors for various body parts. On the one hand, these descriptions are intimate, suggestive, and sometimes explicit. On the other, the metaphors function as much to hide the body as to display it.

To return to our familiar example: 4:1-5. The man pictures the woman's body part by part, with a striking simile or metaphor for each part, three times—twice from her head downwards (though he stops midway), and once, from her feet to her head. She describes his body in a similar fashion, from head to foot, only once, but the fact that she also gazes at his body is extremely important, for if only the man looked there would be no gender equality in the Song.

Looking at his lover and describing what he sees and its effect on him, as I have indicated, is the man's primary mode of speaking about love. Her effect on him is a crucial feature. The sight of her stirs up within him a depth of passion that alarms him, a disturbance in his psyche, a threat to his equanimity that is both

exhilarating and scary. The totality of her overwhelms him. Lingering over the details of her body, part by part, provides him with a way of dealing with the powerful feelings she arouses in him. Here he surveys her body part by part—eyes, hair, teeth, lips, mouth, cheeks, neck, and breasts. Then, as if to make the parts less threatening, he compares them to familiar things. Each part is *like* something in the everyday world he knows, things that do not arouse such strong and disturbing emotions in him, such as a flock of goats moving down the mountainside, sheep that have come up from the washing. The closest he comes to describing something potentially awe-inspiring is the image of the tower with shields hung upon it for her neck—an image that yields to the tranquil, non-threatening image of fawns feeding among lilies for her breasts, 7:1-5

Here he deals with parts of the body not normally exposed to view: the navel, v. 2, which some exegetes see as a euphemism for the vulva ('Your navel is a rounded bowl—may it not lack mixed wine!'), the belly ('a heap of wheat encircled by lilies'), and the breasts, v. 3, 'like two fawns, twins of a gazelle' (which he has described before in the same terms). She describes him, as we shall see, in ways that are also intimate and erotically suggestive.

The inventories of body parts are presented for the visual pleasure they offer to the onlookers, who include the poem's readers. The degree to which they objectify the loved one is counterbalanced by the extent to which the lover is affected. The man does not just look. He loses himself in the vision of beauty he sees before him when he surveys the body of the woman he loves. He is overwhelmed by her eyes and held captive in her tresses—overcome by the very features he contemplates. If he distances himself from the whole person by perceiving her body in parts, he does not remain distanced. He always puts himself in the picture. His first description of her reaches a climax in a metaphor of the woman as a pleasure garden, which he enters, at her invitation, to feast upon its exotic fruits. His metaphoric description of her body here in 7: 1-5 gives way to a metaphor for his desire when he compares her to a palm tree that he will climb and whose clusters—her breasts—he will take hold of. See 7:6 – 8.

Putting himself in the picture he constructs of her is not unlike her telling stories in which both he and she are characters. Neither lover constructs the other without being affected themselves—without becoming part of the story or entering the picture.

What about the way she looks at him? See 5:10-16. If, on the whole, his imagery is more vivid or more picturesque than hers, hers is more relational than his. His statuesque body of precious materials is less an engrossing visual image than a comment on his value to her. His head, hands, and legs do not look like gold in the way that, say, wavy hair resembles goats winding down a mountainside; rather he shares qualities with gold. Like gold he is rare and precious, and dazzling. She describes some of the same features he did when he described her (eyes, hair, lips, cheeks, mouth), but some of her comparisons are different in emphasis from his. Whereas he says, 'your mouth is lovely', she says (v. 16), 'his mouth is sweet'. His 'all of you is beautiful' (4:7) is matched by her 'all of him is desirable' (here in v. 16). He concentrates on the outward appearance (lovely, beautiful); she, on what he is to her. His mouth is sweet *to her*, and to say that he is desirable means that *she* desires him.

An important difference is that, unlike his descriptions of her, she is not looking at him when she pictures his body. She describes him in answer to a question raised by the women of Jerusalem, who ask, 'What distinguishes your lover from other lovers?' His descriptions, in contrast, are represented by the poet as spontaneous outbursts inspired by the sight of her. He addresses her as 'you', whereas she speaks of him as 'he' when she describes him to the women of Jerusalem. Her description is based not on looking at him while she describes him but, presumably, on having looked, and this may help to explain why her reaction to his body is different from his to hers. She is not so unsettled by his body as he is by hers. He deals with her body in parts to cope with her devastating presence. She treats his by parts to cope with his absence and to conjure him up through the evocative power of language.

The fact that he describes her body more often than she describes his may reflect a reluctance about depicting the male body in the culture that produced the Song of Songs. It appears that the female body was the more likely object of the look in ancient Israelite or Judahite culture, as it is in Western culture. For the poet, mutual desire and mutual gratification play an important role in the relationship between the sexes, and thus the poet has the woman look at her lover and describe his body too, even if the circumstances are slightly different. The lovers' descriptions of each other's bodies is meant as a source of pleasure for us too—for, after all, the poem was written for us, its readers. I see the Song of Songs as an extraordinary poetic accomplishment, one of the great love poems of all time, and I hope from what I've said about it you can see why.