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# **THE SONG OF SONGS IN LATE ELIZABETHAN, JACOBEOAN AND CAROLINE POETRY**

**Hilary Elizabeth Elder**

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**Ph.D. Thesis**

**12 OCT 2009**

**Durham University**

**Department of Theology and Religion**

**2009**



## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is about reading. Working on the understanding that all texts read other texts, it aims to uncover something of how English poets from 1590-1650 read the Song of Songs, by analyzing when and how they use it in their poetry. By looking at poetic readings, rather than theological ones, it also explores the connections and distinctions between reading literature and reading Scripture.

As both Scripture and lyric love poetry, the Song of Songs has participated in theological and literary discourse over a long period. The Introduction gives background on both kinds of reading, and how they have been applied to the Song of Songs. It also sets out the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 surveys theological writing about the Song of Songs produced during the period. The material includes sermons, commentaries, household advice books, hymns and translations, including poetic translations. There is a stable core of interpretation, which reads the Song as primarily about the relationship between Christ and the Church, or the individual soul, or both. Within this stable core, however, there is a wide variety of interpretations.

Chapters 3-5 are themed, and look at how poets handle the three topics of the feminine voice, beauty and desire when they read the Song of Songs. The first poet considered in each chapter is Aemilia Lanyer, who provides a plumb-line for the exposition. As a poet seeking elite patronage, Lanyer is typical of her age in many important respects; but she also challenges expectations about poets of the period. The other poets considered are Shakespeare, Southwell, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, Spenser, Donne and Crashaw.

The Conclusion considers what light these poetic readings shed on the relationship between Scripture and literature.

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### **A note on texts.**

Bible quotations are from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

I have used the following editions of the poets:

Crashaw: *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, ed., George Walton Williams (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).

Donne: *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed., C. A. Patrides (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1985).

Lanyer: *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, ed., Susanne Woods (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Shakespeare: *Shakespeare's Poems*, eds., Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Thomson Learning, 2007).

Sidney: *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke*, ed., J. C. A. Rathmell (New York: New York University Press, 1963).

Southwell: *Robert Southwell S.J.: Collected Poems*, eds., Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007).

Southwell, *Love's Garden Grief: The Poems of Robert Southwell, S.J.*, eds., James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

Spenser: *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*, ed., Richard A. McCabe (London, Penguin Books, 1999).

Poem and line references are given in the text of the thesis.

## PREFACE

This project came about, in part, by accident. While studying the Song of Songs in a Hebrew class, I was struck by an analogy that reminded me of a poem by John Donne. When the man in the Song says that the woman's neck is 'as the towre of Dauid buylt for defense: a thousand shields hang therein, and all the targates of the strong men,' (4.4), I thought of Donne's elegy 'To his mistress going to bed':

Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,  
That th'eyes of busie fooles may be stopt there.

(7-8, p. 183)

This is one of Donne's most profane poems, and I am not the first to notice that religious language pervades Donne's profane verse as well as his religious poetry; so I began to think about this, and wrote an M.A. dissertation exploring the connection between the Song and two Donne poems, one profane and one sacred. In this case, the Song provided a locus for exploring the relationship between the two, which is one of the main driving forces in Donne's poetry. There are two aspects of the Song that enable the kind of conversation Donne has with it. First, its content. It is currently popular to assert that the Song's 'literal' content – a celebration of carnal love between man and woman – has been ignored and denied by millennia of religious readings that, in allegorizing the work, sublate or even obliterate this content to a 'higher' spiritual meaning. However, the 'literal' content has in fact hardly ever been ignored by commentators. Even as they claim the 'higher' spiritual meaning, commentators explicitly acknowledge the existence of the 'lower.' The Song of Songs therefore provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between one's worldly and spiritual lives. The second aspect is the Song's position as both Holy Scripture and lyric poetry. The Song of Songs is located in the Bible, and is therefore part of a corpus of writing with its own special status, authorized by God and infused with the Holy Spirit. It is, for many readers, God speaking to humankind. But its genre is lyric love poetry, and while some of its conventions can be very difficult to recover and understand, much of its style and content is influenced by, and contributes to, one of the longest-lived and most widely pervasive genres of literature, certainly in the West. It has its place in the world as well as in heaven, and it provides a liminal literary space for the two worlds to meet and interact.

Looking at Donne's poetry through the lens of the Song of Songs produced some very interesting results, and raised some even more interesting questions, so this

thesis develops the approach and applies it more widely, to consider other poets roughly contemporary with Donne. The aims were:

- to see what themes and concerns poets in late Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline England were addressing when they interacted with the Song of Songs, and what results they were getting;
- to consider further the relationship between Scripture and literature by seeing how the Song of Songs was responded to in a specifically poetic, rather than religious, way in this period.

The second aim, in particular, proved more tricky than originally anticipated. As will become evident, it was ultimately impossible to define what was meant by a 'specifically poetic' reading of the Song of Songs, so strong are the connections between the purposes and methods of literary and religious reading. This, in itself, was a significant result. In terms of method, it meant that at the outset I relegated metrical versions to 'religious' readings, because I wanted to look at poetry that was reading the Song as part of a wider poetic project, rather than poetry whose whole aim was to read the Song of Songs. It did not, however, entail rejecting sacred verse, as long as that verse was not primarily a translation or version of the Song. The result is a corpus of poetry that is diverse in its subjects and in its religiosity, as well as its reading of the Song; and this, too, is significant.

Reading is a community enterprise. To read is to engage in a discourse. By reading how others had read the Song of Songs, I hoped to learn from them to become a better reader of it myself.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1 *Introduction*

The Preface outlined the provenance of this project and its core aims. The central work of the project has been to read a particular corpus of poetry through the lens of the Song of Songs, to uncover something of how the Song was engaged with as literature during the period from about 1590 to about 1650. This chapter provides background and context for the readings of poetry that will follow. It is not meant as a comprehensive, or even a beginner's, guide to the material, but rather to give appropriate background to the approach I shall take with the material. My outline of what the feminine voice says in Chapter 3 (pp.58-60) serves a similar purpose. I do not mean to defend my reading of her voice, but I give it because it is helpful to my readers to know what I have noticed most strongly in what she says. The thesis attempts to work in the space between the disciplines of Theology and English Literature.<sup>1</sup> Most of the commentary on the Song down the ages has been religious in its primary focus, and because the aim here is to uncover something of the cultural dialogue between theology and literature, there is both theological and literary background given in this chapter. The chapter begins by looking at the Song of Songs, what kind of text it is and the history of how it was interpreted up until the early modern period; and there is also a note on the current state of commentary.

The chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the rest of the thesis. The work of one poet, Aemilia Lanyer, acts as a 'plumb-line' for these chapters, and so there is also some background on her and a précis of her work.

### 2 *The Song of Songs*

#### 2.1 *The Song of Songs: one of the books of holy Scripture*

The Song of Songs is part of the corpus of Jewish and Christian Scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures may be divided in several ways. As part of the Jewish *Tanakh* - *Torah* (Law), *Nebi'im* (Prophets) and *Kebutim* (Writings) - the Song of Songs falls into the third category, a kind of catch-all term for the-rest-of-Scripture, including books like Psalms. When written on a scroll, it is one of the *Megilloth*, five books contained in one scroll: the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther. It is also traditionally held to be one of the three biblical works written by Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs (tradition also sometimes ascribes the apocryphal

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<sup>1</sup> See Stephen Prickett's article, 'Biblical and Literary Criticism: A History of Interpretation', in David Jasper and Stephen Prickett, eds., *The Bible and Literature: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1999), 12-39, for an outline of the history of this interdisciplinary practice.

books Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach to Solomon). In the Christian Bible, it falls after Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and before Isaiah. Christian tradition also divides up the Hebrew Scriptures in ways similar to those described above, but its main distinction is between Old and New Testaments; the Song of Songs, of course, is part of the Old Testament.

There is some debate over the book's status as Scripture. This seems to centre on two main issues. First, the Rabbinic literature records some of what Rabbi Aqiba had to say about the Song in the 2nd century c.e., and this appears to suggest some controversy over the status of the book. The Mishnah Yadaim 3:5 records a debate about whether the Song of Songs 'soils the hands' of those who touch it. This question of soiling the hands is generally understood as to do with ritual purity: those who touch Scripture are rendered impure by contact with something so holy.<sup>2</sup> The debate is recorded, in the manner of Rabbinic literature, with no conclusion (the literature simply gives what each side has to say), although the fact that Aqiba's comment comes at the end of the section may indicate that his opinion was decisive. He insisted that; 'all Scripture is holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.' Elsewhere, the literature records Aqiba once again insisting on the holiness of the Song, and also criticizing its use in secular or bawdy settings: 'he who pronounces a verse of the Song of Songs and makes it a sort of song and pronounces a verse in a banquet house not in its time brings evil to the world.'<sup>3</sup> Precisely what is meant by 'banquet house,' however, is not clear. It has been argued repeatedly that this comment bears witness to a cultural practice of singing the Song of Songs in a secular context, but while this argument may be persuasive, it is not conclusive.<sup>4</sup>

This second comment of Aqiba brings us to the second issue concerning the Song's place in Scripture: its apparently carnal and profane content. For both Jews and Christians, Scripture is the word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the fact that the Song of Songs appears to contain no reference to YHWH at all (a characteristic it shares only with Esther and Ecclesiastes among canonical books), coupled with its apparently entirely carnal (and therefore, the argument goes, entirely unspiritual) content, poses a challenge to the readers of Scripture. Most commentators in the

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<sup>2</sup> This is the scholarly consensus, though it is disputed by John Barton, 'The Canonicity of the Song of Songs', in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 4.

<sup>3</sup> TB Sanhedrin 101a, cited in Marvin H. Pope, *The Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 19.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Noam Flinker, *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature: Kisses of Their Mouths* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 18. Flinker uses this as a plank in his argument that the Song has concurrent written and oral lives

tradition either appear to reject the carnal content of the book, or, much more commonly, to relegate it to a lower level of importance.

There can be a tendency to discuss both of these issues as very clearly settled, but it is important to note some resistance to this. First, on the question of a debate about whether to include the Song of Songs in the canon of Scripture, I have already noted the apparent controversy within early Jewish circles; but the Rabbinic texts may be read in a number of ways, and the process of establishing the canon of Hebrew Scriptures remains shrouded in mystery. John Barton has taken issue with the interpretation of the Rabbinic and Christian material.<sup>5</sup> There is no concrete evidence that there was controversy over the inclusion of this text in the Scriptures, just as there is no concrete evidence as to why it was included. What we can say, however, is that we have no evidence of a canon of Hebrew Scripture ever having existed without the Song of Songs.

In the Christian tradition, there are two well-known instances when theologians apparently questioned the place of the Song of Songs within Scripture. In the fifth century, Theodore of Mopsuestia was criticized (posthumously) for saying that the Song of Songs was nothing but a carnal love song and therefore should not form part of Scripture.<sup>6</sup> In the 1540s, a similar argument broke out between Calvin and Sebastian Castellio. As with Aqiba, we do not have the direct words of Castellio, but Max Engammare's careful reading of the material available is very helpful. Calvin attested that 'Castellio considers that [The Song of Songs] is a lascivious and obscene poem, in which Solomon describes his shameless love affairs.' Engammare shows that this dispute stems from the two men's very different hermeneutical methods. For Castellio, morality is the sum of the content of Scripture, and reason is the guide to judging its authority. Hence, a reader cannot accept anything absurd or indecent in the Bible, and it is this that makes the Song of Songs a real stumbling-block for Castellio. His hermeneutical method cannot reconcile the content of the Song with inspiration by the Holy Spirit, for the Song is not moral. By contrast, for Calvin, it is Scripture that judges its human reader, rather than the reader's reason presuming to stand above Scripture. The presence of a work within Scripture is proof enough that it contains the Word of God, and that it is edifying so read; the reader's task is to work out how to respond to

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<sup>5</sup> Barton ('Canonicity', 3) argues that the scholarly consensus that the Song achieved canonicity with difficulty and only on the basis of allegorical reading is based on unjustifiable assumptions. He says that allegorical reading is a sign of high status, rather than dubious canonicity: 'I do not believe there are any examples of a book whose canonicity was secured by interpreting it allegorically'.

<sup>6</sup> This was a minor element in the storm of criticism that hit Theodore's work after his death, which was mainly connected with the heresies of his pupil, Nestorius. See Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 22.

the text in such a way as to be edified. Nevertheless, as Engammare points out, though Castellio appears to have questioned whether the Song of Songs was divinely inspired, he did not deny it a place in Scripture. He referred to it as little as possible in his writings, but he did include it in his editions of the Bible. He accepted the canon of Scripture as it had been handed down.<sup>7</sup>

As Scripture, then, the Song of Songs has two key characteristics that make it seem idiosyncratic to many readers. The first is its apparent focus on human carnal love relations. This is what made the Song morally problematic for Castellio, as we have seen. In fact, however, the Bible presents human sexual relations in a variety of ways. The entry on *Sex and Sexuality* in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* begins: 'sex is at once much-discussed and ignored in the Bible.' It suggests that the Bible's law codes, which lay down strict (and sometimes conflicting) rules about sexual activity, show a concern to maintain the monogamous family unit as essential to the God-given world order (based on Gen. 2-3), a recognition (Gen. 3.16) that the glue that binds such a unit is sexual attraction, and a desire to prevent the collapse of categories of difference (including 'male' and 'female') into chaos, which threatens God's ordering work of creation. In the law codes, this results in severe punishments for crimes such as adultery, and a girl marrying when she is not a virgin. The laws make it clear that appropriate behaviour for men is different from that for women. Many of these laws are similar to other laws of the Ancient Near East, but biblical law is distinctive in identifying homosexual sex acts as punishable (though it does not mention lesbian sex).<sup>8</sup> The entry notes that there is no systematic understanding or explanation of the meaning or significance of sex in the Bible, although one can infer that sexual desire is recognized as a powerful and potentially destructive force. The only explicit statement about this is Song of Songs 8.6-7: 'for loue is strong as death: ielousie is cruel as the graue: the coles thereof are fyrie coles, & a vehement flame. Much water can not quenche loue, nether can the floods drowne it: If a man shulde giue all the substance of his house for loue, they wolde greatly contemne it.'

Sexual desire or activity can play an important role in the Bible. Although the reader is not shown Adam and Eve making love, sexual attraction and activity are key to the story of the Fall in Gen. 2-3. Moreover, the treatment of this story in the Christian tradition, with its doctrine of original sin, has posited a strong link between sexual desire and fundamental human sinfulness. When women who belong to Israel are

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<sup>77</sup> Max Engammare, *Qu'il me Baise des Baisers de sa Bouche: Le Cantique des Cantiques à la Renaissance* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1993), 9-18. Quotation p.11, from *Calvini Opera* 11, cols 674-676. Translation from the French my own.

<sup>8</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 'Sex and Sexuality', in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, 1144-46.



raped by outsiders, the rape can spark war (Dinah in Gen. 34; the Levite's concubine in Judg. 19). The rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon forms a key part of the melodrama of David's kingship (2 Sam. 13; 1 Chron. 3.9). David himself commits proxy murder of Uriah the Hittite in order to hide the fact that he has had an affair with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and God punishes him for it (2 Sam. 11). Solomon is criticized in the Bible and in the tradition for the vast number of wives and concubines he enjoys (1 Kgs. 11). When the prophets wish to criticize Israel for its unfaithfulness to its God, they sometimes use the trope of an unfaithful wife to press home their point (e.g. Isa. 1.21; Ezek. 16; Hos. 2.5). But sexual activity is not simply condemned in the Bible. Adam and Eve, by having sex, become founders of the whole human race. The relations between the patriarchs and their wives are complex and ambiguous. Tamar poses as a prostitute and uses sex to vindicate herself and prove the guilt of her father-in-law, Judah (Gen. 38). The relationship of Ruth and Boaz, which is motivated by sexual attraction, is presented in a strongly positive light. Esther's power to attract by her beauty saves her people. In the New Testament, while both Christ and, more often, Paul, appear to extol chastity, and even celibacy, as the most desirable state for the Christian, neither condemns marriage, and Jesus presents a positive picture of it when challenged about divorce (Matt. 19.1-7; Mark 10.1-12). The portrayal of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs uses the trope of the attractive female in a way that contrasts with the prophetic portrayal of Israel, the unfaithful wife (Prov. 1-9), and in Revelation, the eschatological fulfilment is named 'the marriage-feast of the Lamb' (Rev. 19.7). This small sample of the treatment of sexual relations in the Bible demonstrates a fairly broad spectrum, in which the subject matter of the Song of Songs is perhaps not so incongruous as it may at first seem.

What makes the Song of Songs different is the combination of its subject matter and its genre. The Song of Songs is the only example of lyric love poetry in the Bible – indeed, it is the only example of such poetry that we have in biblical Hebrew. There is other biblical poetry: the songs, for example, of Moses, Miriam, Deborah and others, the Psalms, Job, parts of the Prophets, snatches of poetry found, for example, in the Adam and Eve story. Some of the Psalms even appear to be marriage-songs, and have some generic connection to the Song of Songs (e.g., Psalms 42, 45 and 63), but there is no sustained example of lyric love poetry. The question to ask here is why this lyric love genre seems to make the Song of Songs so idiosyncratic within Scripture, and there are two aspects to this. First is the expressive quality of the poetry. Sexual desire in Bible passages like the Eden or the David stories is placed within a narrative context, so that, even when the narrative itself is ambiguous about the sexual parts of the story (and the Bible is sometimes judgmental, sometimes ambiguous), the reader

of such a narrative feels her- or himself called on to make a judgment about what is happening. The Song of Songs, however, is mostly a first-person text, with speakers rather than narrators. These speakers, for the most part, express how they feel and very rarely make judgmental, or even explanatory, comments about love (except, of course, from the pronouncement at 8.6-7, quoted above). The reader is invited to enter into the experience of desire, rather than to place it in a moral context. If any judgment is implied, it would seem, on first reading at least, to be positive, for the lovers do not restrain their desire, but rather revel in it, even though they do at times suffer for it.

Second, there is what I shall call the 'radical lack of narrative' that characterizes the Song of Songs. There are few works in literature, let alone in the Bible, which lack narrative structure so noticeably as the Song of Songs does. The setting moves, the characters are either multiple or have multiple aspects to them (the man, for example, if he is one man, is both a shepherd and a king), there are only snatches of narrative line and no solid context is given into which to place the poetry. I think that this radical lack of narrative is a central feature of this text, and that many of its readers fail to give it sufficient attention. A great deal of the interpretive energy that has been expended on the Song of Songs down the years has consisted in attempts to provide a coherent narrative structure or context. The most prominent of these is the understanding, widespread in the early modern period, that the Song was composed by Solomon for his wedding to a foreign woman, usually agreed to be Pharaoh's daughter. Here, readers provide a narrative context in which to place the text.

There have also been various historical and apocalyptic allegorical interpretations, which see the different sections of the Song as recounting Israel's history in various ways. The Targum, for example, sees the Song as a history of salvation, culminating in the final redemption of the future. Similarly, Christian writers like Thomas Brightman, following Aponius and Nicholas of Lyra, 'divided the Song into two parts: 1-4.6 describing the condition of the Legal Church from the time of David to the death of Christ, and 4.7-8.14 which describes the state of the Evangelical Church, from a.d. 34 to the second coming of Christ.'<sup>9</sup> The debate about whether the Song is one unified work or a random anthology has involved a quest for structure on the part of those arguing for unity, and while this is not exactly a narrative structure that is being sought, the quest to find a single mind ordering the text for particular reasons resembles a search for narrative.<sup>10</sup> One of the most extreme interpretations is that of Schmokel (1956), who believed the Song was a sacred marriage liturgy and proposed a complete reordering of the text on the basis, such that the opening verse is 8.13 and

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<sup>9</sup> Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 40-54.

the work concludes with 1.16-17.<sup>11</sup> The mystical interpretations, the most influential being that of Bernard of Clairvaux, tend to move at a rambling pace, with moments of intimate communion and stretches of tribulation and even despair that seem unstructured; yet the overall pattern behind this narration is the progress of the soul toward union with Christ. This progress involves complications and setbacks, and does not appear to proceed in a simply linear fashion, but the different episodes are nevertheless held together by the overall concept of the story of the spiritual life of the Christian.<sup>12</sup>

The Song of Songs, then, is a work of Scripture that has links to other parts of Scripture, but that is in important ways *sui generis*, and that has seemed to many commentators to sit uneasily within Scripture, or at least to require intensive interpretation to uncover its true place.

## **2.2    *The Song of Songs: a work of lyric love poetry***

The Song of Songs is also a work of lyric love poetry. Whether it was written as a single work is still a matter of debate; critics have argued for and against its unity on the basis of lexical choices, grammatical idioms, disjunctions and connections in settings, narrative, character and subject matter, and on the question of whether an overall structural schema can be established.<sup>13</sup> But whether or not it was originally written as separate poems over several centuries, two things remain clear: it has come down to us as a single work, and its genre is lyric poetry.

The term 'lyric poetry' literally means words arranged in a formal manner to be sung to the accompaniment of the lyre. The genre has a very long history, with the earliest extant lyric poetry coming from Egypt, around 2,600 b.c.e.. The range of subject matter includes funeral song, praise of the king, invocation to the gods, songs of shepherds and fishermen and love-song. The genre has a varied history, and the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* says that the Renaissance period was 'the great age of the lyric,' citing Petrarch and Ronsard at the start of this period and noting the later flowering of the lyric in English poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 42-44.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 1-4, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, Cistercian Fathers Series 4, 7, 31 and 40 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976-1980). See also below, p.13.

<sup>13</sup> For an outline of the debate, see, e.g., Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 40-54; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 57-67;

<sup>14</sup> J. A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1999), 481-84. Quotation, 482.

How is the genre of the Song of Songs significant? First, although many commentators have felt the need to justify the appearance of 'song' in Scripture, the *Penguin Dictionary* notes that Egyptian, Hebrew and Greek lyrics 'originated in religious ceremonial.'<sup>15</sup> Just as the lyric has a wide range of subject matter, it can also be found in both religious and secular contexts. Second, there is a tension between the lyric's status as a song, implying that it gets its life when it is articulated in public performance, and its tendency to express opinions and emotions in an intimate, almost confessional way. In some of its guises, the lyric allows the most private and intimate aspects of human thought and feeling to enter the public arena. Third, the lyric has a complex status in relation to narrative and to drama. On the one hand, as the *Penguin Dictionary* notes, lyric can be used as a catch-all term 'to describe a particular kind of poem in order to distinguish it from narrative or dramatic verse of any kind.' Lyric, then, is poetry that is neither narrative nor dramatic. On the other hand, many lyrics do contain a narrative, either in the explicit telling of a story, often from a first-person perspective (which emphasizes the personal and emotional aspects of the story), or a narrative that may be deduced by the reader, when the poem itself hints at its own context. Often the use of the first person in the lyric creates a dramatic effect that encourages the reader to infer a narrative context from the text of the lyric. Some of Donne's *Songs and Sonets* are particularly effective at doing this, and the lacunae that make the narrative enigmatic take nothing away from the reader's desire to picture the context, or to uncover a back-story for the poem.

Donne's 'The Triple Foole' exploits the interplay of many of these tensions:

I am two fooles, I know,  
 For loving, and for saying so  
 In whining Poetry;  
 But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,  
 If she would not deny?  
 Then as th'earths inward narrow crooked lanes  
 Do purge sea waters fretfull salt away,  
 I thought, if I could draw my paines,  
 Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay,  
 Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,  
 For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

But when I have done so,  
 Some man, his art and voice to show,  
 Doth Set and sing my paine,  
 And, by delighting many, frees againe  
 Griefe, which verse did restraine.  
 To Love, and Griefe tribute of Verse belongs,  
 But not of such as pleases when 'tis read,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 481.

Both are increased by such songs:  
For both their triumphs so are published,  
And I, which was two fooles, do so grow three;  
Who are a little wise, the best fooles bee.

(pp. 59-60)

Here, the poem tells a story by dramatizing it. The speaker tells his intention in writing his verse: to contain and manage his grief at being spurned by his love. However, as the poem continues, the speaker's aim is thwarted, because his verse is set to music and sung in public. The contrast between the pleasure that the public audience gets from hearing the song and the grief it articulates is acutely painful for the speaker, for whom the song's story and grief are personally true. However, readers have to go further and make a distinction between the speaker of the poem, who is an actor in his own drama, and Donne, the poem's author. Donne may be describing something that really happened to one of his own poems, and that poem may have been autobiographical, as may this one; but we cannot know this. What we do know is that Donne the author (whether or not the speaker) intended his poem for at least one reader and chose to write it down. This poem achieves its existence not as a private outpouring of self-expression, but when read or performed. The tension between public and private is a core feature of this poem.

As a lyric poem, or a collection of lyrics, the Song of Songs shares many of the characteristics that preoccupied lyric writers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Most obviously, it concerns love relations, and so falls into the category 'love lyric.' It is worth noting, however, that the theme of the spurned lover, prominent in *The Triple Foole* and a major feature of the love lyric genre, is almost entirely absent from the Song of Songs. The lovers do sometimes experience problems in coming together, but rarely, if at all, do they express doubts that their love is reciprocated.

The Song also displays a complex relationship between public and private spheres. The lovers sometimes express a desire to make their love public: 'oh that thou werest as my brother that sucked the breastes of my mother: I wolde finde thee without, I wolde kisse thee, then thei shulde not despise thee' (8.1). At other times, they speak directly and intimately to each other, apparently unaware of any external readers eavesdropping on their conversation: 'my dooue, that art in the holes of the rocke, in the secret places of the staires, shewe me thy sight, let me heare thy voice: for thy voyce is swete, and thy sight comelie' (2.14). They are, however, often strongly aware of other people. At their moment of most intimate contact, they invite outsiders to join them: 'arise, o North, and come o South, and blowe on my garden that the spices thereof may flowe out: let my welbeloued come to his garden, and eat his pleasant frute. I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I gathered my myrrhe with my

spice: I ate mine honie combe with mine honie, I dranke my wine with my milke: eat, o friends, drinke, and make you mery, o welbeloued' (4.16-5.1).

As is to be expected, considering its longevity, the love lyric is a highly conventional genre. The Song of Songs shares in and contributes to these conventions. Indeed, it may inaugurate some of them. It includes elements of pastoral, royal settings, city settings, garden episodes and passages in the wild countryside. It links the lovers to the natural world, in particular to flora and fauna, even to the extent that the characters meld with the environment at times, so that he 'is' a gazelle leaping over the mountains and she 'becomes' a garden where he takes his pleasure. Some of the figurative language that the speakers use for each other is easily recognizable, for it has remained conventional: she is a lily, he is a hart, she is fair, he is white, ruddy and golden, her eyes can wound, he tastes better than wine. Some of these features can be traced to before the Song was written (I noted, for example, pastoral among the Egyptian lyrics), while others may well have originated with the Song itself. However, some of the figurative language of the Song is much harder for modern readers to understand, because although it seems likely that it conforms to contemporary conventions, those conventions have not endured, and are now lost to us (in fact, some of them seem to have been lost by the time the earliest commentators began to write on the Song). Her nose is like the tower of David, her hair is like mountain goats, her eyes are doves. The lack of other Hebrew love lyrics with which to compare the Song makes these figures much more of a challenge to later readers.

Finally, we should note that, although the Song of Songs appears to contain no mention of God and no explicitly religious content, its position as a book in the canon of Scripture links it to the religious lyric, and there are theories that it began its life as a liturgical text for a cult.<sup>16</sup> The question of cultic theories is not entirely simple. There is a proposition that Solomon composed the Song of Songs in relation to his marriage to the dark-skinned daughter of Pharaoh. In this case, the Song is seen either as an explanation by Solomon of his choice, possibly in the face of criticism, or as poetry for performance at the marriage feast. If it is understood as the second, then this is fairly close to a cultic theory. The idea of the Song as a marriage-song or epithalamion was current in the early modern period, but the full-blown theory that the words form part of a fertility liturgy in which the king and his bride recreate the nuptials of deities only developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when scholars began to compare the Song with Ancient Near Eastern texts and lore.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a survey of cultic interpretations, see Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 145-52.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 39-40. In particular, Murphy cites Meek (1924), who thought the Song and Psalm 45 'preserved literary fragments of an ancient Canaanite fertility-cult liturgy,

## 2.3 *The Song of Songs and its history of interpretation*

### 2.3.1 *Jewish interpretation*

It is virtually impossible to write about the Song of Songs without first commenting on the history of its interpretation. Marvin Pope begins his commentary: 'no composition of comparable size in world literature has provoked and inspired such a volume and variety of comment and interpretation as the biblical Song of Songs.'<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* entry on the Song says: 'The history of interpretation of the Song is not as bizarre as some are inclined to think ... there is a remarkable unity to be found in the history of its interpretation.'<sup>19</sup> The Song of Songs has been interpreted intensively and extensively throughout its history as a biblical text, partly because of some of the issues highlighted above. It is a prime example of a text that requires interpretation. Its apparently incongruous subject matter, and its radical lack of narrative structure or even context, impel its readers to provide explanations for it, and these have been many, varied, often lengthy and, significantly, often unfinished. I shall outline very briefly the basics of the traditions of interpretation, before considering, also briefly, the current state of affairs.

In Jewish tradition, as Rabbi Aqiba suggested with his comment about the banquet house, there has been a concern to protect the Song from accusations that it is a lascivious and profane piece of literature. From the earliest interpretation we have, recorded in the Midrash and Talmud, the Song was seen as a cryptic text, treating not relations between a man and a woman, but relations between God and his people, Israel. The man is God, and the woman Israel. In this way, she resembles Israel, the unfaithful wife presented in the prophetic literature, and the interpretation does draw out the moments in the text when the woman appears to be hiding from or turning away from the man; but in the readings of the Song of Songs, the focus is on the yearning love that God bears for Israel. What, in the prophets, is God's steadfast love, a characteristic that shows the strength of his loyalty, in the Song of Songs is his emotional attachment and unwillingness to abandon his beloved. This can lead to the

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which had been adapted by Israelites for use in the worship of Yahweh and his consort, a vegetarian goddess,' (40). See also Noam Flinker, *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature*, 88-90. Flinker's chapter on *Venus and Adonis* and the Song of Songs gives details of Renaissance texts that show knowledge of and interest in Ancient Near Eastern religious myths and ceremonies, and their connection with the Hebrew people. In particular, he shows that early modern writers knew of the Adonis myth, and connected his name with the Hebrew *adonai* ('lord', the term used for YHWH, the name of God which could not be pronounced, and applied by early Christians to Jesus). However, he mentions nothing of any connection between this and the Song of Songs.

<sup>18</sup> Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Roland E. Murphy, 'Song of Songs, Book of,' in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, 154.

material presenting God's steadfast love as needy, rather than simply dependable. The Midrash, for example, links 2.14; 'my dooue, that art in the holes of the rockes, in the secret places of the staires, shewe me thy sight, let me heare thy voice: for thy voyce is swete, and thy sight comelie,' to a parable about a king and his daughter. The king's daughter is no longer interested in her father and has begun to turn away from him and ignore him. He longs to see her face and to hear her voice, and he tries various enticements, to no avail. Finally, in desperation, he arranges for his men to ambush her and attack her in the open fields. Now that she is in real danger, she calls on him for help, so that once again, he hears her voice and sees her face. As is typical with the Rabbinic material, the Song is interpreted in multiple ways, drawing on intertextual connections with a wide variety of other Scripture, as well as on other material including folk tales, proverbs and parables; but there is a consistent thread running through the commentary that brings out the emotional aspects of the relationship between God and Israel, rather than, for example, the power or justice of God.<sup>20</sup>

The position of the Song in Jewish liturgical tradition is also interesting. It was used in liturgies both for Sabbath and Passover, chiming with a tradition that the Sabbath was the best night for Jewish couples to make love, and that indeed to do so was an important form of thanksgiving to God.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that the desire to allegorize the Song and to protect it from unsuitable environments like the banquet house was by no means an outright rejection of its carnal content.

### **2.3.2 Christian interpretation**

The Christian tradition of interpretation, like the Jewish, has been overwhelmingly allegorical.<sup>22</sup> Some interpretations, often taking their cue from Jewish interpretive material, even include Israel or the Synagogue as a key persona in the allegory; but the main thrust of interpretation has seen the man in the Song as Christ and the woman as either the Church, or the soul of the individual Christian believer, or both. As in the Jewish tradition, there is a sense that the Song is the 'holy of holies' of Scripture, or at least that it is a special text with a meaning that is not immediately

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<sup>20</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Esther and the Song of Songs*, ed. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans. Maurice Simon, Midrash Rabbah, vol. 9 (London: Soncino Press, 1951), 129-30.

<sup>21</sup> For an outline of the history of Canticles in Jewish liturgical tradition, see *The Targum of Canticles*, ed. Martin McNamara, trans. Philip S. Alexander, The Aramaic Bible, vol. 17A (London: T & T. Clark, 2003), 53-54. For a brief discussion on Sabbath relevance, see Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 171. For the Passover, see Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 251.

<sup>22</sup> By 'allegorical,' I indicate here simply any reading that understands the text to be referring primarily to something other than what the words mean. I do not intend any more specific understandings of allegory, such as that within the medieval 'four-sense' interpretation of Scripture.



accessible. One of the earliest, and certainly one of the most influential commentators, Origen, notes with approval the Jewish tradition of *deuteroiseis*, whereby Scripture is divided into primary and secondary levels. Only those who have already been trained in the reading of Scripture, and who have reached an age of maturity (specifically thirty years old) should be allowed to read texts like the Song of Songs. Origen adds his own gloss to this: '... I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.'<sup>23</sup> For Origen, then, it is not just that the carnal sense of the Song of Songs opens up the possibility of talking about the emotional relationship between God and his people; the carnal sense is dangerous to the unprepared reader, and is to be rejected in favour of spiritual things. Origen had himself castrated in a rather drastic attempt to 'rid himself of the passion of his bodily nature,' and it is notable that the Song of Songs held a high place in the monastic tradition and liturgy, which also tended to place body and spirit in opposition to one another.

Origen's interpretation set the hermeneutical method for well over a millennium. In the Middle Ages, the Song was the biblical text most preached on and commented on, and readings were almost always allegorical and spiritual, developing mystical aspects in the high Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> The high-water mark of this tradition is generally agreed to be the unfinished series of sermons on the Song made by Bernard of Clairvaux for his monks in the twelfth century.<sup>25</sup> In eighty-six sermons, Bernard reached 3.1 of his text, and his exposition presents the Song as the narrative of the inner life of the Christian seeking full union with Christ, his lover and spouse. Bernard seeks to connect the words of the Song with the personal emotional experience of his audience, and to place that experience in the context of a (sometimes troubled) progress of the soul towards the ultimate goal of the spiritual marriage. The influence of this way of reading the Song of Songs was enormous, and I shall have occasion to refer to Bernard several times during this thesis.<sup>26</sup>

One of the differences between Jewish and Christian traditions is the high regard for celibacy within the Christian tradition. Although, as I noted earlier, the Old Testament can be highly critical of sex, in particular of sexual concupiscence, it is in the

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<sup>23</sup> Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, vol. 26 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1957), 23.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 25: 'Bernard's *Sermones in Canticum* are widely recognized to be at once the crowning achievement of the approach to the Song initiated by Origen and the superlative contribution of monastic theology to Christian spirituality'.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 1-4. See also pp. 47-48.

New Testament that celibacy appears to be celebrated as a virtue *per se*, and this seems to have been connected to the expectation within the early Church that the eschaton, and the end-time for the earth, was imminent. This high esteem persisted even when the expected eschaton did not arrive, and fed into monasticism, thus finding a place at the centre of Christian thought and life. Augustine's understanding that sexual desire was an aspect of human life that had been totally degraded by the Fall has also been highly influential in the Christian tradition. For Augustine, the involuntary nature of the sexual impulse, exemplified by the erect penis, was a prime example of how mankind, as a result of sin, had lost the healthy relationship of benign control that he originally had with his body.<sup>27</sup> The Christian tradition has sometimes misread Augustine in thinking he condemned sexuality itself, however, for he did think that it was a good that had been corrupted by the Fall, rather than an evil introduced by it. Even now, there is a general perception, within the Church and outside it, that the Church considers sexual activity to be a sin, and this is linked to the sense that body and spirit are opposed to each other, with body attempting to drag spirit down to its lower moral level.<sup>28</sup> In fact, this is a Gnostic and Neoplatonic idea, rather than an orthodox Christian one, but it has held enormous sway throughout Christian thought.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Christian interpretation of the Song has seemed to seek a higher, spiritual meaning that will transcend the lower, carnal one. As with Jewish tradition, Christian tradition has also held the Song in very high regard, considered it to be in important respects a hidden or cryptic text and used it as a means of exploring the emotional relationship between God and his people.

We should note one further distinctive feature of the Christian tradition of interpretation. It is by no means universal, but in the Middle Ages, an interpretation grew that the woman in the Song of Songs was Mary, queen of heaven and bride, as well as mother, of Christ.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation shows itself both in commentaries and in liturgy concerning Mary, where the Song of Songs features, and it is clear that it was well-known and well-loved.<sup>31</sup> There are links between all three interpretations. Mary, as

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<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1983), XIV.16, 577.

<sup>28</sup> David Carr gives a cogent critique of this prevalent Christian attitude. David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5-8.

<sup>29</sup> For an outline of Gnosticism, see F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1997). For Neoplatonism, 1136-7.

<sup>30</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 158-61.

<sup>31</sup> Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1986), 327-28; Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 42-72. An important example of Marian liturgy is the Litany of Loreto, which was in use probably from the twelfth century, and was

the first person to recognize Christ for who he was and to love him as he should be loved, is a paradigm of the Church; there is a case for calling her its founding member. Moreover, as the person physically and emotionally closest to Christ, she is an example of the ideal relationship that the Christian soul would have with Christ, and a model to emulate. Therefore, as the Church is made up of its members, and so it is appropriate to speak at the same time of the whole Church and of the individual believer, so Mary can represent both at once.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.3.3 *A note on the current state of commentary*

This thesis has been produced in the light of recent commentary on the Song of Songs, and some of its conclusions speak to the current discourse about it. Commentary since the second half of the twentieth century has produced a wide range of interesting readings of the Song, including responses to the Song as literature, consideration of its feminist content and/or implications, and its role in sexual ethics.<sup>33</sup> It has also read previous interpretations in a wide range of ways.<sup>34</sup> However, there has been a general thrust in the understanding of the history of reading the Song, some key features of which I want to highlight now, because it is important to make a distinction between the tradition of interpretation and the current perception of that tradition.

First, and most importantly, there has been a concerted effort to highlight what tends to be called the 'literal' meaning of the text, by which commentators mean the carnal or sexual meaning.<sup>35</sup> Commentators often characterize the whole of the previous tradition as having rejected, ignored or sublimated this literal sense, so that the primary

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published in 1551. Michael Walsh, *A Dictionary of Devotions* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1993), 163.

<sup>32</sup> Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 328. 'If to the Christian [the Song of Songs] expresses Christ's love for his Church, then since Mary is a type of the Church, the figurative Marian interpretation is valid and may powerfully help those with true mystical endowment'.

<sup>33</sup> For the Song of Songs as literature, see, for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 185-203. For feminism, Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). For sexual politics and ethics, Stephen D. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible*, *Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). For a combined literary and psychoanalytical approach, see Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs*, *Bible and Literature* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> For example, Stephen Moore re-reads monastic interpretations from a queer perspective, Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces*. Moore and Virginia Burrus consider the Song in relation to pornography; Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore, 'Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs,' *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no.1 (2003). Elizabeth Kraft reads early novels by women through the lens of the Song, finding that their interpretations represent a variety of views, and tell us something of their struggle to shape an identity in the world, Elizabeth Kraft, *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire: 1684-1814* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Pope, *The Song of Songs*; Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.

task of new interpretation is to recover the literal meaning and restore it to its proper place. This enterprise may be understood to be related to the sexual liberation of the times.<sup>36</sup> It has also gone alongside an interest in the Song of Songs as literature, which coincides with a burgeoning of literary Bible study during this period.<sup>37</sup> The results of this have been exciting and significant, but it is important to note two problems that this dominant reading has brought with it, problems that are now being addressed by recent studies. The first is that this commentary tends to assert the 'literal' meaning of the text in a way that implies that this is unproblematic, whereas in fact the Song of Songs is such an enigmatic piece of literature, and so full of interweaving figurative language, that it is problematic to suggest that there *is* a single obvious and plain literal level to the text at all. Stephen Prickett has pointed out, in relation to biblical interpretation in general, that: 'the idea of a primary literal meaning to a given text is an essentially modern one – dating, in effect, from the rise in status and popularity of the novel.'<sup>38</sup> Moreover, while the quest to give more status to the carnal level of the text is in many ways laudable, the assumption that the literal level of meaning is the primary one, and that all allegory is, at bottom, a form of sublimation, is rather sweeping. It is also surprising in readings that take the Song to be high literature, since literary readings of high literature are not noted for insisting that the text be understood at face value.

The second problem is that the insistence that the overwhelming majority of previous commentators have rejected, ignored or sublimated the literal/ carnal level is, at best, an oversimplification. In the first place, some commentators did not equate the literal and carnal levels of the text. For them, the obvious plain sense is not carnal. This might seem surprising, but then it is surprising to find a woman's neck compared to the tower of David. This text is so enigmatic that it is not easy to spot a single literal level, and what is obvious to some readers may be obscure to others. Second, while commentators of the past sometimes do relegate the carnal meaning to a less important level of significance, they very rarely deny that it exists. Even if the carnal meaning is only a stepping-stone to the spiritual, it is still almost always acknowledged. I have given here something of a caricature of recent commentary, but it is important to

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<sup>36</sup> For a critique of this 'myth of repression,' see David M. Carr, 'Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and its Interpretation', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000), esp. 233-34.

<sup>37</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 203 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*.

<sup>38</sup> Prickett, 'Biblical and Literary Criticism', 19.

question attitudes that are in danger of becoming truisms, but that may conceal 'blind spots' in current reading both of the Song of Songs and of its history of interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

### **3      *Structure and content of the thesis***

In the early modern period and before, the vast majority of writing that commented on the Song of Songs was written with a religious focus. This is the context in which it was studied and thought about down the centuries, and Chapter 2 therefore gives an account of English religious writing about the Song of Songs during the period. In this, there is no aim either to underline or to undermine the dominant Calvinist reading of the Song. The focus is rather on the hermeneutical methods of these interpreters. The chapter provides a sketch of some of the variety of reading practices that they adopted, and how these practices relate to the meaning they derived from their text. The account shows, first, that there is continuity with the tradition of interpretation. Although the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs demonstrates a variety of readings, it also has a stable core of allegorical reading and application to the inner life of the soul, and these features remain in the period under consideration here, often in highly-developed formulations. Second, within the context of that stable core, there is a wide variety of interpretation, both in detail and in overall approach. Finally, it is clear that, even though the writing is religious, much of it is also deeply concerned with the Song as literature, in various ways. The reading practices of interpreters of the Song of Songs were often literary as well as theological. This chapter therefore sets the poetry that follows in the context of religious reading of the Song and begins to indicate some of the interaction between theology and literature which Chapter 6 will draw out further in its conclusions.

#### **3.1    *The three themed chapters***

The poetic material is presented in three themed chapters. Three factors contributed to the selection of the themes. First, they are the three themes that struck me most forcibly on a first reading of the material; and it is worth noting, of course, that their relevance to twenty-first century Western life may indicate my own sensitivity and receptiveness to them, rather than their essential universality. Second, they are themes

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<sup>39</sup> To balance my caricature, I should stress first that the consensus that the Song is primarily 'about' human love has led to a wide variety of interpretations, and also that it is now being questioned, notably by Edmee Kingsmill, 'The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality' (Ph.D. thesis, Oxford: University of Oxford, 2002), who argues that the Song was originally intended as a religious allegory. For an eminently sensible and subtle discussion of the history of interpretation and the importance of attentiveness to the hermeneutical methods of past (and current) interpreters, see Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, esp. 11-12 and 15-16.

that preoccupy current commentary on the Song of Songs (which again may be a reason why they were so obvious to me). This means that they should facilitate a dialogue between the early modern material and current discourse. Third, the themes are specific neither to religion nor to literature, but are relevant to both, and they therefore enable an interdisciplinary discourse. In each of the three chapters, I shall begin by outlining how the Bible, and then the Song of Songs, open up the theme, and move on to consider how one poet of the age, Aemilia Lanyer, handled the theme, and the use she made of the Song of Songs in her treatment. Then, discussion will broaden out to consider other poetry of the age.

### **3.2 Aemilia Lanyer**

There are three main reasons why I have centred the study on Aemilia Lanyer. First, she engages directly with the Song of Songs to discuss the three main themes of Chapters 3-5. Second, Lanyer is in many ways thoroughly typical of her age. She writes elite poetry seeking the patronage of aristocrats. She engages with the poetic tradition and the cultural canon of Renaissance humanism, attempting to craft her poetry to meet the standards of good taste. She engages with her society, in particular in her carefully-worded dialogue with her patrons, expressing views on how the world works, and how it should be. She engages with her fellow poets, placing her own work directly in the context of contemporary English literature. She engages with religious concerns, which she understands as central to her own thought and that of her imagined and proposed readers. She has a liminal status, like many poets of her day. Like Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Samuel Daniel and many others, she was educated above her station and seeks to use that education to improve her status in society by writing poetry for important patrons.

Third, Lanyer challenges her age at the very points in which I have just described her as typical. She is a woman (very unusual in a poet seeking patronage – indeed, Susanne Woods describes her as ‘the first woman writing in English who clearly sought professional standing as a poet’).<sup>40</sup> She advocates social equality, or at the very least much greater social mobility. She calls for an end to patriarchy and promotes an understanding of feminine virtue that, set alongside Christ's Passion, undermines society's assumption that male is the default sex. This combination of

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<sup>40</sup>Susanne Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), vii.

engagement with and challenge to the traditions and conventions of the day makes it particularly interesting to read Lanyer alongside her near-contemporaries.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2.1 *Aemilia Lanyer's book of poetry*

This section gives background on Lanyer and her one published work, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, which she published in 1611, when she was around forty years old.<sup>42</sup> She was the younger daughter of Baptist Bassano, a Venetian musician who had come to England to gain work at Queen Elizabeth's court, and his wife, or common law wife, Margaret Johnson. Her father died when she was about eight, and she seems to have gone into elite service, possibly as a companion, and to have received an aristocratic education in the home of the Dowager Countess of Kent.<sup>43</sup> At eighteen, around the time of her mother's death, she became the mistress of the Lord Chancellor, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, the Queen's cousin, but when, four years later, she fell pregnant, she was married 'for colour' to a court musician with links to her father's family, Alphonso Lanyer.<sup>44</sup> According to her work, she spent some time in the early 1600s with the Countess of Cumberland and her daughter, Lady Anne Clifford, possibly as music tutor to Anne. Her husband, in addition to being a court musician, sought social advancement as a captain in the army. He died two years after her work was published, and she lived in London, near her son's family, until 1645.<sup>45</sup> We have only one book of published poetry by Lanyer, and nothing in manuscript. The work consists of:

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<sup>41</sup> In this, my method follows Susanne Woods, whose monograph on Lanyer places her life and work in dialogue with contemporary canonical poets, with fruitful results both in terms of assessing Lanyer and of re-evaluating the canonical poets. *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Lanyer was 'discovered' in 1973 by an historian of Shakespeare, who was convinced that she was the 'dark lady' of the sonnets; A. L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved - A Modern Edition with Prose Versions, Introduction and Notes* (London: MacMillan, 1973). This led to intense debate, not only about Rowse's attribution, but also about her work: was it primarily interesting because of the light it shed on Shakespeare, or because of its own merits? Since then, Lanyer has been studied fairly extensively, and has entered the English canon, facilitating debate on women writers and on canonicity – may a writer who was apparently not read in her own time be called 'canonical'? A further debate has concerned the religiosity of her work, with some critics arguing that her religious subject was essentially a cover for politically daring writing, and others exploring the spirituality of her poetry. See Kari Boyd McBride's bibliography of Lanyer criticism, [www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/lanyer/lanyer.htm](http://www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/lanyer/lanyer.htm).

<sup>43</sup> Much of this biographical information is gleaned from Lanyer's poem itself, and some commentators think that it is very likely that Lanyer exaggerates greatly her connections with the noblewomen from whom she seeks patronage. Leeds Barroll, 'Looking for Patrons', in *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*, ed. Marshall Grossman, *Studies in the English Renaissance* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

<sup>44</sup> It was the astronomer Simon Forman, whom Lanyer consulted in the 1590s, who reported that her marriage was 'for colour': see Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> See, Aemilia Lanyer, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, ed. Susanne Woods, *Women Writers in English, 1350-1850* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xv-xxx.

- eleven dedications to patrons, known and unknown to Lanyer. Nine are in verse, and two (one verse, one prose) are general dedications to virtuous ladies and the virtuous reader. All the named dedicatees are women, and they include the major royal women and aristocratic women patrons of Lanyer's day;
- *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the long central poem of the work. This is a verse retelling of the Passion, with digressions which praise the main dedicatee, the Countess of Cumberland, which retell other sections of the Bible, notably the Fall narrative of Gen. 2-3, and the legend of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and which comment on contemporary literature and culture;
- *The Description of Cooke-ham*, an elegiac poem bidding a fond farewell to a time spent at the estate of Cookham with the Countess of Cumberland and her daughter, Lady Anne Clifford. This poem has a claim to be considered the first published English 'country house poem'.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Dedications

To dedicate one's poetry to a patron was common in this period. Sometimes, patrons had commissioned the work in question, and sometimes authors made dedications in the hope of future patronage, which could come in the form of financial reward, further commissions, employment with the patron or in other ways. The favour of a patron could indicate an author's political or religious affiliation, or could be a sign of the quality or kind of poetry the author intended to write, or the circles he or she hoped to move in. The extant copies of Lanyer's work vary in the number and order of dedications, making it clear that she was making a bid to exploit the patronage system, as poets of her age often did. Her dedicatees include royalty, people she claims personal acquaintance with and the two senior female literary patrons of her day, Lucy, Countess of Bedford and Mary, Countess of Pembroke.<sup>47</sup> They also include Katherine, Countess of Suffolk, whom Lanyer admits she does not know. Why Lanyer has chosen to approach this particular lady is not clear. The question of Lanyer's strategy with her dedications is an intriguing one, though largely not relevant here. However, there are

<sup>46</sup> Alastair Fowler, ed., *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> According to Margaret Hannay, Mary had effectively retired from patronage on the death of her husband in 1601. Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 173, 84-85. Lanyer's main dedicatee, Margaret, Countess of Cumberland, was also a significant literary patron.



some points it is worth making. First, there is clearly a patronage strategy at work. Second, Alphonso Lanyer was involved in the plan to promote his wife's poetic ambitions, for one of the copies we have was presented by him to Thomas Jones, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, under whom he probably served in the army.<sup>48</sup> Third, the strategy does not appear to have worked, as we have no evidence of further poetry from Lanyer, or of her subsequent employment with any of her dedicatees.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, the dedication strategy was not only designed to promote Lanyer, but also to further some of the key aims of the book as a whole. It is no accident that all the dedications are to women, and Lanyer makes clear in her prose dedication *To the Vertuous Reader* that one of her goals in writing is to vindicate women and to encourage women to speak well of each other and to support each other. This dedication is missing from several copies, suggesting that Lanyer was aware that its fairly direct proto-feminist stance might work against her.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.2.3 *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*

In many respects, the long central poem of the work resembles a rewritten Bible project, an activity that was popular with writers of this period.<sup>51</sup> Lanyer's retelling of the Passion sticks fairly closely to the Gospel account, and introduces a wide variety of biblical intertexts, particularly from the Gospels, the Psalms, the Prophets, Paul and Genesis, as well as the Song of Songs. Many writers of this period produced Bible harmonies or retellings that stitched together parts of Scripture to make a meaningful whole, often including, as Lanyer does, their own commentary on the Bible events. Moreover, this was one of the few genres in which it was generally acceptable for women to write. Sacred writing was much less controversial for women than secular.<sup>52</sup> This fact, coupled with Lanyer's innovative reading of the Bible, has led some commentators to suggest that the sacred content of her work was really a 'cover' for

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<sup>48</sup> Lanyer, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, xvii and xlviii-xlix.

<sup>49</sup> For an historical critique of Lanyer's patronage strategy, see Leeds Barroll, 'Looking for Patrons'. Longfellow also points out that, for a woman, it might simply be less socially awkward to seek patronage from women, and also bring more likelihood of preferment. Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, 63.

<sup>50</sup> For discussion of Lanyer and Patronage poetry, see Leeds Barroll, 'Looking for Patrons'; Kari Boyd McBride, 'Sacred Celebration: The Patronage Poems', in Marshall Grossman (ed.), *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*. For textual history, see Lanyer, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, xlvii-li.

<sup>51</sup> For some indication of the variety of kinds of translation and version, see Chapter 2.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret P. Hannay (ed.), *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985), 1-14.

more literary or socio-political writing, though many readers take the religious content of her work more seriously.<sup>53</sup>

There are several things to note about this poem. First, the close interweaving of biblical intertexts is both striking and typical of the times. Writers and thinkers were very familiar with their Bibles and were used to the idea of making connections between different parts of it to construct a coherent argument – this is what would happen in most good sermons of the day; moreover, it is embedded in the structure of liturgy.

Second, Lanyer's interpretation of the biblical material is both representative of her culture and a challenge to it. Her portrayal, for example, of Christ as in important respects a feminine figure draws on a strong tradition from the Middle Ages, but develops it in a particular way.<sup>54</sup>

Third, the poem includes other, non-biblical material. This includes an engagement with contemporary English literature, through discussion of the stories of popular figures like Cleopatra, Lucrece, Rosamund and Matilda. It also includes, at the beginning and end of the poem, extensive praise of Lanyer's main dedicatee, the Countess of Cumberland. The presence of this material in the main poem may seem odd; it would surely be tidier to have put all material relating to the Countess in her dedication. However, the Countess's function, as both dedicatee and model reader of the work, is developed in these sections in ways that help readers to understand how Lanyer wants them to engage with her work, as will become evident.

### **3.2.4 The Description of Cooke-ham**

Lanyer indicates that the Countess of Cumberland has actually commissioned her to write this poem (near the start of *Salve Deus* she apologises for not having done so). It is an elegiac farewell to an idyllic time spent at the country estate of Cookham with the Countess. It makes extensive use of the pathetic fallacy, showing the house and, more significantly, the grounds, flourishing in the Countess's presence and the onset of winter when she leaves. This genre of writing, which was popular in ancient

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<sup>53</sup>See, for example, Betty Travitsky (ed.), *The Paradise of Women: Writings by Englishwomen of the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 29. Travitsky writes, 'As totalities, these poems are societal rather than religious in purpose'. See also Barbara K. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 213. 'The title of Lanyer's volume of poems promises, somewhat misleadingly, a collection of religious poetry—a genre thought especially appropriate for women writers . . . But despite the title . . . the volume in fact contains several kinds of poems on subjects not exclusively religious, in various poetic genres and verse forms'.

<sup>54</sup>For a treatment of the feminized Christ in the Middle Ages, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Rome, is known as the 'country house poem,' and Lanyer's work is a very early example of it. Jonson's *To Penshurst*, one of the most famous of country house poems, was published in 1615 and possibly written after Lanyer's poem.<sup>55</sup> What is particularly intriguing about Lanyer's poem is that, though its publication precedes Jonson's, it reads as a counter-example to an established tradition. Country house poems extol their patrons by demonstrating that their estates are run in an ideal way. In *Penshurst*, the benign rule of Robert Sidney results in the tenants spontaneously bringing gifts to their lord and the game birds practically lifting up their necks to be wrung, while Lady Sidney produces a seemingly endless line of children. The poem presents patriarchy as the natural, and ideal, world order, which, if performed correctly, leads to success, prosperity and happiness. This is the standard procedure for the country house poem. Lanyer's work, however, celebrates a particularly feminine idyll, and it is possibly because of this that the idyll is so fragile. The ideal living conditions that the Countess establishes at Cookham cannot last.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.3 *Other poets*

Finally, the chapters broaden out to compare Lanyer's treatment of the theme with those of her near contemporaries. The themes are, of course, extremely broad, so that one of the challenges of the thesis has been to balance keeping the focus on the Song of Songs specifically, and showing how the Song participates in the poets' approach to the broader theme at hand. This is more interesting than simple allusion-spotting. There are occasions when poets quote directly from the Song, or use marginal notes to indicate a deliberate allusion, and these are helpful starting points, but the thesis is about reading practices, and allusions are only one way to use a text to aid one's thinking.

In searching for a satisfactory term to describe my method, I hit upon various problems that are not new. The thesis attempts to read how others read by uncovering connections between what they wrote and a text they undoubtedly read: the Song of Songs. It is important to note that the primary interest is not in tracing the history of reception of the text; or even the history of the interpretive methods employed by the

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<sup>55</sup> Fowler (ed.), *The Country House Poem*. For a discussion of Lanyer's possible place as a foundress of the genre, see Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*, 115-25. See also Barbara K. Lewalski, 'Seizing Discourses and Reinventing Genres', in ed. Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*; Marshall Grossman, 'The Gendering of Genre: Literary History and the Canon', in *ibid*.

<sup>56</sup> This was quite true: the estate of Cookham was a crown manor in the possession the Countess's brother, where he provided a home for her during her separation from her husband. Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*, 29. See also Michael Morgan Holmes, 'The Love of Other Women: Rich Chains and Sweet Kisses', in ed. Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*.

poets. Nor is it with authorial intention. The poets are, in some respects, representative of the dominant culture of their time and place, or of specific countercultural movements; and they may be read with the intention of revealing what that culture or counterculture was. They are also, in important respects, idiosyncratic, and may be read with the aim of uncovering the genius of the specific individual writer. The thesis does neither of these things. First of all, it aims to respect these poets both as members of their culture and as agents within it; both bound by the ideology of their day and also interacting critically and creatively with it - in other words, as embodied and engaged persons. Second, it explores the hermeneutical moves they make in order to see what results these moves give, and to see what they contribute to the store of hermeneutical options that the reader of the Song of Songs has today. These writers are neither historical curiosities (whose reading strategies we have now moved far beyond in sophistication) nor geniuses whose universal insights can stand outside of time; they are readers, who are located in a particular culture, but who nevertheless read actively and creatively.

In some respects, this method has connections with the notion of 'midrashic modes of reading' that has been explored intensively over the last thirty years, as part of the burgeoning and increasingly complex study of Bible and literature. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick give a simple identifying definition of midrash:

In rabbinic literature *midrash* designates both a genre of biblical exegesis and the compilations in which such exegesis, much of it initially delivered and later transmitted orally, was eventually preserved. The genre of midrash flourished most dramatically in the land of Israel during the periods of the Tannaitic and Amoraic Sages (70 c.e. to 220 and 220 to 400 c.e., respectively). Important collections of midrashim emerged continually, in diverse settings, from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries, though our knowledge of how or why midrashim were actually generated is extremely sparse.<sup>57</sup>

The kind of exegesis that the midrash provides is rather unusual and particular, and has not been explicitly considered as literature until recently, precisely because it appears to avoid literary features such as structure and closure, and so seemed to scholars more like collections of sayings stitched randomly together than works of literature. However, scholars of literary theory have more recently recognized strong connections between midrash and postmodern literary theory, including theories of semiotics, hermeneutics, intertextuality and theories that focus on readers and the activity of reading.<sup>58</sup> Given that many such scholars were raised on Jewish reading practices, this is not entirely surprising. Daniel Boyarin, for example, explains how he

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<sup>57</sup> Geoffrey H Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), ix.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-18.

found in midrashic modes a way to connect the two cultures in which he functioned; Orthodox Judaism and literary study. Using Hans Frei's description of the roles of ethnographer and native, he shows that the tools of literary theory allow him as ethnographer to explore and investigate his own reading practices as a native reader of midrash, to bridge the gap between his two cultural selves:

For me, the bridge has been literary theory. Literary theory today is not focused on beauty but on meaning. In a sense, literary theory is the discourse where fundamental issues, once part of theology and other branches of philosophy, are being thought through: language, the Subject, the very definition and understanding of humanity. Accordingly, literary theory takes a place for me analogous perhaps to the place that Scholastic philosophy had for an interpreter of the Bible and midrash in the Middle Ages. Contemporary theory opens up possibilities for reunderstanding midrash.<sup>59</sup>

This project has further importance for Boyarin, for he argues that specifically Jewish culture has been erased in the term 'Judaean-Christian', which effectively means 'Christian.' The traditional understanding that Western culture has two streams feeding it - Hellenism and Judaism - has often misunderstood Judaism and so misrepresented it in key respects. Matthew Arnold, for example, contrasted Hebraism's 'strictness of conscience' with Hellenism's 'spontaneity of consciousness', missing thereby both the spontaneity and the consciousness in Hebraism.<sup>60</sup> For Boyarin, the emergence of the study of midrash as an important literary study 'is profoundly encouraging, since it means to me that I have something to say that people other than committed Jewish scholars (or scholars of Judaism) may want to hear, that my work has meaning and importance beyond a coterie of specialists.'<sup>61</sup>

Since this project is not primarily historical, the nature of the poets' interaction with midrash or with Jewish culture is not at issue here. The modes and practices of midrash, however, are helpful as models both of reading and of text. In exploring how these poets read the Song of Songs, the thesis aims to show how the poets opened up and explored interpretive possibilities, rather than how they achieved hermeneutical closure. Midrash records multiple possibilities for the meaning of the biblical text, without commenting directly on their relative value or truth. Moreover, midrash reveals how its interpretations have been arrived at: if it were handling mathematical problems, midrash would score highly on demonstrating its working-out. In the readings of poets that follow, the practices, the hermeneutical moves made by the poets, are at least as interesting as the results, and form part of any critique of results. As far as the text is

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<sup>59</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Meaning of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), x.

<sup>60</sup> Hartman and Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature*, ix-x.

<sup>61</sup> Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Meaning of Midrash*, xi.

concerned, while midrash is not a totally free and unconstrained mode of reading, it is not univocal, and it therefore offers the possibility of identifying the subversive in the biblical text. At least some of these poets probably intended to be subversive in some way: some poems are provocatively erotic; others promote heterodox religious positions, while one promotes an overturning of the gender power structure of the culture. Yet these poets find materials and theology to promote these subversive agendas in Scripture itself; how they did so, how Scripture offered not only orthodoxy but subversion, and how it offered profoundly different things to different readers, is of particular interest to this project.

This means that, in addition to using marginal notes and spotting allusions, the thesis also identifies key tropes, such as marriage, and literary techniques including the pathetic fallacy and synaesthesia as elements offered by the Song of Songs to the poets that they can use in formulating and articulating meaning. It is this structure and process that is most interesting, because it is here that it is possible to see that the poets were reading their Bibles as active agents involved in constructing and experimenting with possibilities for meaning.

The discussion is organized within each chapter poet by poet, each poet treated in roughly chronological order. The result is an argument that is less smooth than I would have liked. However, after several experiments, this seems the most straightforward way to present the material, and since the discourse is complex, choosing simplicity wherever possible seems the wisest course.

### **3.4 Chapter 6: Conclusions**

This chapter draws together the results of the study, and considers their implications for the understanding of the relationship between the Bible and literature. From looking at how the Song of Songs has been read, it draws conclusions about how it may be read. It also places the early modern material alongside recent readings of the Song of Songs, suggesting that recent critique of past reading practices should in some cases be nuanced, and that close attention to the reading practices of the past can be rewarding.

## CHAPTER 2: THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

### 1 *Introduction*

This chapter is about early modern religious readings of the Song of Songs. Although Renaissance readers recognized that the Song of Songs was literature, writing whose primary aim was to interpret the Song of Songs was almost entirely committed to religious readings. That is not to say that literary considerations had no place, as will become clear; but the fundamental question readers were asking was not 'is this good literature?' or 'how does this work compare with other love lyrics?' but rather, 'what spiritual nourishment is the Holy Spirit offering by inspiring this piece of Scripture?' Therefore, virtually all of the material written about the Song of Songs in the Renaissance is in the form of commentaries, homilies, sermons and metrical versions.

However, literature and theology are intertwined, not least because Scripture and liturgy take the form of literary texts. The nature and consequence of this interrelationship is complex and fraught, in the English Renaissance as much as at any time. The humanist trivium of learning focused heavily on literature, on the power of literary works to move and persuade, and the responsibility of readers to read with skill and discernment; but religious texts were contained within another branch of learning altogether - divinity.<sup>1</sup> Schoolboys would study both, but they studied them in different lessons, from different perspectives, and using different rules. Yet Renaissance readers did recognize religious literature as literature. A growing body of scholars was translating the ancient holy texts, and therefore bringing to bear what they had learned not only in their Greek or Hebrew classes, but also in their rhetorical training. If the purpose of literature was to teach, to delight and to move to action, the Bible performed these functions supremely, and its translators were keenly aware both of this fact, and of the responsibility it placed on them as translators.

### 2 *English Renaissance literary criticism and the Bible*

Several works of English literary criticism were produced in this period. Writers celebrated English literature as an important aspect of national identity, and as a growing force to be reckoned with in world culture; and there was also anxiety about this. The great reverence for the classics that the humanist curriculum fostered raised the question of whether a vernacular could attain the dignity of the literature of the golden age. Writers in English were becoming acutely aware that their own vernacular was developing a canon of literature, and they wanted both to place this in the context

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Pincombe, *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the Later Sixteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

of classical literature, and to make a case for English literature as a positive expression of national culture: the greatness of the nation could be measured, in part, by the greatness of its vernacular literature. An example is George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie*, which aims to provide a systematic presentation of the qualities of English poetry, with numerous examples. It places this poetry in the context of the history of poetry as a whole, and presents that history almost exclusively as the history of classical Greek and Latin writing.<sup>2</sup>

Puttenham is typical in making all his comparisons with the classics and virtually ignoring his own sacred texts as literature in his treatment. This is partly because of an intense concern with the rules of versification. Readers knew a great deal about Greek and Latin versification, but while readers of the Bible were convinced that there was such a thing as biblical verse, and that it had rules, no one had yet been able to decipher these rules. In the words of Sidney:

... even the name psalms will speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but songs; then, that it is fully written in metre, as all learned hebricians agree, although the rules be not yet fully found...<sup>3</sup>

Biblical poetry, then, could not be used in a discussion about metre.<sup>4</sup> However, Sidney's work defines poetry primarily not as verse, but as imaginative literature, and to illustrate the power of such literature, he does make use of biblical examples, notably the figurative language of the Psalms and the parables of Nathan the prophet and of Jesus, stories which, though fictitious, reveal deep truths.<sup>5</sup> The *Defence* is, I think, the most significant treatment of biblical literature as literature. Sidney's comments on the Bible are not systematic, and form only a small part of the *Defence*, but they are important, because they form planks in his argument for the moral value of imaginative literature. He recognizes that the Bible contains such literature, and he judges it. But Sidney does seem to be aware that judging Holy Scripture opens a can of worms, and he tries to keep the lid shut on the can. Although he makes limited use of biblical examples, and argues that parts of the Bible are indeed poetry, he places divine poetry

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<sup>2</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

<sup>3</sup> Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or the Defence of Poesy)*, ed. (revised and expanded) R. W. Maslen, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>4</sup> It was used, however, as a justification for metrical experiment in poetry. Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85-110.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*. For the Psalms, 84, for the Jesus example, 91, for Nathan the prophet, 96. On the rare occasions when biblical poetry is given as examples in works of English literary theory, these are the most common citations, which may indicate the influence of Sidney's text.



in its own separate category; a category that he insists his work is not about. The *Defence* is a defence of 'right poetry,' i.e. poetry written not under divine inspiration. It is a fine line to tread, and Sidney goes relatively far along the tightrope.<sup>6</sup> Southwell works from the other direction, arguing in *The Author to his loving Cosen* not that the Bible contains literary writing (this is a given for him), but that all literary writing is worthless unless it takes its cue from the Bible and orients itself to God.<sup>7</sup> Southwell is writing about religious verse, and not the Bible, so he does not spell out what the implications of this might be for readers of the Bible. Most writers simply ignore Scripture when they write about literature.

One other work of literary theory that I have found gives significant biblical examples: Henry Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577 and 1593).<sup>8</sup> This work is a sort of anthology of figurative language, and, very untypically, it draws the majority of its examples from the Bible. This is, of course, partly because figures do not rely on metrical considerations, and so the lack of understanding of biblical versification is not a problem in this case. Peacham's title also indicates that he intends his work to be useful both to students of eloquence and to those who desire better understanding of Holy Scripture, but the preponderance of biblical examples, offered alongside both proverbial commonplaces and examples from the classics without any comment, is striking. Peacham gives no reasons for linking eloquence and the understanding of Scripture, but simply presents his material. His confident presentation of the Bible as a rich repository of literary figures is unique in such works.

Consideration of the Song of Songs as poetry barely features in works of English literary theory, making its appearance as an intertext in English poetry especially interesting.

There is, however, a body of exegetical and homiletical works in English that treats of the Song of Songs, and it is these texts that are the concern of this chapter. It is important to be clear that the aim of this chapter is neither to provide a sketch of the dominant theology of the period, nor a comprehensive map of the variety of doctrinal positions that was adopted. Rather, it is to give a sketch of some of the variety of

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Sidney's thinking on the relationship between Scripture and literature, see Anne Lake Prescott, 'King David as a "Right Poet": Sidney and the Psalmist', *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Southwell, S.J., *The Poems of Robert Southwell, S.J.*, eds. James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence Conteyning the Figures of Grammer and Rhetorick, from Whence Maye Bee Gathered All Manner of Flowers, Coulors, Ornaments, Exornations, Formes and Fashions of Speech, Very Profitable for All Those That Be Studious of Eloquence, and That Reade Most Eloquent Poets and Orators, and Also Helpeth Much for the Better Vnderstanding of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1577). Excerpts from this work appear in Gavin Alexander, ed., *Sidney's 'Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 248-53.

hermeneutical moves that readers were making, and to consider how these reading practices relate to the theological results they obtained. Such a sketch will provide useful context for the reading practices and theological results analysed in the poetry in Chapters 3-5.

### 3 *Theological material*

What follows is the result of a survey of theological interpretation of the Song of Songs in late Elizabethan and earlier Stuart England. As far as I know, there is no major study of the theological interpretation of the Song of Songs in the early modern period; certainly there is nothing of the scale and thoroughness of Max Engammare's study of the interpretation of the Song of Songs during the first half of the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Engammare's study has provided invaluable help with both background material and an understanding of the different categories of literature where interpretation of the Song is likely to be found. The survey informing this chapter does not claim to be comprehensive; for example, I have had the opportunity to study only works in the vernacular, and the lack of Latin material means that what follows has only a very limited Catholic perspective. Most of the works cited in this chapter may be found on Early English Books Online, and were published between the years 1580 and 1640. Within these limits, however, it is possible to say several worthwhile things about theological interpretation of the Song of Songs in this period.

It is interesting to compare the poetry with the theological material for two reasons. First, to see what similarities and differences there are in the *content* of the writing. Do theological writers discuss the same themes as poets when they read the Song of Songs? Does it open up for them discourse on the same subjects? Second, is there a difference in the way they handle the material? The most logical assumption, from a twenty-first century perspective, is that the theological writing will be concerned with doctrine and with questions of orthodoxy, whereas the poetry will be free and inventive, both more affective and, therefore, perhaps theologically looser, even potentially more heretical. The poets chosen for this study are certainly in important senses original and interesting voices, and they were selected for the complexity and interest of their poems rather than as representatives of particular doctrinal viewpoints. While it is reasonable to assume that the religious writing considered here is concerned to convey particular doctrines, the focus in this chapter is not so much in identifying what these are as in exploring how they are arrived at, in analysing hermeneutical moves and their results. In addition, it should be remembered that conveying doctrine

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<sup>9</sup> Max Engammare, *Qu'il me Baise des Baisers de sa Bouche: Le Cantique des Cantiques à la Renaissance* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1993).

is only one of the aims of such writing: sermons in particular are not only exegetical but also pastoral, and (bearing in mind the Renaissance emphasis on rhetoric) written works aim not only to make the correct meaning, but also to convince their readers of that meaning, and to move them to action based on that conviction.

The study includes four basic kinds of material. The first is metrical versions of the Song of Songs. As Engammare notes, the first of these was by William Baldwin and published in 1549, and there are several such versions published during our period. These are part of the growing vogue for translating and rewriting the Bible that stemmed from the Reformation, and they cover a wide spectrum of poetic endeavour.<sup>10</sup> Some aim at high poetry, while others are concerned with making a difficult text accessible to the ordinary believer. There are several which are designed to be sung, and these range from Loe's translation into monosyllables, designed to fit with tunes ready to hand, to George Wither's collaboration with Orlando Gibbons, produced for the Court and presumably intended to scale the heights of artistic endeavour, though apparently published in the hope of achieving wide dissemination and performance.

The second kind of material is commentaries on the Song of Songs. There are several of these. Often, these are published not as stand-alone texts, but alongside an author's commentary on other books. Sometimes, it will be Revelation, in which case they are both seen as difficult or cryptic texts. More often they are the other books of Solomon: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. These three books are seen in various ways as the wise Solomon's teaching on how to live well. A standard way of interpreting these sees Proverbs as a guide to prudent and wise conduct in the world, Ecclesiastes as a manual for recognizing that the world is 'vanity' and beginning to turn the soul away from it and towards the things of God, and the Song of Songs as the final phase in that process. As will be seen, exactly how the Song of Songs completes the process is envisaged in a variety of ways, that are not always clearly expressed. Often, it is easy to spot the doctrinal convictions of the author of the work, and there are various standard interpretations that belong to particular doctrinal standpoints.

The third kind of material is reference to the Song of Songs in works that are about something else. The most common material of this kind is when commentators explain the grammar of Hebrew superlative or emphatic by pointing out that phrases like 'king of kings' and 'song of songs' mean 'the supreme king' or 'the best song.' But there are also other uses, including use of the Song of Songs in books of household piety.

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Bible translation in an historical/cultural perspective, see Lynne Long, *Translating the Bible from the 7th to the 17th Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), esp. 152-84.

The fourth kind of material is sermons. There do not appear to be a great many sermons on the Song of Songs – we have only two from Donne and none from Lancelot Andrewes, for example – but there are a few, and the Song is referred to in sermons on other texts. Once again, doctrinal positions can become evident, and it is also interesting to note in this context the extent to which the preacher is using the Song with the aim of moving his readers.

Finally, it is worth noting the changing position of the Song of Songs within the English liturgy of this period. The Song of Songs had been the most commented-upon book of the Bible in the later patristic period and the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> I have already noted that it was important in Marian devotions (pp.14-15), because of the identification of Mary as the Bride of the Song. The development of feasts honouring Mary led to extensive use of the Song both in the said and sung liturgy for these feasts.<sup>12</sup> It also had a key role in explaining the relationship between Christ and his Church, and in dignifying the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage. This link is shown, for example, in the rite for the dedication of a church, which was identified, via the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, as the wedding between Christ and the church in question.<sup>13</sup> A trace of it can be seen in the marriage rite of the Book of Common Prayer, which identifies one of the functions of marriage as 'signifying unto us the mystical union, that is betwixt Christ and his Church.'<sup>14</sup> However, the richness of use and of allusion of the Middle Ages is absent from the Book of Common Prayer, whose lectionary includes no readings from the Song at all.<sup>15</sup> Even where Mary is celebrated in the calendar, the readings are from the Gospels and from other Wisdom books, not the Song. It is clear from the marriage rite, quoted above, and from the Geneva Bible notes, quoted below, that the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs was current, and was a key to understanding the Song, and that there was some continuity with previous readings; but its everyday use was less overt and less celebratory than it had been before the Reformation.

### **3.1 The Geneva Bible**

There is a variety of interpretations of the Song of Songs in the mainstream exegetical and hermeneutical literature of the period, but it is clear that the

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<sup>11</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs, Hermeneia - a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 21.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriela Initchi, 'Music in the Liturgy,' in eds. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter, *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 660.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Spatz, 'Church Porches and the Liturgy,' in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, 347.

<sup>14</sup> John E. Booty, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Washington: Folger Books, 1976), 290.

<sup>15</sup> *Book of Common Prayer 1559*, 36-47.

interpretation given in the notes of the Geneva Bible represent the 'standard' interpretation of the Song of Songs throughout. This is not to say that Geneva held a particular position of authority, for it was never the Church's 'official' Bible in England. Its widespread availability, its helpful and concise notes and the timing of its publication just after the accession of Elizabeth I all contribute to its influence, but I am not arguing that it was the major influence in Song of Songs interpretation during our period. I only want to note that the interpretations it gives in its notes correspond with most mainstream commentary I have found, and for that reason it is a good base text from which to begin to make some general points about interpretation at the end of the sixteenth and start of the seventeenth centuries.

### **3.2 *An allegory of Christ and his spouse, the Church/soul***

First, the Song is primarily interpreted as an allegory of the relationship between the bridegroom, Christ, and the bride, the Church or the faithful soul. The Geneva notes allow both interpretations and take no pains to distinguish between them, and this standpoint is adopted by most interpreters, so that we find interpretation slipping easily and without comment between reference to the Church - its doctrines and practices – and the individual soul – the personal emotions of consciousness of sin and desire for Christ. A good example is Richard Sibbes in 1639, whose sermons on Canticles 4, 5 and 6 are subtitled: 'a discovery of the neere and deere love, union and communion betwixt Christ and the Church, and consequently betwixt Him and every beleeving soule'.<sup>16</sup> This kind of elision allows commentators to present the Church feeling personal human emotions like yearning and desire, and conversely to link the emotions of its individual members to the doctrines they are to espouse. For example, the Geneva comment on 3.2: 'I wil rise *therefore* now, and go about in the citie, by the stretes & by the open places, & wil seke him that my soule loueth: I soght him, but I founde him not,' runs: 'shewing that although we be not heard at the first, yet we must stil continue in prayer til we fele comfort.' Here, the note envisages the possibility that the believer will feel that his prayer has not been heard, and provides a doctrine of perseverance in faith, and a practical course of action that it promises will lead to emotional satisfaction. The doctrine and the emotion are linked inextricably. We can see the opposite move, for example, in the comment on 2.17: 'vntil the day breake, & the shadowes flee away: returne, my welbeloued...', which runs: 'the Church desireth Christ to be moste ready to helpe her in all dangers.' Here, the Church is

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Bowels opened, or, A discovery of the neere and deere love, union and communion betwixt Christ and the Church, and consequently betwixt Him and every beleeving soule Delivered in divers sermons on the fourth fifth and sixth chapters of the Canticles* (London, 1639).

anthropomorphised, portrayed as having human and personal feelings, including desire.

The complexity of these positions can be indicated with a few examples. First, Samuel Smith, in 1617, published two sermons on Canticles 1.6-7, in which the woman asks the man for directions to where he pastures his flock at noon.<sup>17</sup> Smith sees the woman both as the Church and as its individual members, to some of whom he is preaching, so that the man in the Song is 'our husband,' and 'our souls' are married to him. Also typically, and following the Geneva notes, Smith reads this passage as relating to discernment: in order to get the right directions, the woman needs to go to the 'pastors' rather than the false teachers. A major portion of the sermon concerns how one must love Christ to be saved, and Smith gives four indicators as to how one may tell whether one loves him: one must love his word (and therefore one must read and meditate on it), one must love those he loves (i.e. members of the true church), one must be obedient to his word, and one will not be able to endure hearing him blasphemed. It is clear that the personal emotions of his listeners are a central concern for Smith, and that he has tried helpfully to tabulate these in a reasoned and logical form. It is also clear that the believer's emotional state and true doctrine are inextricably linked. The resulting sermon contains both appeals to emotion and to doctrinal orthodoxy, yet, at least to the modern reader, the way they are linked seems likely to provoke anxiety in the congregation more than either emotional relationship to Christ or clear understanding of doctrine:

It must stirre vp euery Christian man to labour to finde his heart rauished with the loue of Christ Iesus: so as hee can say, out of the affection of his heart, *O thou whom my soule loueth!* So as if the question were demanded, what I loue best? I can truly say, *I loue Christ Iesus more then the whole world: yea, I account all things but losse and dung to winne Christ.* And where men find this true affection and loue of Christ in them, it is a certaine signe of their saluation; that God hath cast his loue upon them, that so the loue of God draws loue to him againe. As the light of the Sunne lights on the eie, and by it wee see the sunne againe. And as by the picture in the Waxe, wee know the Seale: so by our loue to God, wee know his loue to us. O how should this cause euery man and woman, and euery mothers childe among vs, to examine their loue towards Christ, that so they may gather some assurance vnto their owne soules, that Christ hath cast his loue upon them. (pp. 245-7)

John Donne, too, seeks to engage both the emotions and the reason of his congregations, and his method involves the complex intermingling of doctrine and emotion. In his sermon on Canticles 3.11: 'Come forthe, ye daughters of Zion, &

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Smith, *The Great Assize, or, Day of Iubilee. Deliuered in Foure Sermons, Vpon the 20. Chapter of the Reuel. Ver. 12. 13. 14. 15.: Whereunto Are Annexed Two Sermons Vpon the 1. Chapter of the Canticles, Verse 6. 7* (London, 1617).

beholde the King Salomon with the crowne, wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his mariage, and in the day of the gladnes of his heart,' *preached at Denmark house, some few days before the body of King James, was removed from thence, to his buriall*, in 1625, Donne identifies Solomon as Christ, and the crown with which his mother crowned him as his human nature, given him by his mother, Mary.<sup>18</sup> In the following passage, Donne simultaneously explains the allegorical meaning of the verse and tries to convey why this should be comforting doctrine for his hearers:

*Behold your Solomon, your Saviour again, and you shall see another beam of Comfort, in your tribulations from his; for even this Humiliation of his, is called his Espousals, his marriage, Behold him crowned in the day of his Espousals. His Spouse is the Church, His marriage is the uniting of himselfe to his Spouse, in his becomming Head of the Church. The great City, the heavenly Jerusalem, is called The Bride, and The Lambs wife, in the Revelation: And he is the Head of this body, the Bridegroom of this Bride, the Head of this Church, as he is The first-borne of the Dead; Death, that dissolves all ours, made up this marriage. His Death is his Marriage, and upon his Death flowed out from his side, those two Elements of the Church, water and blood; The Sacraments of Baptisme, and of the Communion of himself. Behold this Solomon crowned and married to him, in whose right and merit thou shalt have that Crown.* (p. 288)

One final point to note is that the need to interpret allegorically is often seen as related to the difficulty of the text. The difficulties of the Song of Songs include its apparently carnal content and, less often acknowledged, the radical lack of narrative that I count as one of its leading characteristics (see p.6). Works like Thomas Wilson's of 1615 bear witness to this kind of difficulty. *Theological rules* is a scheme designed to help his readers make sense of, and use of, Scripture. It also includes *AEnigmata sacra, holy riddles; or misticall cases and secrets of diuinitie, with their resolutions*, which is 'a Christian dictionarie Opening the signification of the chiefe words dispersed generally through Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, tending to increase Christian knowledge. Whereunto is annexed, a perticular dictionarie for the Reuelation of S. Iohn. For the Canticles or Song of Salomon. For the Epistle to the Hebrues.'<sup>19</sup> Revelation, Hebrews and Canticles clearly require special study if they are to be correctly understood. This question of difficulty stands in interesting apposition to the question of sweetness and pleasantness treated below. Rarely do commentators make

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne: Edited, with Introductions and Critical Apparatus*, vol. 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-1962), 280-91.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Wilson, *Theological Rules, to Guide Vs in the Vnderstanding and Practise of Holy Scriptures Two Centuries: Drawne Partly out of Scriptures Themselues: Partly out of Ecclesiasticall Writers Old and New. Also Aenigmata Sacra, Holy Riddles; of Misticall Cases and Secrets of Diuinitie, with Their Resolutions. Foure Centuries: The Vnfolding Whereof Layeth Open That Truth That Concerneth Salvation. By T.W. Preacher of the Word* (London, 1615).

much of the fact that this text is at once attractive and difficult, alluring and cryptic, but there is an apparent paradox there. What we can say, I think, is that where a commentator starts from the difficulty, he encourages his readers to bear in mind that the prize for those who put in the effort to understand Canticles properly is a very sweet and desirable one; where he begins from the delight, he implies or says that it is the sweetness of the words that entices readers to begin the quest and keeps them going when the task becomes difficult.

Sir Henry Finch's exposition on the Song of Songs, published in 1615, is prefaced by a letter from the publisher, William Gouge, explaining his reading of the difficulty and sweetness of the Song.<sup>20</sup> After commending the privilege of being able to interpret Scripture for the unlearned, he says:

It is needfull that as the letter of the Scripture bee interpreted, so the mystery thereof vnfolded. Euery booke of holie writ requireth a faithfull and learned interpreter: but some more then other: among and aboue those some, this *Song of Solomon*: and that in regard of the excellency, and of the difficultie thereof.  
(f. A3a)

The Song's excellence is confirmed by its author (both the Holy Spirit and Solomon) and its matter, its difficulty by its poetic form and the 'manie Rhetoricall allegories, and hyperbolicall metaphors which are hard to be vnderstood and rightly applied' (A3b). It is worth taking the trouble to understand the Song, because its matter is '*a blessed, & sweet coniunction between Christ & his Church*, one of the most comfortable mysteries of our Christian faith' (A3b).

George Wither's collection of *Hymns and Songs of the Church* reads the sweetness and difficulty connection in the Song of Songs from the other end, beginning with sweetness and moving on to a warning about misunderstanding:

Svch is the mercy of God, that hee taketh aduantage euen of our naturall affections, to beget in our soules an apprehension of his loue, and of the mysteries which tend to our true happinesse; so, fitting his diuine expressions to the seuerall inclinations of men, that meanes might be prouided to winne some of all. For, otherwhile hee doth it by comparing the same to the glories of a temporall *Kingdome*, to winne such as are most desirous of *honours*. Sometime hee illustrates it by *Treasures, Gold, and pretious Stones*, &c. the better to allure such as are tempted with things of that nature. And diuers other wayes also, as appeares throughout the Booke of God. But in this *Song of Salomon* (wherein is mystically expressed the mutuall affection betwixt *Christ* and his *Church*, with the chiefe passages therof throughout all Ages from *Abel* to the last Iudgement; at which time their blessed *marriage* shall be fully

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Finch, *An Exposition of the Song of Solomon: Called Canticles Together with Profitable Observations, Collected out of the Same. Perused and Published by William Gouge, Preacher of Gods Word in Black-Friers, London* (London, 1615).



consu[m]mated) he doth most mouingly impart vnto vs, the rauishing contentments of the *diuine-Loue*; by comparing it to that delight which is conceaued in the strongest, the commonest, the most pleasing, the most naturall and the most commendable of our *Affections*. And doubtles, it powerfully preuaileth to the enflaming of their spirituall *Loue*, who seeke rightly to vnderstand and apply the mysteries & expressions herein contained. Let no man therefore presume to sing, or repeat, in a carnall sense, what is here spiritually intended; vpon paine of Gods heauie indignation. (pp. 31-2)<sup>21</sup>

### 3.3 *Salvation: faith and works*

Second, there is an emphasis on the inability of the Church/believer to act towards her or his own salvation, coupled with a concern to emphasize the purity of the true church of the elect. We can see this in the Geneva Bible's comment on 1.4, which explains the spouse's sunburn as 'the corruption of nature through sinne, *and* afflictions' (my emphasis). The note on 1.3: 'drawe me: we wil runne after thee,' explains: 'the faithful confesse that thei can not come to Christ except thei be drawn.' This links, of course, to the awareness of sin that occasions repentance. However, awareness of one's own helplessness must not lead to despair, and this is played out in a typical narrative in the interpretation of 5.2-8.

Here, the Geneva notes envisage a complicated scenario. 'I slepe, but mine heart waketh,' shows the spouse (here not specified as either soul or Church) sleeping in the sense that she is distracted from spiritual things by worldly things, and this makes her prey to sin. Christ, sensing that she is in danger, knocks at the door and asks to be let in, but she hesitates. 5.3 is ambiguous: 'I haue put of my coate, how shal I put it on? I haue washed my fete, how shal I defile them?' Why does she hesitate? The Geneva notes allow two possibilities: 'the spouse confesseth her nakednes, and that of her self she hathe nothing; or seing that she is once made cleane, she promiseth not to defile her self againe.' On the one hand, it is her humility in repentance that may cause her hesitation; on the other, it may be a fear of losing the cleansed status she has. Either way, she loses Christ, albeit temporarily, and becomes prey to the watchmen of 5.7, whom the Geneva notes describe as 'false teachers, which wounde the conscience with their traditions.' This links to the interpretation of 1.6-7, when the spouse asks her beloved, characterized as a shepherd, to show her the way, because she is afraid of being led astray, and Christ tells her to follow the footsteps of the flock (to go to the pastors to learn.) This Calvinist anxiety about faith and discernment runs through the Geneva notes, and through much of the commentary

<sup>21</sup> George Wither, *The Hymnes and Songs of the Church Diuided into Two Parts. The First Part Comprehends the Canonickall Hymnes, and Such Parcels of Holy Scripture as May Properly Be Sung, with Some Other Ancient Songs and Creeds. The Second Part Consists of Spirituall Songs, Appropriated to the Seuerall Times and Occasions Obseruable in the Church of England* (London, 1623).

material of the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries. It is connected to worries about correct and false doctrine and practice, and notes like the one above, with its choice of the word 'pastors' indicating where one is to find the right spiritual direction, are examples of the particular, and at times polemical, doctrinal concerns of hermeneutic material in the period. This question is also, of course, linked to faith and works. Salvation depends on faith, not works, but this by no means absolves the faithful from doing their best to do good.

Donne expresses this rather intriguingly in his sermon on Canticles 5.3. He makes use of both of the options presented in the Geneva Bible, and in respect of the second, the idea that once cleansed, the faithful person is loth to become dirty again, he praises this sentiment. He explains that while the washing of baptism is a once-only washing, the washings of regular self-examination in repentance and of regular cleansing through Church ritual are necessary, even though he accepts that human beings do not have the power to save themselves by their actions, but remain reliant on God. In apparent frustration, he exclaims 'How long shall we make this bad use, of this true doctrine, that, because we cannot doe *enough*, for our salvation, therefore we will doe *nothing*?'<sup>22</sup> This comment is potentially controversial, and it may be that Donne was exploiting this potential, for his sermon was preached at the 'churching' of the Lady Doncaster (Lucy Percy, a lady from a family with Catholic connections, and the wife of James Hay, a favourite of the King).<sup>23</sup> Churching was a ceremony whereby a woman was welcomed back into churchgoing after childbirth, and it was considered redolent of Romish superstition by Puritans.<sup>24</sup> Donne's treatment chimes with the anxiety running through the Geneva notes about the manner in which the true church, and its members, may be said to be 'blacke ... but comelie;' an anxiety that runs through Calvinist thought.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Simpson and Potter, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 5, 177.

<sup>23</sup> See John Stubbs, *Donne: The Reformed Soul* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 338-39. At the time of her courtship and wedding, Lucy Percy's father, the Earl of Northumberland, was incarcerated in the Tower for supposed involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. He strongly opposed the match, on grounds both of Hay's Protestantism and Scots nationality, and brought her to the Tower with him, writing: 'that he was a Percie and could not indure that his daughter shold daunce any Scottish giggs.' Quotation from N. E. McClure, ed., *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), 58.

<sup>24</sup> William Coster, 'Purity, Profanity, and Puritanism: The Churching of Women, 1500-1700', *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, Studies in Church History (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 377-87.

<sup>25</sup> John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981). Carey argues that anxiety about salvation, provoked by Calvinist doctrine and apostasy from Catholicism, provides a major dynamic in Donne's poetry.

### 3.4 Solomon and Christ

The Geneva Bible is quite clear that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs. Its *Argument* says that 'Salomon ... describeth the perfite loue of Iesus Christ, the true Salomon and King of peace, and the faithful soule or his Church...' Some commentaries bear witness to a long-standing debate about this. A key question is whether Solomon wrote the Song of Songs as a young man, perhaps in praise of Pharaoh's daughter, or as an old man, after he had written Ecclesiastes. This matters, because, if Solomon wrote the Song when he was young, he wrote it to celebrate earthly and carnal love, and the text's true meaning, the spiritual love between Christ and his spouse, is invested into it purely by the Holy Spirit. If, however, Solomon wrote it as an old man, it bears witness to the mystical wisdom Solomon attained at the end of his life. The tradition maintains that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as an old man (its narrator claims to have been everywhere and done everything), who has come at last to reject what the world has to offer: 'all is vanitie' (1.2). It is on this understanding that the three books of Solomon may be seen to progress from worldly wisdom (Proverbs) through a mature rejection of the world (Ecclesiastes) to the discovery of the wholly spiritual, even mystical, relationship between God and humankind.<sup>26</sup> In the material, commentators take various positions on this, and attempt to answer some of the problems it raises. Ultimately, typology is the solution, for Solomon may be seen as the type of Christ in various ways, and he may or may not be conscious of the typological relationship himself. In that way, even his sensual pleasures may foreshadow the spiritual love of Christ.

The relationship between the three books of Solomon set out by du Bartas and published in English translation in 1605 connects the details of Solomon's life with a complex typological interpretation.<sup>27</sup> In his *Deuine weekes*, which is a Bible harmony or rewritten Bible, he explains that Solomon's writing is like the temple he built, having three parts. Proverbs, with its basic rules for wise living, is the outer court; Ecclesiastes, which recognizes the vanity of the world and teaches repudiation of the flesh, is purgative and represents the inner court; the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies:

Where, in *Mysterious Verse* (as meet belongs)

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Smith (*The Great Assize*, 226-27) sets out this relationship between the three books of Solomon clearly in his sermons on Canticles 1.6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas, *Bartas: His Deuine Weekes and Workes Translated: & Dedicated to the Kings Most Excellent Maiestie, by Iosuah Sylvester* (London, 1605). In this lengthy work, du Bartas also applies the language of the Song of Songs both carnally, to the biographical details of Solomon's life, and spiritually, to the life of faith and to typology, without explaining the connection between the two.

Thou Mariest *Iacob* to Heav'ns glorious King:  
Where, thou (devoted) doost divinely sing  
CHRIST'S and his CHVRCHES *Epithalamie*.

(p. 583)

Du Bartas thus begins with transformation from threefold building to threefold writing, and he moves on to a third stage in the spiritual transformation. He has Solomon end by wishing for the fulfilment of his own royal line, which began with David, with the arrival of the Messiah, the antitype of both the temple and the Word:

O God (sayd *Salomon*) great *Only-Trine!*  
Which of this *Mysticke* sacred House of Thine  
Hast made me Builder; build Mee in the same  
A living Stone. For thy deer DAVIDS name,  
On DAVIDS branches DAVIDS blisse revieue;  
That on his Throne his Issue still may thriue.

(pp. 583-4)

The Geneva Bible, and many commentators of this period, interpret the final verse of the Song of Songs: 'O my welbeloued, flee away, and be like vnto the roe, or to the yong heart vpon the mountaines of spices,' as the Church desiring the second coming of Christ, which will bring the eschaton and the full celebration of the spiritual marriage between Christ and his spouse. The linking here of the themes of Solomon's temple, writing and family tree with the typological course of sacred history is an elegant combination of these typical interpretations.

An interesting example of the use of the different aspects of Solomon is Thomas Walkington's *Salomons sweete harpe* of 1608.<sup>28</sup> This is a sermon preached before the King and dedicated to Thomas Howard and William and Philip Herbert. The sermon's text is Eccl. 12.10: 'the Preacher soght to finde out pleasant wordes,' and it includes many biblical intertexts, among them the Song of Songs. Walkington spends some time arguing that Solomon was not among the reprobate, directly refuting Augustine in this. However, he does not deny that much of Solomon's behaviour was very sinful, and in the following passage, he uses language from the Song of Songs to detail Solomon's carnal misdemeanours:

This *Salomon* whose admirable wisdome the *Queene* of *Sheba* came afar to heare, presenting vnto him, sixescore talents of gold, pearelesse precious stones, and abundance of sweete odours. He who excelled all the Kings of the earth in riches: for he offered in one sacrifice vnto the Lord 22. thousand beeues, an hundred and twentie thousand sheepe. Who made himselfe palaces

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Walkington, *Salomons Sweete Harpe Consisting of Fiue Words, Like So Many Golden Strings, Toucht with the Cunning Hand of His True Skill, Commanding All Other Humane Speech: Wherein Both Cleargie and Laitie May Learne How to Speake. Preached of Late at Thetford before His Maiestie* (Cambridge, 1608).

of the trees of *Lebanon*, whose pillars were siluer, the pauements gold, the hangings purple, whose midst was paued with the loue of the daughters of *Ierusalem*. Who had in his building seuentie thousand that bare burdens, and 80. thousand masons in the mountaine. He who planted himselfe vineyards, made him orchards of all manner of fruit, who had the gold of Kings and prouinces, who had men singers and women singers the delights of the sonnes of men, who had nothing withheld from him of all his heart desired: who was seated in the blissefull *Eden* and *Paradise* of all content, glutted with all delicious viandes; crammed as it were with the pleasures of the world, wanting no delicie to relish his tast, no elegancie to delight his eie, no symphony to rauish and surfet his eare: when he had had his full repast in sinne, when he had runne through *myriades* of delights, glutting all his fiue senses, which we may tearme the *Cinqueports*, or rather the sinports of his soule: hauing thus runne his wild-goose chase, waging warre against God almightie, *tandem receptui canit*, he sounds at le[n]gth a woful reitreit, he comes home by weeping crosse. (pp. 12-13)

It would seem that this passage is bolstering the argument that Ecclesiastes is the book of Solomon's repentance, so surely the implication is that the Song of Songs, therefore, describes the period before this, since Walkington has used its language to describe that period in Solomon's life. Yet Walkington does not pursue this point; he merely uses the language. Moreover, much later in the sermon, he returns to the language of the Song of Songs, expanding on it in the thoroughly traditional manner of a spiritual allegory:

Let vs euery one, euen euery one from the eminent *Cedar* vnto the lowlyest *shrub*, seeke to imitate Christ Iesus as in all our actions, so in all our speeches, of whome the blessed Euangelist speakes thus, fro[m] the very mouth of his enemies; Neuer man spake as this man doth; the Church therefore the spouse of Christ, being enamoured with him and with his comfortable words, she thus begins her sacred Canticle, Let him kisse me with the kisses of his mouth: that is, *cum eius dulci alloquio*, with his sweete and honie-flowing speach: as if thus she should breake out into a feruent passion of her loue, saying; O sweete Iesu, thou fountaine of the gardens, thou well of liuing waters, thou fountaine of Bethlem, thou Ocean of blisse, thou minerall of all perfection, thou heauenly manna the bread that came downe from heauen, thou that art hony to the mouth, and harmonie to the eare, a iubile to the heart, loe I, O Lord, am sicke of loue, of the loue of thy lawes, which are dearer to me then thousands of gold and siluer: comfort me, O comfort me with thy heaue[n]ly words the balsame of my wounded soule: O Lord, O my deare Sauour, list vnto me that I may so list to thee as the Hart brayeth & panteth for the riuers of waters, so my soule panteth and thirsteth for the riuers of Paradise flowing and gushing out of thy mouth: O Lord kisse me I beseech thee with thy lips, that distill downe the pure myrrh of sauing doctrine. (pp. 70-71)

Walkington even uses the term 'paradise' in both sections, first to describe Solomon's fleshpots, and second his spiritual desire. The freedom with which he feels able to move between applications of our text, without explanation or justification, shows

something of the complexity of how the text, and the relationship between its carnal and spiritual content, were treated in this period. While Walkington does distinguish between the carnal and spiritual phases in Solomon's life, he uses the language of the Song of Songs for both.

At the other end of the spectrum, yet still with minimal explanation, Samuel Ward preaches on Revelation 3.19 and the dangers of being lukewarm.<sup>29</sup> Where Walkington preached before the King a sermon designed carefully to praise the status quo, this sermon is more edgy, as its title suggests, implicitly accusing its audience of being lukewarm in its faith. The reference to the Song of Songs comes in a section urging his congregation to turn to Scripture in order to kindle and maintain their zeal: 'After the sparkles once by these meanes kindled, cherish and feed them by reading the word: Let it dwell richly in thy heart, excite thy dulnesse by spirituall Hymnes. Loue-songs enflame not lust, more, then the Song of Songs doth zeale' (p.51). Here, there is no explanation, and no complexity: the Song is to be understood simply as the spiritual opposite of carnal love songs.

Similarly, Alexander Hume in 1599 published a work urging readers to turn from their carnal lives to spiritual, and from carnal poetry to the sacred literature of Scripture, and also providing some examples of sacred poetry from his own pen.<sup>30</sup> In a passage in his dedication to the young men of Scotland, urging them to leave off vain (i.e. profane) poetry and detailing how the Bible provides all the kinds of literature a reader could want, he says: 'walde thou haue a subiect of love? looke the song of songs, of the loue betuixt Christ and his kirk.' Hume details in the work his own wasteful and lustful youth, but does not make use of a version of Solomon's life story as a parallel or parable. The words of the Song of Songs are here kept very separate from any carnal history or content.

### 3.5 ***Sweetness and pleasantness***

I have noted that the Geneva Bible is clear that the Song of Songs needs to be interpreted allegorically. Its *Argument* also makes clear what kind of literature it thinks the Song is: 'Salomon by *moste swete and comfortable allegories and parables* describeth the perfite loue of Iesus Christ, the true Salomon and King of peace, and the faithful soule or his Church' (my emphasis). The question of the place of sweet words in a holy life is a thorny one for our commentators. The Geneva notes aim to draw a

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<sup>29</sup> Samuel Ward, *A Coal from the Altar, to Kindle the Holy Fire of Zeale in a Sermon Preached at a Generall Visitation at Ipswich* (London, 1615).

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Hume, *Hymnes, or Sacred Songs Wherein the Right Vse of Poësie May Be Espied. Be Alexander Hume. Whereunto Are Added, the Experience of the Authors Youth, and Certaine Precepts Seruing to the Practise of Sanctification* (Edinburgh, 1599).

line in the sand with regard to the sweetness of the poetry, as we can see in the comment on 7.1ff. This is the most sensual and suggestive of all the descriptions of the woman in the Song, and at the start of it, a note instructs: 'he describeth the comelie beautie of the Church in euerie part, which is to be understand spiritually.' There is no further comment on any of the details of this description.

The defence of sweetness and pleasantness is common, and is found in a wide variety of contexts. James Melville, in 1598, published a verse prayer manual which provides verse prayers for all times and occasions of the day.<sup>31</sup> He by no means justifies high poetry, and in many respects his arguments for verse are highly practical: verse is easy to learn and remember, and so can be a useful tool for orienting oneself to God.<sup>32</sup> It also delights, and this is seen as one of its practical benefits, too, for like attracts like. There is no hint that Melville approves of secular poetry, singing or dancing, but his lengthy justification of poetry on these grounds cites biblical poetry in a similar way to the more 'aesthetic' poets like Drayton and Fraunce, and even Sidney in the *Defence of Poetrie*, and explicitly describes the Song of Songs as 'sweete and pleasand' (p.3).

One thing that happens frequently when interpreters concentrate on the sweetness and pleasantness of the Song is a smoothing out of the Song and a kind of sweeping under the carpet of its difficulties. Metrical versions can be particularly prone to this, and we may see it in action in Michael Drayton's *Harmonie of the Church*. Drayton published his *Harmonie* in 1591, early in his career as an elite poet. In it, he provides verse paraphrases of the songs in the Bible, including, of course, Canticles. In his dedications, Drayton claims not to be aiming at high poetry: he wants his versions to be seen 'not as Poems of Poets, but praiers of Prophets,'<sup>33</sup> and he speaks not of pagan gods, but the Lord of Hosts: 'not of Vanitie, but of Veritie: not of Tales, but of Truethes.'<sup>34</sup> He says that he has not been inventive, but rather has made his versions 'so exactly translated as the prose would permit, or sence would any way suffer me.'<sup>35</sup> It is fair to say that the Song of Songs is not his strongest poetic offering, but neither is

<sup>31</sup> James Melville, *A Spirituall Propine of a Pastour to His People* (Edinburgh, 1598).

<sup>32</sup> Sidney, Mary and Philip, *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke*, ed. J. C. A. Rathmell (New York: New York University Press, 1963), xii-xiii; Robin A. Leaver, 'Goostly Psalmes and Spirituall Songes': *English and Dutch Metrical Psalms from Coverdale to Utenhove, 1535-1566* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature*; Alec Ryrie, 'The English Bible and Protestant Piety', unpublished lecture delivered to the Tyndale Society, Oxford, October 2006. This kind of defence of sweetness relates closely to the controversy about singing psalms in church that ran hot during the period. It is possible to plot a crude line from Puritan condemnation of singing to Catholic celebration of it, but most positions were much more complex than this.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Drayton, *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J William Hebel, vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1931), 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

it quite an 'exact' version. The only commentary he gives on Canticles is a brief sentence at the start explaining that it declares 'the true and unfained love between Christ and his Church, containing, viii Chapters.' Otherwise, we do not get so much as an indication of who is speaking at any point.<sup>36</sup> For the most part, Drayton sticks to his text in this version, though he does, for example, miss out the 'clefts of the rock' when referring to the dove at 2.14, asking her simply to 'leave thou the place of thine abode' (l.30), and it is this kind of elision that indicates the 'smoothing' job Drayton does on the Song. The description of the beloved at the start of Chapter 4, with its odd analogies of goats and twin sheep, is a good example of how his version stays close to the text and at the same time covers over its difficulties. Drayton's handling of the goat simile, in which the Song's male speaker likens his lover's hair to a herd of goats on Mount Gilead, runs as follows:

Thy haire surpassing faire and seemely to the eie,  
Like to a goodly heard of Goates, on *Gilead* mountaine hie. (3-4)

Drayton does not explain the simile, does not help us visualize the manner in which the hair may be like the herd of goats; but he tells us that the hair is 'surpassing faire and seemely to the eie,' and qualifies the herd of goats as 'goodly,' lest the reader be in any doubt that this is meant to be a compliment. In metrical versions, this kind of move is common.

The idea that the soul progresses from carnal love to spiritual, which the poetry of Petrarchanism so often struggles to embody, had a long history both in poetry and in exegesis. Its classic expression can be found in Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs:

I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.<sup>37</sup>

We might expect this idea to become suspect at the Reformation, because the notion of an orderly progress of the soul implies that it develops goodness, or earns salvation, and so threatens the Reformation's radical concept of grace. Nonetheless, Reformed

<sup>36</sup> Anne Lake Prescott, 'Drayton, Michael (1563-1631)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn., Jan 2008.

[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8042>, accessed 29 March 2009]. It was understood that the *Harmonie* was suppressed when it was published, but this is now known to be wrong.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 1, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), Sermon no. 20, 152.



commentators do make extensive use of it, in various ways. This may be in part because Bernard himself appears to have escaped identification with the medieval schoolmen; he is treated by Lancelot Andrewes and many others as virtually another Father, cited as a similar authority. But it is also because carnal attraction remains a feature of life that very few commentators attempt to reject altogether, and so they need to find a way of accommodating it. We may see the concept, in virtually the same form as Bernard's, recurring in the material. One example is Henry Lok's verse translation of Ecclesiastes, which also includes a large number of sonnets by Lok.<sup>38</sup> Lok works with the standard understanding of Ecclesiastes: that Solomon wrote it to encourage people to turn from the vanity of worldly things to spiritual matters, and in his comment on Eccl. 12.10, he says this of the Song of Songs:

His heauenly Muse with wings of zeale did fly  
 Aboue the common pitch of earthly men,  
 And so inflamed were his thoughts thereby,  
 With holy liking of his loue as then,  
 That he could not containe his gratefull pen.

In thousand songs and fiue his powers did try,  
 The prayes of his sacred soules delight,  
 In whom sweet peace and loue he did espy,  
 Which from him, loue of world did banish quight;  
 Among the which that song of songs by name,  
 Describes her beautie, did him so inflame.

The preacher sought to find out pleasant words, and an vpright writing, euen  
 the words of truth.

But this his large discourse was chiefly ment,  
 To teach the world to know how farre they stray,  
 That do by earthly helps a meane inuent  
 To leade their liues vnto a happie day,  
 Since nature wholly doth the same deny.

Which (for it crosseth carnall mens content,  
 And hardly may amongst most wise haue place)  
 By this most pleasant stile, about he went  
 To giue to naked truth a comely grace:  
 For hardly can corrupted man digest  
 Right wholesome food, vnlesse it well be drest.

(p. 115)

<sup>38</sup> Henry Lok, *Ecclesiastes, Otherwise Called the Preacher Containing Salomons Sermons or Commentaries (as It May Probably Be Collected) Vpon the 49. Psalme of David His Father. Compendiously Abridged, and Also Paraphrastically Dilated in English Poesie, According to the Analogie of Scripture, and Consent of the Most Approued Writer Thereof. Composed by H.L. Gentleman. Whereunto Are Annexed Sundrie Sonets of Christian Passions Heretofore Printed, and Now Corrected and Augmented, with Other Affectionate Sonets of a Feeling Conscience of the Same Authors* (London, 1597).

Here, Lok is saying that the Song of Songs must be understood spiritually, and that Solomon wrote it about the spiritual beauty that caused him to turn from his own love of worldly things. But Solomon was wise enough to realize that if people were to be persuaded to follow his example, they would need to have spiritual joy set out for them in a 'most pleasant stile,' that would 'giue to naked truth a comely grace,' for corrupted man cannot take 'right wholesome food, vnlesse it well be drest.'

Finally in this section it is important to note the range of sweetness and pleasantness in the metrical versions of the Song of Songs, and the limits of this range. Metrical versions include the very practical songs by William Loe (1620), designed to be sung in households, and done in monosyllables, in an attempt to be simple and clear, and to avoid highly wrought speech.<sup>39</sup> In what we might call the 'middle of the range,' we see works like the one in Drayton's *Harmonie*, which strives to keep things simple, but also makes some attempt at poetry, and is not designed to be sung. Some aim higher, like Gervase Markham in 1596, who dedicated his version in high style to Sir Philip Sidney's daughter, whom he describes as 'divine.'<sup>40</sup> A look at the first stanza gives an idea of the kind of poetry he was aiming at:

Imprint vpon my lips pure liuorie  
The hony pleasure of thy mouthes deere kisse,  
For why thy loue, bounded in no degree,  
Exceedes the sence-inchaunting sugred blisse  
VVhich from the taste of wine attracted is.

(f.B1a)

However, there is no simple scale along which to place the versions, for George Wither's version, to take only one example, was meant both to be high art and to be sung, and indeed singable – the tunes were published alongside the words. Francis Quarles' version of 1625 is likewise high and sweet, but nevertheless includes theological explanation, or commentary, within its verse.<sup>41</sup> Here, for example, is his handling of 1.3 'I am blacke ... but comelie':

But you, my curious (and too nice) Allyes,  
That view my fortunes with two narrow eyes,  
You say my face is blacke, and foule; 'tis true;  
I'm beauteous to my Loue, though black to you,  
My censure stands not vpon your esteeme,

<sup>39</sup> William Loe, *Songs of Sion Set for the Ioy of Gods Deere Ones, Who Sitt Here by the Brookes of This Worlds Babel, & Weepe When They Thinke on Hierusalem Which is on Highe* (Hamburg, 1620).

<sup>40</sup> Gervase Markham, *The Poem of Poems. Or, Sions Muse Contayning the Diuine Song of King Salomon, Deuided into Eight Eclogues* (London, 1596).

<sup>41</sup> Francis Quarles, *Sions Sonets. Sung by Solomon the King, and Periphras'd by Fra. Quarles* (London, 1625).

He sees me as I am; you, as I seeme;  
 You see the Cloudes, but he discernes the Skie;  
 Know, 'Tis my Maske that lookes so blacke, not I. (f.B1b)

Both Quarles and Wither produced emblem books, which link words, mottoes and explanations in cryptic codes much beloved of the age. The emblem book is a complex genre that achieved some popularity in England in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Emblem books draw on cryptic connections between pictures and texts, and take various forms. They may be religious or secular.<sup>42</sup> Typically, an emblem book contains a series of engravings of pictures laden with symbolic significance. Each picture has a motto attached to it, and is followed by a poem or other written text that purports to respond to, or explain, the image, the motto and the connection between them. Emblems connect different languages, text formats and signification systems to encode their meaning, inviting the reader to respond in a complex way, and holding out the challenge of a code and the enticing possibility of cracking that code. In their works on the Song of Songs, both Quarles and Wither embrace its cryptic and difficult aspects, its reputation as a secretive text with hidden meanings, but they also seem confident in their own ability to decode the cypher, and to explain it to their readers successfully. Hence Quarles here explains a theological point that depends upon allegorical interpretation within his attractive verse, and without missing a beat.

### 3.6 *The inner life of the soul*

The inner life of the soul was a contentious topic in this period. On the one hand, the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone gave the inner life of the individual Christian a central position. Hence, many Protestant works, some of which are quoted above, display an urgent anxiety to affect and even direct the innermost thoughts of their readers. However, the medieval traditions of internal piety were, of course, Catholic, and one of the key planks in the Catholic Counter-Reformation was to capitalize on and develop this tradition, including the meditative tradition. The most influential handbooks on meditation were Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, François de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life*, Luis de la Puente's *Meditations*, Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Conflict and Conquest* – all Catholic works. As Michael Bath outlines, though Protestants were initially reluctant to use this material, it became highly influential in England in the seventeenth century, notably as an inspirational

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* (London: Longman, 1994); Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948).

force for devotional poetry.<sup>43</sup> In this way, meditation functioned as a bridge across the doctrinal divide, insofar as it concerned the inner life of the soul.

The Song of Songs has a significant place in this tradition, for several reasons. First, it had a strong role in the medieval meditational tradition from which Counter-Reformation meditation grew. In particular, Bernard of Clairvaux was a key figure, and his sermons on the Song of Songs a key text (see p.13). The Song had long been used by those wanting to consider the most intimate aspects of a believer's relationship to God. There are two aspects of the Song that are especially useful in this: first, its intense and emotive poetic language; and second, its subject matter of carnal love. Although such writers reject or transcend carnal love in favour of spiritual love, key features of carnal love make it an apt figure for spiritual love. These texts emphasize the overwhelming desire one feels for union with the beloved, the occasional and fleeting nature of intimacy, the difficulties as well as the joys of the relationship, the desire for mutuality coupled with the helplessness and ignorance of the lover and the threat to selfhood posed by desire, which is both attractive and threatening.

The link between the Song and the innermost spiritual life may perhaps be seen most clearly in two emblem books. Herman Hugo's emblem book, *Pia Desideria* (1628), was profoundly linked to the meditative tradition. Hugo, a Jesuit thoroughly trained in Ignatian techniques, structured his book in three sections, corresponding to the progress of the soul (and somewhat analogous to the progression of Solomonic books from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes to the Song of Songs). It is clear that the reader can use the emblems as tools to meditation, and that there is a progression through them into more elevated spiritual realms. The mottoes are all biblical verses. The Song of Songs has a strong role in books 2, 'Desires of the Religious Soul' and 3, 'Extasies of the Enamoured Soul'. In these books, the soul progresses until, finally, it is ready to leave earthly things and join Christ. The text used for this final state is Song of Songs 8.14, which Hugo interprets as the soul willing Christ to leave her, as she is now ready and able to follow. It is clear that the Song is used systematically here. Its role is wholly spiritual, and becomes increasingly important as the work progresses, and it is effective because of the intensity of emotion that it expresses, and therefore enables, in the reader.<sup>44</sup>

Hugo's work was not published in English translation until 1686, but it was clearly influential, particularly on Quarles' *Emblemes* of 1635, which are in English.<sup>45</sup> This work is in five books, the first two concerned with the misery of earthly life and the

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<sup>43</sup> Bath, *Speaking Pictures*, 162.

<sup>44</sup> Herman Hugo, *Pia Desideria Emblematis Elegiis & Affectibus S. S. Patrum Illustrata* (Antwerp, 1686).

<sup>45</sup> Francis Quarles, *Emblemes* (London, 1635).

difficulties of repudiating it. The final three follow Hugo's three books closely.<sup>46</sup> Quarles does not go so far as Hugo. He, too, ends with Song of Songs 8.14, but with greater ambiguity. His speaker soul asks Christ to leave because the wound of love that he brings is more than she can take; and then begs him to return, for she cannot bear to be without him.

This close connection between the Song of Songs and the latter stages of spiritual development, and in particular with the intense emotions of the inner life, can be glimpsed in some of the other texts in this chapter; but it is particularly evident in these two religious emblem books. One further point to note about the emblem books is the ambivalence of their cryptic nature. The several elements of an emblem explain and expand upon each other. Each element is understood to be, of itself, cryptic. As Bath notes, much of this is connected to theories about hieroglyphics, which are at once closer to the things they signify than words, because they resemble them more directly (and are, therefore, closer to the original, perfect language of Adam, in which words corresponded to the things they signified), and yet they are difficult for the modern person to understand. Like Scripture, and like God's creation, emblems contain truth expressed precisely, but it is not always easy to decipher that truth. This understanding of the nature of the language of truth perhaps explains something of the oddity of the way the Song is broadly understood to be at once sweet and difficult, at once sensual and spiritual.

### **3.7 *Mary, bride of Christ***

It is important to register the specifically Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs, both because of its significance and its pervasiveness. Roland Murphy notes that this interpretation was significantly developed first by Rupert of Deutz (d.1129), with his thoroughgoing Marian exegesis. Devotion to Mary was very important in medieval monastic communities, where an emphasis on virginity and a desire to be espoused to Christ made Mary a powerful role model. As Murphy notes, Mary's position as, in important senses, founder and first representative of the church, fed into an idealized vision of the church.<sup>47</sup> It is also significant that Bernard of Clairvaux, perhaps the single most influential writer on the Song of Songs, was linked strongly to the promotion of Marian devotion, although his sermons on the Song are not particularly Marian.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bath, *Speaking Pictures*, 214-15.

<sup>47</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 24-25.

<sup>48</sup> Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 73-85, traces the complex development of the

Mary's role in the medieval church was multifaceted and hugely important. She was founder of the Church, mediatrix between the sinner and Christ, sign of the perfection of the pure Church, and bride of Christ, as well, of course, as his mother and therefore an instrument of the Incarnation and an agent of salvation. The Song of Songs was used in liturgy, devotion and meditation to illustrate all of these roles; and it as used alongside other biblical texts, so that its use became embedded in a complex semiotic matrix.<sup>49</sup> Much of this became seen as highly suspect by the Reformers, for various reasons. For example, Mary's strong connection to the monastic tradition went against her, and her identification with an idealized vision of the church meant that those who wanted to expose its corruption often found it expedient to undermine the tradition of Marian Veneration. Hence, when Protestant commentators criticize the ornaments of the false church, implying that these ornaments demonstrate her unchastity, they are drawing not only on the language of Revelation and its whore of Babylon, (e.g., 17.5) but also using it to undermine the tradition of praising Mary by describing her adornments, using, among other things, the language of the Song of Songs. One rather subtle example is from Joseph Hall's paraphrase of the Song (1609), in which his version of the groom's description of the bride's beauty at 4.1-9 stresses the inward and spiritual nature of this beauty, and the decorum of its 'ornaments of expedient ceremonies.' Hall makes it clear throughout that the bride in this version is the Church, and while he does not specify who it might be whose beauty is 'wantonly cast forth' and whose ornaments are neither 'gratious' nor simple, the dig at the ostentatious material ornaments of the Roman Church would surely be understood by his listeners:

Oh how faire thou art and comely, my deer Spouse; how inwardely faire with the giftes of my Spirit; how faire outwardly in thy comely administration, and gouernme[n]t: thy spirituall eyes of vnderstanding, and iudgement, are full of puritie, chastitie, simplicitie; not wantonly cast forth, but modestly shining amidst thy locks: all thy gracious profession and all thy appendances, and ornaments of expedient ceremonies, are so comely to behold, as it is to see a flock of well-fed goates grasing vpon the fruitfull hils of Gilead. Those that chew and prepare the heavenly food for thy soule, are both of gracious simplicitie, and of sweete accordance one with another; hauing all one heart, and one tongue: and both themselues are sanctified, & purged from their vncleannesses, and are fruitfull

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link between Bernard and Mary, reading back from Dante, who places Bernard at the heart of the transformation of the poet's vision from Beatrice through Mary to Christ.

<sup>49</sup> Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 42-72; E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 151-77.

in their holy labours vnto others; so that their doctrine is neuer in vaine, but is still answered with plentifull increase of soules.<sup>50</sup>

An idea of the complexity of the matrix of signs associated with Mary, and of the depth of the involvement of the Song in this tradition, can be seen on the frontispiece of Hawkins' *Parthenia Sacra* (1633). This Jesuit emblem book, produces for a Parthenian Sodality, draws heavily on the Song of Songs in its presentation of Mary.<sup>51</sup> The frontispiece draws together many emblems for Mary (see Illustration 1, p.52). Signs that come from the Song of Songs include the enclosed garden, its two trees, an apple and a palm, the fountain, the flowers, the tower and the house. The ship, the star, and the rainbow, however, do not belong to the Song of Songs.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Joseph Hall, *Salomons Diuine Arts, of 1. Ethickes, 2. Politickes, 3. Oeconomicks That Is; the Gouernment of 1. Behauieur, 2. Common-Wealth, 3. Familie. Drawne into Method, out of His Prouerbs & Ecclesiastes. With an Open and Plaine Paraphrase, Vpon the Song of Songs* (London, 1609), 34-36.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Hawkins, *Parthenia Sacra. Or the Mysterious and Delicious Garden of the Sacred Parthenes Symbolically Set Forth and Enriched with Pious Deuises and Emblemes for the Entertainement of Deuout Soules: Contriued Al to the Honour of the Incomparable Virgin Marie Mother of God; for the Pleasure and Deuotion Especially of the Parthenian Sodalitie of Her Immaculate Conception* (Rouen, 1633), illustration, f. A6b.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Stewart, *The Enclosed Garden: The Tradition and the Image in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 45.





Illustration 1



#### **4      *Conclusions.***

The Song of Songs was interpreted in a variety of ways, and was relevant to a variety of topics, in Renaissance England. There were generally agreed understandings, such as that the Song was an allegory of Christ and the Church or the soul of the believer, that Solomon wrote it, and that it is both a difficult and a delightful text; but although many works aim to make it easier for the reader to understand the Song, none achieves a systematic presentation of a single, unified meaning with no lacunae or contradictions. There is also evidence of some reluctance to tackle the Song's difficulties, both literary and moral.

While some commentators follow the path made wide by Bernard in seeing the Song as providing a crucial link between the carnal and the spiritual, that encourages a progression of the soul, others seek to keep a wide gulf between the spiritual delights offered by the Song and any earthly delights at all. To follow either of these paths is no simple matter. Hume drives a wedge between the Song and the analogy on which its interpretation is based, and this leaves him without a point of reference when it comes to describing spiritual desire and delight. Gouge tries to set out a programme for living spiritually in the world, and comes up against the excessive, uncontrolled nature of the Song's language of love, which he has to explain away. For him, it is not that the love language of the Song provides a human analogy for one's relationship with Christ; rather the love between Christ and the Church provides a pattern for human love relationships. The possibilities for thinking through the relationship between carnal and spiritual are many, are complex and are difficult to articulate. While there are some spectrums along which one may place the writers, these interact in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways.

Indeed, the ways in which it is possible to configure the relationship between carnal and spiritual when reading the Song of Songs are many, and commentators often use more than one configuration, not always with clarity and coherence. This difficulty, in practice, frustrates the need for exegetical closure that tends to drive the commentaries. I shall say more on this in Chapter 6.

Chapters 3-5 analyse poetry that makes use of the Song of Songs. It is not to be expected that the poetry will be any more systematic in its interpretations, and we might anticipate that its concerns will be less theological than the material in this chapter. In fact, as we shall see, much of the poetry is highly theological. Nevertheless, the chapters are organised according to themes that do not match those in the sections of this chapter, and which are more general; partly in an attempt to respond to the concerns of the poems themselves, and also (since these themes are neither peculiarly

theological nor peculiarly literary) to facilitate a reading of the complex relationship between literary and theological in the poems, and in the cultural discourse concerning the Song of Songs

## CHAPTER 3: A FEMININE VOICE

### 1 Introduction

I begin with the feminine voice, first of all because it makes sense to consider who is speaking before going into what she says, second because the feminine speaker of the Song of Songs is remarkable in biblical literature simply for being a feminine speaker, and third, because a great deal of recent criticism of the Song of Songs has been driven by reflection on its feminine voice. Phyllis Trible, in 1978, embraced the feminine voice in the Song as an egalitarian counter-force to the patriarchal thrust of the Bible:

Of the three speakers, the woman is the most prominent. She opens and closes the entire Song, her voice dominant throughout. By this structural emphasis her equality and mutuality with the man is illuminated. ... In the Song of Songs, accent upon the female is further increased by the presence of the Daughters of Jerusalem. As a foil and complement to the lovers, this group aids the flow of the action. Women, then, are the principal creators of the poetry of eroticism.<sup>1</sup>

Feminist critics recognized and embraced a female champion, speaking unashamedly for female desire, and claimed her as their own. Warning against uncritical reading, J. Cheryl Exum writes, 'feminist critics are virtually unanimous in their praise of the Song of Songs for its nonsexism, gender equality, and gynocentrism.'<sup>2</sup>

Feminist scholarship was keen to give credibility to 'women's experience,' as something identifiable, genuine and specific that patriarchal society had ignored and marginalized down the centuries.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore not surprising that feminist biblical scholars found in the Song of Songs a strong, central woman's voice. This picture has been complicated, however, by poststructuralist questioning of the essentialism that underlies concepts like 'women's experience.' Critics like Judith Butler argue that gender is a cultural construct, rather than a pre-given essential identity, and point to the way that gender is performed by members of a society.<sup>4</sup> In light of this insight, readers of the Song of Songs have begun to question the 'authenticity' of its feminine voice. David Clines, for example, has put forward the theory that the Song may have been produced with a male readership in mind, providing such readers with a fantasy woman who would never 'do' as a wife, but who offers an exciting and titillating escape from

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 145.

<sup>2</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, 'Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know About the Song of Songs', in eds. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, *The Song of Songs, A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>3</sup> for example, Athalya Brenner, "'My" Song of Songs', in Brenner and Fontaine (eds.), *The Song of Songs*.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

daily reality.<sup>5</sup> Donald Polaski uses Foucault's concept of the Panopticon to suggest that the feminine speaker of the Song of Songs constructs and presents herself in a way that she hopes will be acceptable to the people she imagines may be watching her.<sup>6</sup> The feminine speaker of the Song of Songs is currently a complicated figure.

Gender was a subject of urgent interest in the early modern period, too, and here, it was also complex. On the one hand, society was highly patriarchal, and a great deal of energy was spent defining woman's place and trying to keep her in it. This may be seen clearly in the books of household conduct that were very popular at the turn of the century.<sup>7</sup> On the other, it is clear that gender was, in practice, a complex business. England moved from the confusing situation of having a woman as its ruler to the very homosocial and sometimes misogynistic court of James I. From time to time, an intense debate about women broke out in the literature of the *querelle des femmes*.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, playwrights like Shakespeare played intensively with notions of femininity, writing strong roles for women, which would be played on the stage by boys. When those boys playing women were required by the plot to dress as men (Viola, Rosalind, Portia), the complexity took on a further layer. Poets like Donne wrote poems in the voices of highly misogynistic men ('Goe and catch a falling starre', 'Loves Alchymie') and of rather sympathetic women ('Break of day', 'Sapho to Philaenis'). This was a culture strongly aware of the possibility that gender might be performed. Recent scholarship has begun to attend to this complexity, and to read the texts of this culture as rhetorical constructs, rather than straightforward expressions of selfhood.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter, I begin by considering briefly the place of the feminine voice in the Bible. I move on to outline the feminine voice of the Song of Songs. I then consider the nature and significance of the feminine voice in Lanyer's poetry, and the role of the Song of Songs in forming and authorizing this voice. Finally, I broaden the scope to analyse the feminine voice as it relates to the Song of Songs in other poetry of the early modern period.

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<sup>5</sup> David J. A. Clines, 'Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?', in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Donald C. Polaski, 'What Will Ye See in the Shulammitte? Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs', *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982), 47-56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-126.

<sup>9</sup> See Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke, (eds.), *'This Double Voice': Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, Early Modern Literature in History (Basingstoke, MacMillan, 2000), for a critique of more essentialist positions, and an attempt to address the constructed character of gendered texts in the period.

## 2 **The Bible**

The feminine speaking voice of the Song of Songs is remarkable in the Bible for several reasons, all of which stem from the fact that the Bible is a text produced in, and for the most part read by, patriarchal societies. It is a text in which masculine seems to be the default gender.<sup>10</sup> Whether its readers consider it to be a patriarchal text or not depends on the extent to which they think it invites a resisting reading. Resisting reading is reading 'against the grain' of a text, calling into question the meaning that the text seems to require. Resisting reading is inherently political, and is particularly suspicious of the tradition of interpretation of a text. Such reading can also argue for excess or plurality of meaning, as well as for the validity of transgressive meanings.<sup>11</sup> Resisting reading has been practised on the Bible in various ways, and has offered a challenge to its patriarchal content and tradition.

### 2.1 **Female characters in the Bible**

Feminine voices in the Bible are much rarer than masculine ones. The stories of the Bible reflect a world in which women inhabit mainly the domestic sphere, and in which their need, or opportunity, to speak is limited. There are strong, assertive women in the Bible, but they are unusual. Where women are heroines, like Deborah, judge and warrior, their stories tend to be told fairly swiftly (Judg. 4-5). Where they name their own books (in the cases of Ruth and Esther), although they are in some senses protagonists, they are presented as explicitly feminine heroines, and their stories revolve around their beauty and attractiveness as mates.<sup>12</sup> Usually, when the Bible presents the desires of women, it shows their good desires as centred on children, both on producing them and on promoting their interests (Sarah in Gen. 16-21, Rebekah in Gen. 25-27, Hannah in 1 Sam. 1-2). Even this may be ambiguous, however, as in the case of Sarah, whose frustration at her barrenness leads her to offer her servant Hagar to Abraham, reasoning that 'it may be that I shall receive a child by her' (Gen. 16.2). This action goes against God's will, and results in domestic disharmony (Gen. 16-17). When women desire other things, such as power or religious freedom, they are generally portrayed in a negative light, most clearly in the case of Jezebel (1 Kgs. 16, 18-19, 21; 2 Kgs. 9). Once again, this is not a universal picture. There are powerful

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<sup>10</sup> See Athalya Brenner and Fokkele van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), for detailed studies of the Bible and gender.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi (eds.), *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 262.

<sup>12</sup> For more consideration of the Bible's attitude to physical attractiveness, see Chapter 4.

women, like Deborah, who are positive, and there are strong rulers, even foreign women like the Queen of Sheba, who are also shown positively (1Kgs. 10).

## **2.2 *Feminine language in the Bible***

As well as presenting female characters, the Bible also uses feminine figures of speech, which are usually patriarchal in vision.<sup>13</sup> For example, when God behaves as a mother to his people, nurturing, protecting, loving despite everything, this can reinforce the sense that the remit of the feminine begins and ends with the family (Hos. 11.1-4). However, such language also suggests that God has feminine aspects. Moreover, because God bases some of his public actions in the world on these feminine characteristics, we may infer that feminine concerns have a role in the public sphere (Isa. 66.10-16). When Israel is portrayed in a feminine light, it is usually less positive. She is seen as demonstrating particularly feminine vices of vanity, self-regard, worldliness, lust and inconstancy (Ezek. 16.15-34). Feminine Israel appears to have only two good points. First, she is somehow able to inspire God's love, despite her many faults (Ezek. 16.8-14; Hos. 3.1). Second, she is capable of intense (though not of sustained) repentance, consisting of sorrow and regret for her bad deeds and a desire to return to God's love once again (Ps. 51). It is notable, however, that this repentance is rarely expressed in the feminine voice of Israel. Indeed, feminine Israel barely has her own voice, but rather is described by others.<sup>14</sup>

## **2.3 *The Song of Songs***

It is clear, then, that the fact that over half of the Song of Songs is spoken by a female persona makes it unusual in the biblical canon. However, the foregoing sentence is filled with assumptions that need to be recognized and considered. First, it assumes that there is a single feminine voice in the Song. Most of the tradition of interpretation of the Song makes this assumption, and it was the predominant reading in the early modern period. This thesis will, in the main, assume that there is one female and one male protagonist. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that there is no coherent narrative in the Song, and that the protagonists do not seem to have consistent characters, personalities or backgrounds – or even names. Second, and more important for this thesis, while the speaking voice is feminine, her words may well have been written by a man, and indeed the predominant tradition in the early modern

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<sup>13</sup> See David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 59-74, for an analysis of the gendered portrayal of God and Israel in the Old Testament, particularly as it is presented in terms of a marriage relationship.

<sup>14</sup> The voice of Israel's repentance is chiefly to be found in the Psalms, and the voice in the Psalms, traditionally David's voice, is gendered masculine.

period was that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs. Whether male authorship would compromise the authority of the feminine voice might be an important question for readers, as it has been in recent years – or it might not cross their minds. In Renaissance England, the tradition of Solomonic authorship seems to sit comfortably alongside the idea of a feminine speaker; I have not found the authenticity of her voice coming under scrutiny. In general, readers have tended to assume that the Bible's narrators are masculine. Sometimes this is explicit, as with books authored by named prophets, or with the tradition that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, or that David wrote the Psalms; elsewhere, and especially with the anonymous narrators of the Bible, it remains implied. Masculine is, in general, the default gender of the Bible; and the Song of Songs is, in this respect, the exception that proves the rule.

What the speakers of the Song say is also unusual in the Bible. The Song of Songs is lyric love poetry, and its speakers express the intense emotions and experiences of love. Very few biblical characters speak about their feelings of love. Some, like Jacob and David, are strongly motivated by love, but apart from brief outbursts, both in connection with their love for their sons, the Bible records very little of their inner experience of love (Gen. 37.34-5, 2 Sam. 18.33). When the Bible does use lyric poetry, which it does mainly in the Psalms, it speaks primarily about the experience of love for and relationship with God, not with humans. As women have fewer lines to speak in the Bible, it is unsurprising that they, too, have little to say about love. Although a key element of the curse on Eve in Gen. 3.16 is that she will desire her man, and be subject to him, the Bible spends very little time considering from women's point of view what it is actually like to desire one's man. In the Song of Songs, however, we have extended passages doing exactly that. This is what we would expect from a work of lyric love poetry, and it is worth noting that though most lyric love poetry is spoken by male personae, there is a tradition of important and influential feminine voices, with Sappho at its head.

What, then, does the feminine speaker in the Song of Songs say? First, she speaks about love; human, heterosexual, carnal, physical love. From her first outburst: 'Let him kisse me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy loue is better then wine,' she is ardent and open, desiring intimate physical bodily exchange, and apparently confused about whether she is speaking directly to her beloved, or to a third party. Already, there is the lyric ambiguity about the public expression of intimate desire.

Second, she speaks figuratively, which makes her language both suggestive and elusive: 'like the apple tre among the trees of the forest: so *is* my welbeloued among the sonnes *of men*: vnder his shadowe had I delite, & sate downe: and his frute was swete vnto my mouth' (2.3). Moreover, figurative language of this kind links the

lovers with the world in ways that are also both suggestive and elusive. Precisely in what way the lovers relate to the world can be unclear: are they microcosms, or rulers of the world, or integral parts of an organic whole? Or are the analogies only analogies?

Both lovers use figurative language relating to the world, and while their vision is mostly shared, their experiences are different. Most strikingly, she is part of the landscape, as when she 'becomes' a garden at 4.12: 'my sister my spouse *is* as a garden inclosed, as a spring shut vp, *and* a fountaine sealed vp.' Both lovers accept this description, and it leads to their moment of most intimate consummation, at 5.1: 'I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I gathered my myrrhe with my spice: I ate mine honie combe with mine honie, I dranke my wine with my milke.' This vision, which they both share, relies on her being still and passive, and him roaming free (as he does when he is a stag or a gazelle in other parts of the Song), able to enter and enjoy her. While in this passage she is happy to be a garden, there are moments when her confinement seems to irritate her: 'oh that thou werest as my brother that sucked the breastes of my mother: I wolde finde thee without, I wolde kisse thee, then they should not despise thee' (8.1).

There is also some ambiguity about her freedom of movement, seen in her two nocturnal adventures. At 3.1-4, she wakes at night to find her lover missing, and immediately goes out to seek him, finding him fairly quickly. At 5.2-7, however, he asks her to let him in at night, and when she hesitates, he leaves. Once more, she ventures out to seek him, but this time she is assaulted and wounded by the city guards. As this episode shows, while she embraces love wholeheartedly, it has its dangers and costs, and she sometimes describes herself as 'sick of loue,' (2.5; 5.8) and needing sustenance or support from her friends or her lover.

She is generally wholehearted, but one area in which she occasionally appears to experience doubt is her own beauty. He claims to find her beautiful throughout the Song, but there is one moment at least when she seems aware that her beauty is a complicated matter. 'I am blacke, o daughters of Ierusalem, but comelie, as the frutes of Kedar, & as the curtines of Salomon. Regarde ye me not because I am blacke: for the sunne hath loked vpon me. The sonnes of my mother were angrie against me: thei made me the keper of the vines: but I kept not mine owne vine' (1.4-5). Once again, the passage is enigmatic. We cannot be quite sure whether her blackness contributes to or compromises her beauty (though the context suggests the latter); nor do we know whether the anger and punishment of her brothers is justified, or what exactly it means that she has not kept her own vine (see also pp.111-13).



She describes her lover. Her physical description of his bodily beauty is unusual; in literature, such praise is more often spoken by a man about a female body. Her ability to look at him, and to make judgments about his beauty, and the position of passivity and objectivity in which this places him, are potentially significant (see also Chapter 4).

She describes her lover, what they do, and how it makes her feel, with considerable freedom, but using figurative language that makes her statements enigmatic. She is open, ardent and unashamed; yet we do not know exactly what she does, or exactly what she sees. Finally, she expresses her vision of her relationship in two similar, but not identical verses: 'I am my welbeloueds, and my welbeloued is mine, who fedeth among the lilies' (6.2); and: 'I am my welbeloueds, and his desire is toward me' (7.10). Both of these verses express her understanding that there is a total mutual commitment between the lovers, that they have given themselves to each other without condition, and on the basis of desire.

The feminine voice of the Song of Songs, then, is complex. She speaks only of love, and while she is consistent in loving and desiring her lover, and often confident and assertive, she sometimes seems to be aware of, and to suffer from, harmful social constraints, most particularly in the form of her beating from the city guards at 5.7. Her experience of love is both joyous and fraught with pain and danger. Self-assertion and self-loss seem to be close companions for her. Her use of figurative language broadens out what she has to say, so that it seems that love is the most important thing in the world, or at least the most important thing for her; yet her enthusiastic descriptions of love remain enigmatic and elusive, precisely because of her figurative use of language.

As I have noted, there was keen interest in gender roles, identities and performances in the early modern period. What did poets in this age make of the feminine speaker in the Song of Songs?

### **3      *Aemilia Lanyer's feminine voice***

As I indicated in the Introduction, Aemilia Lanyer's poetic voice is explicitly feminine, and indeed proto-feminist. Lanyer draws on the Song of Songs both on the surface and in the deep structure of her work to facilitate this feminine voice, in several, connected ways. To begin with the surface, there are several allusions to the Song, as one of the many biblical intertexts in the poem, and the most direct and sustained reference comes in the main poem, after the events of the Passion. Lanyer's description of the risen Christ has a margin note: '*A briefe description of his beautie upon the Canticles,*' and a comparison with the Geneva Bible shows how closely the

passage connects to the Song. I present this at Fig. 1 (p. 63), with the Bible quotations next to the relevant parts of the poem.

Fig. 1	
<i>Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum 1305-1320</i>	<i>Song of Songs</i>
This is that Bridegroom that appears so faire,	Come forthe, ye daughters of Zion, & beholde the King Salomon with the crowne, wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his mariage, and in the day of the gladnes of his heart. (3.11)
So sweet, so lovely in his Spouses sight,	
That unto Snowe we may his face compare,	My welbeloued is white and ruddy. (5.10)
His cheekes like skarlet, and his eyes so bright	
As purest Doves that in the rivers are,	His eyes <i>are</i> like dooues vpon the riuers of waters,
Washed with milke, to give the more delight;	which <i>are</i> washt with milke, & remaine by the full vessels. (5.12)
His head is likened to the finest gold,	His head <i>is</i> as fine golde,
His curled lockes so beauteous to behold;	his lockes curled,
Blacke as a Raven in her blackest hew;	& blacke as a rauē. (5.11)
His lips like skarlet threeds, yet much more sweet	Thy lippes <i>are</i> like a threde of skarlet, (4.3)
Than is the sweetest hony dropping dew,	Thy lippes, my spouse, droppe as honie combes:
Or hony combes, where all the Bees doe meet;	honie and milke <i>are</i> vnder thy tongue, & the sauour of thy garments <i>is</i> as the sauour of Lebanon. (4.11)
Yea, he is constant, and his words <i>are</i> true,	I am my welbeloueds, and his desire <i>is</i> toward me. (7.10)
His cheekes are beds of spices, flowers sweet;	His chekes <i>are</i> as a bedde of spices, <i>and</i> as swete flowres,
His lips, like Lillies, dropping downe pure mirrhe,	& his lippes <i>like</i> lilies dropping downe pure myrrhe. (5.13)
Whose love, before all worlds we doe preferre.	

The strongest lexical connections come from the passage at 5.10-16 when the feminine speaker describes her lover, and from 4.1-12, when the masculine speaker describes his lover. It is clear that, in some important respect, the feminine speaker of the Song authorizes Lanyer to subject the body of Christ to her gaze; but Lanyer has made no distinction here between the language that the feminine and the masculine speakers use; she has drawn on both with equal confidence. Gender distinctions are not always rigidly maintained by readers of the Song of Songs.<sup>15</sup> In some respects, this is theologically surprising, since the beauty of the groom (Christ) ought surely to be of a different order from that of the bride. The Geneva Bible notes take care to point out that when the groom describes the bride as beautiful, it is 'because Christ deliteth in his Church' that 'he commendeth all that is in her' (note to 4.1), and that when he says that she has wounded his heart, it is because 'he made his Church beautiful, & riche,' and therefore 'he loued his giftes in her' (note to 4.9). Yet poetic and exegetical writers often apply the language of the Song freely in this way, regardless of the gender of the speaker, and perhaps this indicates that they are not focusing on gender in the way modern readers would expect when they read the Song.

Lexical connections like this are important clues to the presence of the Song of Songs as an intertext, but the Song's role in Lanyer's work goes much further into the deep structure of the work, and in order to appreciate this, it is necessary to get a fuller picture of Lanyer's presentation of her feminine voice. This section therefore outlines the proto-feminist project that drives Lanyer's book.

Lanyer draws attention to the fact that hers is a feminine voice at the start of her first dedication, to Queen Anne:

Vouchsafe to view that which is seldome seene,  
A Womans writing of divinest things. (3-4, p.3)

She writes as a woman and to women (though, of course, men are neither in practice, nor entirely in theory, excluded from her readership), and she pursues a threefold feminine project. She aims to vindicate women, to propose a feminine alternative to patriarchy and to encourage her readers to lives of feminine virtue.

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<sup>15</sup> Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 82. Longfellow notes that Lanyer is unusual among women writers in focusing on Christ's body in this erotic way, but that she does draw on 'a long tradition of mystical marriage writing by men which extols the desirability of Christ for other male readers.' This aspect of Lanyer's writing may be less gendered than modern readers tend to think.

### 3.1 *Vindicating women*

According to the prose dedication *To the Vertuous Reader*, women need vindicating because not only men, but even some women, speak ill of them and seek 'to eclipse the brightnes of their deserved fame' (p.48). In her dedications, and in the main work, Lanyer presents women who deserve fame and praises them, including biblical and historical women and her own contemporaries. But the need to vindicate women goes deeper, and within the main poem, Lanyer finds a place to get to the heart of the matter; Eve's role in the Fall of humankind. In Lanyer's time, the Fall narrative of Genesis 2-3 was one of the standard explanations of the sinfulness of human nature, and Eve's role in it was predominantly understood as demonstrating the pre-eminent weakness in women, and even their predilection for evil.<sup>16</sup> It was also seen as an explanation of, and justification for, the patriarchal structure of society. God had established a hierarchy in creating Adam first and making him responsible for Eve. Moreover, Eve had proved at the Fall the rightness and even necessity of the notion that women should be protected, supervised and controlled by men.

Both of these factors work together, for example, in the typical and influential *Golden Booke of Christen Matrimonye*, by Heinrich Bullinger, published in English translation in 1542:

Paul doth lykewyse adde the occasion, whye wemen oughte to be subieccion to theyr husbendes. Euen because the husbonde is the wifes heade. Whych, sayenge he toke oute of the thyrde chapter of Gene, where it is wrytten thus: Adn the lorde sayde vnto ye woman. Thou shalt depend and wait vpon thy husbendes beck, him shalt thou feare, and he shall haue auctorite ouer the. Thus wryteth Paule himself. i. Timoth. ii. I suffre not a woman to teach or preach or to haue dominion oure her husband. For Adam was first made and then Eua. And Adam was not disceaue but the woman was disceaue, and brought in the transgressyon. For asmuch then as the mastershippe and takynge of auctorite vpon her could not well be dryuen out of the woman, therfore god to punyshe the sinne, humbled her, made her fearfull and subdued her. Such punyshment and ordinaunce of God ought they to regarde, and wyth a good wyll (accordynge to the commaundement of the Lorde, to obey theyr husbendes, leest they fall into Gods wrathe and into further punyshment).<sup>17</sup>

Lanyer discusses the Genesis story in her Passion narrative, using the information given in Matt. 27.19 that Pilate's wife sent to him to tell him to have nothing

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<sup>16</sup> Philip C. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 143-209.

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *The Golden Booke of Christen Matrimonye Moost Necessary and Profitable for All Them, That Entend to Liue Quietly and Godlye in the Christen State of Holy Wedlocke Newly Set Forthe in English by Theodore Basille* (London, 1542), ff. 17b-8a.

to do with the innocent Jesus, for she has had a dream about him.<sup>18</sup> According to Lanyer, Pilate's wife learns in her dream what really happened in the Garden of Eden. When Eve gave the apple to Adam, she:

Was simply good, and had no powre to see,  
The after-comming harme did not appeare... (SD 764-5, p.84)

Eve, Lanyer tells us, acted for the best with the information she had to hand. She had been told by Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree, but she had not been warned to be wary of the serpent. Because she is innocent, loving and insufficiently educated, she is weak and easily cheated. Moreover, the serpent offers Eve knowledge, which she knows Adam values very highly. She takes the apple in order to give knowledge to Adam, in an act motivated by love. Adam, who had had knowledge and instruction from God, was in fact in a position of strength to resist the serpent, and so his fault in eating the apple is the greater. Worse, his motivation was selfish and impure:

If Eve did erre, it was for knowledge sake,  
The fruit beeing faire perswaded him to fall. (SD 797-8)

Worse yet, Adam then blamed Eve:

And then to lay the fault on Patience backe,  
That we (poore women) must endure it all. (SD 793-4)

Possibly worst of all, it was Adam's neglect in not passing on to Eve the knowledge he had from God, and not looking after her properly when God had placed her in his charge, that kept her ignorant and vulnerable to the serpent in the first place:

He never sought her weaknesse to reprove,  
With those sharpe words, which he of God did heare. (SD 805-6)

The root cause of the Fall, then, is that Adam neglected the duty of care given to him by God, most culpably by keeping divine knowledge to himself.

In Lanyer's culture, the standard reading of the Eden story was that it explained human sin and the need for patriarchy, on the basis of woman's greater weakness and

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<sup>18</sup> Longfellow (*Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, 89) suggests late medieval passion plays and poems as a source for Pilate's wife's dream, though in these, the dream comes from Satan, who has realized too late that the crucifixion will work against him, and tries through Pilate's wife to prevent it. Satan's previous use of a woman as persuader, in the garden of Eden, had been successful, but this time, the man does not heed his wife's advice. Lanyer, of course, links Pilate's wife to the garden of Eden in a rather different way.

sinfulness. There were alternative readings. For example, in a 1609 treatise opposing 'Mr Dr. G.'s assertion that it was lawful for men to beat their wives, William Heale argues that Eve, as the final act of God's creation, was more perfect than Adam, and also that she was the lesser sinner, because she argued with the serpent and had had no direct command from God.<sup>19</sup> The Geneva Bible's marginal notes indicate that creation was perfected with the forming of Eve, but they do not go as far as Heale. Similarly, Rachel Speght's *Moralities Memorandum* (1621) is a personalized allegory in which the female speaker is suffering from Ignorance, and cures it by gaining knowledge, which gives her entry into the garden of Erudition. Speght justifies the education of her female speaker with reference to a variety of biblical texts. She says that St. Paul identifies that both men and women have the three parts of body, soul and spirit, and she links these to the faculties of mind, will and power (1 Thess. 5.23). She says that Jesus, in the parable of the talents, told his followers, male and female, that they should make use of all their faculties (Luke 19.23). The way Speght promotes the education of women, and places her argument in a garden, whose delights are the reward for attaining knowledge, is suggestive of Lanyer's argument in *Eve's apologie*. However, when Speght rehearses the Adam and Eve story at the start of her main poem, she indicates that both were to blame for the Fall, and has no hint of the kind of complex argument Lanyer uses here.<sup>20</sup> Lanyer's reading of the Eden story is a particularly careful and logical one, that goes against the dominant trend. It works with her portrayal of good women, and of the importance and value of feminine virtues, to present a positive vision of women as having potential for virtue.

### **3.2 A feminine alternative to patriarchy**

Lanyer also goes further, demonstrating that feminine virtues have a salvific role for humankind. As she develops her retelling of the Eden story, she accepts that the result of the apple episode is the fallen condition of humankind, and in particular, the injustices of patriarchy. But she goes on to link this directly to the Passion. Whatever the rights and wrongs of what Eve did in Eden, what men did at the crucifixion was far worse:

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<sup>19</sup> William Heale, *An Apologie for Women. Or an Opposition to Mr. Dr. G. His Assertion Who Held in the Act at Oxforde Anno 1608. That It Was Lawfull for Husbands to Beate Their Wiues* (Oxford, 1609).

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Speght, 'Mortalities Memorandum, With a Dreame Prefixed', in Susanne Woods, Betty S. Travitsky and Patrick Cullen (eds.), *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works*, Series 1: Printed Writings, 1500-1640: Part 2, vol. 10, The Poets, 1 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Her weakenesse did the Serpents words obey;  
But you in malice Gods deare Sonne betray.

(SD 815-6)

And that means that, because of what they did at the crucifixion, men have forfeited any claim to dominance they might have had. The events of the Passion should overturn the patriarchy that resulted from the Fall:

Then let us have our Libertie againe,  
And challenge to your selves no Sov'raintie;  
You came not in the world without our paine,  
Make that a barre against your crueltie;  
Your fault beeing greater, why should you disdain  
Our beeing your equals, free from tyranny?  
If one weake woman simply did offend,  
This sinne of yours, hath no excuse, nor end.

(SD 825-32)

The new world order which should be ushered in by Christ's Passion and Resurrection, the world-turned-upside-down of the eschatological present/future, for Lanyer involves an end to patriarchy.

To propose such an end to patriarchy, Lanyer demonstrates how feminine virtues work in the world, and argues that the misogynistic justifications for patriarchy that draw on the Eden story for authority are based on a mistaken understanding of the nature of men and women and their relationship, and a misreading of the story itself. She has no political programme for achieving such an overturning of the world order – she is writing an elite poem, after all, not a pamphlet or broadside, nor even a sermon or tract – but she does give a portrait of a feminine society in action, albeit a fragile and fleeting idyll. The final poem in the work, *The Description of Cooke-ham*, remembers a time when Lanyer was part of a feminine household run by the Countess of Cumberland at Cookham. Barbara K. Lewalski encapsulates the difficulty and the audacity of Lanyer's achievement:

Her little volume delivered a formidable challenge to Jacobean patriarchal ideology as it appropriated and rewrote these genres and discourses, placing women at the center of the fundamental Christian myths – Eden, the Passion, the Community of Saints. Like other early modern women writers, she could do little to change the repressive conditions of her world. But she was able – no small feat – to imagine and represent a better one.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski, 'Seizing Discourses and Reinventing Genres', in ed. Marshall Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*, Studies in the English Renaissance (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 57. I discuss *A Farewell to Cooke-ham* in more depth in Chapter 5.



### 3.3 *Encouraging women in virtue*

While Lanyer does not provide a political programme for the ending of patriarchy, she does use her whole work to encourage her readers to make full use of their feminine potential for virtue. She cannot protect them from slander, but in *To the Vertuous Reader*, she urges readers 'not to regard any imputations, that they [i.e. ill-speaking women and/or evil disposed men] undeservedly lay upon us, no otherwise than to make use of them to our owne benfits, as spurres to vertue.'

To help her readers in this, Lanyer provides models of virtuous behaviour, first in the good women she holds up for praise. She also shows biblical authority for feminine virtues. In 'To the Vertuous Reader', she names a litany of biblical women to whom God gave power to overcome the 'pride and arrogancie' of certain men, demonstrating that Scripture shows that God authorizes the exercise of feminine virtue in the world. This litany was a standard tactic of the time, used by writers across the religious and political spectrum, to extol and encourage a variety of godly behaviours in women. Lanyer's use is at the proto-feminist end of the scale. A particularly interesting example is Thomas Bentley, *The Monvment of Matrones: Containing Seuen Seuerall Lamps of Virginitie, or Distinct Treatises; Whereof the First Fiue Concerne Praier and Meditation: The Other Two Last, Precepts and Examples, as the Woorthie Works Partlie of Men, Partlie of Women; Compiled for the Necessarie Vse of Both Sexes out of the Sacred Scriptures, and Other Approoued Authors* (London, 1582). This work is focused strongly on women and the feminine, and the author says in his letter to the Christian reader that he began it as a digest of women's godly writing, especially to be a mirror to women, both good and wicked; but his project expanded. The first section, or 'lampe', contains: 'the diuine PRAIERS, HYMNES, or SONGS, made by sundrie holie women in the Scripture: something explained in the hardest places, for the better vnderstanding and edifieng of the vnlearned Reader,'<sup>22</sup> in other words, paraphrases of the speeches of biblical women, including: 'The song of Sion, or the familiar talke and mysticall communication, or diuine dialogue of the speciall loue betwene the spirituall bridegrome Iesus Christ, and the bride the faithful soule, his sanctified, chaste, and holie spouse the Church: commonlie called, The Song of songs, or Ballat of ballats, made by king Salomon.'<sup>23</sup> Here, Solomonic authorship is in no way seen to compromise the femininity of the voice of the Song. Moreover, Bentley gives a paraphrase of the whole of Canticles, not just the portions spoken by a feminine voice.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Bentley, *The Monvment of Matrones: Containing Seuen Seuerall Lamps of Virginitie, or Distinct Treatises; Whereof the First Fiue Concerne Praier and Meditation: The Other Two Last, Precepts and Examples, as the Woorthie Works Partlie of Men, Partlie of Women; Compiled for the Necessarie Vse of Both Sexes out of the Sacred Scriptures, and Other Approoued Authors* (London, 1582), 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

It is also interesting that, though his original intention was to write a work specifically for women, by the time it got its final title, Bentley saw his work as 'necessarie' to both sexes. Bentley's feminine politics are complex and at many points are at odds with Lanyer's, but the structure of his work as a 'mirror' and encouragement to women, consisting of a combination of rewritten Bible and praise for the godliness of other women, as expressed through their writing, provides a model Lanyer may have been following in important respects.

The Bible is also key to authorizing Lanyer's work, and she makes extensive use of it throughout her work. Her core authority comes from Christ himself. Lanyer presents a Christ who meets women in their sorrow and oppression, who stands in solidarity with them, and who demonstrates the authority of feminine virtues by exercising them himself. Lanyer's Christ is certainly a figure of supreme authority, and she exploits to the full the central paradox of the prince of heaven submitting to death on a cross. She does this in particularly feminine ways. A striking example is Lanyer's presentation of the episode when Peter cuts off the ear of the Roman soldier, in a misguided attempt to defend Jesus. Lanyer presents Peter's action as expressly masculine:

Yet Feare goes forward, Anger Patience kills:  
A Saint is mooved to revenge a wrong,  
And Mildnesse doth what doth to Wrath belong. (SD 582-4)

Such bravado 'offends thy Lord, and is against the Lawes.' (600) By contrast, Jesus puts the situation right by exercising feminine virtues of patience, nurture, healing, mercy and peacefulness; and in doing so, he loses none of his authority:

So much he hates Revenge, so farre from Hate,  
That he vouchsafes to heale, whom thou dost wound;  
His paths are Peace, with none he holdes Debate,  
His Patience stands upon so sure a ground,  
To counsell thee, although it comes too late:  
Nay, to his foes, his mercies so abound,  
That he in pittie doth thy will restraine,  
And heales the hurt, and takes away the paine. (SD 601-8)

The idea that Christ is the model of Christian behaviour was, of course, standard, and so was the exploitation of the paradox of the cross, which confounds traditional notions of masculine heroism. Paul's focus on the foolishness of the cross is among the earliest manifestations of this classic Christian paradox, for example at 1 Cor. 1.18-21. Moreover, the medieval period had seen the development of a tradition

exploring Christ as a feminine figure.<sup>24</sup> But this medieval tradition had developed entirely in the context of the interior life of the soul, whereas Lanyer's vision is social and public.

The culture's notion of feminine virtue at this period was primarily negative. Feminine virtues were the opposite of feminine vices like sensuality, garrulity and insubordination, so that the standard picture of feminine virtue was of chaste, quiet obedience in the domestic sphere.<sup>25</sup> However, in the scene just discussed, Lanyer's Christ demonstrates feminine virtues of peaceableness and healing in a public act of power. I have noted that Lanyer blames men for the crime of the crucifixion. Let us look now at the role that women play in Lanyer's presentation of the Passion.

Lanyer shows Christ at his trial refusing to answer the questions put to him. This silence, reported in all the Gospels, is both striking and enigmatic. It may be interpreted as passivity, as humility, as obedience to God or as a form of rebuke or insubordination to his judges. Offered here as a model for the early modern Englishwoman, so often enjoined to the virtue of silence, Jesus' silence could authorize a variety of behaviours and attitudes. Lanyer contrasts Jesus' silence before the men with the detail given in Luke that, as he carried his cross to Golgotha, he turned and spoke to women in the crowd:

Thrice happy women that obtaind such grace  
From him whose worth the world could not containe;  
Immediately to turne about his face,  
As not remembring his great grieffe and paine,  
To comfort you, whose teares powr'd forth apace  
On *Flora's* bankes, like shewers of Aprils raine:  
Your cries inforced mercie, grace, and love  
From him, whom greatest Princes could not moove:

To speake one word, nor once to lift his eyes  
Unto proud *Pilate*, no nor *Herod*, king;  
By all the Questions that they could devise,  
Could make him answer to no manner of thing;  
Yet these poore women, by their pitious cries  
Did moove their Lord, their Lover, and their King,  
To take compassion, turne about, and speake  
To them whose hearts were ready now to breake.

Most blessed daughters of Jerusalem,  
Who found such favour in your Saviors sight,

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (London: Longman, 1999); Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), for studies pointing to the complexity of gender ideology and practice in the period.

To turne his face when you did pitie him;  
 Your tearefull eyes, beheld his eies more bright;  
 Your Faith and Love unto such grace did clime,  
 To have reflection from this Heav'nly Light:  
     Your Eagles eyes did gaze against this Sunne,  
     Your hearts did thinke, he dead, the world were done. (SD 969-92)

This is a very careful reading of Luke 23.27-31:

And there followed him a great multitude of people, and of women, which women bewailed and lamented him. But Iesus turned backe vnto them, and said, Daughters of Ierusalem, wepe not for me, but wepe for your selues, and for your children. For beholde, the daies wil come, when men shall say, Blessed are the barren, & the wombes that neuer bare, and the pappes which neuer gaue sucke. Then shal they beginne to say to the mountaines, Fall on vs: and to the hilles, Couer vs. For if they do these things to a grene tre, what shalbe done to the drye?

It is not immediately obvious that Jesus is blessing the women: his words sound more like a warning.<sup>26</sup> Lanyer uses the Old Testament understanding here that grace consists in God (in this case Christ) turning his face to one. But his words are important, too. These virtuous women, like Lanyer's imagined readers, love Christ. It is this love that enables and empowers their own acts of love and compassion in the world, and when they demonstrate such Christ-inspired love, they become virtuous. Lanyer does not refer to the words Christ uses in the Luke passage, but they are nonetheless relevant. Christ's apparent warning is also a blessing, for the suffering he predicts is a necessary part of the process of uniting with Christ in a spiritual marriage. Moreover, suffering itself is transformed when endured with Christ. Here, the women reach a low point of despair: 'your hearts did thinke, he dead, the world were done,' and yet Lanyer's description of the light and beauty of Christ's gaze bestowed upon the women is joyous. The bittersweet nature of all-embracing and fully committed love is evoked, and the complexity of its relationship to hope and despair.

There are two further things to note here about this passage. First, Lanyer has transformed the traditional feminine virtues. The women's actions are recognizably feminine and clearly virtuous; they are supportive, loving, selfless and empathetic. But they are not silent or domestic. These women are in the open street, pleading bravely

<sup>26</sup> Patricia Phillipy, 'Sisters of Magdalen: Women's Mourning in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*', *English Literary Renaissance* 31, no. 1 (2000); Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, 88. The conversation between the women of Jerusalem and Christ had long been an established part of the tradition of the *Via Dolorosa*, or *Way of the Cross*. Interpretation appears to be varied, with more or less emphasis on the comforting nature of the encounter, and on the women speaking to Christ. Recent analysis of Lanyer's use of the women tends to stress the difference between the Bible account and Lanyer's, but does not refer to the *Via Dolorosa* tradition.

with the men around them on behalf of Jesus. Feminine virtues are no longer silent, passive, negative and domestic; they are vocal, active, positive and public.

Second, the fact that these women are the 'daughters of Jerusalem' is a subtle, but important, link to the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs features not only a feminine protagonist, but also a chorus of daughters of Jerusalem, who comment on, and occasionally join, the action. It is the daughters of Jerusalem who provoke the female speaker to give her description of her lover, when they ask her: 'O the fairest among women, what is thy welbeloued more then *other* welbeloued? what is thy welbeloued more then *another* loue, that thou doest so charge vs?' (5.9) When she replies with a fulsome description of his beauty, they ask if they can help her to look for him; and she seems content with this. Perhaps they are the friends whom the lovers invite to join them at their most intimate moment of union: 'I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I gathered my myrrhe with my spice: I ate mine honie combe with mine honie, I dranke my wine with my milke: eate, o friends, drinke, and make you mery, o welbeloued.' (5.1) In the tradition of reading the Song of Songs, the daughters of Jerusalem have provided a way of making the intimate interpersonal relationship between two lovers accessible to the whole community of the faithful.<sup>27</sup> In Lanyer's poem, the daughters of Jerusalem here represent anyone who responds to Jesus with feminine virtue; and all such people may model themselves as Christ's bride.

### 3.4 *The bride of Christ*

The *topos* of the bride of Christ is Lanyer's controlling authorizing strategy for her feminine project.<sup>28</sup> Lanyer's aim is to mould her readers into brides of Christ, as she makes especially clear in the dedication 'To all vertuous Ladies in generall':

Put on your wedding garments every one,  
The Bridegroom stayes to entertaine you all;  
Let Virtue be your guide, for she alone  
Can leade you right that you can never fall;  
And make no stay for feare he should be gone:  
But fill your Lamps with oyle of burning zeale,  
That to your Faith he may his Truth reveale. (8-14, p.12)

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<sup>27</sup> When Jesus refers to himself as a bridegroom, he, too, sees not a single bride, but a whole group of attendants as waiting eagerly upon him: e.g. Matt. 9.15, when all of the wedding guests rejoice at the presence of the groom, and Matt. 25.1-12, when there is one groom and ten 'bridesmaids,' who seem to function as brides.

<sup>28</sup> Longfellow (*Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, 3) identifies the mystical marriage trope as offering women writers 'the opportunity to do precisely what the men did not: to rewrite the human aspects of the metaphor, particularly what it meant to be a devout Christian woman.' Her book shows women writers of the period using the trope in a variety of ways.

The bridegroom, of course, is Christ. As I noted in the Bible section above, the Old Testament sometimes presents the relationship between God and Israel in terms of a marriage, albeit a somewhat turbulent one in which the wife frequently misbehaves and the husband sometimes punishes, sometimes forgives. Christian hermeneutics has drawn together several places in the Bible to present marriage as a model of the relationship between the Church/individual believer and God/Christ. The chief of these include several of Jesus' parables, such as Matt. 25.1-13 (the story of the wise and foolish virgins and their oil lamps, which Lanyer refers to in the stanza above); the relationship between God and Israel presented as a troubled marriage in prophetic books like Hosea, Ezekiel and Isaiah; the *topos* of Christ the bridegroom leading his faithful to the marriage feast in the book of Revelation; and the Song of Songs. These texts resonate with each other in the tradition. For example, Revelation 3.20: 'beholde, I stand at the dore, and knocke,' recalls both Jesus' parable at Matt. 25 and the Song 5.2: 'I slepe, but mine heart waketh, *it is* the voyce of my welbeloued that knocketh, *saying*, Open vnto me, my sister, my loue, my dooue, my vndefiled.'

The *topos* of the bride of Christ is central to all three of the areas of Lanyer's feminine project that I have outlined, and she makes extensive use of the biblical material that suggests it. First, just as the man in the Song affirms his lover, 'thou art all faire, my loue, and there is no spot in thee' (4.7), so Christ in Lanyer's work affirms and empowers his brides. Lanyer's dedications afford the opportunity to present several contemporary women as exemplars of feminine virtue graced by Christ, and her chief dedicatee, the Countess of Cumberland, has a further role, to act as a model reader of the work, and bride of Christ, whose example other readers can follow. In this way, vindicating women and encouraging them to virtue becomes one and the same thing; in presenting model brides of Christ to her readers, Lanyer demonstrates the potential for virtue that women have. As a result, there is a tension in the work between praising the virtue of women and encouraging them to further virtue. This is very clear in the dedication to the Countess of Cumberland's daughter, Lady Anne Clifford, who was a young woman recently married to the Earl of Dorset when her dedication was published. This dedication expresses the combination of praise and encouragement in Lanyer's presentation of bridehood, and also demonstrates the theology underpinning it. The dedication 'To the Ladie Anne, Countesse of Dorcet' begins:

To you I dedicate this work of Grace,  
 This frame of Glory which I have erected,  
 For your faire mind I hold the fittest place,  
 Where virtue should be settled & protected;  
 If highest thoughts true honour do imbrace,

And holy Wisdom is of them respected:  
Then in this Mirrour let your faire eyes looke,  
To view your virtues in this blessed Booke.

Blest by our Saviours merits, not my skil,  
Which I acknowledge to be very small;  
Yet if the least part of his blessed Will  
I have perform'd, I count I have done all:  
One sparke of grace sufficient is to fill  
Our Lampes with oyle, ready when he doth call  
To enter with the Bridegroome to the feast,  
Where he that is the greatest may be least.

(1-16, p.41)

As in the dedication 'To all vertuous Ladies in generall', Lanyer uses the parable of the virgins with their oil lamps. Here, it illustrates the power of grace. Grace operates in these stanzas, and in the work as a whole, in a threefold way. First, the grace of the aristocratic patron, as here, empowers the more lowly author of the work. Second, for a person in love, the favour of the beloved person graces the lover. In this case, the blessing of 'our Saviours merits' is the 'sparke of grace' that is sufficient to fill the lamps of Lanyer and her readers with oil, so that they will be able to enter the marriage feast with Christ. Finally, this description of the love relationship between Christ and his brides has already moved into the religious functioning of grace, which, for a Protestant writer like Lanyer, always comes from Christ, as it does here.

The theology of grace was a crucial, but tricky, subject in this period (see pp.37-39). It held particular significance for Calvinist theology like that of the Church of England.<sup>29</sup> Article X of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England demonstrates the complexity of the position:

The condition of man after the fall of *Adam* is suche, that he cannot turne and prepare hym selfe by his own naturall strength and good workes, to fayth and calling vpon God: Wherefore we haue no power to do good workes pleasaunt and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christe preuenting us, that we may haue a good wyll, and working with vs, when we haue that good wyll.<sup>30</sup>

The potential to apply this to bridehood is clear. Wives, at this period, were in many respects possessions of their husbands, and gained their identity through their husbands. The idea, then, that any virtue one possesses is there only by divine grace can be expressed clearly if one models oneself as Christ's bride, participating in his identity by virtue of one's status as spouse. It is possible, of course, to play this concept

<sup>29</sup> See Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547-c.1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. 74-125, for the complex interaction in the period between Calvinist and Arminian positions.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1986), 139.

in two ways. On the one hand, it can be seen to negate any innate identity that the bride may have brought into the marriage. Her ideal role is to suppress her own self and embrace her husband's identity. On the other, becoming the bride of Christ could be seen as elevating one's status, and as profoundly empowering; which is how, as we have seen, Lanyer presents it. Lanyer's Christ does not simply endow his brides with his own virtues, but, by demonstrating feminine virtues himself, he affirms and empowers them.

The religious question of grace makes sense of the highly enigmatic final couplet of the first stanza quoted above, in which Lanyer says that her work is a mirror in which Lady Anne will see her own virtues.<sup>31</sup> Does Lanyer mean simply the virtues that belong to the lady herself? As the dedication progresses, Lanyer shows us a young bride beginning her life as a woman. She reminds Anne that she comes from a noble family, but warns her that it is her own actions, not her heritage, that will judge her. Those actions should be modelled on the actions of Christ:

Bind up the broken, stop the wounds that bleeds,  
Succour the poore, comfort the comfortlesse. (76-77)

This couplet alludes to Isa. 61.1: 'the Spirit of the Lord God *is* vpon mee, therefore hathe the Lord anointed me: he hathe sent mee to preache good tidings vnto the poore, to binde vp the broken hearted, to preache libertie to the captiues, and to them that are bounde, the opening of the prison.' It is a direct call to social action. Moreover, it is the verse which Jesus reads out in the synagogue at the start of his ministry, proclaiming himself as the fulfilment of the verse. (Luke 4.16-28) The practical outworking of this, according to Lanyer, is that her readers, becoming brides of Christ, will not only embody feminine virtues like Christ's but will also be empowered to become agents for social change in the world:

And you a glorious Actor will appeare  
Lovely to all, but unto God most deare. (87-88)

Lanyer has presented to Anne, in this dedication, not simply a mirror that reflects her virtues as they stand, but a vision of what they may be, if graced by Christ. If Anne models herself as a bride of Christ, she will receive from Christ the grace to act like

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<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of the ubiquitous and important *Mirror* trope in the period, see Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in the Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Paul Budra, *A Mirror for Magistrates and the De Casibus Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).



Christ in the world. In that sense, the main poem of Lanyer's work, as well as Anne's dedication, acts as a mirror to Anne, for it presents to her Christ, acting virtuously in the world and empowering both women and femininity.

This model of the bride of Christ underlies and grounds the whole of Lanyer's work. It is based on an understanding of the Protestant theology of grace, whereby all virtue comes from Christ. Lanyer links this theology to the *topos* of bride of Christ in such a way that the new mutual identity of the couple empowers the bride to be virtuous, and to speak and to act in public. There is some theological and ideological ambiguity here. While grace comes from Christ, I have shown that Christ's behaviour authorizes the active practice of feminine virtues, and in this way he could be seen to be empowering natural capacities in the woman, rather than endowing them with virtues they would not otherwise have had. Moreover, the sharp split between virtuous women and evil men at the Passion, as presented by Lanyer, might suggest essentialist categories of male and female.

As to the second of these points, although Lanyer's proto-feminist stance is strong, and some have argued that she has a separatist agenda, I agree with Erica Longfellow that Lanyer is not presenting an essentialist dichotomy.<sup>32</sup> Longfellow argues that Lanyer is struggling towards a theology that transcends gender: 'Lanyer is presenting a much more radical vision than a binary opposition between good women and bad men. She elevates the elements of Christ's life that both men and women are enjoined to follow, in the process suggesting that the call to be Christ-like may supersede any gendered distinctions of virtue.'<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, in order to get to such a position, Lanyer has to undertake a major re-balancing of gendered positions, and in the end, this work of redressing the balance dominates her book.

The question of Christ empowering his brides is even more difficult. Identifying human virtue was a major problem for Reformed Christians, whose rejection of salvation by works led logically to a rejection of any human capacity for good; and yet it is clear that encouraging moral behaviour was as important in the Reformed tradition as within any other Christian tradition. Here, Lanyer's solution is love. The initiative comes from Christ, as is proper in Reformed doctrine, and what he inspires is love. It is the love that the women experience that leads them naturally to virtuous actions. In this way, Lanyer may well be saying that the types of behaviours which society considers to be feminine are those that are the most virtuous, because they stem directly from a loving response to Christ; but this is not to say that women, any more than men,

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<sup>32</sup> Marshall Grossman, 'The Gendering of Genre: Literary History and the Canon', in ed. Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*; Michael Morgan Holmes, 'The Love of Other Women: Rich Chains and Sweet Kisses', in *ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, 91.

naturally possess the capacity or the inclination to act in these ways. It is only to say that society undervalues these behaviours. In addition, Lanyer suggests that women are better placed to practise these virtues precisely because they are undervalued in society, and this causes them pain and suffering, which enables them to empathize with pain and suffering when they encounter it.<sup>34</sup>

Just as the feminine speaker in the Song of Songs experiences pain and danger in her relationship, Lanyer's brides also suffer. The total commitment of the daughters of Jerusalem to Christ means that, when they witness the crucifixion, they experience utter despair: 'your hearts did thinke, he dead, the world were done' (SD 992). Similarly, Lanyer's model reader, the Countess of Cumberland, finds that her love for Christ entails suffering and difficulty:

Oft times hath he made triall of your love,  
And in your Faith hath tooke no small delight,  
By Crosses and Afflictions he doth prove,  
Yet still your heart remaineth firme and right;  
Your love so strong, as nothing can remove,  
Your thoughts beeing placed on him both day and night,  
Your constant soule doth lodge betweene her breasts,  
This Sweet of sweets, in which all glory rests. (SD 1337-44)

The final couplet has a strong echo of the Song of Songs 1.12: 'my welbeloued *is* as a bundle of myrrhe vnto me: he shall lye betweene my breastes.'

In this section, I have outlined how the deep structure of Lanyer's work has a logic that derives from the matrix of biblical texts that allows readers to think of the relationship between a person and Christ in terms of a marriage, in which readers take the role of bride. The Song of Songs is hugely important in this matrix in several ways, and not least for providing the bride with a voice. Her voice is open, ardent, active, lovingly committed and vulnerable; yet her vulnerability does not silence her. She is also beloved of her bridegroom. Lanyer uses all of these characteristics to authorize her own poetic voice, the voices of her female characters, and perhaps most importantly, the voices of her readers, if they allow themselves to be formed as brides of Christ. It is also clear that Lanyer has used her culture's traditions, conventions and modes of expression to create a rather distinctive vision of the feminine voice and to fashion a model for the role of femininity and the female in the world. This model draws extensively on the Song of Songs and its tradition of interpretation. How, then, did other poets make use of the feminine voice in the Song of Songs?

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<sup>34</sup> I explain this further in Chapter 5.

#### 4 Other works

##### 4.1 William Shakespeare: *Venus and Adonis*

Moving from Lanyer to *Venus and Adonis* is not a smooth transition, for these are very different kinds of poem. This in itself is an indication of the variety of poetic material in which readings of the Song of Songs may be found. Shakespeare's two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were runaway successes in the 1590s and 1600s; especially *Venus and Adonis*. It became a byword for the sweet, sugared language of seduction, to the extent that it was used as a parade example in parody.<sup>35</sup> Shakespeare's model for the story came from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but he made an important change to his original. Whereas in Ovid (and throughout the tradition of the myth) Venus and Adonis become lovers, Shakespeare presents Venus wooing Adonis with all her might, but without success.<sup>36</sup> The young Adonis rejects her advances and the relationship is never consummated. Shakespeare's presentation of Venus, then, is especially interesting for this discussion of a feminine voice. Venus is a strong character, physically more powerful than Adonis, able and willing to dominate the conversation, and attempting to bend Adonis to her will; and, of course, she is a goddess, giving her a trump-card of superiority in the relationship. Yet, for all her power and dominance, she achieves nothing of what she desires, and ends the poem, having lost the lover she never enjoyed, cursing all future lovers and retreating to Paphos alone. As Sasha Roberts notes, the idea of the sexually voracious and forward woman was a popular one in erotic writing of the late Elizabethan period, and Shakespeare's Venus certainly found a market.<sup>37</sup> Such a female character may be seen as transgressing ideological norms for female personality and behaviour, and no doubt this transgression is part of the erotic appeal; but Shakespeare's Venus also demonstrates that there was a variety of feminine models available in the culture, and that its ideology was not always as monolithic as it has sometimes been presented.

Yet, on that understanding, the apparent reception of *Venus and Adonis* in the age of Donne may be surprising in two ways. First, the words of an unsuccessful suit became an example of the height of seductive language. Francis Meres, for example, in comparing English poets with the classics, writes: 'the sweete wittie soule of Ouid liues in mellifluous and hony-tongued *Shakespeare*, witnesse his *Venus and Adonis*,

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<sup>35</sup> Sasha Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palsgrave, 2003), 30-42, 60-82; Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen, eds., *Shakespeare's Poems, The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Thomson Learning, 2007), 71-73.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England*, 25.

his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his priuate friends...'.<sup>38</sup> Shakespeare was a byword for 'honeyed' language at the turn of the century, and *Venus and Adonis* was a proof-text for this; yet Venus fails to seduce Adonis. Second, the fact that the would-be seducer is the female in the relationship goes relatively unmarked by readers. Roberts gives examples of fictional male characters using the language of Venus in their attempts at seduction.<sup>39</sup> These examples tend to be satirical, and the speakers are shown misapplying Shakespeare's language in ways that make them look ridiculous. However, the fact that they are men speaking the words of a female character is rarely at the surface of the satire. The only example Roberts gives in which the appropriateness of Venus' feminine voice is tackled head-on is in *Hic Mulier*.<sup>40</sup> The 'Mulier' argues that she is entitled to behave like a man, since men have become effeminate. She gives the example that when men woo, they use Venus' words, thereby abandoning their own masculine territory and leaving a vacuum into which women like *Hic Mulier* may step.<sup>41</sup> But *Hic Mulier* is criticizing men for being effeminate, not Venus for being too masculine.

I want to propose a third resounding silence in the reception history of *Venus and Adonis*, and that is its use of religious language, and particularly the language of the Song of Songs. One of the most famous passages in the poem, quoted frequently in the age of Donne, is lines 229-240:

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemmed thee here  
Within the circuit of this ivory pale,  
I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;  
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:  
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,  
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

'Within this limit is relief enough,  
Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,  
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,  
To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:  
Then be my deer, since I am such a park;  
No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark. (pp.231-2)

In the Song of Songs 4.12-5.1, the man describes his beloved as an enclosed garden (the Hebrew word used at 4.13 is 'pardes' – paradise – which means 'preserve or

<sup>38</sup> Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury Being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth* (London, 1598), 281-82.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England*, 64-76.

<sup>40</sup> *Hic Mulier: Or, the Man-Woman and Haec-Vir: Or, the Womanish-Man, The Rota, University of Exeter* (Ilkley: The Scholar Press Limited, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England*, 36-41. *Hic Mulier* was originally published in 1620.

park') filled with plants and with a fountain at its centre. She accords with this description and invites him in to enter his garden and 'eat his pleasant frute,' which he does, with great gusto. This passage resonates with other passages in the Song when the man is likened to a deer or a gazelle, grazing on plants including lilies. The links between the Song of Songs and this passage in *Venus and Adonis* are very strong, and it is intriguing that they have not been remarked upon. Perhaps the classical provenance of the material, and the fact that it was read primarily as light erotic literature, prevented such a reading.<sup>42</sup> There may also be a deliberate ignoring of potential blasphemy.

It is worth considering this connection a little further. In the Song of Songs, the man describes the woman as an enclosed garden, she agrees, and the pair enjoy living out their shared vision. In *Venus and Adonis*, however, it is only Venus who articulates the trope. She is not only using the feminine voice of the Song of Songs, but also appropriating its masculine voice, so that there is no place in the conversation for Adonis, even should he want one; and, indeed, he does not speak in response to her invitation. Whereas *Hic Mulier* accuses *Haec Vir* of appropriating Venus' feminine voice, thus leaving no feminine role for women, in *Venus and Adonis* itself, Venus' assertive confidence has overrun into dominance, and mutuality has become impossible. Shakespeare's portrayal of Venus is complex and ambiguous. In this passage, the fact that Venus turns what is, in the Song of Songs, a conversation into a monologue may indicate her over-confidence, her overbearing nature, the overwhelming ardour of her feelings, or the hopelessness of one-sided passion – or it may relate to all of these things. Moreover, success may depend not only on the quality of the words one uses, but also on the way one interacts with those with whom one is in dialogue.

This is a poem that plays intensively and inventively with notions of gender. However, just as its overt playfulness may hide more serious content, and its overt pagan source may disguise an engagement with scriptural texts, its concern with gender may also be, at least in part, a motif that Shakespeare uses in order to treat other *topoi*. Moreover, although *Venus and Adonis* is based on a pagan source, it is concerned with religion, not least because Venus is a goddess with universal powers, and the poem ends with Venus using these powers in a way that evokes another biblical text with strong connections to the Song of Songs, for her curse on human love at lines 1135-1164 resonates with God's curse on Eve in Gen. 3.16. Venus' curse provides an alternative explanation for the problems and failures of human erotic love, and I shall consider it further in Chapter 5.

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<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England*, 23.

## 4.2 Robert Southwell

*Venus and Adonis* has consistently been considered a resolutely secular poem, but Robert Southwell, writing about the same time, produced only religious poetry. The possible connections between the two poets and their work are intriguing.<sup>43</sup> Southwell, a Jesuit, was writing within the long tradition of Catholic piety. His life story as a recusant priest and eventual martyr gave a sense of excitement and integrity, as well as poignancy to his work; and his poetry, some of which was first published shortly after his death in 1595, proved very popular with an apparently wide range of readers. Southwell's verse is part of the literature of personal piety that draws on Counter-Reformation practices like Ignatian meditation, and that found a home in both recusant and Protestant spiritual life.<sup>44</sup> This is evident in the poetry Southwell wrote in explicitly feminine voices, both in his choice of female speakers and in the content of the verse. In both, Southwell shows intimate familiarity with the long tradition of reading the Song of Songs. There are two poems in the voice of Mary Magdalene, and one spoken by the Virgin Mary. Both of these figures had been associated strongly with the Song of Songs.

The significance of Mary Magdalene in Christian tradition, and especially during this period, is perhaps not enough studied.<sup>45</sup> She represented the repentant sinner, the one converted from a life of worldly *vanitas* to a life of spiritual truth by Christ, the recipient of Christ's intimate secrets, the archetypal lover of Christ and the devotee of the life of contemplation (in contrast to her 'sister', Martha, who represented the life of action). She was also 'the apostle to the apostles,' as the one who first told the disciples about Jesus' resurrection, and the tradition had expanded this role to include her as privy to Jesus' most intimate secrets, which she was able to communicate to the other apostles.<sup>46</sup> Her importance to post-Tridentine Catholicism is emphasised by Susan Haskins: 'it is perhaps not too much to suggest that Mary Magdalen might stand

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<sup>43</sup> Alison Shell, 'Why Didn't Shakespeare Write Religious Verse?', in eds. Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne, *Shakespeare, Marlowe Jonson: New Directions in Biography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Anne Sweeney, *Robert Southwell: Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English Lyric Landscape, 1586-95* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 71-92, rehearses the evidence for this cross-denominational reach. Rosalind Smith, "'In a Mirroure Clere': Protestantism and Politics in Anne Lok's *Miserere Mei Deus*", in eds. Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke, *'This Double Voice': Gendered Writing in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), 41, suggests a complementary line of development. Her essay demonstrates the political nature of the text, but in referring to the sonnet sequence with which it ends, she notes that it is 'the first sonnet sequence not only to be written in English, but to combine the Petrarchan genre of the sonnet sequence with that of psalm paraphrase.'

<sup>45</sup> Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> See Raymond F. Collins, 'Mary Magdalene', in ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 579-81 for an outline of the extrabiblical traditions concerning Mary.

as the symbol of the Church Triumphant, of the true faith, as it emerged from the deliberations of the Council of Trent.<sup>47</sup> Mary's repentance and embracing of the life of contemplation fed into the focus in this period on the interior spiritual life. Her history as the reformed prostitute was an appealing paradox that set the lives of flesh and spirit in opposition to each other; moreover, the moment of her conversion provided artists with the opportunity to paint a very beautiful woman in fine clothing, even while the painting itself illustrated a turning away from worldly *vanitas* to the enlightenment of Christ. This was a key moment at which the spiritual could be seen in the earthly at its most appealing. It is worth noting that while she was more prominent in Catholic culture in this period, she was also present in Protestant devotion; for example, in Herbert's 'Mary Magdalene'. It was somewhat problematic for Protestants to embrace Mary Magdalene, partly because so much of the tradition surrounding her was extrabiblical, and partly because her role, along with St. Peter, as the practitioner of extreme repentance, could be seen as excessively demonstrative. Aspects of her portrayal are certainly gendered. Traditions that emphasize her life as a prostitute often highlight the traditional 'lower' nature of the woman, who is closer to flesh and further from spirit than man, while at the same time capitalizing on the tradition that the woman, as the more 'natural' of the genders, found it relatively easy to respond to Christ in faith and love. Links between Mary Magdalene and the Song of Songs include the intimacy and sexuality of the relationship presented; the references to ointments, balms and myrrh, which resonate both with the traditional identification of Mary with the woman in Luke 7 who anoints Christ's feet with expensive ointment, and with the episode when Mary goes to Christ's tomb with the intention of anointing his body; the typological identification of the woman finding her lover in the garden with Mary Magdalene finding the risen Christ in a garden (John 20); and, most explosively, the excessively sensual and sexual language of the Song with Mary's position as Christ's ideal lover.<sup>48</sup>

In 'Mary Magdalens Blushe', an example of tears-poetry, Southwell's Mary contrasts her old life of sensual pleasure with her new spiritual life of love for Christ and repentance, matching these opposite kinds of love with the opposites of life and death:

Bad seede I sow'd worse fruite is now my gayne  
Soone Dying mirth begatt long living payne.

(5-6, p.29)

The poem reflects a schema that is typical in Southwell's work. Spiritual and sensual love are linked paradoxically by the opposition of life and death. Sensual love leads to worldly pleasure which is a form of spiritual death, while spiritual love leads to a desire

<sup>47</sup> Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 252.

<sup>48</sup> Haskins, *Mary Madgalen*, 63-67.

for worldly death, in order that one may gain eternal life. The Song of Songs, too, links love and death, in one of its few statements of explanation: 'set me as a seale on thine heart, & as a signet vpon thine arme: for loue is strong as death.' (8.6) This is very far from being a full 'explanation' of the relationship between love and death, but the tradition of interpretation of the Song of Songs, from Origen through Bernard of Clairvaux and down to Southwell, links desire for spiritual life with desire for bodily death.<sup>49</sup> The fact that Mary speaks openly about her emotions and desires links her to the woman of the Song of Songs, and the way she equates bodily death and spiritual life links her to the tradition of its interpretation. Mary Magdalene differs from the female speaker in the Song of Songs in her repentance, a feature totally absent from the Song, but strongly present in the tradition of interpretation. Most Christian traditions of reading the Song of Songs find places in it where they can emphasize the female speaker's awareness of her own unworthiness; primarily 1.4, when she says she is 'blacke... but comelie'.

Southwell's second poem in the voice of Mary Magdalene, 'Marie Magdalens complaint at Christs death', places Mary in the time between Christ's death and resurrection, and develops the themes of love and death, sense and spirit. Here, Mary focuses not on her own sin, but on her desire for union with Christ, which makes her earthly life a kind of death now that he is gone: 'death it is to live without thee' (15, p.40). Once again, the focus is on Mary's inner spiritual life, and Southwell makes use of the concept of the closet of the heart, in which one stores one's spiritual treasures:

With my love my life was nestled  
In the summe of happynes. (25-26)

This idea was increasingly popular in this period, and begins to appear in religious emblem books in the seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup> A visual representation of the closet of the heart appears in Crashaw's *Carmen Deo Nostro*, at the start of a poem to the Countess of Denbigh, showing the heart as a locked cabinet (See Illustration 2, p.85).<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> There is further consideration of the relationship between life, death and desire in Chapter 5.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Victoria James; 'Spirituality and Ideology in Early Stuart Catholic Writing: Reading "Both Upward and Downward"' (Ph.D. Thesis, Oxford, University of Oxford, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> Richard Crashaw, *Carmen Deo Nostro, Te Decet Hymnus Sacred Poems, / Collected, Corrected, Augmented, Most Humbly Presented. To My Lady the Countesse of Denbigh by Her Most Deuoted Seruant, R.C. In Heaty [Sic] Acknowledgment of His Immortall Obligation to Her Goodnes & Charity* (Paris: 1652), f.a3b.



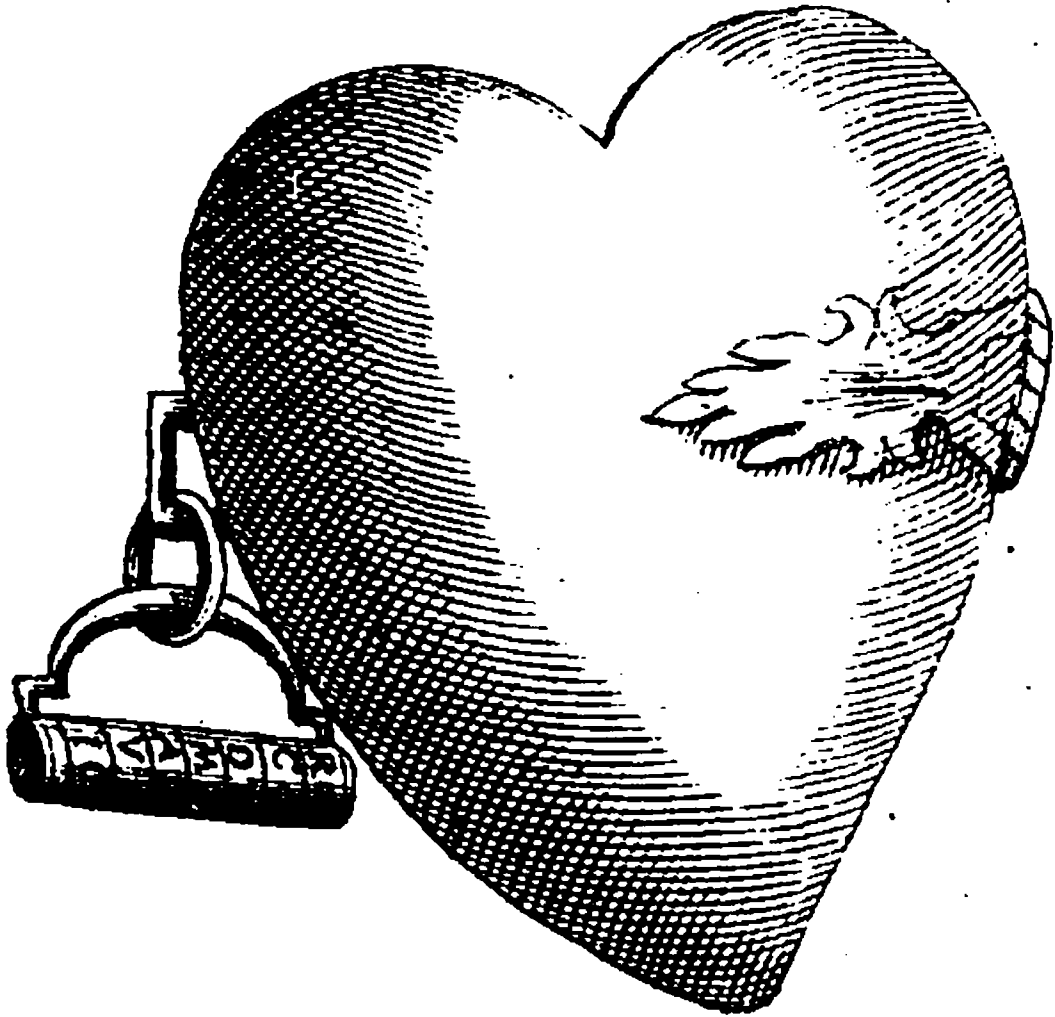


Illustration 2

It links to the Song of Songs 1.12: 'my welbeloued *is* as a bundle of myrrhe vnto me: he shal lye betwene my breastes,' which we saw Lanyer also alluding to. The way that Southwell links these elements together is highly suggestive of the tradition of interpretation of the Song of Songs, but this is mostly not explicit, but rather a hidden part of the semiotic matrix underlying his poetry.

The final poem with a female speaker is 'The virgin Mary to Christ on the Crosse', which rehearses a popular scene for religious writers.<sup>52</sup> Medieval tradition linked the bride in the Song of Songs strongly with Mary (see pp. 49-51). In particular, the words of praise that the man speaks about her were applied to Mary, so that she became identified with *topoi* including the lily, the rose, the dove, the queen and the enclosed garden. It would not be altogether surprising, then, to find Mary speaking with the voice of the woman in the Song of Songs; yet the echoes of the Song in this poem are very faint, certainly no stronger than those in the Magdalene poems.

However, there are some direct allusions to the Song of Songs in Southwell's poetry, and these are to be found in his treatment of Peter. Southwell wrote several poems in Peter's voice, including two poems called *Saint Peters complaynt*, one earlier and much shorter than the other.<sup>53</sup> In what follows, I quote from both versions, indicating which I am using at any time. The poems are consistent in their portrayals, with the later, longer poem expanding upon the shorter one, so I have selected quotations based on which version most clearly and succinctly expresses the point I am making. In these poems, which are in the genre of tears-poetry,<sup>54</sup> Southwell expands on the moment described in Luke 22.61-62, when Peter has denied Christ three times. Jesus looked at Peter, Peter realized what he had done, 'and Peter went out, & wept bitterly.' In Southwell's poems, Peter considers and bewails his own sin; as with 'Mary Magdalens Blushe', the focus is on repentance. Like Lanyer, Southwell indicates his allusions to the Song of Songs in marginal notes in the longer poem. The two allusions are both in Peter's lengthy and effusive description of Jesus' eyes and the impact of a mutual look. As with Lanyer and the daughters of Jerusalem, the moment of eye contact with Jesus is a critical one. The first marginal reference to the Song of Songs is in line 379: 'O Pooles of *Hesebon*, the bathes of grace' (p.74). This is a

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<sup>52</sup> And also, of course, for visual artists. Mary's place at the foot of the cross is attested in the Bible (John 19.25-27), and forms an important part of Christian responses, both to the cross and to Mary herself.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney, eds., *Robert Southwell, S.J.: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 145-151. Southwell's poetry has a complex and often obscure textual history, since expurgated versions of his work were published soon after his death, while fuller versions circulated in manuscript among recusant communities.

<sup>54</sup> See Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56-106, for a detailed discussion of tears-poetry and the place of Southwell within the genre.

reference to Song of Songs 7.4: 'thine eyes are like the fishe pooles in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim.'<sup>55</sup> The second is the following stanza:

O Turtle twins all bath'd in virgins milke,  
Upon the margin of full flowing bankes:  
Whose gracefull plume surmounts the finest silke,  
Whose sight enamoreth heavens most happy ranks,  
could I forswear this heavenly paire of doves,  
That cag'd in care for me were groning loves. (433-8)

The Song of Songs verse is 5.12: 'his eyes are like doves vpon the riuers of waters, which are washt with milke, and remaine by the full vessels.' As with Lanyer's description of Christ '*upon the Canticles*', Southwell uses both the male speaker's description of his female beloved and hers of him, applying both to Christ with no distinction or explanation (see p.64 n.15). Southwell's allusions to the Song come in a long passage in which Peter uses the language of Petrarchan love to express his feelings when he looks at Christ. At this point, Peter is assuming in some respects a feminine role in loving Christ in this way, much as any person wanting to enter spiritual marriage with Christ would need to take up the position of bride. This is a poem that works strongly on the emotions of the reader. The reader is encouraged to reflect on Peter as a kind of mirror to his own spiritual development, as Peter moves through the process of repentance. The bittersweet joys of looking at, and being looked at by, Christ, are key to this emotional process, and it is here that the Song of Songs has an overt job to do for Southwell.

The reader seeking an attitude towards gender ideology in *Saint Peters complaynt* has a difficult task. It is certainly true that Peter himself expresses traditional gender understandings. In the shorter poem, he criticizes himself for allowing his masculine virtue to desert him when he denies Christ: 'Where was the hart that did so little feare / The armed troupes that him did apprehende' (37-38, p.27). In the longer poem, as he casts around for places to lay the blame for his betrayal, he lights not only on the cock which so cruelly crowed, but also on the serving woman who, he says, by asking him a question had tempted him much as Eve tempted Adam, and he expands his critique to include women in general: 'O women, woe to men: traps for their fals, / ... Parents of life, and love: spoylers of both...' (319, 323). In these passages, Peter makes use of traditional patriarchal ideology and traditional patriarchal theology as he reflects on recent events, but readers should be wary of equating Peter's ideology with

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<sup>55</sup> Southwell refers to this as 7.3, and his verse numbering is idiosyncratic in the second reference, too. I can find no reason for this; his numbering corresponds neither to the Vulgate nor Douai Bibles.

Southwell's. Peter is here presented as a parade example of repentance, and repentance is a process, undergone by people who are not perfect. Southwell may well be making a point here about the human resistance to laying bare one's own culpability, rather than a point about the fundamental inferiority of women. Equally, Peter's apparently 'feminine' erotic response to Christ is traditional, rather than explicitly gendered. As Erica Longfellow makes clear, in their portrayal of a feminized Christ and his eroticized and feminized lover, both Lanyer and Southwell are working within a convention which, Longfellow suggests, is not really about gender.<sup>56</sup>

Southwell combines traditional gendered understandings of virtue and sin with use of the traditional paradox of the feminized Christ, to heighten the dramatic impact of Peter's words and to illustrate theological points. Like Lanyer, he is writing poetry to encourage the spiritual development of his readers; but whereas with Lanyer we can extract from her work a consistent view on the gendered structure of her society, with Southwell things are more difficult to tease out. It is clear that gender is 'performed' in Southwell's verse: Peter plays the man when he berates himself for losing courage, and plays the woman when he falls in love with Christ; but Southwell's exploitation of gender expectations, in the end, transcends gender. The woman in the Song of Songs gives Southwell a model for performing femininity that may be used by men and women (as long as its focus is on Christ), but, unlike Lanyer, he does not use this as an opportunity to make a direct challenge to the gender norms of his day.

Southwell writes fully within the long Catholic tradition of spiritual writing, and exploits the paradoxical possibilities of a feminized Christ inspiring adoration and love in his female and male followers. He makes extensive use of both the Bible and the long tradition of its interpretation in his poetry. The next poet in this section is situated firmly in the much newer Protestant tradition, undertaking an ambitious Bible translation project that aims both to achieve the heights of English poetic expression and to translate the Psalms with fidelity to Protestant doctrine. She is also a female poetic voice; but what use does she make of the potential for specifically feminine speech in her work?

#### **4.3 Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke**

The Countess of Pembroke was one of the most important poetic patrons of the end of the sixteenth century, and she also published highly influential literary translations. Her brother, the iconic Protestant poet, Sir Philip Sidney, had begun to translate the Psalms. The Countess completed this task after his death, and the results circulated widely in manuscript form, as is clear, for example, from poems like Donne's

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<sup>56</sup> Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, 83-85.

'Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sidney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister.' Translations of the Psalms had become popular during the century, and there was a wide range of types of translation, from penitential psalms translated in prison by aristocratic poets like Surrey and Wyatt, to metrical versions of the whole Psalter designed to be sung to standard tunes, the most popular of which was known as 'Sternold and Hopkins'.<sup>57</sup> The picture is complex and intertwining. As Hannibal Hamlin notes, what became known as the Sternhold Hopkins Psalter, which achieved immense popularity and longevity alongside a reputation as the embodiment of poor versifying, began life in court circles. Thomas Sternhold was Groom of the Robes both to Henry VIII and Edward VI, and his *Certayne psalmes chosen out of the Psalter of David, and drawen into English metre* was published because Edward had enjoyed hearing them from the lips of their author.<sup>58</sup>

The Sidney/Pembroke Psalter is a major poetic undertaking, attempting to render the Psalms in the highest poetic style, and it probably contains the greatest variety of verse forms of any work published in English to date.<sup>59</sup> Its influence on poets of the early seventeenth century was significant, and may even now be underrated, despite increasing recognition of the work's achievement.<sup>60</sup> Helen Wilcox, for example, in an article comparing Mary Sidney, Aemilia Lanyer, John Donne and George Herbert, concludes by making the case for Mary's important role in the development of devotional poetry: 'we may suggest, with considerable justification, that the group of poets whose work has been the subject of this essay should be referred to as the school of Sidney, or perhaps, even, the tribe of Mary'.<sup>61</sup>

Some Psalms resemble the lyric poetry of the Song of Songs, using the language of love to articulate the relationship between God and the speaker. As I noted above, the speaker of the Psalms was traditionally understood to be, in the main, David; and the words of the Psalms were also understood to be words that every

<sup>57</sup> See Gijsbert J. Siertsema, "'A Great Pasport of Poetrie': Sixteenth-Century European Psalm Translations and the Emergence of Devotional Poetry in England' (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 1991), for a study of the influence of European psalm translation on English devotional poetry.

<sup>58</sup> Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>59</sup> Hallett Smith, 'English Metrical Psalms in the Sixteenth Century and Their Literary Significance', *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 9, no.3 (1946), 270, for example, praises Sidney's Psalms for their 'marvelous variety and ingenuity'. See also Philip and Mary Sidney, *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke*, ed. J. C. A. Rathmell (New York: New York University Press, 1963), xiii-xiv.

<sup>60</sup> See Mary Sidney, *The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*, vol. 2, eds. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon and Michael G. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 337-57, for textual history.

<sup>61</sup> Helen Wilcox, "'Whom the Lord with Love Affecteth': Gender and the Religious Poet, 1590-1633", in eds. Clarke and Clarke, *'This Double Voice': Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, 204.

believer could speak when he or she wanted to converse with God. When Mary Sidney translated the Psalms, did she speak in a specifically feminine voice, and did the Song of Songs enable her to do so? I think an answer to these questions may be found in Psalm 63. This is a Psalm that uses language close to the Song at many points, and I give the Geneva version of the first 8 verses at Fig. 2, with quotations from the Song of Songs beside it.

Fig. 2	
<i>Psalm 63</i>	<i>Song of Songs</i>
O God, thou art my God, early wil I seke thee:	In my bed by night I soght him that my soul loued. (3.1)
my soule thirsteth for thee: my flesh longeth greatly after thee in a baren and drye land without water.	Let him kisse me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy loue is better then wine. (1.1)
Thus I beholde thee as in the Sanctuarie,	Come forthe, ye daughters of Zion, & beholde the King Salomon with the crowne,
when I beholde thy power & thy glorie.	wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his mariage, and in the day of the gladnes of his heart. (3.11)
For thy louing kindnesse <i>is</i> better then life:	For thy loue is better then wine. (1.1)
<i>therefore</i> my lippes shal praise thee.	therefore the virgines loue thee. (1.2)
Thus wil I magnifie thee <i>all</i> my life,	
<i>and</i> lift vp mine hands in thy Name.	
My soule shal be satisfied, as with marow and fatnes,	Vnder his shadowe had I delite, & sate downe: and is frute was swete vnto my mouth. (2.3)
and my mouth shal praise <i>thee</i> with ioyful lippes,	
When I remember thee on my bed,	In my bed by night I soght him that my soul loueth. (3.1)
& <i>when</i> I thinke vpon thee in the <i>night</i> watches.	
Because thou hast bene mine helper,	
therefore vnder the shadow of thy wings wil I reioyce.	
My soule cleaueth vnto thee:	I am my welbeloueds, and his desire is toward me. (7.10)
<i>for</i> thy right hand vpholdeth me.	His left hand <i>is</i> vnder mine head, & his right hand doeth imbrace me. (2.6)

The correspondences to the Song of Songs are significant, and I have noted some of them to the right of the Psalm. The speaker uses sensual language to describe a lover-like longing. The idea of the speaker being in bed and thinking of the beloved is prominent in both, as is the notion of the lover supporting the beloved with hands. The phrasing of Verse 3 resembles closely the opening of the Song of Songs. In the Song, the lover's love is *better than* wine, while in the Psalm, God's loving kindness is *better than* life, and each text gives a reason for admiration: in the Psalm, 'therefore my lippes shall prayse thee;' in the Song, 'therefore the virgines loue thee.' The Psalm gives a more theological gloss to its words, as is evident in the first two verses. Both texts begin with expressions of longing, but where the Song opens, 'let him kisse me with the kisses of his mouth,' verse 2 of the Psalm has: 'thus I beholde thee as in the Sanctuarie, when I beholde thy power and thy glorie.' Christian tradition often understands the Song's kiss of the mouth to be the most intimate communion with God, which is precisely what the Psalm describes, but in terms of religious worship. It is as if the Psalm explains the figurative language of the Song in religious terms; that is certainly how it has often been read.<sup>62</sup>

Mary Sidney's translation of this Psalm is telling. She begins:

O god, the god where all my forces ly,  
how doe I hunt for thee with erly haste!  
how is for thee my spirit thirsty dry!  
how gaspes my flesh for thy refreshing taste! (1-4)

At first, it can be difficult to understand how the Countess has derived a hunting metaphor from these lines. I think it is from an intertextual connection with another Psalm that uses the lyric language of love: Psalm 42, which begins: 'As the harte

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 1, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 16: 'today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from his heart: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Those to whom it is given to utter these words sincerely are comparatively few, but any one who has received this mystical kiss from the mouth of Christ at least once, seeks again that intimate experience, and eagerly looks for its frequent renewal.' The idea that the Song as a whole is a key to the most intimate access to God, analogous to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple, has been present throughout the history of its interpretation, feeding various strands of mysticism. The earliest expression of this seems to be Rabbi Aqiba's comment that: 'all Scripture is holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies' (Mishnah Yadaim 3.5). By the time Aqiba spoke, of course, the Jerusalem temple was no more, and only the spiritual meaning of his phrase was available; but to link this idea of intimate access to God to texts like Psalm 63, which treats both the spiritual and the physical Sanctuaries, is an obvious intertextual and hermeneutical move.



braieth for the riuers of water, so panteth my soule after thee, o God.<sup>63</sup> This verse expresses a similar longing in similar terms; the deer is dry and wants water. A deer may be part of a pastoral landscape, as in both of these Psalms, but it also has its place in the more masculine field of the hunt; though, of course, in this context, the deer is the hunted, whereas the Countess's speaker in her translation of Psalm 63 is the hunter. This is not to say that women never hunted; but hunting is culturally a masculine pursuit (as well as an elite one), and the female figures who practise it, like Diana and the Amazons, are presented as exceptional. It is, of course, also strongly linked to courtly love, which is likened to the chase in poems like Wyatt's 'Whoso list to hunt', a version of Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* 190. Nonetheless, I think Sidney's use here of the hunting allusion, and her transformation of the deer from feminine hunted to masculine hunter, downplays the specifically feminine potential of the speaker's voice, particularly as in the Petrarchan tradition, the role of the hunter adopted by the speaker of this Psalm is traditionally the masculine one. If the Countess had used the word 'panteth' instead of 'hunteth,' as her brother did in Psalm 42, she would have had both a closer translation and a more feminine text. It may be going too far to suggest that the Countess has deliberately made her voice masculine here; but we can say that she is not exploiting an opportunity to speak in an explicitly feminine voice; and I think Mary Sidney's voice is generally ungendered in her Psalm translations.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4.4 John Donne

If Mary Sidney's voice in her Psalm translations is not specifically gendered, John Donne's poetic voice often is. In his profane poetry, his speakers are often clearly delineated personae, and, like Southwell, Donne uses his culture's representations of gender in his characterizations. His use of cultural commonplaces, however, need not signify unqualified acceptance of them, especially when, as Southwell did in the poems treated above, he speaks explicitly in the voice of a character. Donne makes interesting use of the Song of Songs in his profane and his sacred poetry, and, as with Shakespeare, we find an intriguing hint of the feminine voice of the Song of Songs in a

<sup>63</sup> It is generally agreed that Sir Philip Sidney translated the first 43 Psalms in the Sidney/Pembroke Psalter (see p. 62, n.59). His translation of Psalm 42 begins: 'As the chafed hart which brayeth/ Seeking some refreshing brook,/ So my soul in panting playeth, /Thirsting on my God to look.' Philip Sidney, *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 334.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Sidney, *The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*, vol. 1, eds. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon and Michael G. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). In her introduction, Margaret Hannay comments on the seriousness of Pembroke's literary endeavour, on her careful negotiation of gender norms to authorize her writing, and on her apparent confidence in her own right to write. For example, Hannay writes 'she never apologizes for her role as a woman writer and rarely comments on it', (25).

profane poem, 'Sappho to Philaenis.' In this poem, the great poetess Sappho agonizes about the absence of her female lover, which has caused Sappho to lose her poetic inspiration. The poem uses a variety of standard love themes, including water and fire, and the comparison of the lover's body to a divine body.

Like Venus, Sappho also uses the trope of the female body as a paradisal garden; but unlike Venus, Sappho describes her lover's body, not her own, in these terms:

Thy body is a naturall *Paradise*,  
In whose selfe, unmanur'd, all pleasure lies,  
Nor needs *perfection*; why shouldst thou than  
Admit the tillage of a harsh rough man?  
Men leave behinde them that which their sin showes,  
And are, as theeves trac'd, which rob when it snows.  
But of our dallyance no more signes there are,  
Then *fishes* leave in streames, or *Birds* in aire. (35-42, p.191)

In the Song of Songs, the male lover describes his female beloved as a paradise, and they both share and enjoy this vision. Shakespeare's Venus presents herself as a paradise and cannot get her lover to join in her vision. Donne's Sappho, like the male lover in the Song, finds her lover's body a paradise, but she presents men as a threat to that paradise; they will plough a furrow, something that never happened in paradise. Only the gentleness of a female lover will preserve paradise and offer perfect pleasure.<sup>65</sup> The lovers in the Song of Songs do come together, Venus and Adonis do not, and in 'Sappho to Philaenis' the reader is left not knowing whether Philaenis will return. Whether Donne's vision of lesbian mutuality is sustainable, we do not know; but his presentation of it in terms of paradise is suggestive that the gardens of Eden and Song of Songs offered him the trope of a garden as an imagined place of unspoiled sexual delight, and it is significant that when Donne envisages a sexual body as a paradisal garden, his primary concern is mutuality.<sup>66</sup>

However, it is mainly in Donne's sacred poetry that the feminine voice of the Song of Songs comes to the fore. Donne's *Holy Sonnets* do not explicitly identify their speaker or give any background information about him, and it is tempting for the reader to assume that the speaker and the poet are one. It is certainly true that the poems concern inner religious experience, and belong in the meditative tradition that has been

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<sup>65</sup> Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 81-94, makes interesting points about the gendered difference between (masculine) erotic imagery of ploughing and sowing, and (feminine) erotic imagery of fruits.

<sup>66</sup> I shall return to this question in Chapter 5.

studied extensively.<sup>67</sup> Louis L. Martz, in particular, has connected this poetry with the tradition of meditation that stemmed from Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, and that was popular in this period (see p. 47).<sup>68</sup> The situation for the reader of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* is similar to that for the reader of the Psalms. We read words that speak directly to God about the personal relationship between the speaker and God, and we read the words as potentially applicable to ourselves, as individual representatives of humankind. But, just as early modern readers of the Psalms knew that David wrote them, readers of the *Holy Sonnets* know that they were written by John Donne, so the role of 'everyman' is understood to be at once universal and gendered masculine.

This makes the voice of 'Holy Sonnet 14' especially interesting, for the speaker appears to be gendered feminine:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you  
 As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;  
 That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend  
 Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.  
 I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,  
 Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,  
 Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,  
 But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue,  
 Yet dearly I love you, 'and would be lov'd faine,  
 But am betroth'd unto your enemy,  
 Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,  
 Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
 Except you'enthral mee, never shall be free,  
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

(p.443)

Here, as with Southwell's Mary Magdalene, the speaker resembles in many ways the adulterous wife Israel of the Old Testament, helplessly entangled with a lover, but filled with a repentant desire to return to God, her true love. The trope of the bride of Christ is crucial here, and it is linked to the practice in the meditative tradition of gendering the soul feminine, so that it may contemplate entering a spiritual marriage with Christ, even though the person possessing the soul may be male. In this poem, however, the soul is betrothed not to Christ, but to Christ's enemy, the devil. The poem makes use of the *Christus Victor* model of salvation history, which understands that, because of original sin, humanity rightfully belongs to the Devil, and can only be won

<sup>67</sup> See especially, Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1962); Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), esp. 147-78.

<sup>68</sup> Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*.

back for God in violent combat, by Christ.<sup>69</sup> Donne's speaker uses imagery of a besieged town to express this, and the metaphor linking a lover to a town recalls the Song of Songs 4.4: 'thy necke is as the towre of Dauid buylt for defense: a thousand shieldes hang therein, *and* all the targates of the strong men,' 7.4: 'thy necke *is* like a towre of yuorie: thine eyes *are like* the fishpooles in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim: thy nose *is* as the towre of Lebanon, that loketh toward Damascus,' and 8.8-10: 'We haue a litle sister, and she hath no breastes: what shal we do for our sister when she shalbe spoken for? If she be a walle, we will buylde vpon her a siluer palace: and if she be a dore, we wil kepe her in with bordes of cedre. I am a walle, & my breastes *are* as towres: then was I in his eyes as one that findeth peace.'

The *Holy Sonnets* as a whole struggle with the speaker's difficulty in gaining what he most desires (I shall come to the use of the masculine pronoun in a moment), even the paradoxical difficulty he has in desiring it strongly enough, or at least his inability to desire it effectively enough. In *Holy Sonnet* 14, the speaker feels so powerless that rape is the only solution. As John Carey has pointed out, this is on one level an expression of the Calvinist understanding of grace, and of the believer's utter incapacity to do anything good using his own resources. Carey's reading of the *Holy Sonnets* brings out the tensions both in the theology and in the simultaneously impotent and yet too manly state of the speaker (whom he reads as Donne):

the unfitness of what he can find to say to God repeatedly afflicts Donne in the "Holy Sonnets." ... Nor is it just that he feels unworthy – that would be quite proper. What worries him is that he can't feel unworthy enough ... He implores God to smash or melt him ... but the desperation of the "Holy Sonnets" depends on that prayer not being answered. If it were, he would be able to feel the saving pangs of pain. As it is, the pain which tears the sonnets is the pain of painlessness, of spiritual paralysis, which signals God's desertion.<sup>70</sup>

On this understanding, for the speaker to assume the feminine position, as many readers think Donne's speaker does here, is an obvious tactic.<sup>71</sup> The standard patriarchal hierarchy places men beneath God and women beneath men. Thus, when the relationship between a human person and God is modelled as a marriage, God or Christ will be the groom and the human person the bride. Assuming the feminine position in such a relationship therefore affords an opportunity to practise humility,

<sup>69</sup> Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1931).

<sup>70</sup> John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 34.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Rambuss cites several commentators in his critique of this position, including William Kerrigan, Wilbur Sanders, Debora Shuger, Ann Baynes Coiro and Achsah Guibbory. Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 51-52.

something all Christians were called to do, as an essential prerequisite for repentance, without which salvation was impossible.<sup>72</sup>

If, then, readers know that this poem is authored by a man, we may take him to be assuming the feminine position in the poem. The poem is ambiguous, however, for though its speaker wants to 'admit' God, she or he begs to be raped in order 'that I may rise and stand' (3), a rather masculine position. Moreover, the groom in the poem is neither Israel's God nor Jesus, but the Trinity, confusing the position still further. Richard Rambuss has argued in detail that the speaker of this poem is masculine, because he wants to stress the homoerotic aspects of the desire it expresses.<sup>73</sup> I think he is right to stress the poem's transgressive nature, and to insist that we should recognize the ambiguity of the speaking voice, but wrong to deny that the poem's overall conceit concerns contractual marriage settlements, which were always heterosexual in this period. To the modern reader, there is some confusion in that the speaker is only 'betrothed' to the devil, yet requests 'divorce' by rape. The position is, indeed, confused; but betrothal could be a serious and legally binding state in this period.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the position of 'bride of Christ' has always been notionally a liminal one. Settled marriage to Christ can only come in the heavenly afterlife; for living humans, to be the bride of Christ involves fleeting experience of union with the beloved, and long stretches of absence, longing and frustration. Here, for example, is Bernard of Clairvaux:

For when after vigils and prayers and a great shower of tears he who was sought presents himself, suddenly he is gone again, just when we think we hold him fast.... And so, even in this body we can often enjoy the happiness of the bridegroom's presence, but it is a happiness that is never complete because the joy of the visit is followed by the pain at his departure. The beloved has no choice but to endure this state until the hour when she lays down the body's weary weight, and raised aloft on the wings of desire, freely traverses the meadows of contemplation, and in spirit follows the One she loves without restraint wherever he goes.<sup>75</sup>

There is a tension between masculine and feminine in this poem, most particularly in the sense that the subordinate feminine position requires rape, a violent

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<sup>72</sup> For an outline of Christian humility, see F. L. Cross, and E. A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1997), 804. For how this works in the standard Puritan spiritual readings of the Song of Songs, see Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18-30.

<sup>73</sup> Rambuss, *Closest Devotions*, 49-58.

<sup>74</sup> For some detail on the variety of formal and informal betrothal contracts at this period, see Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Penguin, 2007), 251-67.

<sup>75</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs 2*, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series 7 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 135.

and destructive attack upon the person. This understanding is in sharp contrast both to Donne's vision in 'Sapho to Philaenis', and to Lanyer's vision of spiritual marriage. If we understand the poet here to be a man assuming the feminine position, and if we link this to the humility required of the repentant Christian, the male speaker here is struggling to unman himself in order to repent. We can see this tension, though not expressed in gendered terms, in the title of Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises whereby to **conquer oneself**, and order one's life, without being influenced in one's decision by any inordinate affection,*' (My emphasis).<sup>76</sup> If Donne's speaker is a man, he is engaged here in an heroic battle to conquer himself by emptying himself of his masculinity.

To get a more complete comparison of Lanyer's and Donne's use of the bride of Christ *topos*, there are two other places in the poetry to look. Donne's *Holy Sonnet 5* does not play with gender in the same way as *Holy Sonnet 14*, but it does handle the struggle to achieve humility. It begins:

I am a little world made cunningly  
Of Elements, and an Angelicke spright,  
But black sinne hath betraid to endless night  
My worlds both parts, and (oh) both parts must die. (1-4, p.437)

There is no denying the strength of the sorrow for sin here, but it is predicated on the knowledge that the speaker is 'a little world made cunningly,' (1) and what threatens this rather magnificent concept of self is 'black sinne.' This could be construed as sins perpetrated by others, or as original sin, but in the *Holy Sonnets* in general, as in the meditative tradition as a whole, sin is seen mostly as personal, as perpetrated by others, or as original sin, but in the *Holy Sonnets* in general, as in the meditative tradition as a whole, sin is seen mostly as personal, as perpetrated by the individual and as harming that individual. On this understanding, the human speaker is acutely aware of his own frailty, but it resides, ironically, in his own power: he is a whole world, and to overcome himself requires an heroic effort. In *Holy Sonnet 4*, the first line addresses 'my black Soule', the counterpart to 'black sinne' in line three here. The soul is the primary locus of the sin, intense consciousness of which will lead to the humility that enables repentance; so the order of events in this spiritual process is that the

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<sup>76</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. W. H. Longridge (London: Robert Scott, 1919), 24. This title appears in the 'autograph' manuscript, written by a secretary but with corrections in Ignatius' hand, from which this translation was made. The title comes after the twenty 'annotations' which form an introduction for the reader, and at before the start of the first week of exercises.

person commits sin, and then is sorry for it, and this (if he can achieve it) leads him to the true humility that enables repentance and a return to relationship with God.

Lanyer's brides of Christ, however, have a different experience of sin. In the following passage, Lanyer describes the spiritual state of her model reader/bride, the Countess of Cumberland, as she falls in love with Christ:

[Christ's] all-reviving beautie, yeelds such joyes  
To thy sad Soule, plunged in waves of woe,  
That worldly pleasures seemes to thee as toyes,  
Onely thou seek'st Eternitie to know,  
Respecting not the infinite annoyas  
That Satan to thy well-staid mind can show;  
Ne can he quench in thee, the Spirit of Grace,  
Nor draw thee from beholding Heavens bright face. (SD 33-40)

Where Donne has a '*black Soule*', the Countess of Cumberland has a '*sad Soule*,' and this is because the 'waves of woe' in which she is plunged are not the result of a conscious process of inward soul-searching, revealing to her that her actions in the world have been sinful and damaging, rather, she is sad because external social pressures have oppressed her, and limited her ability to act in the world at all. She knows her defects because the world makes her suffer for them. The humble position of the feminine soul is an open, evident state, not something that requires an internal battle to achieve. Where Donne moves from being a 'little world' to intense inner consciousness of sinfulness in the quest for a relationship with Christ, Lanyer's reader/brides move from being belittled in the world to becoming empowered by the grace of their divine spouse to act gloriously in it. Lanyer's treatment, with its feminine point of view, both shifts the focus away from repentance and towards fulfilment, and also places an emphasis on external, social life in the world in addition to, and in relationship with, the wholly internal soul-searching of the medieval Canticles tradition within which Donne is working, at least in this respect.

The final Donne poem I want to look at here is *Holy Sonnet 11*, because it helps to show the crucial difference in imaginative meditation between identifying with Christ and identifying with his bride. We saw that heroic self-emptying was necessary for a masculine persona in search of a spiritual marriage with Christ. In that sense, the spiritual quest was for a kind of *imitatio Christi*, for the prime example of a person who emptied himself in humble obedience is Christ himself.<sup>77</sup> In *Holy Sonnet 11*, Donne imagines himself as one of the crowd watching Jesus' last journey towards Golgotha,

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<sup>77</sup> This idea is expressed, for example, in the 'hymn' of Phil. 2.6-11.

and attempts to identify both with and as Christ, so that his own suffering is occasioned not only by sympathy but also by a sense of unmanned powerlessness:

Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side,  
Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,  
For I have sinn'd, and sinn'd, and onely hee,  
Who could do no iniquitie, hath dyed:  
But by my death can not be satisfied  
My sinnes, which passe the Jewes impiety:  
They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I  
Crucifie him daily, being now glorified.'

(1-8, p.441)

Ironically, however, his powerlessness extends to being incapable of moving himself from the position of crucifier to that of crucified. He is unable to place himself in the most powerless position of all. When Lanyer describes the Jews taunting Christ as he walks to Golgotha, she and her readers are likewise observers at the scene:

And wilfull Jewes to exercise their lust,  
With whips and taunts against their Lord are bent;  
He basely used, blasphemed, scorn'd and curst,  
Our heavenly King to death for us they sent:  
Reproches, slanders, spittings in his face,  
Spight doing all her worst in his disgrace.

(SD 939-44)

Lanyer presents her readers with female observers to identify with, using, as we have seen, the daughters of Jerusalem from Luke 22. Lanyer offers her readers a third subject position at this scene: neither crucifier, nor crucified, but bride. Like Donne's persona, the women try to intercede on Christ's behalf when they witness what men are doing to him; but where Donne's persona begs for the abuse to be redirected towards himself, the women appeal to the better natures of the abusers:

... seeing how much they did transgresse,  
By teares, by sighes, by cries intreat, may prove,  
What may be done among the thickest presse,  
They labor still these tyrants hearts to move;  
In pitie and compassion to forbear  
Their whipping, spurning, tearing of his haire.

(SD 995-1000)

These women are moved directly by love for and loyalty to Christ, and, as we have seen, though they fail to save Christ, they gain his grace as a result of their actions. Donne's speaker, attempting to identify with Christ, finds the task impossible and himself powerless; Lanyer encourages her readers to identify with Christ's bride, so that they will be able to enter a relationship that involves suffering, but that offers the



promise of fulfilment, rather than a threat of annihilation; and it is her vision of the feminine voice of the bride of Christ that allows this possibility. In this way, Lanyer's use of the feminine voice of the Song of Songs is both more socially focused and outward looking, and much less centred on repentance, than the struggling masculine/feminine speaker of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*.

#### 4.5 Richard Crashaw

The poet who marks the *terminus ad quem* for this study, Richard Crashaw, combines an intense interest in the traditional gestures of repentance – weeping, sorrow and humility – and an interest in feminine qualities and perspectives; yet with a notable lack of focus on actual repentance itself. His poems celebrate the openness to Christ occasioned by the wound of love and exemplified by the vulnerability of women; but, this feminine openness and vulnerability is linked not to sin, or to repentance occasioned by awareness of sin; rather it is a demonstration of feminine virtue.

Crashaw's baroque style, which has characteristically been seen as more European than English, draws on the synthesis of religious devotional traditions and courtly love, Petrarchan and Neoplatonic tropes characteristic of most of the poets in this series, to produce poetry that has an unmistakably feminine character.<sup>78</sup> I want to consider here what kind of femininity this is and the role played in it by the Song of Songs.

First, Crashaw's interest in femininity is not only a question of style. He presents important female role models in his work, particularly Mary Magdalene, the Blessed Virgin and Teresa of Avila. I have already noted the strong cultural connections between the Maries and the Song of Songs. In the 'Hymn in the Assumption', Crashaw makes extensive use of the Song of Songs 2.10-12 to evoke the beauty and excitement of the event of Mary's Assumption:

Rise up, my fair, my spotlesse one!  
The winter's past, the rain is gone.  
The spring is come; the flowrs appear  
No sweets, but thou, are wanting here.  
Come away, my love!

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Crashaw, *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, ed. George Walton Williams (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970). The Introduction begins his introduction to his edition of Crashaw: 'Richard Crashaw may be considered the most un-English of all the English poets,' xiv. For a contrary view, see Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56, 97-103. For explorations of Crashaw and 'femininity', see Eugene P. Cunhar, 'Crashaw's "Sancta Maria Dolorum"', in ed. John R. Roberts, *New Perspectives on the Life and Art of Richard Crashaw* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990); Paul A. Parrish, "O Sweet Contest": Gender and Value in "The Weeper", in *ibid.*



Come away, my dove! cast off delay,  
The court of heav'n is come  
To wait upon thee home; Come come away!  
The flowrs appear.

(9-17 p.115)

Mary's Assumption is the moment when she becomes Christ's bride as Queen of Heaven, so the association of this moment with the man in the Song calling his beloved to 'come away' is a classic one.<sup>79</sup>

Crashaw follows the Southwellian tradition in writing tears-poetry about Mary Magdalene. His poem *The Weeper* takes such verse as far as it was to go in English, and many readers have responded negatively to what they consider to be its baroque excess.<sup>80</sup> I showed that Southwell's portrayal of Mary Magdalene moved from repentance to a simple loving focus on Christ. The tears of the Magdalene could be interpreted as tears of sorrow for her own sin or of love for Christ, or as a combination of the two. Crashaw's admiration for Mary's weeping is apparently boundless, and he shows her tears ascending to heaven:

Upwards thou dost weepe,  
Heavens bosom drinks the gentle streame.  
Where th'milky rivers meet,  
Thine Crawles above and is the Creame.  
Heaven, of such fair floods as this,  
Heaven the Christall Ocean is.

(19-24, p.125)

The image recalls the Song of Songs 5.12: 'his eyes *are* like dooues vpon the riuers of waters, which are washt with milke, & remaine by the ful vessels.' This comes from the section where the woman describes her lover, and this strengthens the suggestion that Mary's tears, when they reach heaven, adorn Christ there. For Crashaw, Mary's total devotion to Christ, signified by her tears, has enormous spiritual power.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582, canonized 1622) also had strong connections to the Song of Songs. Teresa introduced ascetic reforms in the Carmelite order of which she was a member. Her writings, which include pastoral and exegetical works as well as autobiography, focus strongly on the Song of Songs, which, as medieval monks and nuns before her had done, she read as a mystical text. These writings had begun to become available in England in the early seventeenth century, especially the *Life*, which was translated by the Jesuit William Malone in 1611, and by Sir Tobie Mathew,

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<sup>79</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Allen Lane, 2009). Rubin notes that the connection between these verses and the Assumption is made in the liturgical celebrations for the day at Cluny, c.1030, which includes the *Tota pulchra es*, whose words are those of Song of Songs 4.7, 11; 2.11-12 and 4.8; 139-40.

<sup>80</sup> Parrish, "O Sweet Contest", 129, n.6.

in a version titled *The Flaming Heart*, in 1623.<sup>81</sup> Femininity is a crucial aspect of Teresa's writing. In order to write at all, she needed the support of a male authority, and her writings combine humility and confidence in ways that exploit the traditional understanding that women, as lower and more 'natural' than men, may have a more direct access to certain forms of spirituality.<sup>82</sup> Teresa presented herself in her writing as a bride of Christ, and offered this subject position to her readers (she was writing for nuns in her charge). Crashaw, significantly, wrote in 'An Apologie for the Fore-Going Hymne' that from Teresa's writings: 'I learn't to know that love is eloquence' (8, p.59).<sup>83</sup>

Teresa's writings present themselves as highly personal, so that through them, her readers engage with her own life experience. Crashaw certainly reflects on her life in his poems about her. The most famous incident in her life, referred to in the title of Sir Tobie Mathew's translation of her *Life*, *The Flaming Heart*, was a vision she had in which she was stabbed in the side by a seraph, receiving thereby the divine wound of love. The classic scriptural text for this, of course, is Song of Songs 4.9: 'my sister, my spouse, thou hast wounded mine heart: thou hast wounded mine heart with one of thine eyes, & with a chaine of thy necke.' In this text, of course, it is the man who asserts that the woman has wounded him. Crashaw's poem *The Flaming Heart* handles this event, and in particular the artistic tradition that had grown around it. The standard artistic portrayal of Teresa receiving the wound of love shows her supine with the seraph standing over her. Crashaw takes issue with this, accusing the artist of misrepresenting Teresa:

One would suspect thou meant'st to paint  
Some weak, inferiour, woman saint. (25-26, p.63)

Crashaw writes that anyone looking at the picture should:

... transpose the picture quite,  
And spell it wrong to read it right;  
Read HIM for her, and her for him;  
And call the SAINT the SERAPHIM. (9-12)

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<sup>81</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Complete Works of St Teresa of Jesus*, trans. E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. 1978), xvi; Jane Stevenson, 'Female Authority and Authorization Strategies in Early Modern Europe', in eds. Clarke and Clarke, *This Double Voice: Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*.

<sup>82</sup> Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>83</sup> See Diana Trevino Benet, 'Crashaw, Teresa, and the Word,' in ed. Roberts, *New Perspectives on the Life and Art of Richard Crashaw*, for a detailed consideration of the connection between Teresa's writings and Crashaw's attitude to words.

The reason for this, as we have seen, Crashaw does not want Teresa to be seen in the inferior, feminine position, and this relates to the powerful lesson that she has taught him, that 'love is eloquence.' While the seraph may wound Teresa, what is important about her to those who encounter her in her writings is her power to inflict the salvific wound of love on them with her words. Yet, for all Crashaw's rejection of the idea of Teresa as feminine in a weak or inferior way, it is her feminine passivity, openness and vulnerability that have empowered her:

For in love's feild was never found  
A nobler weapon than a WOUND.  
Love's passives are his activ'st part.  
The wounded is the wounding heart.

(71-74)

Crashaw exploits the paradox that Christian love, the most powerful kind of love, is found when one is at one's most vulnerable, and he uses gendered understandings in his treatment. Femininity, for Crashaw, is at once weak and powerful, because feminine openness and passivity bring enable one to receive the wound of love, which enables closeness to Christ. As for Lanyer, for Crashaw, femininity is spiritually empowering; but in a rather different way. Lanyer's brides of Christ are empowered to act in the world in support of those who are suffering. Crashaw's Teresa demonstrates and explains to her readers how one may receive the wound of love for oneself; and, indeed, inflicts it with her own eloquence, which, according to Crashaw, is love itself.

Femininity is clearly vital for Crashaw, and he asserts that the feminine voice – in the form of Teresa's voice – is a powerful influence on him. Crashaw's work exploits gendered understandings of identity to present a very positive picture of the feminine. Moreover Crashaw uses the rich tradition of the Song of Songs in his verse in various ways. However, it is not a question for Crashaw of speaking in the voice of a woman. He speaks to and about the Maries and Teresa, not as them. The reason for this, as I shall argue over the course of the next two chapters, concerns the openness and vulnerability that Crashaw celebrates so thoroughly in his work, and that is linked to various tropes in the Song of Songs, as I have begun to show. For Crashaw, personal identity is not ultimately important, and therefore gender is more interesting to him as a resource than as an aspect of identity. Hence, he can deny that Teresa is a 'weak, inferiour, woman saint' while simultaneously placing her on love's battlefield as a warrior who wins by being passive and receiving a wound. The Song of Songs is vital to Crashaw as the pre-eminent scriptural text about the experience of love. Teresa of Avila, who expressed her intense spiritual experience of the wound of love in the terms of the Song of Songs, communicated that experience of love to Crashaw in her

writings, and, as I shall show, he aims to do the same for his own readers. Crashaw uses the language of the Song, and tropes of masculinity and femininity, in his poetry, and intermingles them, as we have already begun to see. Teresa is no 'weak, inferior woman,' yet the way she plays the man on the field of love is feminine.

## **5      *Conclusions.***

The first thing to conclude here is that there is no universally agreed position about the feminine voice and the Song of Songs. There are occasions when the femininity of the speaker appears to be irrelevant, as when poets put the words of one of the lovers of the Song in the mouth of a speaker of the 'wrong' gender. Both Lanyer and Southwell, for example, when describing Christ, use language taken from both of the Song's protagonists, and this seems not to matter. What counts is that the supreme language of beauty is applied to Christ. There is more to say on this in the next chapters. However, often, the feminine voice does matter, and it matters in a variety of ways.

For Shakespeare, Venus' use of the man's words signifies that something is wrong in the relationship he is describing. It seems that Shakespeare is using the Song here as a literary text only, playing with it and re-reading it to promote his own scheme in his own poem. The extent to which he may be making a point about appropriate gendered behaviour is open to question, and it is interesting that his early readers did not appear to notice either the reference to the Song or Shakespeare's manipulation of its gendered voices.

Southwell, too, has an ambiguous approach to gendered voices. Like Shakespeare, Southwell feels free to exploit and play with notions of gender in service of his wider aims. He also finds the feminine voice particularly useful for expressing love, and therefore feels quite free to have his Peter use the Petrarchan language of love, linked to the Song of Songs, when he speaks of his love for Christ. This is a confused position, for, as lover of Christ, Peter ought to be in the feminine position, but Petrarchan speakers are more usually masculine, and this confusion is reflected in Peter's free use of the language of both the Song's male and female speakers.

The connection between femininity and love is raised in a wide variety of ways by these poets. Crashaw's feminine voice seems to stem from the centrality of love in his scheme. On the one hand, this means that he becomes a champion of women and of femininity. On the other, it is precisely the indeterminacy of feminine identity, its passivity and openness, that makes it especially capable of love; and this makes Crashaw, in some respects, a champion of the non-identity of the feminine. The constructedness of gender is, in this way, particularly evident in Crashaw. The feminine

voice of the Song of Songs is helpful to Crashaw not only in its tradition of interpretation, but also because it links love and the feminine so thoroughly. Both Crashaw's and Southwell's use of the feminine voice raises the question of the relationship between femininity and love (and masculinity and love) which has always been, and remains, fraught and complex.

For Donne, the question of appropriate gender roles is much more urgent. In *Holy Sonnet 14*, Donne plays with gender in a similar way to Shakespeare and Southwell, but his gender play is at the heart of his religious purpose. He takes the idea that, in the spiritual marriage, the human person performs the role of the bride, and explores the problems created by the position of extreme abjection that this requires. In that way, even though his poem may be read entirely analogically, it nevertheless raises the question of appropriate human gender relations that are at the same time religious questions. The problems that the poem explores resonate with each other in many directions.

Lanyer's feminine voice, too, is constructed and performed. Like all the poets discussed here, she makes extensive use of the received tradition. She bases her scheme on the idea of bridehood, but whereas Donne explores the problems of this *topos* by taking its traditional hierarchical gender structure to the extreme, Lanyer aims to rewrite bridehood with a focus on empowerment rather than hierarchy. For this reason, even though Lanyer's notion of spiritual marriage is thoroughly spiritual and does not relate directly to human marriage relations, it does have profound social implications, many of which relate to gender.

The feminine voice of the Song of Songs, along with her tradition of interpretation, offers a wide range of opportunities to poets in this period. She appears both in religious and in profane poetry. She offers the opportunity to become open and vulnerable, to accept (or try to accept) a position of radical inferiority. She also offers the chance to challenge the traditional inferiority of the feminine position. Poets use her voice to express love ardently and openly; and to look admiringly at the male body.

## CHAPTER 4: BEAUTY

### 1 *Introduction*

In Chapter 3, I considered the significance of the feminine speaking voice of the Song of Songs. I want now to move on to explore something of what she speaks about. I noted that one of the most prominent things both lovers do is to describe each other. They do this because they are in love, and describing each other's beauty is a way of expressing their love and admiration. Each lover considers the other to be very beautiful, and this beauty is clearly important to them. The focus on beauty, and the conviction that the beauty of the beloved is important and praiseworthy, are two of the key conventions of love poetry. However, it is no simple matter to discern exactly why the beauty of the beloved is so important, or exactly what it consists in, for the language used to describe the beloved is often figurative, so that the poetry both bolsters convention and opens it up to multiple interpretation. This chapter begins with a brief outline of the place of beauty in the Bible and in the Song of Songs. It moves on to look at Aemilia Lanyer's vision of beauty, and the role the Song of Songs plays in her exposition of beauty. Finally, it looks at other poets of the early modern period who interact with the Song of Songs when they use the language of beauty.

### 2 *The Bible*

#### 2.1 *The Bible*

It is surprisingly tricky to research biblical aesthetics. In biblical and theological dictionaries, there is rarely an entry under 'beauty' or 'aesthetics', and where there is, one tends to be directed to an entry such as 'art', where there will be a consideration of treatments of the Bible in art, rather than of the Bible's own aesthetics or attitudes to beauty. There are studies of aesthetics and religion, but these tend to be systematic and philosophical rather than biblical.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, the significance of the Bible as literature has risen to prominence, and scholars have explored both the enormous literary influence that the Bible has had on creative writers, and the literary character of the Bible itself.<sup>2</sup> Such scholarship is important to this study, of course, but it, too, has little directly to say about the Bible's attitude(s) to beauty, other than to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1990); Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); James Alfred Martin, Jr., *Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue between Aesthetics and Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). See also David Jasper's historical survey in Andrew Hass, David Jasper and Elisabeth Jay (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15-34.

suggest, either directly or by implication, that the Bible, as great literature, privileges the verbal over the visual. Such an impression is confirmed by the Bible's insistence on the impossibility of seeing God, coupled with the Hebrew God's utter rejection of any images of himself. Yet this is complicated, both by Gen. 1.27, which states clearly that God created an image of himself in humankind, implying that something related to perfection may be seen in human beings, and by the great importance given both to seeing and hearing in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> I aim in what follows to give a bare outline of the Bible's own attitude to beauty.

The Bible is enigmatic when it comes to beauty, as is evident in the creation narrative of Gen. 1-3. God creates the world and everything in it, and repeatedly, and without qualification, describes it as 'good.' We might assume that this goodness includes beauty. However, the first three chapters of Genesis contain words meaning 'good' and 'delightful' or 'desirable,' but no Hebrew words for 'beautiful' or 'fair.' Beauty is certainly suggested. In Gen. 2.9, the garden of Eden is said to contain every tree that is 'pleasant to the sight and good for meat,' linking a word for 'desirable' (here translated 'pleasant') with sight; and when Eve looks around the garden in Gen. 3.6, she also finds that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil 'was good for meat, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, & a tree to be desired to get knowledge.' The word here translated 'pleasant' relates primarily to physical appetite, longing for fine food, and it can have both good and bad senses in the Bible. Eve's perception links the physical pleasure of eating with the visual pleasure of looking upon a tree, and with desire for wisdom, so that we get a strong suggestion that the tree is attractive, but there is no physical description, for example of its colour or foliage, or of the kinds of fruit that hang from it. Goodness and beauty are linked here, and linked with desirability; but though beauty clearly has a visual component – the tree is pleasant to the eyes – the physical constituents of this beauty remain unspecified.

The greatest concentration of descriptions of beauty is to be found in the poetic passages of the Prophets and the Psalms, where descriptions of beauty are placed in the context of God. Creation is beautiful because of the greatness of its creator, or it becomes beautiful when it orients itself towards God in praise: 'the heauens declare the glorie of God, and the firmament sheweth the worke of his hands' (Ps. 19.1). Such writings often combine the use of highly conventional language with imagery that overturns expectations: 'the mountaines leaped like rams, & the hilles as lambs' (Ps. 114.4). The New Testament in general pays little attention to beauty, except in the

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<sup>3</sup>David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 18-24. Carr argues in detail that the words 'image' and 'likeness' that occur in this verse refer explicitly to visual bodily similarity.



book of Revelation, which takes up the poetic language of the Psalms and Prophets, with its unusual and striking imagery. There is also one moment when Jesus makes a point about beauty, as he advises his disciples not to worry about their future physical needs: 'consider the lilies how they grow: they labour not, nether spin they: yet I say vnto you, that Solomon him self in all his royaltie was not clothed like one of these. If then God so clothe the grasse which is to day in the field, & to morow is cast into the ouen, how much more *will he clothe* you, o ye of litle faith?' (Luke 12.27-8).

Significantly, for this study, this saying concerns Solomon.

When it comes to the beauty of the human body, the Bible's treatment is once again enigmatic. Many biblical women are explicitly described as beautiful,<sup>4</sup> and in these cases, their beauty usually drives the narratives in which they are involved. The beauty of Sarah causes Abraham to tell her to lie to Pharaoh about her marital status, which gets them into a difficult situation and in trouble with God (Gen. 12.10-20). Bathsheba's beauty causes David to sin (2 Sam. 11-12), and she herself goes on not only to become queen, but also queen mother to the king of Israel's period of great peace and prosperity. Esther's beauty brings her to the attention of another king and allows her to save her people. In all of these stories, female beauty has a power in the patriarchal world that can be harnessed, and that also threatens to upset the world order. Whether the beauty itself is good is ambiguous, for it is possessed and used by good and bad women, and by women who are a mixture of both.

The book of Proverbs contains one of the Bible's few pronouncements on female bodily beauty, in the advice that King Lemuel's mother gives him in Chapter 31. The last section of her advice concerns that rare thing, a capable wife, whose character and actions Lemuel's mother describes to him in detail. She does not mention the wife's looks at all, but at the end of her description, she warns: '*fauour is deceitful, and beautie is vanitie: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shal be praised*' (31.30). The first part of her advice concerns just and equitable rule, and at the start of this section, Lemuel's mother links women with strong drink: '*giue not thy strength vnto women, nor thy waies, which is to destroy Kings. It is not for Kings, o Lemuel, it is not for Kings to drinke wine nor for princes strong drinke, Lest he drinke, and forget the decree, and change the iudgement of all the children of affliction*' (31.3-5). This is a traditional patriarchal attitude of suspicion of beauty as a snare. Some of the Bible's narratives go along with this judgment, while others challenge it. The book of Esther, in which Esther's beauty unmans King Ahasuerus in just the way that Lemuel's mother warns about, has it both ways, for Esther is the heroine, using her beauty for good.

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that, although there is a strong tradition that Eve, the first created woman, was supremely beautiful, the Bible does not describe her as beautiful.

Bodily beauty in the Bible also concerns men, on occasion. It can be a blind spot in Western culture to imagine that beauty is a female preserve. Though Helen's beauty is generally understood to be the catalyst the story of Troy, it was Paris's good looks that attracted the goddesses and set in motion the cycle of events. Sometimes, the Bible presents beautiful men. It is Joseph's looks that land him in prison, from where he begins his ascent to power (Gen. 39). Beauty is also at issue when we meet David. Samuel is sent by God to Jesse, to anoint one of his sons as King. When Jesse's first son, Eliab, is presented to him, Samuel thinks:

Surely the Lords Anointed is before him. But the Lord said vnto Samuel, Loke not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature, because I haue refused him: for *God seeth* not as man seeth: for man loketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord beholdeth the heart. (1 Sam. 16.6-7)

We infer from this that Eliab is a good-looking young man. Yet, when all the sons have passed before Samuel and God has not chosen any, and David is sent for, the first thing the narrator tells us is that he is beautiful:

And he sent, and broght him in: and he was ruddie, and of a good countenance, and comelie visage. And the Lord said, Arise, & anoint him: for this is he. (1 Sam. 16.12)

Often, God demonstrates that he 'does not see as mortals see' by choosing outwardly unattractive people as his instruments. When Moses tries to reject God's call to lead and save his people, one of the main planks in his argument is that he is 'slow of speech,' (Exod. 4.10) which tradition has often understood to mean he has a stammer; he is hardly good material for a charismatic leader. In the David story, God has reminded Samuel of his idiosyncratic vision, yet goes on to choose a beautiful and extremely charismatic figure as Israel's King; moreover, some of the problems David faces in his career, and some of the bad decisions he makes and sins he commits, are related to his attractiveness and charisma. As a key factor in personality or in catalysing a story, beauty is more often seen in the Bible in women than men; but beauty can be important in men, too.

## **2.2    *The Song of Songs***

The Song of Songs is acutely interested in beauty, and the Song's use of figurative language draws on the beauty of the natural world, of artefacts and of bodies. The 'literal' reading of the text (if such can, in the end, be uncovered) would understand most, or even all, of the talk about beauty as primarily about the lovers themselves.

Hence, when she 'is' a garden, he is talking about her in terms of a garden, not about a garden in terms of her. This is analogous to the rest of biblical poetry, whose primary focus, whatever language is being used, is God; in the Song of Songs, the primary focus is the lovers. Almost all biblical poetry makes explicit at some point that its primary meaning and significance concern God; the Song of Songs does not (though, of course, most of its readers down the centuries have understood its primary meaning and significance as to do with God.)

The poetic language of beauty is, as I have said, both highly conventional and highly inventive. This may be seen in the classic description of a beautiful person as 'fair.' In many languages, including Hebrew and English, 'fair' means both 'pale' and 'beautiful,' and in Western cultures, the classically beautiful person has fair skin and golden hair. Alongside this classic convention sits the idea of the idiosyncratically dark beauty. I shall describe the classic convention as an aesthetic of order, and the subversion of the convention I shall call an aesthetic of paradox. The lovers in the Song of Songs describe each other as beautiful, repeatedly using the adjective 'fair.' The man is emphatic in his description of the woman:

Thou art all faire, my loue, and there is no spot in thee. (4.7)

Not the slightest fault can be found in the woman. Beauty is perfection. When she describes herself, however, she sees things differently:

I am blacke, o daughters of Ierusalem, but comelie, as the frutes of Kedar, & as the curtines of Salomon. Regarde ye me not because I am blacke: for the sunne hath looked vpon me. The sonnes of my mother were angrie against mee: thei made me the keper of the vines: but I kept not mine owne vine. (1.3-4)

There is a translation problem with this verse. When she says 'I am blacke ... but comelie', the word translated here 'but' is the particle *waw*, which can mean either 'but' or 'and.' The translator has only context for guide, and translators have been virtually unanimous in choosing 'but' here until the twentieth century, when the possibility of 'and' has been opened up. There would seem to be two main justifications for choosing 'but.' First, of course, the aesthetic of order dictates that blackness and beauty do not go together, so we would expect the speaker to be aware that her black beauty requires some explanation. Second, she provides just such an explanation. The woman goes on to say that she has become sunburnt as a consequence of being punished by her brothers, who were angry with her. In this verse, she asks her interlocutor not to look at her, on account of her blackness, a self-consciousness that

seems to run against her earlier claim that she is beautiful even though black. Whether the woman remains confident in her own beauty as it stands, or regrets the loss of her fair skin, is hard to assess.

It is worth noting that the question of 'black beauty' was a hot one in the age of Donne. Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) pondered the apparent incongruity that Stella's eyes were dark, yet beautiful: 'when nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes, / In colour black why wrapped she beams so bright?' (7, 1-2).<sup>5</sup> Beauty began to become a question, not only of the extent to which a person matched up to an ideal standard, but also of the idiosyncrasies and even blemishes of the person, and the compelling effect these could produce upon a particular beholder. The confusion and moral ambiguity that results when standards shift, and when particular perspectives are privileged over generally agreed norms, was explored in some detail by poets at the turn of the century, with Shakespeare's famous *Sonnet* 130 perhaps taking the discussion as far as it could go. The sonnet is so ambiguous that the reader cannot tell whether the speaker finds his lover attractive despite her physical imperfections, or whether he holds her, or their relationship, or love itself, in high regard at all.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head...

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

(1-4; 13-14)<sup>6</sup>

The Song of Songs also exploits, and complicates, the aesthetic of order. For example, his assertion that there is no spot in his lover comes at the end of one of the passages where he praises her beauty with a sustained 'description' of her:

Beholde, thou art faire, my loue: beholde, thou art faire: thine eies *are like* the dooues: among thy lockes thine heere is like the flocke of goates, which loke downe from the mountaine of Gilead. Thy tethe *are like* a flocke of *shepe* in good ordre, which go vp from the washing: which euerie one bring out twinnes, and none is baren among them. Thy lippes are like a threde of skarlet, & thy talke is comelie: thy temples *are within* thy lockes as a piece of a pomegranate. Thy necke is as the towre of Dauid buylte for defense: a thousand shields hang

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<sup>5</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 1997), 375.

therein. and all the targates of the strong men. Thy two breastes are as two  
yong roes that are twinnes, feding among the lilies. Vntil the day breake, and  
the shadows flee away, I wil go into the mountaine of myrrhe, and to the  
mountaine of incense. Thou art all faire, my loue, and there is no spot in thee.  
(4.1-7)

The passage begins and ends with emphatic assertions of the woman's beauty, so the reader is expecting to read a description of classic, ordered beauty. Many readers are able to find such a description in this passage, but they often have to work hard to do so. Marcia Falk, for example, argues that although precise visual images are difficult to obtain from passages like these, it is possible, even at this temporal and cultural distance from the author: 'in fact, the metaphors in the Song express a sophisticated poetic sensibility which, although foreign to us today, can be made accessible through critical analysis. The process is simply one of proper visualization.' She goes on to apply this method to the simile of the goats and hair, saying that if one imagines the scene at a distance, the visual correlation between goats and hair is strong. It is of course highly possible that at least some of these descriptions are standard ones from within a tradition of Hebrew love poetry of which the Song of Songs is the only surviving example. If so, the likening of teeth to sheep might be, to the original intended readers, no more odd than if we were to hear teeth described as pearls: an analogy that is decidedly odd when we think about it, but we don't tend to think about it because it is a commonplace in our literary culture.<sup>7</sup> However, for all that, the 'description' we are given is not as smooth as its framing assertions imply. First of all, it is important to note that the passage gives us no details about the actual physical appearance of the woman, except that she probably has good, clean, even teeth. Can it truly be called a 'description' at all?<sup>8</sup> Attempts at a mental visualization of the woman on the basis of this passage lead to an image far from any standard ideal of beauty.<sup>9</sup>

Second, even conceding the possibility that the language of the passage is all conventional, but using conventions now lost to us, it is still a challenge to read it smoothly. The imagery that predominates is of animals, both wild and domestic, but this is not consistent. The lips are a thread of scarlet, while the neck is a tower; both human artifacts (the second explicitly connected with military function), and the cheeks are pomegranate, but pomegranate sliced open, presumably with a knife. Moreover,

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<sup>7</sup> Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982), 83-84.

<sup>8</sup> Athalya Brenner, 'Gazing Back at the Shulammitte, yet Again', *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no.3/4 (2003).

<sup>9</sup> See Fiona C. Black, 'Beauty or the Beast? The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs', *Biblical Interpretation* 8, no. 3 (2000). Falk's argument about 'proper visualization' takes issue with previous interpreters (Waterman, Segal and Soulen) who had suggested the possibility of a grotesque reading. It is this grotesque reading that Black explores.

the penultimate verse describes not the woman but what the man intends to do. This is something he will have more to say about from 4.8 on, and it is as if this verse has intruded into the 'description' as a herald of what is to come.<sup>10</sup> The Song, then, is typical of biblical poetry in making use of both the aesthetics of order and of paradox, and in intermingling them in unsettling ways to challenge the reader, and the reader's understanding of what constitutes beauty.

In the man's description of the woman above, describing her as beautiful and praising her as worthy of love appear to go hand in hand. The assumption is either that beauty is in itself praiseworthy, or that it denotes or signifies virtue in some other form. This is even clearer in the passage in Chapter 5 when the woman describes the man:

My welbeloued is white and ruddy, the chiefest of ten thousand. His head *is* as fine golde, his lockes curled, & blacke as a rauē. His eyes *are* like dooues vpon the riuers of waters, which are washt with milke, & remaine by the ful vessels. His chekes *are* as a bed of spices, *and as* swete flowres, & his lippes *like* lilies dropping downe pure myrrhe. His hands as rings of gold set with the chrysolite his bellie like white yuorie couered with saphirs. His leggs *are* as pillars of marble, set vpon sockets of fine golde: his countenance as Lebanon, excellent as the cedres. His mouth *is* as swete things, and he is wholly delectable: this is my welbeloued, & this is my louer, o daughters of Ierusalem.  
(5.10-16)

Her description is a little more like a description than his: we learn that he has black, curly hair, for example. Occasionally, she repeats phrases he uses for her, and, like him, she has dominant types of imagery – first nature, then stone – that are intermixed with images from different realms. Again, the image we get if we construct this description literally is bizarre, perhaps starting to resemble a statue rather than a living being.

It is worth considering the contexts of these descriptions. While he speaks to her, praising her as an expression of his love and admiration, she is speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem, because they have asked her what is so special about her lover. This is her answer. She says he is beautiful and describes his beauty to them. Her answer is so convincing that they decide they want to go out and seek him with

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 62-67; Marvin H. Pope, *The Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 40-54, for outlines of the wide variety of proposals as to the Song's structure and unity. Alter (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*), 185-203, has analysis of the workings of repetition and overlapping in the Song. See also J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 11-13. Exum argues that the intertwining character of the text is a strategy evoking sexual desire. The suggestive, yet enigmatic, way that the speaker's locutions wind round each other in passages like these is, I would argue, a key aspect of the work's 'radical lack of narrative'.

her. Beauty, then, is a motivator and reason for love and admiration. Does this mean that anything that motivates love can be considered beautiful? The Song of Songs raises this possibility repeatedly. In these two passages, both lovers refer to each others' mouths, using Hebrew terms that imply other senses, too. He says, 'Thy lippes are like a threde of skarlet, and thy talke is comelie,' using a Hebrew term for lips that is strongly linked to the mouth as organ of speech, and he makes this explicit by referring to her talk as 'comely,' a word meaning, in Hebrew as in English, 'beautiful' and also 'fitting.' Her beauty appears to reside in what she says as well as what she looks like. When she says, 'His mouth is as swete thinges, and he is wholly delectable,' she uses a Hebrew term linking the mouth to taste, and again makes this reference explicit in the second part of the sentence. For her, the taste of him is part of his beauty.

Elsewhere, the Song links sight and hearing:

My dooue, that art in the holes of the rocke, in the secret places of the staires,  
shewe me thy sight, let me heare thy voice: for thy voyce is swete, and thy sight  
comelie. (2.14)

There is a strong link, expressed in all these connections, between beauty, love and mutuality. Here, the lover clearly says that her sight and her voice are beautiful, and that is why he wants to see and hear her. He wants her to turn to him, and to share her beautiful gifts. The focus I noted earlier on the mouth emphasizes this, and is of course announced at the very start of the book: 'Let him kisse me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy loue is better then wine' (1.2). Beginning, as so many commentators have noted, *in medias res*, the speaker's desire is to be kissed, the most intimately mutual of the many things the mouth can do. I shall consider this link between love, beauty and mutuality further in Chapter 5, but in the context of this chapter, the connection is important because it raises major philosophical questions about beauty. Is beauty primarily an essence of itself, that can be objectively identified and that does not depend on being perceived, or is beauty 'in the eye of the beholder'? Does its essence reside in discourse, in perception, in experience? And what is its relationship to virtue? The Song of Songs is not, of course, a philosophical work, but its refusal to choose between the aesthetics of order and paradox, coupled with its evocation of all the senses, does throw these questions at the reader.

The quotation above linked sight and hearing, but a notable feature of the Song as a whole is its evocation of all the senses. We have noticed, both in the Genesis passage and in the Song of Songs, that the Bible sometimes applies words suitable for one sense to another – Eve found that the tree aroused the appetite of her eyes. The Song of Songs appeals to multiple senses, often all at once. For example, the woman's

description of her lover appeals to sight (my welbeloued is white and ruddy), smell (his chekes are as a bed of spices), taste (his lippes like lilies dropping downe pure myrrhe), touch (his hands as rings of golde set with the chrysolite). In this passage, only hearing is missing. The synaesthetic quality of this evocation of multiple senses is a significant feature of the Song.<sup>11</sup>

What did poetic readers of the Song of Songs in the early modern period make of these questions? Once again, I shall use Aemilia Lanyer as a 'plumb-line', beginning with a discussion of her treatment of beauty and the role the Song of Songs plays in it; and I shall then move on to other poets of the age.

### **3      *Aemilia Lanyer and beauty***

As I noted in Chapter 3, Lanyer's authority for her writing comes primarily from Christ, whom she aims to present to her readers as their groom. The climax of her presentation of Christ is the 'briefe description of his beautie upon the Canticles' at lines 1305-1320 (fig. 1, p.63). Towards the end of her main poem, Lanyer makes clear that her work has been a 'taske of Beauty' all along (SD 1322), and it is here, in the body of the risen and transfigured Christ, that beauty in its fullness can be expressed, in the poetic biblical language of love of the Song of Songs; but the poem's journey to get to this point is a long one, which we now need to trace. I shall outline Lanyer's presentation of beauty, and show how the Song of Songs fits into her scheme.

#### **3.1    *Christ's beauty***

In her work, Lanyer presents the transfiguration of Christ's body as a process. We may look at the dedication 'To the Ladie Katherine Countesse of Suffolke', to begin to see this in action. Lanyer has indicated in several dedications that her poem will present Christ himself to the view of her readers, and here Lanyer encourages Katherine to let her daughters read her work, so that they, too, can get the benefit of its vision of Christ. She says:

Here may they see him in a flood of teares,  
Crowned with thornes, and bathing in his blood;  
Here may they see his feares exceed all feares,  
When Heaven in Justice flat against him stood:  
          And loathsome death with grim and gastly look,  
          Presented him that blacke infernall booke,

Wherein the sinnes of all the world were writ,  
In deepe Characters of due punishment;

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of synaesthetic techniques in the Song, see Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 83-101.



And naught but dying breath could cancel it:  
Shame, death, and hell must make the attonement:  
Shewing their evidence, seizing wrongful Right,  
Placing heav'ns Beauty in deaths darkest night.

Yet through the sable Clowdes of Shame & Death,  
His beauty shewes more clearer than before;  
Death lost his strength when he did loose his breath:  
As fire supprest doth shine and flame the more,  
So in Deaths ashie pale discoloured face,  
Fresh beauty shin'd, yeelding farre greater grace.

No Dove, no Swan, nor Iv'rie could compare  
With this faire corps, when 'twas by death imbrac'd;  
No rose, nor no vermillion halfe so faire  
As was that pretious blood that interlac'd  
His body, which bright Angels did attend,  
Waiting on him that must to Heaven ascend.

(61-84, p.39)

Lanyer consistently characterizes death as ugly, and here its ugliness is identified with darkness, according to the traditional Western aesthetic of order. Christ, by contrast, in the final stanza quoted embodies all of the traditional colours of beauty which, applied to worldly beauty, Lanyer elsewhere calls 'those gawdie colours' that 'soone are spent and gone' (*SD* 188, p.59). In this section, the 'sable Clowdes of Shame & Death' have become a kind of refiner's fire, clarifying and purifying Christ's bodily beauty. This section presents a version of the aesthetic of paradox, or 'black beauty'. Lanyer stresses that Christ's beauty at his death is utterly unconventional. Ugly death is 'sable', and linked to shame, and an 'ashie pale discoloured face' should not be beautiful, yet in the final stanza, the conventional colours of beauty that belong to the aesthetic of order, red and white, are present. The pale body and the red blood represent a new and paradoxical form of beauty. It is significant that, while this section handles themes and figures that feature in the Song of Songs, and, moreover, while the connection between admiring Christ's suffering body and admiring the body of the beloved in the Song would be an obvious move to make, there is no strong intertextual connection with the Song here. Lanyer saves that for the final stage of the transfiguration of beauty. Although this passage asserts the beauty of Christ, and hints at what makes him beautiful (his deathly pale body and his flowing blood), it is not easy for the reader to identify what is visually beautiful about the image evoked, and the complex aesthetic of the Song of Songs has contributed to enabling Lanyer to complicate things for her readers. We shall need to return to this point.

This passage is a telescoped version of what happens in the main poem to Christ's body, and to the language of beauty. I want now to pursue this further, to see

how systematic Lanyer's conception of beauty is, and how central the Song of Songs is to its articulation.

In *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Christ is described several times, at key points in the story of his Passion and Resurrection. The first substantial description is a stanza describing Christ as he stands before Caiaphas, the Priests and Elders, hearing the accusations of the false witnesses:

The beauty of the World, Heavens chiefest Glory;  
The mirrour of Martyrs, Crowne of holy Saints;  
Love of th'Almighty, blessed Angels story;  
Water of Life, which none that drinks it, faints;  
Guide of the Just, where all our Light we borrow;  
Mercy of Mercies; Hearer of Complaints;  
Triumph over Death; Ransomer of Sinne;  
Falsly accused: now his paines begin. (SD 641-8)

Although the stanza begins by describing Christ as 'the beauty of the World,' we are not presented with an image of the bodily Christ at his trial. Rather, the language is the language of biblical poetry, filtered through liturgy, so that words like 'Crowne,' 'Water,' and 'Light' are laden with symbolic and specifically religious meaning. The Song of Songs, too, is concerned with some of these things, especially crowns (3.11) and water (4.12, 8.7), but the terms in Lanyer's stanza are abstract, rather than figurative. What happens in this stanza is not a description of bodily beauty, but a symbolic description of Christ's salvific function; yet its headline title is 'beauty.' Beauty, here, is not only the concern of the eyes; but, rather than increase the sensory impact of the poetry by evoking a multisensory response in the reader, as the Song does, Lanyer here abstracts and intellectualizes. (This, of course, makes the final line in the stanza, which returns the reader to the concrete story with simple and emotive language - 'falsly', 'paines' - particularly effective.) It is necessary for Lanyer's readers not only to witness the full story of Christ's painful transfiguration before they can see his beauty in its uncomplicated fullness, but also to understand the story with their reason. This makes further sense of the way that Lanyer reserves the full-blown use of the Song until the description of the resurrected Christ.

The next lengthy description of Christ is on the cross is a much more visceral and visual picture, and I present the stanza as Fig.3 (p.119), so as to be able to show on the right the links between the stanza and Psalm 22.

Fig. 3	
<i>Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum</i> 1161-1168	<i>Psalm</i> 22
His joynts dis-joynted, and his legges hang downe,	I am like water powred out, and all my bones are out of ioynt;
His alabaster breast, his bloody side,	mine heart is like waxe: it is molten in the middes of my bowels. (14)
His members torne, and on his head a Crowne	
Of sharpest Thorns, to satisfie for pride:	
Anguish and Paine doe all his Sences drowne,	
While they his holy garments do divide:	They parte my garments among them, and cast lottes vpon my vesture. (18)
His bowells drie, his heart full fraught with griefe,	My strength is dried vp like a potsheard, and my tongue cleueth to my iawes. (15)
Crying to him that yeelds him no reliefe.	My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me, & art so farre from mine health, <i>and from</i> the wordes of my roaring? O my God, I crye by daie, but thou hearest not, & by night, but haue no audience. (1-2)

It is not a beautiful picture, but it is related to beauty. The traditional exemplary colours of beauty, red and white, are represented in Christ's 'alabaster breast' and 'bloody side.' Throughout the poem, Lanyer has made use of Christ's robes. In 'To all vertuous Ladies in Generall', she urges her readers to put on these robes, which are described as 'purple scarlet white' (15). There is a connection between the robes and Solomon, as Lanyer highlights in this dedication, when she evokes Christ's saying about the lilies of the field at Luke 12.27, 'Consider the lilies howe they growe: they labour not, neither spin they: yet I say vnto you, that Salomon himselfe in all his royaltie was not clothed like one of these':

Come deckt with Lillies that did so delight  
 To be preferr'd in Beauty, farre before  
 Wise *Salomon* in all his glory dight:  
     Whose royall roabes did no such pleasure yield,  
     As did the beauteous Lilly of the field. (17-21, pp.12-13)

In the Song of Songs tradition, lilies are often understood to be virtues, with which Christ's would-be brides clothe themselves.<sup>12</sup> Christ's royal robes, earthly and physical, were given to him at his trial, in mockery of his supposed self-aggrandizement. Christ wore those robes at his trial, and those colours, to his death; a death which, as we saw in the dedication to Katherine, Countess of Suffolk, purified and transfigured beauty. The contrast between worldly and spiritual beauty is here laid out in its complexity, as Lanyer presents her readers with a picture of Christ's transfiguration in painful progress. The connection between Christ, Solomon, the lilies and the Passion is complex, and is, of course, evidence of how often, how carefully and how purposefully biblical texts had been read down the centuries, resulting in traditions that weave different parts of the Bible together to create webs of interconnected meanings. Once again, Lanyer draws on the tradition in its full complexity, and once again the reader has to wait for a direct allusion to the Song; yet the references to Solomon, the robes and the lilies are part of a traditional understanding of Solomon that placed the 'sublime' Song as his greatest achievement and in important respects the high point of Scripture.

After the stanza cited as Fig. 3 above, Lanyer goes on to ponder the paradoxical mystery of the cross for several stanzas, and then moves the story on to

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 3, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, Cistercian Fathers Series 31 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 1-6, understands them in this way in Sermon 47, on 2.1. It is worth noting that Bernard insists that these virtues come from Christ and not from inherent virtue in the bride herself.

Joseph of Arimathea, burying Christ's body. With that body, Lanyer buries the poetic language of beauty, represented by the 'purest coulers' of the lily and the rose:

There this most pretious body he incloses,  
Imbalmd and deckt with Lillies and with Roses.

Loe here the Beautie of Heav'n and Earth is laid,  
The purest coulers underneath the Sunne.

(SD 1279-82)

This stanza and the next tell us that this situation cannot last long, for: 'glory must end what horror hath begun.' (1284) The Maries arrive with their ointments to embalm the corpse, but they do not find it, and in the following stanza, Lanyer transforms the physical ointments the Maries had brought to beautify Christ's body into the spiritual ointments that the Church now brings to the risen Christ: 'the oyles of Mercie, Charitie, and Faith' (1295). Then, we reach the risen Christ, and '*a briefe description of his beautie upon the Canticles*.' Here, at last, we have transcended paradox. Joy no longer mingles with pain, and ugliness neither taints nor refines beauty, for the work has been done. Worldly physical beauty has been put to death and resurrected in transfigured form, in the body of the risen Christ.

The allusions to the Song are very strong in this passage, as we have seen (fig. 1, p.63), and the strength of the connection is emphasized by the marginal note. Why has Lanyer chosen to use the language of Canticles so fully at this point in her poem? First, we should note that the two stanzas themselves do not rework the words of Canticles in any startling way. Lanyer's description mingles the female speaker's description of her beloved, and his of her, but, as I have noted, this was common in the period, and I do not think that it has particular significance here. The lexical connections to the Geneva Bible are very strong. Lanyer has added some words of encouragement to her readers in turning the passages from first to third person. For example, where the female speaker of the Song uses no comparatives in her description, Lanyer tells her readers that Christ is 'so sweet... that...', and the lips are not only sweet like honey, but 'much more sweet.' She also, very significantly, gives a reason in addition to sensory beauty why one might love Christ: 'yea, he is constant, and his words are true.'

These changes are important, because they link the Song's vision of beauty to Lanyer's developing scheme. Lanyer, as I have shown, presents the transfiguration of Christ as a process. He is always, in some important sense, true beauty, and those who love him see this, but the fullness of his beauty can only be witnessed by Lanyer's readers at the resurrection. The experience of witnessing the Passion narrative in the

role of Christ's bride has educated Lanyer's readers to understand what true spiritual beauty is. It consists in those things that attract one to what is good, and therefore it is present supremely in Christ, who is all good. Christ is beautiful when he is suffering precisely *because* he is suffering for those he loves. Lanyer's readers can see beauty in the painful scene because they recognize the strength, truth and loyalty of that love; but the scene remains painful. When Christ rises from the dead, the reader understands about love and loyalty, and so she is ready to appreciate Christ's beauty in unadulterated joy. The scheme is based on the understanding that we suffer and are glad with those we love, and they are always beautiful to us because we love them. One of the things that makes them beautiful is their love for us (hence, the suffering Christ is beautiful to his brides); and what makes us happiest is to see them happy (hence, the most joyful vision of his beauty is at the Resurrection).

In light of this, it is appropriate for Lanyer to use the effusive and joyful language of the Song of Songs in its fullness only at the end of the reader's journey with Christ, for only now can the reader properly appreciate it. The fact that the description gives no clear visual picture of the risen Christ does not matter. The figurative language of the Song activates the reader's senses, and it is the feelings of joy he inspires, rather than Christ's flowing locks, straight nose or full red lips, that make the risen Christ beautiful. But, although the precise details of Christ's risen form do not matter, the fact that Lanyer is describing the resurrected, and not the ascended Christ, is highly significant. Spiritual beauty, for Lanyer, is to be seen in physical earthly bodies. The classic Christian opposition between body and spirit will not do here, for the incarnate Christ has transformed the possibilities available to human bodies. In this way, the Song of Songs, used very carefully and with its tradition of interpretation, provides Lanyer with the tools to re-think aesthetics through the incarnation and resurrection.

### **3.2    *The eye of the beholder***

Lanyer's readers, as we have seen, are to model themselves as brides of Christ, and Lanyer aims to teach her reader/brides to see properly, to discern true spiritual beauty in the world. The lesson is not an easy one, for worldly notions of beauty have a strong hold on human vision and must be radically challenged. In one respect, Lanyer's understanding of beauty differs somewhat from the vision of the Song of Songs. The Song presents beauty as potentially dangerous, but it is rather ambiguous about what the danger is, and at whom it is aimed. It is the male speaker who twice says that his beloved has wounded him with her eyes: 'my sister, *my* spouse, thou hast wounded mine heart: thou hast wounded mine heart with one of

thine eyes, & with a chaine of thy necke' (4.9), and: 'turne away thine eyes from me: for they ouercome me: thine heere is like a flocke of goats, which loke downe from Gilead' (6.4). This conforms to the classic understanding of beauty as something which is possessed by women, and can be highly dangerous to men. Lanyer, by contrast, is very careful to present beauty as dangerous to the women who possess it, as Susanne Woods details.<sup>13</sup> In this, Lanyer has some support from the Song of Songs, for, although it is the man who complains of the wound of love, the person whom the reader actually sees wounded and beaten when she goes out to seek her beloved, is the woman, at 5.2-7. However, the Song makes no statement of explanation about this, whereas Lanyer takes her readers through a comprehensive process to teach them about the dangers of worldly beauty, and prepare them for encountering it. The dangers of worldly beauty are clearly very important for Lanyer, and the re-education of her readers is essential for their moral and spiritual wellbeing (even though Lanyer cannot protect them from the physical dangers of being beautiful), but this part of Lanyer's argument is free of the Song of Songs.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, Lanyer keeps the Song for Christ.

Lanyer does not utterly reject the classic aesthetic of order, however. She gives a long section comparing the Queen of Sheba with the Countess of Cumberland. In this section, Lanyer takes the classic aesthetic of order to the limits of its capability, as the good and beautiful aspects of the Queen are attracted to the good and beautiful features of Solomon:

Spirits affect where they doe sympathize,  
 Wisdom desires Wisdome to embrace,  
 Virtue covets her like, and doth devize  
 How she her friends may entertaine with grace;  
 Beauty sometime is pleas'd to feed her eyes,  
 With viewing Beautie in anothers face:  
     Both good and bad in this point doe agree,  
     That each desireth with his like to be.' (SD 1593-1600)

Sheba, a good, wise and beautiful queen, is drawn to Solomon and good results. But Lanyer reminds us that what matters about this episode is its typological significance: Solomon (a king whose name means 'peace') is a type of Christ, and so this mutual relationship where goodness, wisdom and beauty find and help each other, is 'but a

<sup>13</sup> Susanne Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 83-90.

<sup>14</sup> There is some speculation that Lanyer had painful personal experience of the dangers of relying on one's beauty for success, through her affair with Lord Hunsdon. See, e.g., *Ibid.*, 33-41..

figure' (*SD* 1610) of the love between Christ and the Countess of Cumberland, the model reader/bride of the work.

If Solomon is a type of Christ, a shadow or an inkling of the full truth that was to come, we may ask how it is that Solomon managed to compose the words that Lanyer thinks are supremely apt to describe Christ in all his beauty. This is a problem that does sometimes exercise commentators on the Song, as they present Solomon as both superlatively wise and badly flawed; but, for the most part, inspiration by the Holy Spirit is considered a sufficient answer to this dilemma.<sup>15</sup> Lanyer does not address this directly. In line with her general practice of not focusing on sex, Solomon's infamous love-life and the part the Queen of Sheba may have played in it are simply not mentioned. Instead, she uses the story both to praise another good, strong and wise woman, and to present an example of the aesthetic of order at work. This passage is the strongest presentation in Lanyer's poem of the normative aesthetic of order, and it also shows the limits of this aesthetic. It demonstrates that Lanyer does not close off the possibility of approaching truth by means of worldly beauty, but it is clearly not adequate of itself, and in most of her poem it is either thoroughly unsatisfactory, or beside the point. It is also significant that this section comes near the end of the poem, after the reader has been taken through the painful process of the Passion. The reader is perhaps now at less risk of being misled by the charms of worldly beauty, and can view Solomon and the Queen of Sheba with some objectivity, seeing not only their attractiveness, but also its limits.

Lanyer, then, uses the Song of Songs very carefully and specifically within a complex and detailed treatment of beauty. Worldly beauty is a dangerous snare, particularly to the women who possess it, because it misleads them into thinking that the worldly power they can gain by it has substance, when, in fact, it is both highly precarious in worldly terms and of no value spiritually. The Song of Songs has no major role in Lanyer's treatment of worldly beauty. It does, however, come into its own in her treatment of the beauty of Christ. The beauty of the incarnate Christ is true earthly beauty, and, when Lanyer's readers read as brides of Christ, they are enabled to see it. It is a bodily physical beauty, but it is not to do with scoring high points for visual attractiveness. Rather it comes from recognizing true love and entering into a mutual relationship with it. It is because of this mutual love that Christ is beautiful even in his grotesque suffering to his brides, and it is because of this mutual love that his beauty is at its fullest when he rises from the dead, and can be seen in joy. Throughout the painful process of Christ's transfiguration, the Song of Songs has had a role, particularly in questioning the classic aesthetic of order, and in evoking an emotional

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Walkington, discussed on pp. 40-41.



response, but it is only at the Resurrection that the words of the Sublime Song burst through in their fullness. This scheme makes considerable use of traditions of reading the Song, and achieves a Protestant theology of beauty that is at once embodied and spiritual. How does it compare with other poetic readings of beauty that make use of the Song of Songs?

#### **4 Other works**

The Song of Songs was understood almost universally as an allegorical text; a text that presented itself as being about one thing (human carnal love between a man and a woman), but that was really about something else (relationships between Church and Christ, soul and Christ, or even, according to Luther, people and prince.)<sup>16</sup> This allegorical tradition, alongside the Song's own complex aesthetics, would suggest that the Song might offer opportunities to poets when they want to handle complicated subjects, or to complicate ostensibly simple subjects. The notion of beauty could be tackled both as simple (with the aesthetic of order) and complex (with the aesthetic of paradox), and the early modern period was greatly exercised by beauty both in theory and in practice. The poets and works presented below make use of the Song in a wide variety of ways when they write about beauty. Once again, I discuss them in roughly chronological order, which means that we shall lurch somewhat from treatment to treatment, but it does at least ensure some continuity of structure among the three themed chapters of the thesis.

##### **4.1 William Shakespeare: *Venus and Adonis***

While Lanyer's focus is strongly Christological, Shakespeare's, in *Venus and Adonis*, is not. But he, like Lanyer, presents visions of beautiful bodies that are not all they seem, and, like Lanyer, he makes some use of the Song of Songs in his portrayal. One of the key opportunities opened up by the Song is the chance to view the male body. Traditionally in Western love poetry, it is men who speak and women who are the objects of their gaze, and therefore their discourse.<sup>17</sup> However, as we have seen, in the

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<sup>16</sup> The Geneva Bible, for example, begins its *Argument* to the Song: 'In this Song, Salomon by moste swete and comfortable allegories and parables describeth the perfite loue of Iesus Christ, the true Salomon and King of peace, and the faithful soule or his Church...' Luther's unusual interpretation insists that the 'simplest sense and the real character of this book' is 'a song in which Solomon honors God with his praises; he gives Him thanks for his divinely established and confirmed kingdom and government; he prays for the preservation and extension of this his kingdom, and at the same time he encourages the inhabitants and citizens of his realm to be of good cheer in their trials and adversities and to trust in God, who is always ready to defend and rescue those who call upon Him.' Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes; Lectures on the Song of Solomon; Treatise on the Last Words of David*, Luther's Works 15, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Ian Siggins (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972), 191.

<sup>17</sup> This is not, of course, universal, but it is the cultural norm.

Song of Songs, the woman describes her lover to her companions, and in such glowing terms that they ask to join her in her search for him. In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* we can see just how uncomfortable it could be for a male character to become the object of the feminine gaze. Venus is the first to violate the conventions of love poetry, when she takes the masculine role of the lover, pursuing Adonis:

Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,  
And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him. (5-6, p.132)

Even this is ambiguous, for Venus, of course, is no ordinary female, but the goddess of love; nonetheless, the extreme discomfort that Adonis feels about being looked at, admired and pursued in this way is palpable, and is linked by Shakespeare to the traditional colours of beauty, red and white. Shakespeare makes great play of these colours throughout the poem, making them perform both their traditional duties and, as here, some more unusual ones:

Still he is sullen, still he lours and frets,  
'Twixt crimson shame and anger ashy pale.  
Being red, she loves him best; and being white,  
Her best is bettered with a more delight. (75-78)

Susanne Woods teases out the complex ways in which the colours of beauty operate in her discussion both of Lanyer and Spenser, and Lanyer and Shakespeare.<sup>18</sup> Adonis is here emasculated by Venus' gaze, powerless to affect her response to his beauty: 'Look how he can, she cannot choose but love' (79).

One of the deep seams of intertext in this poem, as I began to show in Chapter 3, is the Song of Songs. It is not always clear that the Song of Songs is a direct intertext, because of the high correspondence between the Song's *topoi* and those of love poetry in general, and Petrarchan poetry in particular (such as eyes, red and white, flowers, the wound of love and, of course, the kiss on the lips.) However, as Adonis attempts to break free from his encounter with Venus, he claims he is becoming sunburnt, and this is a clear echo of the woman's complaint in Song of Songs 1:5 'regarde ye me not because I am blacke: for the sunne hathe looked vpon me':

Souring his cheeks, cries 'Fie, no more of love!  
The sun doth burn my face; I must remove.' (185-6)

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<sup>18</sup> Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*, 54-61, 74-83.

Stanley Stewart has noted that the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs was understood as a place of shelter from extremes of weather and temperature; here, Adonis uses the language of the Song to articulate his need for protection from the extreme heat of Venus' passion.<sup>19</sup> But Venus, in further echoes both of the Song and the tradition Stewart refers to, insists that she herself can be the garden that will provide exactly the shelter he needs:

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemmed thee here  
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,  
 I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;  
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:  
     Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,  
     Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

'Within this limit is relief enough,  
 Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,  
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,  
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain. (229-38)

Adonis, as we have seen in Chapter 3, does not share her vision (pp.79-81). However, just as Adonis is powerless to remove himself from Venus' gaze, she has found herself unable to make him look at her:

Look in mine eyeballs, there thy beauty lies;  
 Then why not lips on lips, since eyes in eyes? (119-20)

She is beginning to discover that, now that she has abandoned her feminine position as object of the gaze, she will have to pay the price. We saw in Chapter 3 that she appropriated the words of the man, and the result is that there is no space in the discourse left for the man, Adonis. She has used the words spoken freely by the man in the Song and tried to impose their meaning on the man she loves. In the Song of Songs, the image of the woman as a garden is couched in the traditional male/female dichotomy, in which the woman is passive and still, the beautiful object, while the man is active and mobile, the gazing subject; but it is also mutual, because both lovers accept their roles. Venus, however, is trying to have her cake and eat it, for she wants both to look and to be looked at. More, she wants both to be looked at and to determine how she is seen; and her efforts are doomed to failure.

Venus, like the lovers in the Song of Songs, makes use of the figure of the world as the body. Like the Song of Songs, *Venus and Adonis* raises questions about

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<sup>19</sup> Stanley Stewart, *The Enclosed Garden: The Tradition and the Image in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 60-96.

the relationship between bodies and the world, for Venus is a goddess, and at the end of the poem, has the power to pronounce a global curse. There is potential for more than analogical significance in her presentation of herself as a paradise. Lanyer, too, finds global significance in bodily beauty, but her vision is centred on Christ. Both poets also emphasize the key role of the mutual gaze, and though their visions are very different, for both, the success or failure of the mutual gaze has universal implications.

It is, of course, extremely daring of Shakespeare to take this sacred imagery and use it in a profane and pagan piece of literature which was read chiefly as erotic entertainment by its early readers. But that is not all that he is doing. He has overturned two key aspects of the biblical text. First, his characters are not conforming to gender norms, and, second, his poem tells a story of unrequited, and not of mutual, passion. The intertextual connection is not there merely to shock, but Shakespeare is also interacting with the Song, alluding to its ideal picture of love to emphasize the dysfunctionality of the relationship between Venus and Adonis.

#### **4.2 Robert Southwell**

Shakespeare's response to the Song of Songs in *Venus and Adonis* appears to treat the Song primarily as a literary intertext, rather than as a religious one. It may well be that a potential link between Venus and Mary (sometimes presented in this period as divine Venus) adds a further dimension to Shakespeare's use of the Song in *Venus and Adonis*, but the reading I have outlined above relies on close reading of the text, and does not depend on the tradition of interpretation of the Song. Southwell, however, did not write secular poetry, and he did interact fully with the tradition of interpretation.

The medieval tradition of sacred verse drew heavily on the Song of Songs, especially in relation to Mary, the paradigm of feminine virtue and beauty and Queen of Heaven. Mary was identified as the bride of the Song, and its figurative language was applied to her (see pp.49-52). This tradition became so deeply embedded in the culture, both poetically and liturgically, that the figurative language of the Song appeared alongside other *topoi* in an integrated way. For example, in both poetry and the visual arts, images of Mary as the rose, the perfect bride and the enclosed garden sit alongside those of Mary as the star of the sea, an image taken from the ancient hymn *Ave Maris Stella*. As a Jesuit, Southwell remained wholly connected to the medieval Marian tradition, and he makes use of it in his poetry on Mary. A brief look at how this works shows just how deeply embedded it is in the structure of his thought. Here, for example, Southwell describes Mary's marriage to Joseph with reference to Song of Songs 4.12: 'my sister, *my spouse is as a garden inclosed, as a spring shut vp, and a fountaine sealed vp*':

God lent his paradise to Josephes Care  
Wherein he was to plante the tree of life.

(iii *Our ladyes Spousals* 7-8, p.4)

Mary is God's Paradise, the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs, which is Eden redeemed. This couplet also makes use of 2.3: 'like the apple tre among the trees of the forest, so *is* my welbeloued among the sonnes *of men*: vnder his shadow had I delite, & sate downe: and his fruite was swete vnto my mouth.' Jesus is the tree of life that grows inside her. In the tradition, Jesus could be represented either by the tree, as here, or by the fountain in the garden. Later in the sequence on Mary, Southwell describes her Assumption:

Gemm to her worth spouse to her love ascendes,  
Prince to her throne Queene to her heavenly kinge  
Whose court with solemne pompe on her attends...

(xiv. *The Assumption of our Lady* 13-15, p.12)

Here, the language of feminine beauty is applicable to Mary because of the Song of Songs tradition: 'thy chekes are comelie with rowes of stones, and thy necke with chaines' (1.9); 'There are threscore Quenes & forescore concubines, & of the damsels without nomber. *But* my dooue is alone, & my vndefiled, she is the onelie *daughter* of her mother, and she is deare to her that bare her: the daughters haue sene her and counted her blessed: *euen* the Quenes and the concubines, and thei haue praised her' (6.7-8). It is notable that the Song of Songs is totally integrated into the poetic framework of these examples; it is not quoted or explained, but rather it is used to underpin the theology and the poetics of the poem. Even more significantly, it is also the Song of Songs tradition that identifies the man with Christ and the woman with Mary, allowing the otherwise problematic idea that Christ's mother is also his bride to become a commonplace.

However, as I noted in Chapter 3, the passage in Southwell's poetry that announces its connection to the Song of Songs by means of marginal notes is the long section in the second *Saint Peters complaynt* poem, in which Peter remembers exchanging a look with Christ. The whole poem, spoken by Peter, rehearses his repentance after he has denied Christ three times (Luke 22.54-62). Southwell uses a complex of biblical *topoi*, including the wound of love belonging to the Song of Songs 4.9: 'my sister, *my* spouse, thou hast wounded mine heart: thou hast wounded mine heart with one of thine eyes.' Southwell conflates this with the prophetic *topos* of the heart of stone: 'I wil take the stonie heart out of their bodies, & wil giue them an heart of flesh,' (Ezek. 11.19). In the following stanza, we can see this at work:

You flames divine that sparkle out your heats,  
 And kindle pleasing fires in mortall hearts:  
 You nectar'd Aumbryes of soule feeding meats,  
 You graceful quivers of loves dearest darts:  
 You did vouchsafe to warme, to wound, to feast:  
 My cold, my stony, my now famishde breast.

(349-54, p.73)

The flames are the two beams that come from Christ's eyes to meet Peter's. As 'flames divine,' they also evoke the fire of love of Song of Songs 8.6: 'love is strong as death: ielousie is cruel as the graue: the coles thereof are fyrie coles, & a vehement flame.'<sup>20</sup> Like Lanyer, Southwell links the idea that the eyes must be educated by the love of Christ with the wound of love, and explicitly draws attention to the Song of Songs as he does so. Like Lanyer's daughters of Jerusalem, Southwell's Peter is awestruck by Christ's gaze:

O sacred eyes, the springs of living light,  
 The earthly heavens, where Angels joy to dwell:  
 How could you deigne to view my deathfull plight,  
 Or let your heavenly beames looke on my hell?  
 But those unspotted eyes encountred mine,  
 As spotlesse Sunne doth on the dounghill shine.

(331-6)

As for Lanyer, the Song of Songs provides for Southwell a bridge between Petrarchan and religious appreciation of beauty, so that stanzas like the one quoted above recall both secular love poetry and the Song of Songs, especially 4.15: 'o fountaine of the gardens, o well of liuing waters, and the springs of Lebanon,' and 4.7: 'thou art all faire, my loue, and there is no spot in thee.' Petrarchan language combines with more or less oblique references to biblical poetry throughout this section, and in much of the poem. Here, the combination of the springs with the unspotted eyes evokes the Song particularly. This kind of lover-like language places Peter in a role rather similar to a bride, even though he himself is male. This, of course, resonates with the mystical tradition of reading the Song of Songs, in which all readers (and the souls of all readers were gendered feminine) desired to be Christ's bride.

Where Southwell differs from Lanyer is in Peter's emphasis on his own unworthiness. The particular look that triggers the poem has the effect not of a blessing, but of a reproof:

<sup>20</sup> The word translated her 'a vehement flame' is *shalhebetyah*, which, with its 'yah' ending, is the only possible direct reference to God in the Song.

In time, o Lord, thine eyes with mine did meete,  
 In them I read the ruines of my fall:  
 Their chearing raies that made misfortune sweet,  
 Into my guilty thoughts poud floods of gall,  
 Their heavenly lookes that blest where they beheld,  
 Darts of disdaine, and angry checks did yeeld.

(325-30)

Lanyer's poem displays remarkably little interest in repentance, whereas Southwell's poem is specifically and explicitly a poem all about repentance. Where the look of love from Christ educated, delighted and empowered the daughters of Jerusalem, who responded by empathizing with Christ and pleading for him in Lanyer's poem, in Southwell's the look educates and delights Peter, but also makes him acutely aware of his own unworthiness: he is a dunghill to Christ's sun.

One of the reasons why Southwell is important in English poetry is that he is an early and influential proponent of applying the forms of lyric poetry to religious subjects. The significance of the seventeenth-century religious lyric has been recognized and extensively studied, and Southwell had a prominent role in its development.<sup>21</sup> Southwell explains his poetic project, which he sees as extending beyond his own poetry, and being taken up by other writers, in his prose epistle *The Author to his loving Cosen*. He says that poets have been 'abusing their talent' in applying the noble art of poetry to unworthy, i.e. worldly, subjects. Poetry itself is good, for God uses it in the Bible and even Christ at his Passion used it, giving 'all men a paterne to know the true use of this measured and footed style.'<sup>22</sup> His own poetry is an attempt to persuade poets to see the error of their ways and begin writing poetry about holy subjects 'wherein it may be seene, how well verse and vertue sute together.' Of course, poets had been trying to do this for centuries. European medieval poetry dedicated to Mary resembled secular love poetry closely, and the poetic tradition that came from Dante through Petrarch, and that was extremely popular in England in the late sixteenth century, attempted to resolve the tension between profane and sacred love by plotting a path from carnal to spiritual love for a beautiful and inaccessible woman. On this understanding, the poet's appreciation of beauty was connected to his spiritual

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1962); Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (eds.), *'Bright Shoots of Everlastingnesse': The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987); John R. Roberts (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century English Religious Lyric* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> The reference to Christ must be to his use of a verse from Psalm 22 on the cross. It is interesting that, though, as we have seen, no one at this period had cracked the code of biblical metrics, Southwell writes with total confidence that these words were in a 'measured and footed style.'

development. Both Southwell and Lanyer follow this scheme, demonstrating that believers need to be educated to see properly, and that the look of love from Christ is instrumental in this process.<sup>23</sup> In the early modern period, even after sonnet sequences themselves fell out of fashion, the idea that the experience of true beauty was a spiritual revelation persisted in the continued development of the Neoplatonic tradition.<sup>24</sup> The next poet in the series also makes use of the Neoplatonic tradition in a religious scheme, but his process is substantially different from Southwell's, and from Lanyer's.

#### 4.3 **Edmund Spenser: *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion***

Though Spenser was a thoroughly Protestant poet, in important ways he, too, was engaged on a similar project to Southwell's. He, too, drew on the poetic tradition of Dante and Petrarch, which aimed to sacralize the poetry, and the experience, of love. This tradition proposed two solutions to the problem of the attractions of the bodily female form. In the first, the beholder's sight is gradually refined until it becomes so spiritual that the carnal longings inspired by the beautiful woman are no longer felt.<sup>25</sup> The second establishes the Virgin Mary as the paradigm of female beauty and virtue, and therefore an appropriate object of veneration. Neither solution was open to Spenser, for neither was in line with Protestant doctrine. Protestants could admire the Blessed Virgin, but not venerate her, lest they slip into idolatry. Protestants, unlike adherents of the old religion, could not see celibacy as the highest calling, but were obliged to respect marriage and procreation as equally God-given and virtuous. The English sonnet sequences of the end of the sixteenth century often explored the difficulties of resolving the tension between desire for physical and spiritual beauty. Spenser proposed a new solution. His speaker undergoes the usual torments of doomed love, but his suit turns out not to be doomed at all; he is, finally, successful, and he gains his lady's love. Indeed, Spenser went on to marry the woman to whom he had written his sonnets, and wrote an *Epithalamion* celebrating the consummation of the relationship.<sup>26</sup> His project is not, after all, the same as Southwell's, who aimed to

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<sup>23</sup> Woods (*Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*, 56-61) shows how Lanyer's exposition relates closely to Renaissance Neoplatonism, but has its own particular features.

<sup>24</sup> Woods (*Ibid.*, 56, and 174, n.25) notes that Pico della Mirandola 'describes the ladder that ascends from a lady's physical beauty to divine love'.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy, A History of Western Philosophy 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 127-195; Donald R. Kelley, *Renaissance Humanism* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 34-54, for background to Neoplatonism.

<sup>26</sup> Noam Flinker, *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature: Kisses of Their Mouths* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 66-87. Flinker's chapter on Spenser's *Amoretti* and their relationship to Baldwin's *Canticles, or Balades of Solomon* of 1549 begins with a helpful outline of scholarship on the relationship between Spenser and the Song (66-69), and notes the



redirect the poetic language of love and beauty towards sacred objects.<sup>27</sup> Spenser needed to spiritualize and sacralize the earthly and carnal success of his quest (though, of course, the reader cannot know at what point Spenser realized his outcome would be different: or what the relationship really is between Spenser and his poetic voice.) Significantly, Spenser is known also to have produced a version of the Song of Songs, and although this version is lost, it has been suggested that 'it still lives, though without its name, in a few passages of the *Epithalamion*, the *Amoretti*, the *Faerie Queene*, and *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*.'<sup>28</sup>

In Sonnet 3, Spenser reiterates the traditional sonnet connection between the beloved's beauty and divinity, and the speaker stresses that the contemplation of her beauty has refined and spiritualized his own sight:

The sovereign beauty which I do admire,  
Witness the world how worthy to be praised,  
The light whereof hath kindled heavenly fire  
In my frail spirit (by her from baseness raised)  
That, being now with her huge brightness dazed,  
Base thing I can no more endure to view  
But, looking still on her, I stand amazed  
At wondrous sight of so celestial hue.

(1-8, p.218)

This is classic Petrarchan sonneteering of the kind that fed into, and upon, Renaissance Neoplatonism. It resembles both Southwell and Lanyer in demonstrating that to look upon the beauty of a virtuous and beautiful person refines and trains the sight so that one may perceive the divine; but Southwell and Lanyer have retrained the focus of the onlooker to Christ, while for Spenser, it remains fixed on the beloved woman. Spenser portrays a beautiful and good woman as a means of spiritual fulfillment; but his speaker's quest involves not her death (as it does for Dante and Petrarch), but marriage to her. Spenser, therefore, cannot follow the traditional path whereby the lover eventually moves his gaze from his beloved to train it upon the divine itself, but has to find spiritual fulfillment in the gaze on his beloved. In the

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distinctive feature of Spenser's sonnets that they do not require the death of the lady. His chapter focuses on connections between Baldwin and Spenser, and on the configuration of the relationship between allegorical and carnal meanings.

<sup>27</sup> See John N. King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 148-82, for a treatment of Spenser's Protestant handling of love. See Anne Sweeney, *Robert Southwell: Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English Lyric Landscape, 1586-95* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 243-46, for a comparison of Southwell and Spenser's understanding of beauty.

<sup>28</sup> Israel Baroway, 'The Imagery of Spenser and the Song of Songs', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 33 (1934), 24, quoted in Flinker, *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature*, 66.

*Amoretti* Spenser sought to sacralize both his beloved's body and the possibility of carnal relations with her.

Spenser uses the term 'fair,' in connection with the beautiful lady's mouth, as the Song of Songs does, to describe both its visual beauty and the beauty of its other sensual possibilities – speech, touch, smell; but where the Song proposes no hierarchy of the senses, Spenser, in *Amoretti* 81, once more makes order from this richness:

Fair is my love, when her fair golden hairs  
With the loose wind ye waving chance to mark;  
Fair when the rose in her red cheeks appears,  
Or in her eyes the fire of love does spark;  
Fair when her breast, like a rich-laden bark  
With precious merchandise, she forth doth lay;  
Fair when that cloud of pride (which oft doth dark  
Her goodly light) with smiles she drives away;  
But fairest she when so she doth display  
The gate with pearls and rubies richly dight  
Through which her words so wise do make their way  
To bear the message of her gentle spright:  
The rest be works of Nature's wonderment,  
But this the work of heart's astonishment.

The language of Petrarchan love and of the Song of Songs describes the woman's beauty; but her speech is the most amazing thing of all about her, and is the thing that can astonish the heart. There are some problems with this, most notably that we never find out, in this sonnet at least, what the woman says. This poem reflects the sequence in that, although it claims to find her wise, gentle and virtuous speech more praiseworthy than her physical appearance, it spends a great deal more time discussing her appearance than her speech, and in considerably more detail. Unlike the woman in the Song of Songs, Spenser's beloved only emerges in quotation marks from her object position to speak for herself, and the speaker who claims to admire her words controls which of them his readers hear, and how we encounter them. This woman, unusually, gets to keep her virtue and to enjoy carnal relations with her man; but although the double bind seems to favour her, it also silences her.

Spenser's *Epithalamion* is, in some respects, the conclusion to the *Amoretti*, for it was written to his bride to celebrate their marriage. It, too, makes use of the Song of Songs, and in similar ways to the *Amoretti*. In the following passage, the speaker encourages the 'merchants' daughters' to look upon his bride. As when, in Song of Songs 5.10-16, the woman describes her lover to the daughters of Jerusalem and they respond by asking if they can come with her to seek him, the merchants' daughters are impressed by what they see. Fig. 4 shows the passage, with relevant parts of the Song of Songs alongside.

Fig. 4	
<i>Epithalamion 167-184</i>	<i>Song of Songs</i>
Tell me, ye merchants' daughters, did ye see	Come forthe, ye daughters of Zion, & beholde the King Salomon (3.11)
So fair a creature in your town before?-	
So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,	
Adorned with Beauty's grace and Virtue's store,	
Her goodly eyes like sapphires shining bright,	Thine eies <i>are like</i> the dooues (4.1)
Her forehead ivory white,	Thy temples <i>are</i> within thy lockes as a piece of a pomegranate. (4.3)
Her cheeks like apples which the sun hath rudded,	Thy chekes <i>are</i> comelie with rowes of stones, and thy necke with chaines. (1:9) His chekes <i>are</i> as a bed of spices, <i>and</i> as swete flowres. (5:13)
Her lips like cherries charming men to bite,	Thy lippes <i>are</i> like a threde of skarlet. (4:3) His lippes <i>are</i> like lilies dropping downe pure myrrhe. (5:13)
Her breast like to a bowl of cream uncruded,	
Her paps like lilies budded,	I am the rose of the field, & the lillie of the valleis. (2:1) Thy two breastes <i>are</i> as two yong roes that <i>are</i> twinnes, feding among the lilies. (4:5)
Her snowy neck like to a marble tower,	Thy necke <i>is</i> as the towre of Dauid buylt for defense: a thousand shields hang therein, <i>and</i> all the targates of the strong men. (4:4)
And all her body like a palace fair,	Thou art all faire, my loue, and there is no spot in thee. (4:7)
Ascending up with many a stately stair	How beautiful <i>are</i> thy goings with shoes, o princes daughter: the iointes of thy thighs <i>are</i> like iewels. (7.1)
To Honour's seat and Chastity's sweet bower.	Thy navel <i>is</i> as a rounde cuppe that wanteth not lickour: thy belly <i>is</i> as an heape of wheat compassed about with lilies. (7:2)
Why stand ye still, ye virgins, in amaze	O the fairest among women, whether <i>is</i> thy welbeloued gone? whether <i>is</i> thy welbeloued turned aside, that we may seke him with thee? (5:17)
Upon her so to gaze,	
Whiles ye forget your former lay to sing,	
To which the woods did answer and your echo ring?	

This is a blazon, a description, part by part, of a woman's beautiful features. The Song of Songs contains several of these kinds of description of the woman (as well as one of the man), and these descriptions, though apparently admiring, are not smooth. There are two things to consider about Spenser's blazon here, and they are both interesting problems created by Spenser's attempt to make a consistent aesthetic of order from the ambiguous material of the Song of Songs. First, Spenser's speaker has appropriated the feminine voice of the Song of Songs, in something of the same way that Venus took the man's words in *Venus and Adonis*. Whereas the daughters of Jerusalem are invited to gaze upon the man's body, here Spenser's speaker invites the merchants' daughters to look at his bride. This is one of the ways in which Spenser's sequence, despite its happy ending, fails to achieve the mutuality of the Song of Songs. Though the speaker lays himself bare in many ways, he never allows his readers' gaze to turn on him.<sup>29</sup> Second, Spenser's speaker makes a concerted effort to be smooth in his figurative language. Where, as we have seen, the Song of Songs moves between domains of reference and throws up figurative language that is difficult for the reader to understand, Spenser's speaker attempts to make the way easy for his readers. The comparisons do move between precious stones and fruit, but with a sense of orderliness, and it is clear how we are to take the figurative descriptions. For example, in line 177 here, the woman's neck is: 'like to a marble tower.' The idea of marble skin, smooth, fair and cool, is easy for readers to grasp. In the Song of Songs 7.4, the man describes the woman's neck as 'like a towre of yuorie.' But in 4.4, the woman's neck is: 'as the towre of Dauid buylt for defense: a thousand shieldes hang therein, and all the targates of the strong men,' a more difficult image to decipher. It is the same with other images in this description, which bear a close resemblance to the Song of Songs, yet are more straightforward in their application.

This becomes particularly interesting towards the end of the description, for Spenser finds himself in trouble attempting to finish his description in an orderly and decorous fashion. The standard pattern for a blazon is to move either up or (more usually) down the body. The description in Song of Songs 7 is unusual in moving upwards from the woman's feet. Here, Spenser goes down until he reaches the 'paps,' and then appears to reverse direction, visiting the marble neck, discovering that the whole body is 'like a palace fair,' and climbing some steps to conclude at 'Honour's

<sup>29</sup> See David J. A. Clines, 'Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?' in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). There is some analogy here with Clines' reading of the Song of Songs as a text in which a masculine milieu creates a 'feminine' persona for its own purposes, though, of course, Spenser's project is more sympathetic, and more spiritual, than Clines' proposal.

seat and Chastity's sweet bower,' an unspecified location. Noam Flinker apparently thinks this is on the face, but a literal understanding of the location of chastity's bower might place it lower, indicating that Spenser has not really reversed the direction of his blazon, or at least that, having reached the feet, he has not ascended as many of the 'stately' stairs as Flinker thinks.<sup>30</sup> This ambiguity resembles the circumlocution of the Song of Songs, especially 7.3: 'Thy navel *is* as a rounde cuppe that wanteth not lickour: thy belly *is* as an heape of wheat compassed about with lilies.' Here, the Hebrew word translated 'navel' may well mean 'vulva,' while the word for 'belly' includes 'womb,' and can refer to the whole body, or to its most central and intimate part. The ambiguity of this description of sacralized bodily beauty is marked, and I think related to the difficulty Spenser has in articulating mutuality when he is writing within a tradition that places one partner in the consistent position of looker and speaker, and the other as looked-at and silent. There is, here, a distinction between the Song of Songs itself and the interpretive tradition within which Spenser was working and which continued to develop as Renaissance Neoplatonism. The feminine, in this tradition, has a high place, but virtually no voice.

#### 4.4 John Donne

Human bodily love and the spiritual life are two of the primary concerns of Donne's poetry, and although it would seem at first an easy matter to divide his poems under these headings, with very little crossover, a closer reading reveals that he, like Spenser, was concerned with the relationship between sexual desire and spirituality.<sup>31</sup> He displays rather scant interest in beauty, in comparison with many other poets of his age, but he is interested in the gaze, and I want to look briefly at three poems here that concern the gaze, because they show us something of Donne's approach to beauty, and how the Song of Songs fed his thinking about it. These poems, like Spenser's give no voice to the object of the gaze, but the effects are rather different.

Like *Venus and Adonis*, 'To his mistress going to bed' is a profane poem about sexual desire that uses religious language, which heightens the urbanity and sophistication of its tone, gives a frisson of blasphemy, and possibly also suggests more serious questions about the relationship between bodily and spiritual love. The

<sup>30</sup> Flinker, *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature*, 86. Flinker also sees *Epithalamion* as less sexually daring than *Amoretti*: 'The balance between holy and carnal has likewise been resolved into honour, chastity and the amazement of the virgins. Courtship has yielded to the formalities of the wedding day', *ibid.* I am less sure that resolution has been achieved, or that sexual daring has retreated.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Gosse (ed.), *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1899), 124. Donne himself fostered this perception, drawing a distinction between his young self, 'Jack Donne,' and the older 'Dr Donne'.

poem is a monologue in which a man speaks to his mistress, urging her to get undressed and come to bed. Like Spenser's *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, the speaker thinks very highly of the beauty of the woman, and desires her; and, like Spenser, he sacralizes his relationship with her; unlike Spenser, his tone is knowing and comic. The poem contains imagery and *topoi* from a range of fields of reference, including geographical exploration, mining, classical *topoi* and fashion. Use of religious language is a prominent feature of Donne's poetry, as is the idea of the person as a microcosm, and they are linked here in a mock-religious scheme. This rather elegant couplet, which links the actions of the woman to the natural world, reminds the reader of classical poetry, of Petrarchan poetry, even of Chaucer; and also of the Song of Songs:

Your gown going off, such beautiful state reveals,  
As when from flowry meads the hills shadowe steales. (13-14, p.184)

This is, for Donne, an unusually beautiful couplet, and it links four of the core *topoi* of the Song of Songs: flowers, hills and shadows. In 2.1, the woman says 'I am the rose of the field, & the lily of the valleys,' and at 2.17 she urges her lover: 'Until the day break, & the shadows flee away: returne, my wellbeloued, & be like a roe, or a young hart upon the mountaines of Bethel.' Donne's speaker develops his identification of the woman with the world, with mounting excitement:

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,  
Before, behind, between, above, below.  
O my America! my new-found-land,  
My kingdom, safest when with one man man'd,  
My Mine of precious stones: My Emperie,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee!  
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;  
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be. (25-32)

Here, there is an intertextual connection with Song of Songs 8.6: 'set me as a seal on thine heart, & as a signet upon thine arm.' We see from the foregoing lines that where the speaker's 'hand is set' in this case is all over her body.<sup>32</sup>

At the poem's climax, Donne's speaker makes a coherent argument for a religion of the beautiful female body as the locus of carnal relations, with the speaker as chief priest with exclusive access to the holy of holies:

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Williams, *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 270. 'Seal' at this time could be both allusive of maidenhead, and of the marriage contract. In this sense, the consummation of marriage is linked to a seal, the woman's vagina analogous to the wax receiving the phallic stamp.

Like pictures, or like books gay coverings made  
 For lay-men, are all women thus array'd.  
 Themselves are mystick books, which only wee  
 (Whom their imputed grace will dignifie)  
 Must see reveal'd.

(39-43)

Like Spenser, rather than redirecting the carnal gaze to spiritual end, Donne's speaker is here proposing a spiritualization of the carnal itself; and he expresses this in terms of a mystical religion, whose books (books like the Song of Songs and Revelation) are written in a secret code that only the initiated can understand.

Like Spenser's speaker, though more overtly (and indeed with considerable relish), Donne's speaker objectifies the woman he speaks of. As in Spenser's sonnets, the mistress herself has no voice; and, unlike Spenser's speaker, her lover makes no claim to be interested in anything else other than her body. For him, her body is the height and centre of what there is of her.<sup>33</sup> However, we should note some ambiguity in the poet's treatment of his speaker, (not unlike Shakespeare's treatment of Venus and Adonis). While the speaker presents himself as a world adventurer, a king of all he surveys and a powerful persuader of his mistress, and while readers do not hear from her, it may be telling that, by the end of the poem, we are still not sure whether she is undressed yet. Moreover, the speaker reveals in the final couplet that he himself is already naked. Is he really as in control as he presents himself? Did she, in the end, disrobe and join him? Although Donne's speaker may leave no room for his mistress' voice in the poem, the poem itself leaves several courses of action open to her.

This poem experiments with a religion of the body, based on a man's exclusive access to his woman's body, and it also, I think, mocks the speaker who proposes it. He is certainly somewhat 'carried away' by his excitement. In 'The Extasie', by contrast, bodies are necessary, but souls are higher. Like 'To his mistress going to bed', 'The Extasie' evokes a countryside setting, somewhat reminiscent of the Song of Songs 2.3: 'like the apple tre among the trees of the forest, so is my welbeloued among the sonnes of men: vnder his shadow had I delite, & sate downe: and his fruite was swete vnto my mouth,' and 7.11-12: 'Come, my welbeloued, let vs go forthe into the field: let vs remaine in the villages. Let vs get vp early to the vines, let vs se if the vine florish, whether it hath budded the smale grape, or whether the pomegranates florish: there wil I giue thee my loue':

<sup>33</sup> Donne's poems express a variety of positions about this, from the apparently positive mutuality in *The good-morrow*, in which the male and female lovers' love appears to be 'mixt equally,' (19), or *The undertaking*, which imagines the possibility that the lovers can 'forget the Hee and Shee,' (20) through the highly ambiguous *Aire and Angels*, which asserts that: 'Just such disparitie / As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie, / T'wixt womens love, and mens will ever bee,' (26-28) to the misogynistic *Loves Alchymie*, which urges: 'Hope not for minde in women; at their best, / Sweetnesse, and wit they're, but, *Mummy*, possest.' (23-24).

Where, like a pillow on a bed,  
 A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest  
 The violets reclining head,  
 Sat we two, one anothers best...

(1-4, p.99)

The connection between the natural setting and the bed also recalls the Song of Songs 1.15: 'my welbeloued, beholde, thou art faire and pleasant: also our bed is grene.'

In this poem, Donne expresses a profound interest in mutuality and its bodily manifestation by means of a mutual gaze.<sup>34</sup> The lovers spend all day on the bank, looking at each other and experiencing a mutuality that transcends their individual identities. I shall return to 'The Extasie' in Chapter 5, but for now, it is important to stress that, for all the bravura of the speaker in 'To his mistress going to bed', Donne is much more profoundly interested in mutuality than he is in beauty.<sup>35</sup> Though he is interested in bodies, he is not generally particularly interested in describing their beauty, and so when we come to Donne's sacred verse, we find that Christ's beauty, whether bodily or heavenly, is not a major focus.<sup>36</sup> In *Holy Sonnet* 13, Donne does consider the beauty of Christ on the cross, and provides a scheme very similar to Lanyer's:

Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,  
 The picture of Christ crucified, and tell  
 Whether his countenance can thee affright,  
 Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light,  
 Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell  
 And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,  
 Which pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight?  
 No, no; but as in my idolatrie  
 I said to all my profane mistresses,  
 Beauty, of pittie, foulnesse onely is  
 A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,  
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,  
 This beauteous forme assumes a pitious minde.

(2-14, p.442-3)

<sup>34</sup> Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), ix-x. Carey, interestingly, thinks that this lack of interest in the physical appearance of the women his poems address inhibits the potential for mutuality in Donne's poetry: 'In some respects, Donne isn't a love poet at all. The physical characteristics of the woman he's supposed to be talking to don't concern him. Nor does her personality: it is completely obliterated by Donne's.' I am not so sure. It may be that, in not delineating his interlocutor, he leaves her space to be herself and freedom to respond to him as she will.

<sup>36</sup> R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 563-67. Evidence from Donne's will, which is transcribed in full in Bald, shows that he was very interested in art, as he owned a substantial collection of paintings of biblical figures, which hung in his dining room, study and chamber, among other places, suggesting that he may have meditated upon these visual images. He also, famously, sat for a painting of himself in his death shroud; another instance of Donne's acute interest in and engagement with visual images.



Once again, there is a strong focus on the eyes, which give out 'amazing light,' but are quenched on the cross. Once again, Christ on the cross is asserted as beautiful, but the reader is not given a beautiful picture. It is not that Christ's beauty attracts the speaker, who then realizes how good Christ is, but rather Christ's goodness (his 'pitty' in the poem), in the form of loving self-sacrifice, is what his beauty consists in. But, although Donne's scheme is very similar to Lanyer's, the Song of Songs has no place in it. Its language of beauty does not appear to have resonated with Donne outside the context of carnal love relations.

#### 4.5 **Richard Crashaw**

As with Southwell and Lanyer, the Song of Songs' language of beauty is an integrated intertext in Crashaw's work, and is religious. His use is perhaps more extensive and pervasive than Southwell's, and less controlled and logical than Lanyer's. This is, of course, partly because Lanyer's extant work consists of one integrated book of poetry, whereas, for Crashaw, we have collections of independent poems. Nonetheless, we may say that Crashaw's use of the Song is less programmatic than Lanyer's, and this is partly because he exploits the synaesthetic elements of the Song more than Lanyer does. All of these poets aim to move their readers, and use evocative and sensual language to do so. This is a key feature of the seventeenth-century religious lyric, and, as I have noted, is linked to meditative practices, and to intertextuality with secular love poetry traditions. Crashaw takes the use of sensual language in religious poetry further than any of the others, and the Song of Songs is an important source for him.

We may see this at its joyful height in *To the name above every name, the name of Jesus*. This poem evokes all the senses in its contemplation of the name, to create an exuberant lyric, subtitled a 'hymn.' This is an incarnational poem, responding to the biblical idea that the name of God may not be spoken by humankind. In the Old Testament, this prohibition is a sign of the utter transcendence of God. For Christians, it is only the incarnation that can bridge this gulf between God and humankind, so that the name of Jesus is the name of God that can be spoken, and the incarnation is what enables this to happen. Crashaw's work is intensely concerned with interpenetration, with porousness and the possibility for exchange, and in writing a hymn to the name of Jesus, he is celebrating the crossing of the divine into human language. But a name, unlike a body, is not a physical entity, so while this hymn uses highly figurative language to conjure up images of beauty and sensuousness, it does not anchor them in Christ's body. The following passages, at fig. 5, are typical, and show how the Song

of Songs takes its place within this language of sensual beauty. The poet is encouraging his readers to look out for the arrival of the name.

Fig. 5	
<i>To the name above every name, the name of Jesus</i>	<i>Song of Songs</i>
Lo, where Aloft it comes! It comes, Among The Conduct of Adoring SPIRITS, that throng Like diligent Bees, And swarm about it. O they are wise: and know what SWEETES are suck't from out it.	
It is the Hive,	Thy lippes, <i>my</i> spouse, droppe as honie combes: honie and milke are vnder thy tongue. (4:11)
By which they thrive, Where All their Hoard of Hony lyes.	
Lo where it comes, upon The snowy DOVE'S	My dooue, that art in the holes of the rocke, in the secret places of the staires, shewe me thy sight, let me heare thy voice: for thy voyce is swete, and thy sight comelie. (2:14)
Soft Back; And brings a Bosom big with Loves. (150-159)	
O dissipate thy spicy Powres	Who is she that commeth vp out of the wildernes like pillars of smoke perfumed with myrrhe and incense, & with all the spices of the marchant? (3:6)
(Clowd of condensed sweets) and break upon us	
In balmy shows; O fill our senses, And take from us All force of so Prophane a Fallacy To think ought sweet but that which smells of Thee ... (167-172)	
SWEET NAME, in Thy each Syllable A Thousand Blest ARABIAS dwell; A Thousand Hills of Frankincense;	O my welbeloued, flee away, and be like vnto the roe, or to the yong heart vpon ye mountaines of spices. (8:14)
Mountains of myrrh, and Beds of spices, And ten Thousand PARADISES. (183-187)	His chekes are as a bed of spices. (5:13) Vntil the day breake, and the shadows flee away, I wil go into the mountaine of myrrhe and to the mountaine of incense. (4:6)

In the Song of Songs, these images of doves, honey, hills of frankincense, mountains of myrrh and paradise, are applied to the bodies of the two lovers. For Crashaw, the incarnation allows the poetic terms of perfect beauty to be applied to the divine.

However, while Crashaw has a joyfully beautiful poem on the name of Christ, when it comes to Christ's body, he focuses much more strongly on the cross. The foot of the cross is a favourite location for Crashaw, and this is often, in the tradition, a feminized and specifically Marian subject position. The tradition begins in the Gospels, which give women including the Blessed Virgin and the daughters of Jerusalem a prominent role at the Passion, and also present women including Mary Magdalene visiting the tomb in order to tend Jesus' body (Matt. 27.55-56, 27.61-28.8; Mark 15.40-41, 15.47-16.8; Luke 23.49, 23.55-24.12; John 19.25-27, 20.1-18). These traditions grew, with, for example, the devotion of the Seven Sorrows of the virgin and hugely important hymn *Stabat mater dolorosa*, which reflects on Mary at the foot of the cross and was in wide use from the later Middle Ages.<sup>37</sup> Crashaw exploits the full potential of the grotesque and visceral impact of witnessing Christ on the cross. Crashaw follows other writers of seventeenth-century religious lyric in drawing on classical, courtly, Petrarchan and Neoplatonic material, as well as on biblical language, to involve his readers in the emotion of the scene, and it is the intensely synaesthetic character of Crashaw's treatment distinguishes his work. This synaesthetic quality is, as I have noted, a key feature of the Song of Songs. As we have seen in his poems on Teresa of Avila, Crashaw has a special focus on the *topos* of the wound of love (pp. 102-5). In *Steps to the Temple* there is a series of four poems handling the wounds of love suffered by Christ. 'On the wounds of our crucified Lord' begins the sequence:

O these wakefull wounds of thine!  
Are they Mouthes? or are they eyes?  
Be they Mouthes, or be they eyne,  
Each bleeding part some one supplies.

Lo! a mouth, whose full-bloom'd lips  
At too deare a rate are roses.  
Lo! a blood-shot eye! that weepes,  
And many a cruell teare discloses.

(1-8, p.24)

The Song of Songs presents both eyes and mouths as instruments of communication. The eyes can express: 'thine eies *are like* the dooues' (4.1); they can facilitate communication: 'shewe mee thy sight, let mee heare thy voice: for thy voyce is swete, and thy sight comelie' (2.14); and they can wound: 'thou hast wounded mine heart with one of thine eyes' (4.9). The mouth can speak: 'thy lippes are like a threde of skarlet &

<sup>37</sup> Michael Walsh, *A Dictionary of Devotions* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1993), 248.

thy talke is comelie' (4.3); it can eat and drink: 'I ate mine honie combe with mine honie, I dranke my wine with my milke' (5.1); and it can kiss: 'Let him kisse me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy loue is better then wine' (1.1). In all these ways, eyes and mouths are synaesthetic, operating on multiple sensory levels. They are also sites of porousness on the body, and it is this potential for intermingling that Crashaw particularly exploits in his incarnational theology.<sup>38</sup> He has a strong interest in the exchange of fluids, seen in various poems. In the *Song of Songs*, fluids often mix, including milk, honey, water, wine and myrrh. The tradition of interpretation of the *Song of Songs* introduced blood into the mix, a substance entirely absent from the *Song of Songs*, and poets like Crashaw make the most of this. Here, 'On the wounds...' ends by balancing the drops of Christ's blood with the tears of the poem's addressee:

The difference onely this appeares,  
(Nor can the change offend)  
The debt is paid in *Ruby*-Teares,  
Which thou in *Pearles* did'st lend. (17-20)

The second, short, poem in this sequence is 'On our crucified Lord naked and bloody', and here the speaker ponders the 'garment' of Christ's blood, which he wore at his crucifixion. We have already seen Lanyer linking Christ's 'bloody side' with the clothes put on him at his trial, and Crashaw makes the same move. This time, Christ's wound is 'the purple wardrobe of thy side.' (4, p.24) The third poem takes the reader to 'Easter-Day', where, as in Lanyer, the risen Christ appears in glory, with no more talk of wounds. Crashaw uses high-flown language, but it is more theoretical and less aesthetic than in the poems handling wounds, expounding the meaning of what he is presenting, rather than evoking a sensual and emotional response to what he sees. The poem ends:

Nor is Death forc't; for, may hee ly  
Thron'd in thy Grave;  
Death will on this condition be content to Dy. (16-18, p.26)

There is no vision of Christ's risen body such as we get in Lanyer. Moreover, this poem is not the glorious end of the sequence, for Crashaw returns to the cross in the next poem, 'On the bleeding wounds of our crucified Lord'. Once more, as Crashaw observes the scene, it is its liquid content that grips him:

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<sup>38</sup> See Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 26-35; Richard Rambuss, 'Sacred Subjects and the Aversive Metaphysical Conceit: Crashaw, Serrano, Ofili', *English Literary History* 71 (2004). Crashaw's interest in porousness is discussed in detail.

Jesu, no more, it is full tide.  
From thy hands and from thy feet,  
From thy head, and from thy side,  
All thy *Purple Rivers* meet.

(1-4, p.111)

The river becomes a flood in which all the faithful drown:

A deluge of deliverance,  
A deluge least we should be drown'd.'

(39-40)

There have been some hints during this sequence, including in 'Easter-day', of the poetic language of beauty, and in the final couplet of this poem, the paradox of joy and grief, of beauty and the grotesque, is explained with a quotation from the Song of Songs, 4.15; 'o fountaine of the gardens, o well of liuing waters':

Nere was't thou in a sence so sadly true,  
The well of living Waters, Lord, till now.

(41-2)

I have shown Crashaw embracing the vulnerability and passivity of assuming the feminine position. Here, he seems to relish the painful Passion more than the glorious Resurrection, certainly in emotional terms, for it is here where Crashaw brings the evocative and synaesthetic language of the Song of Songs into play, and not in 'Easter-Day'.<sup>39</sup>

A comparison of how Crashaw uses the language of beauty in the Song of Songs with the practice of the other poets in this series shows two significant things. First, Crashaw's use of synaesthetic techniques is the most thoroughgoing of all the poets. This mingling of senses allows for a number of results. First, it heightens the affective quality of the work. Poetic theory of the time was virtually unanimous in holding that the poet's job was to 'teach and delight' his readers.<sup>40</sup> Crashaw, perhaps supremely, delighted in moving his readers. Second, in the Song of Songs, evoking synaesthetic responses complicates things for the reader, and can be confusing. At the poem's key moment of union between the lovers, for example, the man describes their coming together in multisensory terms: 'I am come into my garden, my sister, my

<sup>39</sup> Crashaw also visits Mary at the foot of the cross, in *Sancta Maria Dolorum*, and once again he concentrates on mutuality by means of exchange of fluids. This poem has even less physical description than the ones we have been looking at. I consider it further on pp. 136-7.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or the Defence of Poesy)* ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, revised and expanded R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). Sidney says that the end of poetry is 'to teach and delight,' (86) and later explains that in order for this to happen, the reader must be moved: 'for who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught?' (94).

spouse: I gathered my myrrhe with my spice: I ate mine honie combe with mine honie, I dranke my wine with my milke' (5.1). The climactic effect is created by this assault on the senses, but the literal level of his utterance is obscure. Similarly, Crashaw's enthusiastic multisensory approach can make it difficult for the reader to understand rationally what he is saying. On the one hand, *To the name* is a joyous confirmation that truth is possible in human speech because of the incarnation; on the other, the exuberant and evocative language raises the possibility that anything might be said; in which case, how is the reader to know what precisely is being said? This impression is strengthened by the fact that Crashaw outdoes the language of the Song of Songs. Where the Song had one hill of frankincense, Crashaw has a thousand, and 'ten thousand paradises' (183, 185). Since the Song is meant to be the sublime expression of God's Word, what may Crashaw hope to achieve by overgoing it?

Second, it is interesting that, for all Crashaw's enthusiasm, and thoroughly incarnational theology, he does not present a vision of the bodily risen Christ. Indeed, of the poets in this series, only Lanyer does. While both poets use the language of the Song of Songs in poems about Christ, Crashaw's use of the Song is more extensive than Lanyer's when he considers Christ's suffering body. Both poets write joyful poems about Christ, Lanyer focusing on Christ's risen body and Crashaw on his name. I shall consider some of the implications of this point in Chapter 6.

## 5 **Conclusions**

In the Song of Songs, beauty is important; especially the beauty of the human body. The Song's treatment of beauty raises several questions. First, because of the figurative language used, what is the relationship between the human body and the world? Second, because of the enigma created by the figurative language, in what does beauty actually consist? Third, because, for the speakers, the lover's beauty seems to be a reason for loving, what is the value of beauty, and what is its connection to virtue? Finally, what role does beauty have in relationship? It is not the same thing to be the gazer and to be the object of the gaze. How can people negotiate this difference to achieve a mutual vision?

For all the poets in the series, the relationship between the human body and the world is important, and this is one of the key links between the profane poetry of Shakespeare and Donne and the religious poetry in this chapter. The goddess Venus describes her own body as a 'little world,' and her failure to persuade Adonis to enter that world results in a universal curse on love. While she is failing in her quest, Venus is a comic character, the gap between her own self-presentation and Adonis'

resistance making her ridiculous; but her grief restores both her gravitas as a character and her divine power. Donne's speaker in 'To his mistress going to bed' is also made ridiculous by his hyperbolic claims about his mistress' body, which is not just a beautiful body, but a 'new-found land.' His attempt to found a secret religion of the female body is comic; but it, too, raises questions about the global significance of the human body; and for both of these poems, those questions concern mutuality.

The religious poetry of Southwell, Spenser, Lanyer and Donne all emphasizes the critical importance of re-training the eye of the beholder to perceive true beauty within a spiritual framework. For Southwell, Lanyer and Donne, this entails not only a new method of perception, but also a new object of the gaze; specifically, Christ. Here, the Song of Songs provides the model for subjecting a male body to one's gaze, and they all use this model, though Lanyer is the most thoroughgoing, both in her training programme for her readers and in her focus on Christ's body. It is only Lanyer who makes use of Christ's risen, but not yet ascended, body as the locus of incarnate spiritual beauty. The thoroughness of Lanyer's scheme may well be to do with the fact that her work is a unified book of poetry, designed to be read as a single whole; but it also appears to owe something to detailed reflection on what it is to be the object of the gaze, as well as on the power of the gaze itself.

Spenser's scheme is different. He, like the others, attaches great importance to the need to re-train the eye, but he does not re-focus the gaze on Christ. In some senses, this makes his understanding of beauty the fullest synthesis of earthly and spiritual; his appreciation of the beauty of his lover is the focus throughout, and her virtue teaches him to appreciate that beauty properly. However, because the human body of the beloved is not displaced here, something is lost. On the one hand, it is Christ. Because the speaker's gaze remains on the woman's body, Spenser's scheme lacks the Christological weight of the others'. On the other, the woman herself becomes trapped as the object of the gaze. 'Standing in,' as it were, for Christ, she is divinized; yet she is not a goddess, but a woman; and it is significant that her consistent position as object of the gaze, while it elevates her, also silences her. This is the opposite of the feminine abjection we saw Donne struggling to achieve (pp. 95-101), and both positions appear to present a barrier to mutuality.

Finally, Crashaw explores the synaesthetic qualities of the language of the Song of Songs in his rendering of a beauty that is at once highly evocative and sensual, and remarkably unspecific. Where Shakespeare and Donne found that considering the beautiful human body involved thinking about the cosmos, for Crashaw, the different cosmic elements seem to leak into each other in the spiritual experience.



For all of these poets, thinking about beauty entails thinking about mutuality, and this moves us into the territory of the next chapter: desire.

## CHAPTER 5: DESIRE

### 1 Introduction

For the Song of Songs, and for the poets in this study, one of the most important things about beauty is that it attracts and inspires desire. In the previous chapter, a study of the use of the Song of Songs in relation to beauty led consistently to the consideration of the power of beauty to attract, particularly through the *topos* of the gaze, and thereby into discussion about mutuality. This chapter considers desire in more depth. Beauty and love are indeed so closely linked that there will be considerable reference back to the previous discussion, but each topic deserves its own chapter, not least in order to tease out their connections.

First, I need to justify my use of the term 'desire,' for it would seem initially more obvious to have used 'love.' 'Love' is a broad term in English, covering, for example, at least four terms in ancient Greek - *agape*, *philos*, *charitas* and *eros* - and poets of this period use the Song of Songs in their treatment of all four of these kinds of love. According to the *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, the etymological root of *agape* is obscure, but its use in the New Testament is distinctive, denoting the most reasoned form of love, in which one holds the beloved in high esteem. *Philos* is friendship, marked by kindly attitude and good will. In Greek philosophy, especially Aristotelian, it developed into an elaborate concept of mutually exclusive amity between a defined group of equals. *Charis* is 'the quality of that which is attractive and gives joy,' and usually refers in classical Greek to a subjective disposition of goodwill; hence its suitability for describing the Old Testament concept of the Lord's favour. It also necessarily inspires gratitude on the part of its recipient. It is easy to see how this concept was amenable to Christian theological usage, particularly in relation to the concept of grace. *Eros* does not appear in the New Testament at all. It is the love that is furthest away from reason, which is, of course, why the god Eros and his Roman counterpart, Cupid, are often depicted as blind. While the *Theological Lexicon* defines these four loves precisely and in clear distinction from each other, their practical use, certainly outside the New Testament, if not within it, is often decidedly more involved and sometimes confused. The absence of a New Testament usage of *eros* might be understood as condemnation of it, but this is the kind of argument from silence that has only limited value, especially in view of the instability of different words for love down the ages and across languages.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. James D. Ernest, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 8-22.

The kind of love that the Song of Songs itself expresses is, on the 'literal' level, closest to *eros*, describing as it does the desire for sensual physical contact between two people; on the allegorical level, it is usually read as being *charitas*. The desire of *eros* has been used in culture and literature to explore the nature of desire more broadly; sexual desire functions in Western culture as a kind of touchstone of desire. This can be reductive, so that all forms of desire are seen as, at bottom, manifestations of sexual desire. This formula has been very prevalent towards the end of the twentieth century, but while sexual desire has been seen down the ages characteristically as a touchstone for desire, desire has not always been seen as exclusively sexual. The early seventeenth century was as interested in sex as any period, but its understanding of the relationship between sexual desire, desire more broadly and love, was by no means simplistic. As this chapter is particularly concerned with the attracting impulse of desire, and as this will include sexual desire and desire of other kinds, I have chosen 'desire' as its title rather than 'love' or 'eros.'

There are four related oppositions, or paradoxes, involved in desire as an impulse of attraction, that need to be highlighted here. First, desire is involuntary, and yet it is a matter of the will. Desire is not something a person chooses to experience, and in its intense forms it can seem to overcome a person and dictate actions independently of the person's reason. Yet the ability to override, or to control, or to direct, or even to stimulate desire is an essential attribute of the human will, and is particularly important in enabling a human being to act morally.

Second, because it is involuntary, desire is experienced as external to the self, often as an alien force attempting to take over the person in its throes. Yet a person's desires are also experienced as the core of her or his being. What one desires, in the end, is fulfilment, and it is oneself that one desires to be fulfilled.

Third, desire has an object that is external to the self. However, in the kind of desire we are dealing with here, the desire is not only to possess and enjoy the desired other, but also for one's own desire to be reciprocated. Roger Scruton, in his definition of sexual desire, points out this key difference between desiring a dish of carrots (the feelings of the dish of carrots are irrelevant) and desiring a person (the feelings of the desired person are perceived to be a crucial component in what is going on: even though one cannot control, or even know, those feelings, one desires to be desired by the person).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, though what is desired is, by definition 'other,' very often desire

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1986), 74-83. 'We may now put together our two major observations: first, that desire is directed towards the embodiment of the other ... Secondly, that it has an inherently individualising intentionality. Both point in the same direction: both invite us to see the other's perspective as a fundamental part of the object of desire,' (82).

is motivated by a sense of likeness to, even identity with, the desired object. The other reflects the self, or is even felt to be a part of the self. Desire is desire for mutuality, and mutuality implies both multiplicity of persons and unity of experience and focus.

Fourth, desire is physiological, elemental, even animal.<sup>3</sup> However, the emotions provoked by desire - in particular, delight and torment, anticipation and doubt, fulfilment and frustration – are only possible because of specifically human consciousness. Desire, in other words, exists at the threshold where our animal and human natures meet, at the point when consciousness begins or ends. It is these four paradoxes that the poets considered in this chapter wrestle with and exploit.

This chapter, like the previous two, begins with a brief consideration of desire in the Bible and the Song of Songs, before analysing how Aemilia Lanyer treats desire and the role of the Song of Songs in her treatment, and then broadening out the discussion to other poets of the early modern period.

## **2      *The Bible***

### **2.1    *The Bible***

Two classes of desire are dealt with in the Bible: desire between human beings and desire between humans and God. Desire between humans is characteristically handled in narrative, while desire between humans and God is more frequently to be found in poetry, especially the Psalms and the Prophets.

The Bible is ambiguous about human sexual desire, as it is about feminine voices and about human physical beauty. It is human sexual desire, inspired by human physical beauty, that causes David to sin in the Bathsheba affair; but the desire for offspring that the patriarchs and many biblical women have is presented positively, and relies upon sexual desire for its fulfilment. Nowhere is this ambiguity more complex than in the story of Adam and Eve. While the sex act is not referred to until Gen. 4.1, God's first blessing on humankind implies it: 'and God blessed them, and God said to them, Bring forth the fruite and multiplie, and fil the earth' (Gen. 1.28). This is in the context of blessing, but in the second version of the creation of humankind, sexual desire appears within a curse: 'vnto the woman he said, I wil greatly increase thy sorowes, & thy conceptions. In sorowe shalt thou bring forth the children, and thy desire *shal be subiect* to thine housband, and he shal rule ouer thee' (Gen. 3.16). This curse

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<sup>3</sup> Scruton (Ibid., 59-61) insists that animals cannot experience sexual desire, precisely because they lack human consciousness. It is not my purpose here to make categorical statements about differences between animal and human nature. I have set out the opposition in this paragraph purely to emphasize the importance of the threshold of human consciousness in the experience of human desire.

is highly ambiguous, for it is hard to tell whether Eve's desire for her husband is part of the curse, or in itself a blessing, complicated by the curse of subjection.

Human desire is not always sexual in the Bible. The term used for 'desire' in Gen. 3.16 is particularly intriguing in this respect, for it occurs only three times in the Bible. This is the first, and the third is in the Song of Songs, where it comes within a joyous assertion of mutual love: 'I am my welbeloueds, and his desire is toward me' (7.10). Here also, its meaning includes sexual desire; but its second use, in Gen. 4, is not sexual. This is the story of Cain and Abel, when Cain is angry because his offering has not pleased God, in contrast to his brother's. God speaks to Cain:

Then ye Lord said vnto Kain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance cast downe? If thou do wel, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not wel, sinne lieth at the dore: also vnto thee his desire *shalbe subiect*, and thou shalt rule ouer him. (4.6-7)

In this instance, God personifies sin, characterizing it as a prowler and ascribing to it desire to possess Cain. Here, desire is a strong force that seems to come from outside the person and take over. Yet God is clear that Cain has the power to master this invasion – according to God, this desire should be subject to Cain's will. Cain ignores God's advice and kills Abel, and God maintains that Cain is responsible for his actions, and punishes him accordingly. In this story, the questions of whether desire is internal or external, and what power the human will has to control it, are at issue.

In the New Testament, attitudes towards sexual desire are more consistently negative, especially in the Pauline material, which appears to present sexual abstinence as the best course of action, if a person is capable of it. However, other forms of love are celebrated: in particular, the friendship between apostles and disciples, and the desire that communities of Christians have to be together.<sup>4</sup>

Desire relating to God is more typically found in biblical poetry, and some of the strongest expressions of desire between humans and God come in the Psalms. For the Bible, and for its ideal readers, a large part of human desire (and indeed the best part of it) is bound up with God. The fulfilment of this desire is typically described as the

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<sup>4</sup> In Matt. 19.1-12, Jesus is positive about marriage, but responds to the disciples' comment that, if divorce is such a bad thing it would be better not to marry by saying: 'there are some chaste, which were so borne of *their* mothers bellie: and there be some chaste, which be made chaste by men: & there be some chaste, which haue made them selues chaste for the kingdome of heauen. He that is able to receiue *this*, let him receiue it.' (12) For Paul, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 1988), 54. The main place where Paul appears to promote an ascetic way is 1 Cor. 7, which Brown notes is 'the one chapter that was to determine all Christian thought on marriage and celibacy for well over a millennium.'

person receiving God's favour, and in the Psalms, the human speakers desire God's favour in several typical forms including vindication (e.g. Ps. 17.1-2), vengeance (Ps. 17.13), relief from torment (Ps. 22.1-2), secure refuge (Ps. 17.7-8), delight at receiving God's favour (Ps. 63.3-5), and, finally, simple desire for God, expressed sometimes, as here, in language like that of human lovers:

As the hart braieth for the riuers of water, so panteth my soule after thee, o God. My soule thirsteth for God, *euen* for the liuing God: when shal I come and appeare *before* the presence of God? (Ps. 42.1-2)

This last example resembles many of the expressions of desire in the Song of Songs: desire for mutuality and togetherness. In the other examples, the Psalmist tries to describe his desire by means of its results, but here, it is simply to be in the presence of God that is the beginning and end of the desire. Most typically, God's favour is presented as God turning his face towards the favoured person, as in the passage above, where the height of the desire is to behold God's face. Hence, in Psalms like Psalm 22, it is the fact that God has not answered the Psalmist's cry that causes greatest anguish.

The potential for mutuality between humans and God is complicated by the fact that the Bible insists on the vast gulf between God and humans, and between divine experience and human experience:

For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, nether *are* your waies my waies, saith the Lord. For as the heauens are hier then the earth, so are my waies hier then your waies, and my thoughts about your thoughts. (Isa. 55.8-9)

On the one hand, God's utter transcendence and self-sufficiency would seem to negate the possibility of mutuality between humans and God. In particular, there is a discrepancy of need, for while humans rely totally on God, God, surely, cannot need anything from humans. Yet God does desire in the Bible, and he desires things of humans. In Hosea, he says:

For I desired mercie, & not sacrifice, & the knowledge of God more then burnt offrings. (Hos. 6.6)

Human beings seem to be aware of this, at least sometimes. Humans recognize that God's steadfast love shown to them is the model for their own loving behaviour, but they find it difficult to achieve, because their will often succumbs to capricious desire. In the Psalms, we see the speakers trying not only to articulate a relationship to God, but

also to train the self, to bring the will to bear to direct human desire toward God, in order to gain his favour. This is precisely the sort of activity God advised Cain to do, and it is at work in Psalm 51. In this Psalm the process of repentance is outlined. The speaker begins by begging for mercy, expressing belief in God's steadfast love and recognizing the full horror of his sins, and his awareness that God knows it all. He goes on to ask God to purge him, and then to give him wisdom, so that he may go on to teach other sinners about God. There is a conscious effort to place human desire under the direction of God. On the one hand, God's favour is truly the deepest desire of this person. On the other, it is a desire that he cannot sustain involuntarily, but must attempt to train. Paradoxically, he must place his deepest desires under God's control in order to fulfil them.

Human desire in the Bible, then, is focused on another person, or on God. It is a powerful motivating force, which is at once part of the person's deepest essence, and yet also an invading force from outside. It is, and is not, controllable by the will. It is capricious, yet it is essential. It is at the core of the self, yet it is focused on the other. It is sometimes discussed in terms of human sexual desire, about which the Bible is ambiguous; it is also handled outside the context of sexual desire.

## **2.2    *The Song of Songs***

The main content of the Song of Songs is the expression of desire, from its first words: 'let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.'<sup>5</sup> This desire is expressed within the context, and in the terms, of sexual desire. The woman's desire is for carnal physical contact, but opportunities to come together are fleeting, and punctuated by anguish at being apart, and by searching for one another. The lovers' desire seems to encompass the world for them. Their desire appears in various settings, and the lovers themselves merge into those settings, 'becoming' animals, plants and a garden at various points. Desire is either inspired by, or justified by, the beauty of the beloved; it is not made clear which.

While the speakers in the Song of Songs are usually positive about desire, there are ambiguities in the presentation of desire in this book, too. The speakers find that desire can lead to danger and even self-loss:

I opened to my welbeloued: but my welbeloued was gone, & past: mine heart was gone when he did speake: I soght him, but I colde not finde him: I called him, but he answered me not. The watchemen that went about the citie, founde

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<sup>5</sup> For an outline of what the feminine voice of the Song of Songs has to say about desire, see pp. 58-60.

me: they smote me & wounded me: the watchmen of the walles toke away my  
vaile from me; (5.6-7)

Turne away thine eyes from me: for they ouercome mee. (6.4)

At times they say that their love is exclusively mutual:

I am my welbeloueds, and his desire is toward me; (7.10)

My sister my spouse *is* as a garden inclosed, as a spring shut vp, *and* a  
fountaine sealed vp. (4.12)

On one occasion, however, she describes him to the daughters of Jerusalem in such a way that they want to join her in her search for him, and she appears content with this. Moreover, at the moment of their most intimate coming together, in her sealed garden, he invites some friends to join them:

I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I gathered my myrrhe with my  
spice: I ate mine honie combe with mine honie, I dranke my wine with my milke:  
eat, o friends, drinke, and make you mery, o welbeloued. (5.1)

Desire in the Song of Songs begins from sexual desire, but broadens out to include various natural and built environments, friends and family. This inclusiveness could be taken to signify that sexual desire is seen as the fundamental and all-encompassing element of desire more generally. Yet, equally, it is possible that the Song discusses the general *topos* of desire in terms of one of its standard and most intense manifestations. The question of whether the Song's vision of desire includes spiritual or religious elements is complicated by the fact that the Song does not appear to mention God. There is one particle of one word that can be understood as a reference to God: when the Song describes love as 'a vehement flame' at 8.6, the term used ends 'yah', and so the word can be translated as 'flame of God'.<sup>6</sup> It is also striking that the woman's description of her beloved at 5.10-16, when she likens him to various stones, can make him sound rather like a statue, or even an idol.<sup>7</sup> Yet the Song's lack

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 253-54; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 191-92.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Marvin H. Pope, *The Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 533-50. 'The closest biblical parallel to this line is frequently ignored by commentators, apparently because it suggests an unwelcome line of interpretation. The vision of the great and shining image which Nebuchadnezzar saw in his troubled dream had a head of fine gold, Dan 2:32, whereas in Daniel's own vision of a similar image composed of various shiny metals and



of explicit reference to religion or spiritual love, coupled with its place in Scripture, adds to the biblical ambiguity about sexual desire, and to the Song's enigmatic character as a text. It is open to the reader to understand its expression of sexual desire as an example allowing discussion of non-sexual desire by analogy: to understand it as presenting sexual desire as the fundamental essence of the human experience of desire, the Rome to which all roads lead; or to understand it as one part of the human experience of desire, with its place alongside and in relation to other kinds of desire.

The Song of Songs is idiosyncratic in the Bible in the way it handles desire. Desire between men and women, especially sexual desire, is usually treated in the Bible in narrative, and is therefore handled primarily in terms of events and outcomes, rather than expression of emotion. Where the Bible does express the emotion of desire, this is predominantly in poetry, and concerns the desire between humanity and God (though this can be expressed in the terms of human desire). What makes the Song of Songs unusual is that it expresses in depth what human loving desire feels like without explicitly applying this to desire for God; and thus, as part of the canon of Scripture, it opens the way for its readers to connect human carnal desire and human divine desire. One of the most interesting aspects of studying how people have read the Song of Songs is to uncover the ways in which they have configured this connection. This is true in all periods, and certainly in the early modern era.

### 3 ***Aemilia Lanyer and desire***

I have noted that the engine of Lanyer's rhetorical strategy in her work is the bride of Christ *topos*. We have seen how this subject position is empowering for the person who adopts it, and how to become the bride of Christ entails retraining the eyes to perceive beauty properly. It is now time to consider what it is that makes Christ desirable as a bridegroom, and what the relationship between Christ and his reader/brides is like. Once again, the Song of Songs is a key part of the matrix of biblical texts that authorizes the bride of Christ *topos*, and once again, Lanyer's use of the Song of Songs as a specific intertext is carefully managed. The following analysis begins with the bride of Christ *topos*, and specific intertextual connection with the Song of Songs comes later, reflecting Lanyer's use of the Song's language of desire in her work.

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precious stones, Dan 10:5, the loins are golden,' (535). 'A relevant consideration ... is the use of magical statues in conjunction with incantations for healing. The incantation intended to make the ailing human as clean and healthy and shiny bright as the magical statue of the deity which was composed of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, marble, and other beautiful and bright materials,' (547).

### 3.1 *Mutual desire in the spiritual marriage*

The practicalities of marriage were complicated in early modern England. On the one hand, most people expected that they would marry; on the other, young people were discouraged from marrying until they had the means to set up a household, and this meant that courtships could be long and unstable. There is some evidence of arranged marriage, especially higher up the social scale, but society in general appeared to agree that compatibility and affection between the partners was as important as their financial and social situation.<sup>8</sup> Marriage was both personal and social, and when choosing a partner, people expected to consult their own feelings and also to assess the social and material benefits that the marriage would be likely to bring. The introductory remarks to the wedding liturgy give three reasons for marriage, the third being 'for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other.' Later, each partner promises to love the other.<sup>9</sup> The liturgy also makes a direct connection between mystical marriage and human marriage, asserting that marriage signifies 'unto us the mystical union, that is betwixt Christ and his Church.' Lanyer's portrayal of the spiritual marriage is definitely of a love relationship – but what kind?

The first point to note is that Lanyer shows a love that comes initially from Christ, whose love graces the person to return that love. The process is clarified near the start of the main poem, as Lanyer explains what has happened to her model reader/bride, the Countess of Cumberland, who has been graced by Christ:

And thou (deere Ladie) by his speciall grace,  
In these his creatures dost behold his face.

Whose all-reviving beautie, yeelds such joyes  
To thy sad Soule, plunged in waves of woe,  
That worldly pleasures seemes to thee as toyes,  
Onely thou seek'st Eternitie to know,  
Respecting not the infinite annoyas  
That Satan to thy well-staid mind can show;  
Ne can he quench in thee, the Spirit of Grace,  
Nor draw thee from beholding Heavens bright face.

Thy Mind so perfect by thy Maker fram'd  
No vaine delights can harbour in thy heart,  
With his sweet love, thou art so much inflam'd,  
As of the world thou seem'st to have no part;  
So, love him still, thou need'st not be asham'd,

<sup>8</sup> See Eric Josef Carlson, *Marriage and the English Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 105-41, for an analysis of marriage in practice in the period.

<sup>9</sup> John E. Booty (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Washington: Folger Books, 1976), 290-92.

Tis He that made thee, what thou wert, and art:  
Tis He that dries all teares from Orphans eies,  
And heares from heav'n the wofull widdows cries. (SD 32-49, pp.52-3)

It is Christ's grace that has sparked the love the Countess of Cumberland has for Christ, and it is this grace that enables her to remain constant despite the attractions of the world. Such grace inspires a selfless love, focused not on exclusive possession of the beloved, but on loyalty and constancy, so that the Countess can see Christ's face in those around her and will, as the poem shows us later, do good in the world. Accepting the love that Christ has graced her with enables her to be worthy of that love, for her mind is made perfect. This scheme reflects proper Protestant doctrine of the Church of England at the start of the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup>

It is definitely *desire* for Christ that is inspired by grace here, and this desire is linked to *eros*, as the Petrarchan language of line 45 makes clear: 'with his sweet love, thou art so much inflam'd.' However, despite the occasional use of Petrarchan language like that quoted above, Lanyer's attitude to sexual desire is at best neutral. In her dedications, she mentions the marriage only of Katherine, Countess of Suffolk, whom she does not know, using standard biblical language to describe her relationship to her husband: she is the 'loving Hinde and pleasant Roe, / Wife of his youth, in whom his soule is blest, / Fountaine from whence his chiefe delights do flow' (38-40, p.37). These lines resonate in particular with Proverbs, which advises its reader to rejoice in the wife of his youth (5.18) and the Song of Songs, with its paired deer and its fountain. Often, Lanyer ignores sexual desire. For example, when she compares Cleopatra's love for Antony unfavourably with the Countess of Cumberland's love for Christ, the primary difference she presents between the women is not between Cleopatra's earthly wanton desire and the Countess's spiritual love, but between Cleopatra's pride and inconstancy and the Countess's humility and constancy (SD 1409-1432). Occasionally, Lanyer praises chastity, for example, both the Countess's:

But your chaste breast, guarded with strength of mind,  
Hates the imbracements of unchaste desires. (SD 1545-46)

and also the Virgin Mary's:

Farre from desire of any man thou art,  
Knowing not one, thou art from all men free. (SD 1077-78)

In general, however, she avoids discussing sexual relations or sexual desire.

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<sup>10</sup> For an outline of the relevance of the Calvinist doctrine of grace, see pp. 36-38 and 74-75.

### 3.2 *Christ, the desirable spouse*

Lanyer needs to present Christ as attractive and desirable, but, as I have shown in Chapter 4, readers have to wait until the resurrection for an uncomplicated description of Christ's as beautiful. Earlier descriptions are more paradoxical, even grotesque (see pp.116-122). Lanyer's use of the language of love poetry is carefully modulated. I quoted above the rather standard description of the Countess of Suffolk's relationship with her husband, that uses the biblical language of love drawn from Psalms, Proverbs and the Song of Songs; later in this dedication we can see how Lanyer typically mixes love language and biblical language to present the suffering Christ as desirable:

Heere I present to you the King of kings:

Desiring you to take a perfit view,  
Of those great torments Patience did indure;  
And reape those Comforts that belongs to you,  
Which his most painfull death did then assure. (42-46)

Where we might expect a description of the King of Kings to be alluring, it immediately becomes a description of torments. Likewise, as Lanyer encourages the Countess to let her daughters read her work, so that they may feed 'on heavenly food' (51), the first image she provides is far from delightful:

Here may they see him in a flood of teares,  
Crowned with thornes, and bathing in his blood. (61-62)

This poem includes a comprehensive list of Christ's desirable qualities, as part of its strategy to persuade the daughters:

In whom is all that Ladies can desire;  
If Beauty, who hath bin more faire than he?  
If Wisedome, doth not all the world admire  
The depth of his, that cannot searched be?  
    If wealth, if honour, fame, or Kingdoms store,  
    Who ever liv'd that was possest of more?

If zeale, if grace, if love, if pietie,  
If constancie, if faith, if faire obedience,  
If valour, patience, or sobrietie;  
If chast behaviour, meekenesse, continence,  
    If justice, mercie, bountie, charitie,  
    Who can compare with this Divinitie? (85-96)

Despite Lanyer's placing of 'Beauty' first on the list, Christ does not in practice attract by being beautiful in the conventional way, as we have seen. When Lanyer describes her own relationship with Christ, for example in the dedication to Queen Anne, it is his experience of suffering that draws her. She describes herself as 'clos'd up in Sorrowes Cell' (109) and goes on:

But in Christs suffrings, such sweet taste they have,  
As makes me praise pale Sorrow and the Grave. (113-14, p.8)

The love relationship between Christ and his spouse begins, then, in sorrow, with Christ gracing the spouse with his love, and Lanyer gives several presentations of Christ's loving behaviour. We have seen how the daughters of Jerusalem were able to move Christ to turn and speak to them (pp. 71-73), and this very human mutuality is key to Lanyer's presentation of the loving Christ in her narrative sections. Its clearest presentation, outside the daughters of Jerusalem section, is in Lanyer's treatment of the Gethsemane sequence, where she shows Christ with his closest friends and companions. Lanyer contrasts Christ's divine mission with his very human need to share his grief with his friends; a trait which is human, but also good:

Sweet Lord, how couldst thou thus to flesh and blood  
Communicate thy grieffe? tell of thy woes?  
Thou knew'st they had not powre to doe thee good,  
But were the cause thou must endure these blowes. (SD 377-80)

Yet didst thou tell them of thy troubled state,  
Of thy Soules heavinesse unto the death,  
So full of Love, so free wert thou from hate,  
To bid them stay, whose sinnes did stop thy breath. (SD 385-88)

Just as Lanyer found comfort from Christ when he met her in her grief, Lanyer's Christ seeks comfort by sharing his grief. This is a mutual relationship, and this sense of Christ's presence in, and understanding of, sorrow, is key to Lanyer's presentation of what makes him desirable.

The language Lanyer uses in presenting her readers with a desirable Christ is mixed, then, and includes limited use of the language of love poetry and of rhetorical persuasion. It also makes extensive use of biblical poetic language. The section quoted above (pp.158-9, ll. 32-49) that describes how the Countess of Cumberland is inflamed with love for Christ, moves into a lengthy section praising Christ. I quote below, as fig. 6, two stanzas of this section, to demonstrate how Lanyer interweaves biblical passages to create a magnificent and grand picture of Christ, and of his relationship

with the Countess. I place some biblical references at the right, to give a sense of the density of biblical allusion in this poetry.

Fig. 6	
<i>Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum 73-88</i>	<i>Bible</i>
With Majestie and Honour is He clad,	The Lord reigneth, and is clothed with maiestie ( <i>Ps 93.1</i> ), O Lord my God, thou art exceeding great, thou art clothed with glorie and honour. ( <i>Ps 104.1</i> )
And deck'd with light, as with a garment faire;	Which couereth himselfe with light as with a garment, ( <i>Ps 104.2</i> ), let vs put on the armour of light, ( <i>Rom 13.12</i> ) A light to be reueiled to the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel ( <i>Luk 2.32</i> )
He joyes the Meeke, and makes the Mightie sad,	Hee hath put downe the mighty from their seates, and exalted them of lowe degree. ( <i>Luk 1.52</i> )
Pulls down the Prowd, and doth the Humble reare:	hee hath scattered the proude in the imagination of their hearts. ( <i>Luk 1.51</i> )
Who sees this Bridegroom, never can be sad;	Can the children of the marriage chamber mourne as long as the bridegrome is with them? ( <i>Mat 9.15</i> )
None lives that can his wondrous workes declare:	<i>Job 38-42.</i>
Yea, looke how farre the Est is from the West,	As farre as the East is from the West:
So farre he sets our sinnes that have transgrest.	so farre hath he remooued our sinnes from vs. ( <i>Ps 103.12</i> )
He rides upon the wings of all the windes,	And he rode vpon Cherub and did flie, and he came flying vpon the wings of the winde. ( <i>Ps 18.10</i> )
And spreads the heav'ns with his all powrefull hand;	and spreadeth the heauens like a curtaine. ( <i>Ps 104.2</i> )
Oh! who can loose when the Almighty bindes?	And I will giue vnto thee the keyes of the kingdome of heauen, and whatsoever thou shalt binde vpon earth, shalbe bound in heauen: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in heauen. ( <i>Matt 16.19</i> ) Verely I say vnto you, Whatsoever ye bind on earth, shall be bound in heauen: and whatsoever ye loose on earth, shalbe loosed in heauen. ( <i>Matt 18.18</i> )
Or in his angry presence dares to stand?	But who may abide the day of his comming? and who shall endure, when he appeareth? ( <i>Mal. 3.2</i> ) Therefore the wicked shall not stande in the iudgement, nor sinners in the assemblie of the righteous ( <i>Ps 1.5</i> ). Who shall ascend the mountaine of the Lord? and who shall stand in his holy place? ( <i>Ps 24.3</i> ) and who shall stand in thy sight, when thou art angrie! ( <i>Ps 76.7</i> )
He searcheth out the secrets of all mindes;	Shall not God searche this out? for hee knoweth the secrets of the heart. ( <i>Ps 44.21</i> ) Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, and our secret sinnes in the light of thy countenance. ( <i>Ps 90.8</i> ) At the day when God shall iudge the secretes of men by Iesus Christ, according to my Gospel. ( <i>Rom 2.16</i> )
All those that feare him, shall possesse the Land:	But meeke men shall possesse the earth. ( <i>Ps 37.11</i> ) Blessed are the meeke: for they shall inherite the earth. ( <i>Matt 5.5</i> )
He is exceeding glorious to behold,	
Antient of Times; so faire, and yet so old.	and the Ancient of dayes did sit. ( <i>Dan 7.9</i> )

This description of Christ presents not only (or even?) a lover, but is far more all-encompassing, and exploits the splendour of biblical poetry to achieve its aim. But the Song of Songs is practically invisible as an intertext in the passage from which these stanzas are taken. Only in line 77, where Christ is referred to as a bridegroom, is there a hint: 'Who sees this Bridegroom, never can be sad,' but this is a closer allusion to Matt. 9.15. The Song of Songs and the tradition of reading it as a text about spiritual marriage is key to Lanyer's overarching framework, and to her rhetorical strategy. Nonetheless, her use of the Song's language of love is carefully controlled in her work, and the next section considers more closely how this works, specifically in relation to desire.

### 3.3 *Desiring Christ*

Lanyer's controlling strategy, the 'bride of Christ' *topos*, relies on a traditional network of intertextual biblical associations including the Song of Songs. But Lanyer also alludes to the language of the Song in her work, and the pre-eminent place is, of course, the two-stanza blazon of the risen Christ which is labelled '*upon the Canticles*' in the marginal notes (SD 1305-20: fig. 1, p.63). Chapter 4 demonstrated that this was the climax of Lanyer's systematic rewriting of the concept of beauty, and how the Song of Songs was instrumental in this for Lanyer because of its position as love poetry that was also Scripture. As Lanyer deals with desire, she seems to be equally systematic, and very careful, with using the language of love poetry. There is a flicker of Petrarchan language when Lanyer introduces the Countess of Cumberland as Christ's model bride near the start of the main poem (quoted above, p.158-9, ll. 32-49), but this flicker is quickly smothered by the language of biblical poetry that is not love poetry, as the description of Christ continues.

Just as Lanyer controlled her use of the beauty language of the Song of Songs, so that it reached its full expression in the blazon of the resurrected Christ, she also controls the language of desire. I have already noted that Lanyer is not particularly interested in sexual desire, and when she uses the language of desire, she consistently links it to the souls of those she is addressing, making it clear that the language of love is to be understood spiritually. Here are three examples. The first comes at the end of the dedication to Arbella Stuart:



That in his dying armes he might imbrace  
Your beauteous Soule, and fill it with his grace. (13-14, p.17)

The second is from the dedication to Susan, Countess of Kent:

Take this faire Bridegroom in your soules pure bed. (42, p.20)

Finally, here are two couplets from the dedication to Lucy, Countess of Bedford:

The true-love of your soule, your hearts delight,  
Fairer than all the world in your clear sight. (6-7, p.32)

Where your faire soule may sure and safely rest,  
When he is sweetly seated in your breast. (20-21)

We may put this 'spiritualizing' strategy alongside the use of love language in the narrative section of the main poem, which shows the love between Christ and the disciples (*SD* 337-440), and between Christ and the daughters of Jerusalem (*SD* 969-1000). Both passages include love language, and there is even a Petrarchan reference to Peter's 'hot Love' proving 'more cold than Ice' (*SD* 348), but Lanyer situates this language in the contexts of Christ's friendship with his disciples, and then in the public street, between Christ and a group of women; these are embodied, human contexts, but do not concern sexual desire.<sup>11</sup> These passages hint at the Song of Songs, but we have to wait until the end of the main poem, after the pivotal resurrection blazon of 1305-20, with its description of Christ '*upon the Canticles*', to find the Song's language of desire used more fully. Where the language of beauty culminated in this blazon, the language of desire becomes more effusive after it. Lanyer moves from the blazon to return to a presentation of the relationship between the Countess of Cumberland and Christ, with which she began the poem. Over ten stanzas, Lanyer describes what this relationship is like for the Countess, how it involves trials and separations, how Christ tests her by appearing in various forms, all of which the Countess recognizes and ministers to, proving her constancy and making her more lovely in Christ's eyes. Once again, the language of love appears, as here, when the Countess recognizes Christ 'in Shepherds weed' (1345), and:

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<sup>11</sup>This, of course, conforms to the classic allegorical interpretation of the Song, which can (though it often does not in practice) encourage application to public social contexts involving the Church. For example, the Geneva Bible note to Song of Songs 1.7, when the man replies to the woman's request for directions as to where to find him with his flock, reads: 'Christ speaketh to his Church, bidding them that are ignorant, to go to the pastors to learne.'

Thy colour changes, and thy heart doth rise;  
Thou call'st, he comes, thou find'st tis he indeed. (SD 1348-49)

In this passage, language more specifically related to the Song of Songs begins to appear, as at the end of the stanza quoted below:

Oft times hath he made triall of your love,  
And in your Faith hath tooke no small delight,  
By Crosses and Afflictions he doth prove,  
Yet still your heart remaineth firme and right;  
Your love so strong, as nothing can remove,  
Your thoughts beeing placed on him both day and night,  
Your constant soule doth lodge betweene her breasts,  
This Sweet of sweets, in which all glory rests. (SD 1337-44)

Here, once again, Lanyer follows the schema of spiritual love, with its basis in suffering, its key features of loyalty and constancy and its spirituality reinforced by the reference to the Countess's 'soule.' The final couplet, describing the Countess lodging Christ between the breasts of her soul, echoes Song of Songs 1.12: 'My welbeloued is as a bundle of myrrhe vnto me: he shal lye betwene my breastes.' Moreover, this pattern is followed by mystical interpreters of the Song of Songs such as Bernard of Clairvaux, whose series of sermons on the Song describe a relationship that consists of moments of intimacy punctuated by long absences and the torment of longing.<sup>12</sup> Lanyer's presentation of the relationship between Christ and the Countess is remarkably similar, but still, the love language of the Song is muted in her presentation.

It is in the final section of the main poem that Lanyer makes much more extensive and fulsome use of the sensual language of love, deriving in part from the Song. This is the section that deals with martyrs. Having compared the Countess of Cumberland with several classical and biblical women, including the Queen of Sheba, whose relationship with Solomon is described extensively, but without reference to sexual love, or to Solomon's notorious passion for sexual enjoyment of women - rather, their relationship is presented as 'of the minde' (SD 1591. See also pp.123-4) - Lanyer concludes by comparing the Countess with the early martyrs, in whose 'worthy steps' she desires to tread (SD 1826). This move allows Lanyer to conclude her discussion of beauty by linking the colours of beauty, white and red, with the colours of martyrdom,

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 3, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, Cistercian Fathers Series 31 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 40; 'for the keener her joy in his presence, the more irksome her sense of his absence. The removal of what you love spells an increase of desire for it, and what you eagerly desire you miss painfully.'

also white and red.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it also allows her to give full rein to the sensual language of desire:

Sweet holy rivers, pure celestiall springs,  
Proceeding from the fountaine of our life;  
Swift sugred currents that salvation brings,  
Cleare christall streames, purging all sinne and strife,  
Faire floods, where souls do bathe their snow-white wings,  
Before they flie to true eternall life:  
Sweet Nectar and Ambrosia, food of Saints,  
Which, whoso tasteth, never after faints.

This hony dropping dew of holy love,  
Sweet milke, wherewith we weaklings are restored,  
Who drinks thereof, a world can never move,  
All earthly pleasures are of them abhorred;  
This love made Martyrs many deaths to prove,  
To taste his sweetnesse, whom they so adored:  
Sweetnesse that makes our flesh a burthen to us,  
Knowing it serves but onely to undoe us. (SD 1729-44)

These stanzas make a transition from the Countess of Cumberland to the martyrs, and describe Christ's grace, which flows in rivers from his body on the cross, in the form of blood and tears. Once again, Lanyer uses a complex of biblical allusions, with the Song of Songs as a strong intertext here. The 'fountaine of our life' in 1730 is Christ, understood as the fountain in the enclosed garden of the Song. According to these stanzas, souls bathe themselves in Christ's grace (here represented by the liquids flowing from his body on the cross) and this enables them to 'flie to true eternall life.' The act of bathing, described at 1733, recalls Song of Songs 5.12: 'his eyes *are* like dooues vpon the riuers of waters, which are washt with milke, and remaine by the ful vessel/s,' as well as Psalm 55.6, in which the speaker wishes for the wings of a dove. This liquid of Christ's grace is saints' food, like the food the Psalmist urges his readers to taste: 'taste ye & se, how gracious the Lord is,' (Ps. 34.8), and it is also like the dew dropping from the (female) lover's lips in the Song of Songs: 'thy lippes, *my* spouse, droppe as honie combes: honie and milke are vnder thy tongue' (4.11). It is, of course, the eternal nourishment offered by Christ in John 6.54: 'whosoeuer eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life.' In the second half of the second stanza, Lanyer turns to the martyrs, who embraced the pain of death literally in order to bring them closer to Christ.

The story of the Countess's spiritual marriage with Christ links strongly to this presentation of the martyrs by means of the tradition of interpretation of the Song of

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<sup>13</sup> Susanne Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 80.

Songs. Since at least Augustine's *Confessions*, it had been a standard Christian understanding that the Christian's earthly life was characterized by a restlessness which could only be overcome by death: 'our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.'<sup>14</sup> Hence, the liminal moment of the spiritual wedding, the moment of consummation of the spiritual marriage, was the moment of the believer's death. The mystical tradition believed that one could have fleeting experiences of union with Christ in life, and that these were useful in stimulating one's desire for Christ; but full, untroubled union came only in death. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, says 'this vision is not for the present life; it is reserved for the next...'<sup>15</sup> Since the Countess was still alive when Lanyer wrote and dedicated her work, she needed other subjects if she was to present to her readers the moment of consummation of the spiritual marriage, and the martyrs fulfill this function.

The martyrs, as I have shown, embrace Christ's suffering quite literally by replicating it. I have stressed throughout my discussion of Lanyer the embodied quality of her poetry and her theology, and it is in her presentation of the martyrs that the paradoxical character of this is at its most acute. Lanyer is very clear in the passage quoted above that flesh has become a 'burthen' to the martyrs, whose sole purpose is 'to undoe' them. Yet it is the sweetness of the liquids flowing from Christ on the cross that inspire them with the desire to embrace death in particularly physical ways. It is interesting that Lanyer's examples of martyrs are all male. They are the most famous martyrs in the tradition, but female martyrs were well-known and often treatments of them raised interesting questions about gender. Treatments of the English Protestant martyr Anne Askew are particularly interesting in the way that they attempt to resolve a celebration of her forthright religious commitment with appropriate female behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Erica Longfellow speculates that Lanyer's choice to treat only male martyrs is an indication that her overall project is not separatist or anti-men, describing the section of the poem as a 'conciliatory ending to such a challenging poem.'<sup>17</sup>

Lanyer has struggled to express the paradox of embodied spirituality throughout her work. The martyrs provide for her an expression of and a resolution to the paradox, for they are the pre-eminent examples of people using their bodies to the full in order to deny the world. The Song of Songs provides its readers with a highly sensual and fully

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *Confessions: Books 1-13*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs 2*, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series 7 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 123.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine V. Beilin, *The Examinations of Anne Askew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91. For a contrary view, Barbara K. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 213-42.

enthusiastic expression of love. Lanyer takes care in her work not to apply that form of expression to human sexual love, but to direct it to a spiritual love which is nonetheless grounded in embodied human interpersonal existence. This love, as we saw, begins with Christ's love for the person, and results in a constancy to Christ that is expressed in practical love for others. Lanyer's understanding of the traditional scheme of the spiritual marriage in the mystical tradition seems to be thorough, and she has translated it from the monastic and ascetic context to the conditions of Jacobean secular society. However, there are some questions that her treatment begs. First, because she simply does not deal with sexual desire *per se*, the place of sexual desire in her scheme remains obscure. The people she was writing for were not monks and nuns, and Lanyer neither offers them a rationale for sexual activity, nor makes a strong point of urging them to reject it. Her work simply does not handle it at all, except insofar as the feminine idyll at Cookham does have some similarities to the conventual ideal. Second, her work has profound political and social implications that form part of her theological scheme. She calls for women to be educated, honoured and respected, and for a collapsing of social hierarchies, on theological grounds. This makes world-rejecting passages like lines 1743-1744, quoted above, resonate with ambiguity. On the one hand, the theological scheme that places body and spirit in opposition to each other was (and is) so standard that such a couplet might be read simply as a commonplace; yet Lanyer's theology is strongly embodied, and she offers no schematic resolution of these two apparently incompatible understandings of human life in relation to the divine.

The reader might well ask if there is any place for simple pleasure and enjoyment in Lanyer's scheme. Is delight possible in earthly life?

### **3.4 *Desire and fulfilment? The Description of Cooke-ham***

The final poem in Lanyer's work is, according to *SD* 17-24, the one that the Countess of Cumberland actually commissioned her to write. The commission was to write 'praisefull lines of that delightful place' (*SD* 18), and Lanyer does indeed remember a happy time spent at Cookham with the Countess and her daughter. In this poem, Lanyer uses the pathetic fallacy to describe a wholly delightful idyll, where everything, and in particular, all nature, accords with the joy of the human members of this ideal community:

That Oake that did in height his fellowes passe,  
As much as lofty trees, low growing grasse:  
Much like a comely Cedar streight and tall,  
Whose beauteous stature farre exceeded all:

How often did you visite this faire tree,  
 Which seeming joyfull in receiving thee,  
 Would like a Palme tree spread his armes abroad,  
 Desirous that you there should make abode:  
 Whose faire greene leaves much like a comely vaile,  
 Defended *Phebus* when he would assaile:  
 Whose pleasing boughes did yeeld a coole fresh ayre,  
 Joying his happinesse when you were there. (55-66, p.132)

The Song of Songs makes extensive use of the pathetic fallacy, in describing landscapes that fit with the lovers' moods, in placing the lovers in various settings that suit their emotions, and in likening them to animals, plants and landscape. Here, for example, the Song of Songs uses the pathetic fallacy to link the appropriateness of the lovers coming together with the arrival of spring:

My welbeloued spake & said vnto me, Arise, my loue, my faire one, & come thy way. For beholde, winter is past: the raine is changed, and is gone away. The flowers appeare in the earth: the time of the singing of birdes is come, & the voice of the turtle is heard in our land. (2.10-12)

The pathetic fallacy is, of course, a common poetic device, and one characteristically used in the country house poem, which aims to describe a country house as a means of praising its lord, or, as in this unusual case, its lady. In the context of the country house poem, the pathetic fallacy can therefore perform a theological role, for it demonstrates that the person being praised is fulfilling God's plan for the earth by ordering his or her own portion of it according to God's will: a really well-run country house can be an Eden recovered. We have already encountered several important links between the Eden narrative and the Song of Songs, and this is another. Both present an ideal earthly landscape peopled by a loving couple; as Lanyer writes to the Countess of Cumberland, when she writes about Cookham, she is: 'presenting *Paradice* to your sweet sight' (SD 21).

There are also some suggestions of further links to the Song in the passage above. The two trees to which the great oak is likened both feature in the Song. The Cedar is an archetypally strong and beautiful biblical tree which, in the Song, is part of the beautiful, safe bower where the lovers can enjoy each other: 'my welbeloued, beholde, thou art faire and pleasant: also our bed is grene: the beames of our house are cedres' (1.15). The palm becomes the beloved woman, providing delight and nourishment to the man as he climbs up into it: 'I said, I wil goe vp into the palme tree, I wil take holde of her boughes: thy breastes shal now be like the clusters of the vine: and the sauour of thy nose like apples' (7.8). Trees are central both in the Cookham grounds and in Lanyer's poem, (as well, of course, as in Eden). Under them, the

women sit and read Scripture together, meeting Christ and his Apostles by meditating on the Gospels (81-4), learning God's will with Moses (85-6) and singing with David (87-90). Just as nature is in harmony with the virtuous community, the book of nature is in harmony with the book of Scripture.<sup>18</sup>

Once again, when Lanyer uses the language of sensual delight, it is not in reference to sexual desire, but here again it is connected to intense interpersonal human relationships, though this is less strongly linked to the *topos* of the spiritual marriage than elsewhere in her work.<sup>19</sup> Here, her enjoyment of her time as a member of an ideal feminine community is filled with pleasure; but this idyll, too, is bittersweet, because of its fragility. When the Song of Songs says that the winter is past, the speaker hints at no awareness that it will ever return. Although bad things happen to the lovers during the Song, they speak mostly in the moment, without reference to past or future.<sup>20</sup> However, Lanyer is reminiscing, and she shows us the landscape not only blossoming to greet the Countess of Cumberland, but withering and dying when she leaves:

The trees that were so glorious in our view,  
Forsooke both flowres and fruit, when once they knew  
Of your depart, their very leaves did wither,  
Changing their colours as they grewe together. (133-136)

There is nothing of this in the Song of Songs. Lanyer's poem is filled with a yearning longing for a time that can never be recovered, and while she presents this time, as we have seen, as explicitly the product of an ideal Christian community, she does also speculate on whether such earthly delight is a foretaste of heaven or a worldly illusion:

Vouchsafe to thinke upon those pleasures past,  
As fleeting worldly Joyes that could not last:  
Or, as dimme shadowes of celestiaall pleasures,  
Which are desir'd above all earthly treasures. (13-16)

What destroys it is the necessity for the Countess to leave the place, the reasons for which the poem does not go into (see p.23 n.56). Lanyer also explains that class divisions prevent Lanyer herself from maintaining her relationship with Anne Clifford in

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<sup>18</sup> See Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* (London: Longman, 1994), 160-98, for an analysis of the relationship between the books of Scripture and nature, with particular reference to emblematics,

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Michael Morgan Holmes, 'The Love of Other Women: Rich Chains and Sweet Kisses', in Marshall Grossman (ed.), *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*, Studies in the English Renaissance (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), for a reading that does find sexual content in this poem.

<sup>20</sup> Exum, *The Song of Songs*, 6.

particular, and bemoans the injustice of the class system (99-110). For Lanyer, the country house idyll is at worst a dream, and at best a glimpse, of paradise, because patriarchy and the class system both conspire to prevent its fulfillment on earth. Once again this accords with the Christian understanding that the fulfillment of human desire is only to be achieved in heaven, on one's death. However, Lanyer also identifies reasons why her idyll is unsustainable. These are primarily socio-political factors, notably the patriarchal and hierarchical culture in which she lived, and Lanyer's analysis therefore hints that the apocalyptic earthly paradise may come if these stumbling-blocks were to be removed from the world. The work, as I have noted, is not primarily a polemical one, and so this hint at a political theology remains only a hint, but it is there.

In this context, the kiss episode in *Cooke-ham* is worth investigating. Before leaving Cookham, the Countess of Cumberland tours the estate bidding it farewell, and as she does so, she bestows a kiss on the great oak tree:

To this faire tree, taking me by the hand,  
 You did repeat the pleasures which had past,  
 Seeming to grieve they could not longer last.  
 And with a chaste, yet loving kisse toke leave,  
 Of which sweet kisse I did it soone bereave:  
 Scorning a sencelese creature should possesse  
 So rare a favour, so great happinesse. (162-168)

This kiss may stand in relationship to the kiss of the mouth in the Song of Songs 1.2. The Bernardine tradition recognized that the kiss of the mouth is the most intimate and interpersonal of kisses, and of gestures, and linked it to the Incarnation as the means whereby humankind could get direct access to the divine.<sup>21</sup> Lanyer's act of kiss-theft, which she knows was wrong, 'yet this great wrong I never could repent' (174), is the kiss of the mouth gone awry. Though Lanyer does not criticize the Countess directly, there is an implication that she has bestowed her favour out of order, on a 'sencelesse creature,' and all of the participants in the exchange are left with only the memory of 'fleeting worldly Joyes that could not last' (14), or with 'dimme shadowes of celestial pleasures' (15). There may be a hint of Protestant critique here. In the Roman Catholic practice of Veneration of the Cross, which takes place on Good Friday, the congregation takes turns to kiss the cross.<sup>22</sup> This could be seen by Protestants, like Lanyer and the Countess of Cumberland, as a kind of idolatry. The Countess's act of kissing the tree, a 'senceless creature,' puts the divine world-order out of kilter, and

<sup>21</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 1, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 5-52.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Walsh, *A Dictionary of Devotions* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1993), 80.



Lanyer's eagerness to take the Countess's kiss for herself, rather than putting things right, is a display of selfishness, and a misguided attempt to preserve the idyll.

I have shown that Lanyer's treatment of beauty was systematic, consistent and complex, and that her use of the Song of Songs within a matrix of intertexts was careful and controlled. In the dedications and in *Salve Deus*, we see a similar consistency and care, as Lanyer puts into poetic and narrative practice a love that is both spiritual and embodied, both graced by Christ and demanding constancy and effort on the part of the beloved, and that is born in sorrow and that leads to the ability to embrace grief in the hope of eternal joy. In particular, Lanyer avoids applying the language of the Song of Songs to sexual desire (which she avoids discussing at all). She uses it rather sparingly to enhance the sensual appeal of her poem, and more extensively to describe the progress of the spiritual marriage, drawing here strongly on the tradition of interpretation of the Song. The most effusive use of the Song's language of desire relates to the martyrs, whose love for Christ leads to a desire to join him in death. There is a link to the Song of Songs here, for the Song's only statement of explanation links desire and death: 'loue is strong as death' (8.6), and the tradition links this to the world-renouncing spiritual marriage. But *Cooke-ham* complicates the picture. Though it is still not explicitly about sexual desire, it does describe and reflect on earthly, sensual, interpersonal human pleasures, and it struggles to find an enduring place for such pleasures in the world. What do other poets make of the Song of Songs' expression of desire?

## **4 Other works**

### **4.1 William Shakespeare: *Venus and Adonis***

I showed in Chapter 4 that Shakespeare uses references to the Song of Songs as he highlights the extreme discomfort Adonis feels at becoming the object of Venus' gaze (pp. 125-8). The heat of the gaze, which Adonis experiences as burning, is the heat of desire: in this case unreciprocated. Like the Song of Songs, *Venus and Adonis* is, on its surface level, about sexual desire, and it uses the language of sensual excess to express and to evoke desire. Here, for example, Venus speaks to Adonis near the start of the poem. Like the woman speaker in the Song of Songs, she comes straight to the point, beginning *in medias res*:

'A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know.  
Here come and sit, where never serpent hisses'  
And being set, I'll smother thee with kisses;

And yet not cloy thy lips with loathed satiety,

But rather famish them amid their plenty,  
 Making them red and pale with fresh variety.  
 Ten kisses short as one, one long as twenty:  
 A summer's day will seem an hour but short,  
 Being wasted in such time-beguiling sport.'

With this she seizeth on his sweating palm,  
 The precedent of pith and livelihood,  
 And trembling in her passion, calls it balm,  
 Earth's sovereign salve to do a goddess good.  
 Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force  
 Courageously to pluck him from his horse.

(16-30, pp.22-23)

In late Elizabethan and early Stuart times, *Venus and Adonis* was a parade example of the seductive use of language (see p.79, n.35). Yet, as we see here, though Venus speaks with the authority of the goddess of love, neither Adonis, nor, it seems, her narrator, is convinced by her rhetoric. When Venus has finished speaking, the narrator undercuts her, and her language. He points out that what Venus refers to as 'balm' is really a 'sweating palm,' making the reader wonder whether her earlier description of the delights of kissing might also be euphemistic. In the Song of Songs, both lovers responded to the language of sensual excess; in *Venus and Adonis*, mutuality is lacking, and without it, sexual desire appears ridiculous. Such a treatment stands in interesting relation to the sonnet sequence tradition, which often plays up the woman's lack of response in order to heighten the sense of the speaker's pain and torment. Here, though, the difference in viewpoint between Venus and the narrator makes her passion bathetic. Readers of the Song of Songs do not identify irony as one of its characteristics, making Shakespeare's use of the Song in his poem particularly interesting.

As we have begun to see, it is lack of mutuality that makes this description of desire vulnerable to failure. In the Song of Songs 4.12-15, the man describes his beloved as an enclosed garden or park ('paradise') with fruits, spices and a sealed fountain within.<sup>23</sup> In *Venus and Adonis*, Venus describes herself in strikingly similar terms:

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemmed thee here  
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,  
 I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;  
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:  
     Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,  
     Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew word *pardes* is a Persian loan-word, and appears in the Bible only in Song of Songs 4.12 and Ecclesiastes 2.5. It does not occur in Genesis, though the Greek Septuagint translation does use the cognate *paradeisos* for the garden of Eden.

'Within this limit is relief enough  
 Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,  
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,  
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:  
     Then be my deer, since I am such a park;  
     No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'

(229-40)

This passage is particularly resonant, because Venus is a goddess, and the Song of Songs 4.12-15 was linked in medieval tradition with the Virgin Mary, the closest thing to a goddess that the Christian religion could provide. Indeed, poets and emblem makers sometimes presented 'Divine Venus' and 'Divine Cupid' as allegorical representations of Mary and Christ.<sup>24</sup> Just as Mary was instrumental in recovering the prospect of paradise for Christians by housing Christ in her sinless body, Venus here offers paradise to Adonis, in the form of her own body. Yet, whereas in the Song of Songs, it was the man who described the woman as a garden, and her joyous agreement with him led to the consummation of their relationship (4.16), Venus fails to persuade Adonis to join in her vision.

Venus' likening of herself to a garden is also a striking use of the pathetic fallacy, which Shakespeare and Venus use extensively throughout the poem. James Yoch shows how Venus both describes herself in terms of nature and orchestrates nature to accord with her own wishes and circumstances, though he does not address the significance of her ultimate failure to achieve what she desires, despite her goddess status.<sup>25</sup> I have shown that her failure to persuade Adonis to share her vision demonstrates the lack of mutuality in their relationship and dooms it to failure. As things begin to unravel for Venus, Shakespeare makes a further parodic allusion to the Song of Songs. In the Song, just after the lovers have agreed that she is a garden, she invites winds to blow on her in order to release her fragrance (4.16); but when Venus worries about Adonis' fate and begins to cry, winds blow on her with rather different results:

But like a stormy day, now wind, now rain,  
 Sighs dry her cheeks, tears make them wet again.

(965-6)

Just as, when Venus spoke of the park, it was really herself she was referring to, here the stormy day is not actual weather, but Venus' troubled state of mind. However,

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<sup>24</sup> See Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1964), 83-168, for the transformation of Venus and Cupid into religious figures.

<sup>25</sup> James J. Yoch, 'The Eye of Venus: Shakespeare's Erotic Landscape', *English Literary Renaissance 1500-1900* 20, no.1 (1980).

although Venus has not been able to manipulate the world to get the outcome she wants, what happens in her body does, in the end, have universal significance, because of the curse she will pronounce.

*Venus and Adonis* moves through different kinds of presentations of sexual desire. While its characters remain consistent in their positions, Venus desiring and Adonis resisting, the poem shows desire as animal, as violent, as sensually sweet, as gentle and as ridiculous, to take a few examples. Indeed, from Venus' point of view, by the end of the poem, her love for Adonis has gone through a wide range of physical and emotional stages; almost everything but sexual consummation, which has been extensively discussed, but not achieved.

The poem ends with Venus placing a curse on all future earthly love, before she retires to Paphos, intending to shut herself up there and remain absent (1135-1164). Her curse is fairly lengthy, as she describes a multitude of ways in which love can, and will, go wrong. Even though Adonis would see their relationship very differently, from Venus' point of view, the curse reflects her own story in loving Adonis unsuccessfully. It is as if, now she has lost in love, she is withdrawing the use of her own power to direct and control love in the world. While the narrator has often comically undercut Venus throughout the poem, here she becomes sympathetic. Venus' relationship with Adonis was never mutual, but her experience of loss and grief is powerful nonetheless, and common to all lovers who have lost, either by rejection or by death. Venus lost by both.

This curse also resonates with God's curse on Eve at Gen. 3.16: 'vnto the woman he said, I wil greatly increase thy sorowes, & thy conceptions. In sorowe shalt thou bring forth the children, and thy desire *shal be subiect* to thine housband, and he shal rule ouer thee.' Where the story of the Fall in Eden provided one explanation for the fact that human love is difficult, compromised, painful, and goes wrong, Shakespeare has here provided an alternative aetiology. The Venus and Adonis myth already had two aetiologies of its own – that the story of Adonis reflects the annual cycle of growth, death and rebirth on earth, and that it explains the creation of the anemone.<sup>26</sup> But Shakespeare's aetiology, like the one in Genesis, is concerned with sexual desire between men and women.

Shakespeare's poem is not religious in the way that Lanyer's is, or indeed that most of the poems I shall be discussing are. However, it is interesting that, in writing a poem that sets out and explores some of the besetting problems of human sexual desire, he draws on both Genesis and the Song of Songs. He uses both in a profoundly

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<sup>26</sup> Hélène Tuzet, 'Adonis', in ed., Pierre Brunel, trans., Wendy Allatson, Judith Hayward and Trista Selous, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes* (London: Routledge, 1992), 8-10.

enigmatic way. When Venus describes herself as an enclosed garden, she both locates paradise in the context of sexual desire (as does the Song of Songs, and, to an extent, the Eden narrative), and offers paradise, in the form of sexual fulfillment, to Adonis. But, as Lanyer's paradise recovered at Cookham was a fleeting idyll, Venus' proffered paradise is rejected, and its possibility recedes. It is interesting that Shakespeare's biblical allusions reverse the biblical order. Christian theology, with its Christological and Mariological reading of the Song of Songs, saw the garden of the Song of Songs as redeeming what had gone wrong in Eden. Shakespeare's Venus offers the garden of the Song of Songs to Adonis, and only after he rejects it does she invoke a universal curse reminiscent of God's curse on human love at Gen. 3.16.

#### **4.2 Robert Southwell**

For Southwell, there is no ambiguity: paradise is not to be found in the context of sexual desire, and therefore it should not be sought there. He makes this quite explicit in 'Loves Garden Grief', a poem in which he uses the garden *topos* to describe sexual desire as an anti-paradise. Where Shakespeare uses the Song of Songs enigmatically, so that in the end it is difficult for the reader to deduce a particular attitude to sexual desire, Southwell's oppositional irony is very direct:

Vaine loves avaunt, infamous is your pleasure,  
     Your joy deceit:  
 Your jewels jests, and worthelesse trash your treasure,  
     Fooles common bait.  
 Your pallace is a prison that allureth  
 To sweet mishap, and rest that paine procureth,  
  
 Your garden grieve, hedg'd in with thornes of envie,  
     And stakes of strife:  
 Your Allyes errorr graveled with Jelosie,  
     And cares of life.  
 Your bankes are seates enwrappt with shades of sadnes,  
 Your Arbours breed rough fittes of raging madnes.  
  
 Your beds are sowne with seedes of all iniquitie,  
     And poys'ning weeds:  
 Whose stalkes evill thoughts, whose leaves words full of vanity,  
     Whose fruite misdeedes.  
 Whose sap is sinne, whose force and operation,  
 To banish grace, and worke the soules damnation.  
  
 Your trees are dismall plantes of pyning corrosives,  
     Whose roote is ruth.  
 Whose barke is bale, whose tymber stubborne fantasyes:  
     Whose pyth untruth.  
 On which in liewe of birdes whose voyce delighteth:

Of guiltie conscience screeching note affrighteth.

Your coolest summer gales are scalding sighings,  
Your shoures are teares,  
Your sweetest smell the stench of sinfull livyng,  
Your favoures feares,  
Your gardener Sathan, all you reape is misery:  
Your gaine remorse and losse of all felicitie.

(p.64)

This poem alludes to various biblical gardens, including Eden and the garden in the Song of Songs. Many of the tropes of the Song appear, in grotesque form. Here, the jewels with which the man promised to adorn his lover (1.9) have become 'worthlesse trash,' the king's chambers where the lovers will rejoice (1.3) is a prison, the enclosed garden of 4.12 is now hedged with 'thornes of envie,' instead of flowers and fruit there are 'seedes of all iniquitie,/ and poys'ning weeds,' the varied and beautiful trees have become 'dismalle plantes of pynning corrosives,' the voice of the turtledove (2.12) has a 'screeching note,' while the fragrant breeze which blew on the garden (4.16) is now 'summer gales,' and the wonderful aromas have become 'the stench of sinfull livyng.'

For Southwell, as I have shown in Chapter 4, paradise is found in one specific female body: that of Mary, understood according to his tradition as the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs:

God lent his paradise to Josephes Care  
Wherein he was to plante the tree of life. (iii *Our ladyes Spousals* 7-8, p.4)

Mary's womb is, of course, a place explicitly protected from sexual desire. It is surely significant that Southwell's 'garden grief,' though a horrible parody of the Song of Songs in many respects, does not contain a fountain – which, in the tradition, represents Christ. As we can see, Southwell rejects the use of the Song's garden *topos* outside the context of the Blessed Virgin.

However, like Lanyer, Southwell sees Christ's body as a locus of desire. I showed in Chapter 4 how Peter in the longer *Saint Peters complaynt* received the wound of love from Christ's eyes, and, like Lanyer, Southwell uses Petrarchan language to heighten the emotional effect of his description of Peter's feelings for Christ. Here, he describes Christ's eyes:

The matchles eyes, match'd onely each by other,  
Were pleasd on my ill matched eyes to glaunce:  
The eye of liquid pearle, the purest mother,  
Broch'd teares in mine to weepe for my mischance;

The cabinets of grace unlockt their treasure,  
And did to my misdeed their mercies measure. (355-60, p.73)

Like Lanyer, Southwell uses Petrarchan language; like Lanyer, he evokes a matrix of biblical passages including the Song of Songs; and, like Lanyer he intersperses theological explanations. In this passage, like Lanyer, he emphasizes that what issues from Christ's eyes is grace.

Just as Lanyer progressed from love of Christ to desire for martyrdom, Southwell's poetry has a strong focus on the paradoxical oppositions of spiritual life and worldly death. For example in 'Marie Magdalens complaint at Christs death', which reads both like a lover's lament and like an expression of desire for martyrdom, Mary begs to die of love, because Christ's death has rendered the world meaningless to her:

With my love, my life was nestled  
In the summe of happynes:  
From my love my life is wrested  
To a world of heavynes.  
O lett love my life remove  
Sith I live not where I love. (25-30, p.40)

There is a complex interplay between desire and sorrow, for desire for death is the result both of loving Christ and of being weary of, or afflicted by, worldly life. In 'I dye alive', the speaker explains:

Not where I breath but where I love I live  
Not, where I love but where I am I die; (13-14, p.46)

and in 'Lifes deathes loves life':

And sith love is not where it lives  
Nor liveth where it loves  
Love hateth life that holdes it backe  
And death it best approves. (17-20, p.48)

It is hard not to read back into poetry like this the poet's subsequent biography, as an iconic Catholic martyr, for these poems express the mental reordering and preparation necessary for martyrdom, as the speaker rejects the world and develops desire for life with his or her beloved Christ in heaven. But it is important to note that it was other poets, notably Lanyer and Crashaw, who developed Southwell's language and thinking into poetry more explicitly about martyrs. Southwell's work may read like a preparation for martyrdom, but he does not write poetry in the voice of, or about,

martyrs in the way that Lanyer and Crashaw do. Moreover, though passages like those quoted above, that link love and death, always contain an echo of the Song of Songs 8.6, Southwell makes neither a strong textual allusion nor a marginal note. It is worth repeating in this context that desire for worldly death is a strong component of the mystical tradition. Once one has experienced the the spiritual marriage (or at any rate a foretaste of it) the world becomes wearisome, and one desires, first, to spend one's life in contemplative pursuit of more such experiences, and then, to die, in order to make the spiritual marriage perfect. This understanding is strongly linked to reading the Song of Songs (see p. 166, n.12). However, while the Song itself states that love is as strong as death, it at no point expresses desire for death. Indeed, although 8.6 is an explanatory statement, it is in fact rather ambiguous. It is not clear whether the speaker is setting up love and death as equal combatants locked in battle, or simply as analogous, or as closely connected; the verse may be read in any of these ways.

For the next poet to be considered, however, the distinction between spiritual and worldly desire did not lead to a rejection of the world, or to a desire for death.

#### **4.3 Edmund Spenser: *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion***

We have seen that Spenser aimed to sacralize his beautiful beloved, and that this led to a complex attempt to smooth and resolve the beauty language of the Song of Songs (pp. 132-37). Sacralizing, even deifying, the beautiful beloved has a long tradition; but for the most part, it relies on the woman herself being inaccessible. Her glorious beauty inspires her admirer to sexual desire, but her inaccessibility enables her to guide him from sexual desire to spiritual desire, after the manner of Dante's Beatrice and following the pattern of the Medieval adoration of the Virgin Mary. The opposition between carnal and spiritual desire can, after all, be maintained; the first, properly trained, leads to the other, which is infinitely superior. However, Spenser's lady was not inaccessible, and his task includes not only sacralizing her beauty, but also the sexual consummation of their relationship. Spenser is, then, both working within a tradition and rewriting it.<sup>27</sup>

The traditional sonnet sequence moves between two poles. On the one hand, the speaker expresses how the great beauty and goodness of the beloved lady refines and purifies his carnal desires. On the other, this refinement typically involves a considerable struggle, so that, for example, Petrarch's defeat of his carnal desire for Laura is only properly achieved after her death; while for Elizabethan sonneteers like

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<sup>27</sup> See John N. King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 148-82, for an analysis of Spenser's scheme and its relationship to the Petrarchan tradition, to Neoplatonism and to Scripture, in particular the Song of Songs.



Sidney, it is never fully accomplished. But, for Spenser, the opposition between carnal and spiritual must be a false one; and so his sequence proceeds in a subtly new way. Spenser spends much time on the wound of love inflicted by the look of the beloved's eye: a *topos* handled by the Song of Songs at 4.9 and 6.4. Like any lover, Spenser's speaker finds that his lady's eyes have power to harm him; but in *Amoretti* 21, he describes how she uses her eyes to 'train' his desires:

For with mild pleasance, which doth pride displace,  
She to her Loves doth lookers' eyes allure,  
And with stern countenance back again doth chase  
Their looser looks that stir up lusts impure

...  
Thus doth she train and teach me with her looks:  
Such art of eyes I never read in books.

(5-8, 13-14 p.233)

We have also seen both Southwell and Lanyer using eyes to train the sight of the person in love, but in their cases, the educator is Christ himself, and so the erotic language does not have direct sexual potential in the same way that it does for Spenser. Spenser retains the traditional opposition between admiration of the lady's beauty/virtue and 'lusts impure,' so that readers might find some irony in the fact that the story culminates in marriage between the speaker and his beloved, celebrated in the *Epithalamion*. This hierarchical privileging of his lady's 'mind' or 'virtue' is a feature of *Amoretti*, so how does Spenser square this with the fact that his story ends in carnal consummation? Is sexual desire one element in the matrix of desire? Is it an archetypal example of desire? Or is it the essence and height of all forms of desire? Reading *Amoretti* 68, in which the speaker pursues his suit on Easter day, we might think it is the last of these:

Most glorious Lord of life that, on this day,  
Didst make Thy triumph over death and sin  
And, having harrowed hell, didst bring away  
Captivity thence captive, us to win:  
This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,  
And grant that we, for whom Thou didst die,  
Being with Thy dear blood clean-washed from sin,  
May live for ever in felicity;  
And that Thy love, we weighing worthily,  
May likewise love Thee for the same again;  
And for Thy sake, that all like-dear didst buy,  
With love may one another entertain:  
So let us love, dear love, like as we ought:  
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

Placed in a sermon, such a sentiment would be unproblematic, for the 'love' referred to would be read as *charitas* or *agape*. Spoken to one's beloved, however, it implies that the love lesson taught by Jesus is *eros*; moreover, it is not even *eros* directed towards Christ incarnate, but it is *eros* fulfilled in carnal knowledge of the fair, human beloved.

The combination of the attempt to express perfect, or complete desire, with the aesthetic, physical, linguistic and moral problems inherent in this attempt is one of the things that make sonnet sequences so interesting, and I think that Spenser's sequence, presenting the same problems within a slightly different moral framework, is as interesting as any, not because he resolves the problems of sonnet sequences, but because his attempt opens up new questions: most especially, how can *eros* enjoyed be part of a spiritual scheme of love?

The difficulties of resolving even love reciprocated and enjoyed in marriage into a spiritual scheme are also evident in *Epithalamion*. I showed in Chapter 4 how Spenser, like Lanyer, uses the blazon to describe his beloved, and how he smoothes his beauty language to give an image of his beloved that is easy on the eye, and also decorous, yet suggestive, when he refers to 'Honour's seat and Chastity's sweet bower' (180) (fig.4, p.135). It was clear that the smoothing process created fissures of its own.

In *Epithalamion*, we find another of the problems that desire presents handled with reference to the Song of Songs. I noted that the Song of Songs at times presents an exclusive mutuality between the two lovers, but at times opens this out to include the lovers' friends (p.156). Epithalamia of this period often handle this *topos*, for they are public poems written to celebrate a mutually exclusive sexual partnership, and often in particular to celebrate the public significance of the partnership in question.<sup>28</sup> Even though Spenser makes clear in the final stanza that his poem is a wedding gift to his bride, his speaker addresses his *Epithalamion* to a group of 'learned sisters,' whose identity is in some ways analogous to the daughters of Jerusalem and friends of the Song of Songs, and who remain highly enigmatic. They may be a group of bridesmaids, or wedding guests, or they may be wood nymphs, or muses.

There are two telling differences between the couple in the Song of Songs and Mr and Mrs Spenser. First, while the man in the Song invites the friends to join the couple at the moment of their greatest intimacy, here, the wedding guests drink and dance before the wedding night, and the speaker sends them away once they have brought the bride to her bedchamber. This is, of course, complicated by the fact that

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<sup>28</sup> King (ibid., 171-72) notes that Spenser introduces the form of the Epithalamion into print in English, and that his 'fusion of the roles of bridegroom and singer' is an innovation.

the speaker does continue to describe the wedding night, so that the readers of the poem are not excluded, or at any rate, not excluded in the same way.

Second, despite the exclusivity of the partnership, its mutuality is compromised, because there is only one speaker here. In the Song, the voices of man and women interweave during their moments of intimacy. Here, only the man speaks. Moreover, the speaker has considerable problems to overcome; he is describing the experience of the wedding night to his own bride, from her point of view. She will read the poem on or after the wedding night, and the poem attempts to tell her what that night is like for her. The speaker is describing an event that has not happened yet, and although it is an event at which he will be a participant, he describes it from the other person's point of view, that other person also being the proposed reader of the description:

But let still Silence true night watches keep  
That sacred Peace may in assurance reign,  
And timely Sleep (when it is time to sleep)  
May pour his limbs forth on your pleasant plain  
The whiles an hundred little winged loves,  
Like diverse-feathered doves,  
Shall fly and flutter round about your bed,  
And, in the secret dark that none reproves,  
Their pretty stealths shall work, and snares shall spread,  
To filch away sweet snatches of delight  
Concealed through covert night.

(353-363, pp.312-3)

The multiple awkwardness of this is clear as the speaker attempts to describe consummation. His bride remains a passive object in the scene, while he himself disappears altogether, replaced by 'an hundred little winged loves' (357). The event itself appears to happen during sleep, and though we are in a sense witnesses, the scene apparently remains 'concealed through covert night' (363). This portrayal resembles the Song of Songs in important ways, and especially in the tactics used to obfuscate the event itself. The Song's language is highly erotic, but because it is figurative, it also often evasive, so that, for example, we are not quite sure what parts of the woman's body are being referred to in 7.2, when it mentions the navel and the belly. We have already seen a similar evasiveness in Spenser's treatment of 'Chastity's sweet bower,' and here it is again, in the highly evasive language Spenser's speaker uses for himself, for his bride and for the activity they engage in.

Moreover, both Spenser and the Song of Songs play on the night time and on states of sleep and wakefulness when they handle desire. In the Song of Songs, the woman twice seeks her lover in the night, with different consequences each time. On

the first occasion, on her bed at night was where she sought him, but did not find him (3.1). The second also begins in bed at night, but her state of consciousness is doubtful: 'I slepe, but mine heart waketh' (5.2). In Spenser's stanza, the state of consciousness of the participants in the scene is likewise doubtful, but it is notable that Spenser lays a good deal more stress upon the secret, hidden quality of the night than the Song of Songs does. Both its nocturnal episodes end in the public street, and there is no emphasis on the bed as a secret or private place. This comparison makes some of Spenser's words resonate with unease: his implication that someone might reprove the lovers' actions if they were not hidden, that the activity involves 'stealths', 'snares' and 'sweet snatches of delight' work to undermine the moral scheme of the speaker's courtship. He has brought his relationship to the moment of consummation within a framework of married love, yet that consummation still needs cover of darkness, and feels itself to be transgressive.

Spenser attempts to place adoration of the beautiful beloved, and sexual enjoyment of her within marriage, within a spiritual and religious scheme. The Song of Songs is an indispensable resource for him in this project; but as his scheme, and his presentation, resolves some of the paradoxes in the Song, it sets up new ones of its own; and the intertextual reading of his work with the Song helps to expose these.

#### **4.4 John Donne**

Donne explores desire extensively, and in multiple ways. It is difficult to place him at one point on the spectrum that runs from seeing sexual desire in analogical relationship to spiritual desire, to seeing it as the epitome of all forms of desire, for sometimes he presents body and spirit in oppositional terms, while at others he explores the relationship between them with considerable subtlety. Two of the Donne poems I have discussed in previous chapters, for example, could be read as representing two very different models for understanding sexual desire. *Holy Sonnet 14* uses the analogy of a rape to describe the intensity and difficulty of the speaker's desire to be loved by Christ. While the connections between sexual desire and love for Christ are intense and disturbing in the poem, it is reasonable to read the poem as primarily 'about' the spiritual life, and not about sexual desire, and it is clear that sexual desire is used in the poem primarily analogically, as a means to the end of discussing spiritual desire.<sup>29</sup> At the other end of the scale, in 'To his mistress going to bed' Donne

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<sup>29</sup> Craig Payne, 'Donne's *Holy Sonnet 14*', *The Explicator* 54, no. 4 (1996), 209-213. Payne lists several contributors to *The Explicator* who have minimized the implications of this rape metaphor: 'previous explications have attempted to down play this figure; for example, Thomas J. Steele, SJ [*The Explicator* 29 (1971):74], maintains that the "sexual meaning" is "a secondary meaning" and "probably not meant to be explicitly affirmed." Moreover, George Knox [*The*

attempts to articulate a vision of sexual desire as the height and essence of divine life, and even to give it its own religion.

Like Southwell and Shakespeare, Donne has a version of the enclosed garden as paradise, not recovered, but parodied. In 'Twickenham garden', the speaker comes to a garden:

Hither I come to seeke the spring,  
And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,  
Receive such balmes, as else cure every thing; (2-4, p.73)

but his presence there as a rejected lover ruins any chance of recovering Eden:

And that this place may thoroughly be thought  
True Paradise, I have the serpent brought. (8-9)

In a parody of the pathetic fallacy, he says that, though he came to seek spring, it would be better if:

... winter did  
Benight the glory of this place,  
And that a grave frost did forbid  
These trees to laugh and mocke mee to my face.' (10-13)

The use of 'spring' in line 2 here is punning: the spring Donne's speaker seeks is the springtime (like that described in the Song of Songs 2.11-12), and it is also the spring or fountain of water that should be found in the centre of paradise recovered, as it is described in the Song 4.12 and 4.15. The springtime he ruins, as we have seen, by his wintry mood; and he offers himself to become the fountain at the garden's centre:

Make me a mandrake, so I may grow here,  
Or a stone fountaine weeping out my yeare.

Hither with Christall vyals, lovers come,  
And take my teares, which are loves wine... (17-20)

The disappointed lover becomes a parody of the 'well of living waters' (Song 4.15), at the centre of the garden, and an emblem of the human sexual desire gone wrong that

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Explicator 15 (1956):2] writes that the poem does not "require our imagining literally the relation between man and God in heterosexual terms" and that "the traditions of Christian mysticism allow such symbolism of ravishment ...". Such a reading is not, of course, the only reasonable reading, particularly for readers who perceive a connection between spiritual and sexual desire. Moreover, an analogical reading is not necessarily reasonable, especially if it downplays the shocking quality of the sexual language.

is decreed by God in Gen. 3.16, and by Shakespeare's Venus after her disastrous courtship of Adonis. Donne's speaker is locked inside the universal curse on sexual desire, experiencing love going wrong and helpless to change his situation.

This use of the pathetic fallacy in 'Twickenham Garden' is a comic example of Donne's characteristic preoccupation with the idea of the person as a microcosm. It was evident when Donne's speaker said, 'I am a little world, made cunningly...' (*Holy Sonnet* 5,1, p.437) and in 'To his mistress going to bed', when he finds his mistress to be 'my America, my new found land' (27, p.184). This idea is, of course, a very popular one at this period, and for Donne, it provided opportunities for comedy, and also for asserting and exploring the interconnectedness of things, including body and spirit. The Song of Songs is one of the intertexts that allows for this kind of thinking, for it describes its lovers, and their relationship, in terms of the world, its plants, its creatures, and even its buildings. The Song, of course, expresses, but hardly ever explains the connections it makes; Donne, however, analyzes.

Even in the excessive 'To his mistress going to bed', we saw Donne explaining his subject. His speaker asserts that the naked body is the ultimate locus of complete delight:

As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be,  
To taste whole joyes. (34-35)

Yet, though Donne's speaker does not reject the body, he does often present the body/spirit hierarchy along traditional lines. 'The Extasie' is one of the most complex attempts to articulate the relationship between bodily human love and spiritual experience, and its speaker is clear here that bodies are lower than souls:

They [bodies] are ours, though not wee, Wee are  
The intelligences, they the speares. (51-52, p.101)

But the speaker knows that the encounter he describes would have been impossible without bodies, and that the bodily communication between hands and eyes was deeper than any words could have been:

Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred  
Our eyes, upon one double string,  
So to'entergraft our hands, as yet  
Was all the meanes to make us one,  
And pictures in our eyes to get  
Was all our propagation.  
As 'twixt two equall Armies, Fate

Suspends uncertaine victorie,  
 Our soules, (which to advance their state,  
 Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee.  
 And whil'st our soules negotiate there,  
 Wee like sepulchrall statues lay,  
 All day, the same our postures were,  
 And wee said nothing, all the day.

(7-20)

There are echoes of the Song of Songs in this passage. The focus on the look of the eyes, and its linking to military imagery, suggests 6.3-4: 'thou art beautiful, my loue, as Tirzah, comelie as Ierusalem, terrible as an armie with banners. Turne away thine eyes from me: for they ouercome me.' Donne's speaker proposes in this poem that the communication between the two lovers' souls has created a new and transcendent being, or substance (it is difficult to say what manner of thing it is) that consists in the mutuality of the lovers:

When love, with one another so  
 Interinanimates two soules,  
 That abler soule, which thence doth flow,  
 Defects of loneliness controules.

(41-44)

This, surely, is the fulfillment of desire in mutuality; and for Donne's speaker it is unimaginable without bodies, which are not 'drosse to us, but allay [alloy]' (56). The intensity of the experience and the extreme difficulty in articulating it are marked. Nowhere does Donne find a simple formula for expressing the place of the body in the life of the soul – or where he does, as we have seen, he lays it open to mockery. Yet it is a question that cannot be avoided.

Like Lanyer's, Donne's spirituality is embodied, but unlike Lanyer, Donne is profoundly concerned to articulate a role for sexual desire in the spiritual life, however difficult it is to conceptualize that role. For Donne, the Song of Songs may be used not only for translating the language of sexual desire into the spiritual field, but also for exploring the spiritual potential of sexual desire. His use of the Song of Songs as he does this is at times as daring as Shakespeare's; at its most outrageous in poems like 'To his mistress going to bed' and 'Twickenham Garden', which provide their readers with plenty of excuses not to take them seriously. In *Holy Sonnet 14*, the seriousness of the religious topic and the scriptural authority of the Song within that context allow for a daring use of the Song, which readers may choose to moderate by treating it analogically, as indeed many readers continue to do. Nonetheless, it is a bold use of the *topos*, and the violence of the poem's language suggests that Donne intends to disturb his readers. In a poem like 'The Extasie', however, the shock factor is much

lower, but the poem's exploration of mutuality, both the mutuality of a pair of lovers and the mutuality of a human being, consisting of body and spirit, is intense and profound.

#### 4.5 *Richard Crashaw*

We have already seen that the Song of Songs is an important intertext for Crashaw. In Chapter 3, I showed how some of the 'feminine' character of Crashaw's poetic voice stems from the significance for him of the wound of love, and the passive and vulnerable state needed if one is to receive the wound. Crashaw developed the traditional mingling of courtly, Petrarchan and Neoplatonic language with the language of the Song of Songs to present a vision of this kind of love to his readers. In Chapter 4, we saw that Crashaw used the synaesthetic character of the Song of Songs both to move his readers and to blur or obfuscate specific meanings (pp.141-47). Both of these tactics serve his treatment of love, to which I now turn.

Like Lanyer, Crashaw uses the bride of Christ *topos* as a model for his readers, especially when he is addressing women. In 'Ode on a prayer booke', for example, which was sent with a prayer book to an unidentified woman, Crashaw urges his reader to respond to the book as Christ's bride:

For worthy soules, whose wise embraces  
Store up themselves for HIM, who is alone  
The SPOUSE of Virgins and the Virgin's son.

But if the noble BRIDEGROOM, when he come,  
Shall find the loytering HEART from home;  
Leaving her chaste abroad  
To gadde abroad ...

(44-50, p.141)

The idea that the bride might 'gadde abroad,' of course, is raised in Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids and their oil lamps at Matt. 25.1-12. Crashaw goes on to describe this putative bride's relationship to Christ in highly sensual terms:

Amorous languishments; luminous trances;  
SIGHTS which are not seen with eyes;  
Spirituell and soul-peircing glances  
Whose pure and subtil lightning flyes  
Home to the heart, and setteth the house on fire  
And melts it down in sweet desire ...

(69-74)

He ends by promising:

... she shal discover  
What joy, what blisse,



How many Heav'ns at once it is  
To have her GOD become her LOVER.

(121-24)

Like Southwell, Crashaw uses the highly sensual and affective language of desire to evoke what is carefully identified as a spiritual, even a mystical experience. As with Lanyer, the *topos* of the bride of Christ provides a bridge for the spiritual application of love language, and has a particular frisson when addressed to a woman. However, Crashaw is freer than Lanyer with the sensuality and affectiveness of his language.

Like Lanyer, Crashaw has some individual exemplary brides of Christ whom he presents to his readers; most especially Teresa of Avila. With Teresa, Crashaw is able to elaborate on the links between love and death, and between spiritual and literal martyrdom, in ways somewhat similar to Lanyer. In the first of Crashaw's Teresa poems, *A Hymn to the name and honor of the admirable Sainte Teresa*, he tells the story of how she left home, aged six, to seek martyrdom with the moors. Though she is too young to understand what she is doing:

Yet has she'a HEART dares hope to prove  
How much lesse strong is DEATH then LOVE.

(26-27, p.54)

Here, we see both how Crashaw privileges emotion over reason, and also how this leads him to respond to the emotional pull of the Song of Songs, even to the extent of outdoing its own claims. The Song says only: 'loue is strong as death' (8.6). We have already seen this tendency in Crashaw to overgo the language of the Song (p.147). God, however, has other plans for Teresa, 'a milder MARTYRDOM,' (64) for:

Thou art love's victime; and must dy  
A death more mysticall and high.

(75-76)

Love, then, even if it does not lead to physical death, as the six-year-old Teresa had intended, leads to another kind of death. We have seen Lanyer extolling this kind of death in life for love of Christ as lived out by the Countess of Cumberland; we have seen Southwell setting out a scheme very similar to Crashaw's, and we have seen Donne struggling to come to terms with the kind of self-loss at once desired and feared in both human love relationships and the spiritual relationship between a soul and God (pp. 95-101). What is particularly characteristic in Crashaw is that this kind of self-loss, called, in *Ode on a prayer book*, 'delicious DEATHS; soft exalations / Of soul; dear and divine annihilations' (77-8), appears to be easy to embrace. The fear expressed in Donne is much less evident in Crashaw.

Crashaw continues his meditation on Teresa in two further poems, and in *The Flaming Heart*, in which he considers the standard portrayal of Teresa being wounded in the side by a seraph with a spear, he comes to her physical death, which he describes as the culmination of her desire:

By all thy brim-fill'd Bowles of feirce desire  
By thy last Morning's draught of liquid fire;  
By the full kingdome of that finall kisse  
That seiz'd thy parting Soul, and seal'd thee his. (99-102, p.65)

Here, Crashaw links the seal of Song of Songs 8.6 with the kiss of the mouth from 1.2.<sup>30</sup> Once again, the kiss of the mouth here represents full and complete union with Christ, and therefore identifies spiritual marriage with the moment of physical death, the 'finall kisse' that brings the 'full kingdome' of God to the dying believer.

I have noted Crashaw's interest in fluids. Crashaw's evocation of the miraculous 'liquid fire' above is an example of how unstable fluids can be for him. His focus on liquids and orifices is particularly striking, as wounds can become mouths or eyes, allowing the exchange of fluids which include water, blood, wine and milk. With the exception of blood, all of these liquids feature in the Song of Songs, and the speakers in the Song are also happy to mix them together: 'I dranke my wine with my milke: eat, o friends, drinke, and make you mery, o welbeloued.' (5.1) Mutuality is crucial for Crashaw's scheme, which functions in this respect in a similar way to Lanyer's. We saw that, for Lanyer, the reader/bride is graced by Christ's love, and how this leads to her love for and loyalty to Christ, expressed first, as by the daughters of Jerusalem, in public support for Christ himself, and subsequently, as by the Countess of Cumberland, in seeing those around her through Christ's eyes and behaving lovingly towards them. In more visceral terms, Crashaw also expresses the power of mutuality. In *Sancta Maria Dolorum*, when Crashaw addresses Mary at the foot of the cross, the mutuality of mother and son is such that they exchange verbs for their actions:

Wile with a faithfull, mutuall, floud  
Her eyes bleed TEARES, his wounds weep BLOOD. (19-20, p.165)

Crashaw ends this poem drawing more directly on Song of Songs 5.1, begging Mary to teach him to become drunk on Christ's wounds, so that he may lose himself in the death of mutuality with Christ:

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<sup>30</sup> There is a further hint of 8.6-7 in Crashaw's phrase 'liquid fire'. The Song of Songs here links fire and water simply by placing statements about them next to each other. Crashaw, typically, outdoes this language, creating a new phrase, 'liquid fire', which transgresses category boundaries to link the two elements. This is, of course, a classic Petrarchan technique.

O let me suck the wine  
 So long of this chaste vine  
 Till drunk of the dear wounds, I be  
 A lost Thing to the world, as it to me.  
 O faithfull freind  
 Of me and of my end!  
 Fold up my life in love; and lay't beneath  
 My dear lord's vitall death.  
 Lo, heart, thy hope's whole Plea! Her pretious Breath  
 Pow'd out in prayrs for thee; thy lord's in death.

(101-10)

Crashaw's interest in the porousness of things, and his delight in the possibility that desire leads to annihilation, might suggest that he would make use of the pathetic fallacy in his treatment.<sup>31</sup> Its use in the Song of Songs raises questions of identity and self-loss, as well as the interconnectedness between different orders of things: the man indicates that the coming of spring is relevant to the lovers' relationship (2.10-13), and they describe each other in terms of flora, fauna, landscape and built environment. Crashaw's use of these things is, however, rather limited. He does apply the Song of Songs to Mary in the traditional way. In his 'Hymn in the Assumption', as I have noted (pp.101-2), the springtime calling of Song of Songs 2.10-13 is applied to Mary's Assumption into heaven:

Rise up, my fair, my spotlesse one!  
 The winter's past, the rain is gone.  
 The spring is come, the flowrs appear  
 No sweets, but thou, are wanting here.

(9-12)

Where Lanyer found that the passing of winter was a temporary, fleeting moment followed swiftly by autumn, Crashaw here capitalizes on the sense of timelessness in the Song of Songs to link this passage to the final fulfillment of Mary's desire, as she enters heaven, where winter is eternally past.

Crashaw also uses this kind of poetry, as we saw in the Beauty chapter, in the *Hymn to the Name*, when he urges all creation to join in the praise of Christ incarnate; but the *topoi* of orifices and liquids are much more prevalent in his work, and particularly in his handling of desire. The two *topoi* do come together, however, in *The Weeper*, in which Crashaw, at his most effusive, expands on the tears of Mary Magdalene. Here, Crashaw finds ample opportunity to develop his liquid theology. Mary's tears become pearls, milk, cream, wine, blood and streams, rivers and oceans during the course of the poem, in ways that at times refer to the Song of Songs:

<sup>31</sup> See Richard Rambuss, "Sacred Subjects and the Aversive Metaphysical Conceit: Crashaw, Serrano, Ofili," *English Literary History* 71 (2004): 39.

O cheeks! Bedds of chast loves  
 By your own showres seasonably dash't;  
 Eyes! nests of milky doves  
 In your own wells decently washt.

(85-8, p.131)

This passage echoes Song 5.12 and 13, though not in that order: 'his eyes *are* like dooues vpon the riuers of waters, which are washt with milke, & remaine by the ful vesse/s. His chekes *are* as a bed of spices.'

Mary's tears also become a fountain, so that she becomes the enclosed garden in this poem. The stanza quoted above ends:

O wit of love! that thus could place  
 Fountain and Garden in one face.

(89-90)

All of the above shows Crashaw's use of the full intensity of the language of love to describe, evoke and advocate the spiritual life to his readers. He does not hide from them the suffering and self-loss that it will entail, but presents the whole as promising and delivering delight. The Song of Songs is one of several underlying intertexts, that appears occasionally in direct quotation. From the Song, Crashaw has taken intense sensuality, a focus on mutuality and the connection between love and death, and he has played up the positive aspects of all of these, and most especially of death in love, and self-loss in mutuality. The fear associated with these things, he minimizes. I noted in Chapter 3 that the question of the feminine voice was not an urgent one for Crashaw, and suggested that this was because of the low importance he attached to individual identity. In his treatment of mutual love, we can see that spiritual desire makes individual identity irrelevant, or even a burden, so that self-loss is no longer feared, but is simply part of what one desires. Here, for example, in 'A Song', the speaker's desire for death is joyous:

Still live in me this loving strife  
 Of living DEATH and dying LIFE.  
 For while thou sweetly slayest me,  
 Dead to my selfe, I live in Thee.

(13-16)

The contrast between Crashaw's sweet slaying and Donne's holy rape is sharp.

Crashaw's use of the Song of Songs is predominantly analogical, in the sense that it is not related directly to sexual desire. Crashaw attempted very little in the way of love poetry, and had no Laura, Stella or Celia, real or imagined, to whom he wrote. I

want to end my consideration of Crashaw, however, by looking at one poem in which he does consider sexual desire in some detail, and in which he does evoke the Song of Songs. This poem stands in interesting relation to Spenser, for it is an *Epithalamium*. It probably celebrates the marriage of a friend in 1635, and is addressed to the couple, and primarily to the bride. The poem's conceit is to begin as mourning the death of a 'matchlesse maydenhead' (11, p.486), but immediately, the speaker admits:

A fine thin negative thing it was  
a nothing with a dainty name.'

(13-14)

The lady herself initially feared its loss, but soon found that the thing created by its loss, the marriage, is a new and better mutual identity. Crashaw refers to classical *topoi* for the most part in this, and especially the phoenix, whose death brings new life; and his presentation of the new creation that is a mutual human love resembles in this respect Donne's 'The Extasie'. Like Donne, Crashaw sees a new mutual creation born as the bride's individual identity is lost, though his presentation of mutuality suffers in the same way that Spenser's does in his *Epithalamion*, by focusing only on the bride. The death of her individual identity is described in some detail, and in language not quite so circumlocutory as Spenser's, but quite similar in its awkward delicacy, and in the rather paradoxical absence of the groom from the scene:

With many pretty peevish tryalls  
Of angry yeelding, faint denyings  
Melting No's, and milde denyalls  
dying lives, and short lived dyings;  
with doubtfull eyes,  
halfe smiles, halfe teares,  
with trembling joyes,  
and jocund feares;  
Twixt the pretty twilight strife  
of dying maide and dawning wife;  
twixt raine, and sun-shine, this sweet maydenhead  
alas is dead.

(73-84)

As in Donne's vision in 'The extasie', and Spenser's in *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, there is a spiritual essence to this union, and when Crashaw describes the involvement of heaven in the marriage, he uses language more directly connected to the Song of Songs:

Nor may thy Vine, faire oake, embrace thee  
with ivy armes, and empty wishes,

but with full bosome enterlace thee,  
     and reach her Clusters to thy kisses;  
         safe may she rest  
             her laden boughes,  
         on thy firme breast,  
             and fill thy vowes,  
 up to the brimm, till she make even  
 their full topps with the faire eyed heaven,  
 And heaven to guild those glorious Hero's birth  
                     stoope and kisse earth. (121-132)

This stanza draws on various sections of the Song. The male lover of the Song is likened to a tree where she finds safe rest, though it is an apple tree, not an oak: 'Like the apple tre among the trees of the forest, so *is* my welbeloued among the sonnes of *men*: vnder his shadowe had I delite, & sate downe: and his frute was swete vnto my mouth' (2.3). He does describe her as a fruitful vine: 'I went downe to the garden of nuttes, to se the frutes of the valley, to se if the vine budded, *and if* the pomegranates florished' (6.10). But the most lengthy passage that seems to echo Crashaw's stanza is 7.7-8: 'This thy stature is like a palme tree, and thy breastes like clusters. I said, I wil go vp into the palme tre, I wil take holde of her boughes: thy breastes shal now be like the clusters of the vine: and the sauour of thy nose like apples.' Crashaw's bride, like this woman, bears fruit. In the Song of Songs, she is not a vine twining herself around a strong tree; rather, she is the strong tree into which the man climbs to find delight and protection. Crashaw's portrayal of the groom as the oak round which the bride winds herself erases this element, with the result that his poem presents a consistent, and highly normative, vision of gender roles. Once again, the feminine position is the one that allows Crashaw to present the death of one's individual identity as a good thing. The bride herself in his *Epithalamium* is, at least at first, worried about this loss, but she soon finds out that overall, she gains.

Like Spenser's *Epithalamion*, we must assume that this poem is not to be read primarily as an analogy, but as an expression of the idea that spiritual content may be found in the sexual consummation of a marriage. Yet, like Donne, Crashaw does not explain clearly how this may be, and in what way the new creation of the couple is a spiritual being. But while, for Donne, the articulation of this idea is an abiding concern, for Crashaw it seems to be only of limited interest. Most of his poetry, while highly sensual, is not directly about sexual desire. It raises interesting issues connected with sexual desire, but it may be read as primarily analogical. Nonetheless, although Crashaw is not by and large interested in human sexual love relationships, this poem includes several of the *topoi* that are abiding concerns for him, including the relationship between desire and loss of personal identity.

## 5 Conclusions

The first thing we may say is that when it comes to sexual desire, the picture is more complex and varied than might be expected. We find the Song of Songs in profane poetry about sex, and in religious poetry about the spiritual life, but we also find both profane and religious poetry that asks very serious questions about the place of sexual desire in spiritual life. Even Shakespeare, whose poem is very profane, comments on religious tradition in *Venus and Adonis*. His poem is in some respects a re-telling of the Fall narrative of Gen. 2-3, insofar as it has been read as an explanation of how sexual desire went irrevocably wrong for humanity. A female figure, linked to an enclosed garden, fails in love and the consequence of her failed relationship is a global curse on human sexual relations. Where the tradition (especially the Marian tradition that saw Mary as the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs) read the Song as Eden recovered, Shakespeare begins in the garden of the Song, and humanity, in the form of Adonis, rejects that garden and loses it for ever. Everything is the wrong way round. The female figure is the divine one (*contra* the allegorical reading of the Song), and the paradise so tantalizingly offered is not to be; Adonis does not even want it.

Of the religious poems that explicitly affirm sexual desire, Spenser attempts to find a place for it in a spiritual scheme of virtue. However, he loses one of the advantages of the allegorical scheme, for if both partners in the relationship are human, the place for the divine in the relationship is more difficult to find. Moreover, because his speaker begins from the position of idealizing his beloved, he creates two further dangers. First, his devotion to her runs the risk of becoming idolatry. Second, the unequal relationship between the two lovers threatens the potential for mutuality. Crashaw's *Epithalamium* handles the same themes, but resolves these problems by minimizing the individual identity of the female partner. It is her supreme ability to disappear into her lover's arms that allows the sexual relationship to develop a new spiritual identity; though the role of the male partner in this is sketchy at best.

Donne straddles and clarifies these problems. In *Holy Sonnet* 14, he articulates the very real difficulties that a person seeking a mutual relationship has if she or he is required to become so abject as to be destroyed within the relationship. What will be left to be mutual with? In 'The Extasie', he comes closest to describing a mutual experience of love that transcends the individual identities of those experiencing it to create a new, mutual identity. This is very similar to the new identity that both Spenser and Crashaw seek to articulate; but, for Donne, its achievement relies on a tension between the mutual partners, not the destruction of one, or both, of them. The

imaginary string along which the lovers' eyeballs hang is both the means to bring them together in a mutual gaze, and the thread that keeps them tied to their own identities.

Southwell and Lanyer both present schemes that do not rely on sexual desire, though they use its language. Southwell explicitly rejects sexual desire, and this, rather paradoxically (but very typically for the tradition) allows him to use its language with considerable freedom when speaking of spiritual desire. Lanyer ignores sexual desire, though, like Southwell, she uses its language. For Lanyer, *eros* is both spiritual and embodied, but she does not explore the liminal role of sexual desire in connecting the two. The incarnate Christ does the work of connecting body and spirit, which, of course, is why the language of sexual desire is focused on him, and why the body of the risen Christ is so important in her scheme. All of the poets demonstrate by their use of the language of sexual desire that *eros* has a wider application than only sexual desire itself. It is not simply a question of analogy, even for a poet like Southwell who straightforwardly rejects sexual desire. There is a spiritual *eros* which may be spoken about most effectively in the terms of sexual *eros*. The difference between Southwell and Spenser is not that one recognizes spiritual *eros* while the other does not; it is that one tries to articulate a connection between sexual and spiritual *eros*.

Donne attempts to reduce all other categories to the category of sexual desire in 'To his mistress going to bed', but this reductive vision is its own parody, something which becomes even more obvious when one sets the poem in the context of Donne's work more generally. Although Donne's poetry may be split into sacred and profane poems (and indeed it often is arranged in this way), it is Donne who demonstrates most thoroughly that when one speaks of profane *eros*, sacred *eros* is nevertheless at issue, and vice versa. Indeed, it is probably partly because he wrote both kinds of poetry that the connection is so obvious.

These readings of the Song of Songs present desire in a variety of ways. For some (Southwell and Lanyer), human sexual desire may be rejected or sidelined, although its language is an essential tool for the articulation of spiritual desire. For others (Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne and, in one poem at least, Crashaw), human sexual desire either has cosmic implications, or is an integral part of spiritual *eros*, although working out what role it plays is difficult and complicated, involving struggle, the threat (or promise) of self-loss and the very troublesome quest for mutuality.



## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This project was initially prompted by the story that the body of recent commentary on the Song of Songs tells; namely that the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs has been characterized until recently by relentless rejection or sublimation of its primary subject matter, which is its sexual content. Having found reference to the Song in an early modern poem about sex ('To his mistress going to bed'), I thought that a search for sexual readings of the Song in poetry of this period might be worthwhile. The commentators might be right about religious interpretation of the Song sublimating or rejecting any sexual meaning, but perhaps its sexual content might emerge in other kinds of material. Happily, the situation turned out to be far more interesting than this rather reductive quest anticipated.

### ***The content of poetry that draws on the Song of Songs***

I have drawn out three elements of the content of poetry drawing on the Song of Songs, which formed the themes of Chapters 3-5. This is already an indication of the superabundance of the results, since I was initially only searching for sex. I shall deal with them here in reverse order.

#### ***Desire***

It is important to begin by acknowledging the variety of the material. All of the poets respond to the sexual language of the Song, but they do so in different ways. Some do use its language in poems about sex, although even the most profane of these (Shakespeare, Donne) point, with questionable seriousness, to a greater global or religious significance in their poems. Moreover, two of the poets who use the Song's sexual language to discuss sex (Spenser and Crashaw) do so in a religious framework, aiming in their Epithalamia to articulate a place for married sex within a godly life. Of those who spiritualize the language, applying it to Christ, or to other figures including the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene, there is a variety of ways in which that spiritualized desire is imagined. For Southwell and Crashaw, for example, the focus is all on the inner spiritual life of the believer. Social consequences may ensue from the spiritual experience they aim to give their readers in their poetry, but these are not part of the poetry. For Lanyer, however, focusing the language of desire on Christ changes how that desire is envisioned in highly practical ways, and the social outworkings of the spirituality she proposes are presented, at least in part, in the poetry. The recent history of interpreting the Song has often suggested that it must be seen as *either* about inner spiritual life *or* about sex; but the poetry of the early modern period suggests otherwise.

Writers like Spenser and Crashaw, Donne and possibly even Shakespeare, were thinking about the relationship between spirituality and sex, while Lanyer used the Song's sexual language to present a spirituality that was not only internal, but also embodied and socially focused.

### **Beauty**

Almost all the poets seem to agree with the religious commentators that the Song of Songs' language is the supreme language of beauty. For some of them, this leads to a smoothing over of its paradoxical or grotesque elements. Spenser's blazon of his bride, for example, allows the reader no room to consider her body as idiosyncratic in any way. For others, however, the Song offers the opportunity to explore the paradoxical nature of Christian faith, and this is seen most clearly in those writers who apply the Song's language of beauty to the suffering Christ. Crashaw does this with the most relish, finding in the grotesque a way to express suffering that is spiritually life-giving. Lanyer also focuses on Christ's suffering, and presents a thoroughgoing and radical idea of beauty, and of the relationship between worldly and spiritual beauty; but she uses the body of the risen Christ to control the paradox. The joyful language of beauty of the Song of Songs may be focused on Christ's risen body, so that the beauty of his suffering body remains painful for the viewer, who perceives its beauty because of love, which at the same time causes suffering and comforts the sufferer. Lanyer's move to focus the Song's language of beauty on the risen, but not ascended, Christ, is particularly interesting because it appears to be unique. The theology in it merits further consideration. Spenser's *Amoretti* 68 links the risen Christ to the loving couple in a somewhat similar way, but there are two key differences. First, the gaze of Spenser's speaker remains on his beloved, and does not move to Christ; second, Spenser proposes that Christ's call to love is directly relevant to human sexual relationships, which is a topic Lanyer does not handle.

The melding of the Petrarchan paradigm of the beautiful beloved lady with the Christian paradox of the beauty of Christ, which is a primary meeting point for the religious and the literary traditions, was set out by Dante, whose *Paradiso* showed how the latter, properly understood, could lead to the former. Beatrice, the beloved beautiful woman, eventually trains Dante to reject worldly beauty and turn his gaze on Christ. Writers in the early modern period were still exploring this paradigm. From a Protestant perspective, Spenser sought to erase the need to reject the beautiful beloved in order to make spiritual progress. From a Catholic one, Southwell rejected outright the need for a beautiful beloved in order to start the process. The relationship between worldly and spiritual beauty continued to be contested and troubled, and we find this discussed

from both ends; Donne proposes, rather mockingly, a religion of the body in a profane poem, while religious writers suggest several different models for the relationship between worldly and spiritual beauty. The problem rumbled on, and the Song of Songs continued to be a partner in the dialogue.

### ***A feminine voice***

The feminine voice of the Song of Songs is of enormous interest to current commentators. In this poetry, there is, once again, a variety of responses. Some commentators virtually ignore the feminine voice *qua* feminine voice, and this is not as extraordinary as modern readers might imagine. For Southwell, for example, Peter may speak in the voice of the woman in the Song because he is in love with Christ; it is the love that counts, not the femininity of the voice. Things are more ambiguous with Shakespeare. Venus appropriates the masculine voice of the Song, while Adonis places himself in the position of the woman. This may be simple gender-blindness on Shakespeare's part, or (I think more likely) it may be part of a strategy to question the accepted norms of gender relations as they are applied to human love. If it was the second, his early readers do not seem to have paid this aspect of the text much attention; if the first, this would be evidence that early modern thinking allowed for more complex and nuanced understandings of gender performance than modern commentators have sometimes posited. For Spenser, the feminine voice is not a key part of his attempt to reconfigure the relationship between love, beauty and spirituality. The beautiful woman remains the idealized object of the gaze, but does not speak for herself. I have suggested that this creates a really interesting tension in his work, for while he aims to outline an ideal relationship, it is a relationship in which mutuality is not fully achieved.

Both Donne and Crashaw consider the negative aspects of the feminine position. Donne takes the standard hierarchical understanding of gender relations to the extreme, finding that adopting the feminine position requires a total abjection and relinquishing of self that is at once tantalizing and painful. Crashaw, by contrast, celebrates the self-emptying possibilities of the feminine position, which offers absorption into an identity far more desirable than the single self. It is important to note that, although Crashaw's is, in this sense, a negative vision of femininity, in which the feminine is a desirable position precisely because of its ability to disappear, the feminine voice is critical to Crashaw's presentation; it was Teresa of Avila's writing that taught him that 'love is eloquence' (*An Apologie for the Fore-Going Hymne*, 8).

For Lanyer, the feminine voice of the Song is also critical, as her project rests on defining bridehood such that it is empowering for the bride. Lanyer's brides suffer,

as Crashaw's and Donne's do, and this is key to their spiritual development. However, their suffering is imposed by external conditions, and this is crucial. Just as Christ meets Lanyer's brides in their suffering, the women, like the daughters of Jerusalem, meet Christ in his suffering, so that suffering is the locus of a supportive mutuality, not of one partner's disappearance into the other.

Before moving on to consider the second of my original aims, I want to note two points. First, in all three areas, there is a wide variety of treatments, all making use of the Song of Songs. It is far from a monolithic picture. Second, all three *topoi* interrelate in important ways. When poets think about desire, questions of beauty arise, because it is necessary to reflect on what stimulates desire. When poets think about desire, questions of gender arise, because desire entails a quest for mutuality, and most of the ways that Western culture thinks about mutuality (and desire and beauty) are gendered, in more or less complex ways.

### ***Scripture and Literature***

The second aim of my project was 'to consider further the relationship between Scripture and literature by seeing how the Song of Songs was responded to in a specifically poetic, rather than religious, way.' The first thing to say about this, of course, is that the two types of reading cannot be entirely separated, or certainly not at this period. I have shown that religious writers on the Song of Songs recognized that it was literature, and indeed had a variety of attitudes towards literary techniques, which they applied in their own writing. It is also clear that poets adopt theological positions and set them forth within their poetry; moreover, these positions affect not only the opinions they present, but also the way in which they articulate them. Form and content are ineradicably intertwined. Even the least religious poem in the series, *Venus and Adonis*, handles religion in two ways. First, it uses Scripture as an intertextual resource. It could be argued that this is simply the result of the pervasiveness of religion in the period. Everyone knew Scripture so well, and had known it from such a young age, that it was simply a part of their vocabulary. In a pre-secular age, Scripture leaked into every aspect of life. However, it cannot therefore be regarded as merely a verbal pollutant. Texts bring with them baggage, and the texts of Scripture bring religious baggage. When these texts appear in poetry, as we have seen, they resonate with their tradition, and with the sense of holiness that they bring; even if that holiness is being mocked, as in 'To his mistress going to bed'. Second, *Venus and Adonis* is extremely inventive with the Song of Songs and Gen. 2-3. It reads them, in a pagan context, backwards and inside-out to present an alternative explanation to the biblical one as to

why human sexual relations are hopelessly compromised. Shakespeare moves from the Song of Songs to Genesis, backwards, and his characters adopt the wrong gender positions, inside-out; the result is the same human condition that centuries of Christian tradition had explained by interpreting these very biblical texts. Even when explicitly separated from their religious context and tradition, then, these scriptural texts still provide resources for thinking about the big questions, questions about the human condition, and about humans' place in the world. These are the questions that the texts themselves both attempt to answer (in the case of Genesis) and beg (the Song of Songs).

The readings of the Song of Songs that I have found in poetry represent a wide range of positions, from conservative to radical in religious terms. Once again, the picture is complicated. A reading like Lanyer's owes a great deal to the tradition of interpretation, most particularly the bride of Christ *topos*, and yet her reading uses that tradition to propose a vision of bridehood that has radical socio-political implications. Some of her theological moves are new. For example, Christian tradition has always struggled to reconcile a belief that bodily resurrection was essential to God's scheme of salvation through Christ with a body/soul oppositional duality. Lanyer's focus on the risen, but not ascended Christ as the epitome of spiritual, yet embodied beauty provides a highly logical response to this tension, and one that is found in the Bible: the most world-rejecting of the gospels, that of John, has Jesus inviting Thomas to put his hands in his wounds, a proof of his bodily resurrection (John 20.24-29). Yet, certainly in this period, poetic and religious readings of the Song of Songs focused on Christ's bodily suffering, his ascended form, his name and his presence in the eucharist, rather than on his resurrected body; only Lanyer makes this connection to the Song of Songs. This would suggest that when Lanyer wrote her poem, she was, at the same time and using the same tools, doing theology.

Third, both literature and Scripture connect things. The history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs has been characterized by an intensive concern to understand the connection between *eros* and spirituality. The current story about that history of interpretation has tended to accuse most past readings of trying to make a radical separation between the two, and there is some evidence of this in the religious and the poetic readings of the Song that this study has explored. But it should also be acknowledged, first, that the quest is extremely difficult, and second, that it is not universal, and third, that it is not as simple as it sounds. In particular, *eros* itself may be understood in a number of ways. The modern Western world has both elevated human sexual *eros*, so that it is seen to be a force in almost every human activity, and also demystified it, so that it is seen as in some way discrete and disconnected from other

aspects of human existence.<sup>1</sup> For writers in the early modern period, using the language of sexual desire to discuss spiritual or other forms of desire did not always seem anomalous or sublimating, because there was a greater recognition of, and acceptance of, spiritual *eros*. Moreover, writers including Crashaw, and especially Spenser and Donne, were concerned to find a place for sexual *eros* within the orbit of spiritual *eros*. Their writing bears witness to the strong desire to do it, to the difficulty of doing it, and to the interconnectedness of both sexual and spiritual *eros* with other aspects of human life. In particular, for Spenser, Donne and Crashaw, articulating a spiritual and sexual *eros* entailed addressing gender relations. Interestingly, for Lanyer, articulating an embodied spiritual *eros* also involved addressing gender relations, but it did not require a consideration of sexual *eros*.

The strong connection between making poetry and doing theology is particularly evident in the realm of hermeneutics, because, in making poetry, poets are making meaning. Sidney insists that 'poet' is a good word for a poet, precisely because 'it cometh of this word *poiein*, which is "to make": wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him "a maker."<sup>2</sup> Sidney prefers this word to the Latin *vates* (diviner or prophet) because he resists the Platonic notion of the 'right poet' speaking divinely inspired words that do not come from himself, insisting upon the right poet's use of his own intellect in making poetry. In an important argument that he admits not everyone will accept, he compares the activity of the poet in writing to that of God in creating:

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature, but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam: since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.<sup>3</sup>

For Sidney, the connection between right poetry and the divine is not that God inspires the words of the poet, but that God gave humankind a creative imagination, an 'erected wit,' that, in theory at least, enables him to imagine, and then to strive to make, a better world.

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5-11.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or the Defence of Poesy)*, ed. (revised and expanded) R. W. Maslen (ed) Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

I think this formulation, which Sidney articulates rather tentatively, is important for the poets in this study. Like Sidney's 'right poet,' they all read the Song of Songs not as empty vessels to be filled with its pure meaning, or its received tradition, but as active participants in meaning-making. As a result, the meaning they make is varied and sometimes contradictory. In addition, their meanings are often incomplete (as was, perhaps significantly, Sidney's *Arcadia*). The poets raise questions as well as answering them. Spenser, perhaps inadvertently, asks where is the place for Christ in a marriage between a man and a woman (as opposed to a marriage between Christ and the church or Christ and the soul); Donne asks how the mutuality of love can avoid collapsing the individual self, as does Crashaw, in a rather different way; Lanyer leaves hanging questions both about the socio-political consequences of her reading of Scripture, and about the place of sexual love in a godly life. Their readings are also all, in some way, subversive, overthrowing old certainties with new insights.

The poets in this study demonstrate that reading Scripture was active and creative for them, that literary processes were essential tools in their hermeneutics, that the possibilities for meaning were multiple and that reading Scripture raised questions as well as providing answers.

### ***Scripture, literature and the Song of Songs***

If this study has been able to say that the connection between biblical hermeneutics and poetic reading practices in the early modern period is a strong one, are there any wider implications?

The question of Scripture and literature has been raised and explored by scholars of the Bible and of literature, especially during the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> It is a question that travels in at least two directions. First, the flow of influence from the Bible into English literature is a strong, and a formative current in the canon. Recognizing this influence is an important part in the attempt to understand English literature, both individual works and the corpus as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Second, the Bible itself is literature, and so it is appropriate to apply to it the techniques of literary criticism.<sup>6</sup> Discourse about these two things has burgeoned over the last half-century; but just as literary criticism was practised for millennia before the establishment of university literature departments, so the interaction between Bible and literature has been taking

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<sup>4</sup> See David Jasper, 'The Study of Literature and Theology', in eds. Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay, *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15-34.

<sup>5</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

place ever since the Bible first began to be read, and, indeed, while it was still being written. Parts of the Bible quote from, reinterpret and rewrite other parts.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of thinking about the Bible and literature has focused either on the Bible *as* literature or the Bible *in* literature. This study has aimed to link these two things by exploring the question at one remove. It has found readings of the Song of Songs *in* a body of poetry, and has asked what this poetry has to tell us about how the poets read the Bible *as* literature. It has also found that the poets do read the Song of Songs *as* literature, for they recognize and respond to its literary qualities, such as figurative language, synaesthesia and the pathetic fallacy. Moreover, their reading is at the same time theological, in that the process of interpretation of the Song, as it appears in their poetry, involves thinking through questions of God and the world, of body and spirit, of immanence and transcendence and even of life and death. As they make poetry, the poets also do theology. This theology takes a wide variety of shapes and forms. Spenser aims to articulate a spirituality of married love that integrates the literary tradition of courtly love with the Protestant doctrine he advocated. Lanyer seeks a positive and practical feminine way to be godly, by recasting the role of bride of Christ. Donne, like Spenser, seeks a spirituality that integrates bodily and spiritual selves and makes sense of human sexual love. Southwell and Crashaw seek to recreate in words the transcendent experience of encounter with the Word. These are not the only things the poets do, but they are the things that connect most strongly to their literary reading practices.

If we are looking to explore the connections between Scripture and literature, the Song of Songs is a particularly useful text to examine. First, its genre of lyric love poetry has had, and continues to enjoy, a long life in the extra-religious world. Bible scholars have identified many genres of literature in the Bible, but the genre of the Song, lyric love poetry, is perhaps the most 'literary' of all, and when this is coupled with the Song's lack of direct reference to God or the things of God, the text begins to beg literary questions of its readers, whether they be religious readers or not. Lyric love poetry covers a very wide range of positions in relation to the religious, or the spiritual. We have seen something of this in this thesis: 'To his mistress going to bed' is at once a quasi-religious and an extremely profane poem, whereas 'The extasie' is not religious, but is profoundly spiritual, and even theological. Second, as in these poems, the genre of lyric love poetry tends toward a threshold between the profane and the sacred. Third, literary features of the Song itself, such as its radical lack of narrative

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<sup>7</sup>Michael Fishbane, "Inner Biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interpretation in Ancient Israel," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).



and its use of synaesthesia, both entice a reader into the text and frustrate the readerly desire for closure, and for the end of reading.

At a lecture on Theology and the Reading of Books, Rowan Williams, drawing on Bakhtinian criticism, made the point that there is no last reading of a text, that reading is something that is never finished.<sup>8</sup> In his view, this is one of the most important connections between Scripture and literature, for both kinds of text contain 'excess' that demands a response from the reader, and that ensures that the text can never be completely appropriated. It is this feature of both scriptural and literary texts that has enabled them to be so talked about and written about over a long period; and this, in turn, gives readers added value.

This is one of the key virtues of a 'canon'. By re-reading a text that someone has read in the past, one responds to that previous interpretation, and in some way enters a dialogue with the past. In that context, it is significant that so many of the major commentaries on the Song of Songs are themselves unfinished: Bernard of Clairvaux, in eighty-six sermons, barely got beyond Chapter 2. It is not only unnecessary to finish reading the Song, it is also impossible. J. Cheryl Exum notes that the circling nature of the text, coupled with its evocation of immediacy, its repetition and resistance to linear narrative, both stimulates and frustrates a desire for narrative closure.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps in this sense that the Song of Songs is 'the holy of holies,' not because it expresses ultimate truth in the most coherent and thorough form, but because it is the prime example of a text that a reader can never finish. It is appropriate that the 'holy of holies' comment was made by Rabbi Akiba, one of the greatest of the midrashic exegetes, for it is in the nature of midrashic reading that it is ongoing, and that the full truth of the biblical text remains always beyond knowing.

The development of the academic discipline of literary criticism has often either presented itself or been presented as concerned primarily with technical criteria about craftsmanship, which can give the impression of being objective, and distanced from other kinds of judgment, including ethical and moral judgment. But it was the advent of postmodern literary theory, from deconstruction onward, that appeared to remove the possibility of ethical and moral reading, precisely because it dismantled the very notion of objectivity and demonstrated multiple possibilities for interpretation. Once the prospect of finding an absolute standard that could be shared by writers, readers and texts had receded, how could readers hope to measure their interpretations against any benchmark?

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<sup>8</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Theology and the Reading of Books', unpublished lecture, St John's College Borderlands Lecture, Durham University, 27 February 2009.

<sup>9</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 11.

Yet this situation turned out not to be so desperate. Readers of both literature and the Bible found that the recognition that reading depends upon a network of relationships, whether it be between readers and texts, authors, worlds (of the author, the text, the reader), between texts and other texts, or even between readers and other readers, carried profound ethical and moral implications. It is this recognition that has fuelled much of the work of biblical scholars interacting with postmodernism. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains the ethical imperative resting on Bible scholars:

If scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization ... then the responsibility of the biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving the readers of our time clear access to the original intentions of the biblical writers. It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary sociopolitical contexts.<sup>10</sup>

It is no surprise that David Clines, who quotes this passage repeatedly, has written articles with titles such as: 'Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?'<sup>11</sup>

The moral imperative is particularly evident in Bible reading, because the Bible is held to be the Word of God, and so what it says about ethics and morals may be seen to be God's words on these subjects. However, the recognition that readers read as situated human beings, rather than as either empty vessels consuming the text, or as godlike beings standing over the text in judgment, has led readers also to realize that the way they read literature has moral implications. If Donne's poetry is misogynistic, how may I, as a woman and a feminist, be permitted to enjoy his poetry? Do I need to prove in my reading that the poetry is not misogynistic, or do I need to reject the poetry and stop reading it? It is no longer open to me to say that I enjoy it on a literary level only, relishing its rhetoric and its élan, but escaping contact with its sexual politics, just as it is no longer good enough to say that the poetry is from a distant time with a different culture and a different moral framework. It is true, but it is not enough. Just as I expect to make moral judgments about my own culture and my own life, I expect Donne's poetry not simply to reflect aspects of his culture, but to

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<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107(1988), 15, quoted in David J. A. Clines, "The Pyramid and the Net: The Postmodern Adventure in Biblical Studies," in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967-1998*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 156.

<sup>11</sup> David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?," in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

interact actively and critically with them. In this thesis, I have demonstrated the poetry doing just that, interacting critically both with his culture and with the Bible.

Such a discovery begs the question, 'is reading by its nature theological?' This is an important and difficult question, for two reasons. First, it is a question that is certainly offensive to many very serious readers who would claim no interest in theology, and whose stance must be respected. Second, if all reading is theological, then all literature must be potentially theological, which leaves the Bible in a tricky spot. In this respect, the lack of direct reference to God in the Song of Songs is instructive, because the very large amounts of theology that its readers have found in it have been extracted from the text's potential, rather than from what is self-evident in it. If all literature is potentially theological, what distinguishes Scripture from any other literature?

This question lifts the lid on a monumental vat of worms. Either the Bible is 'just literature', in which case its status as Scripture is nothing but an empty title, though rather a powerful and dangerous one, given the things its readers have done in its name; or, if all literature has theological potential, how can reading it avoid being a matter of faith? How can any reader hope to read any text without being not only touched by it, but also implicated by it? My disdain for a particular novelist becomes no longer a question of consumer choice, but a problem for me. Postmodernism has instigated an intense, complex, wide-ranging and ongoing debate about these things, but the questions have been current for much longer.

We can see Sidney grappling with them just beneath the surface of *An Apology for Poetry*. At the start of his discourse, Sidney identifies three different types of poet; those divinely inspired to write scriptural poetry, the *vates*, those who write non-imaginative content in verse form, and 'right poets'. The first kind is explicitly excluded from his treatise, which proclaims itself to be about 'right poets,' yet Sidney does give them some consideration. In speaking of David as the author of scriptural poetry, Sidney says:

what else is the awaking his musical instruments, the often and free changing persons, his notable *prosopopoeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts' joyfulness, the hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith?<sup>12</sup>

David is, then, a *vates*, yet Sidney qualifies even his achievement – David 'almost' achieves his vision. Speaking of 'right poets' in the quotation above (p.202),

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<sup>12</sup> Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or the Defence of Poesy)*, 84.

Sidney compares the 'erected wit' with the 'infected will' of humankind, saying that, though the fallen nature of man prevents him from reaching perfection, yet he may still imagine perfection, or, in Sidney's own words, present 'a perfect picture' (p.90). For that reason, right poetry has a highly moral function for Sidney, for it should both show its readers what is good and move them to seek and do the good: 'for, as Aristotle saith, it is not *gnosis* but *praxis* must be the fruit. And how *praxis* cannot be, without being moved to practise, it is no hard matter to consider' (p.94).

On the one hand, Sidney draws a sharp distinction between poetic Scripture and right poetry; on the other, right poetry is able, and indeed is obligated, to picture forth perfection, to give moral instruction and to inspire its readers to action. *An Apology for Poetry* is a complicated work, itself extremely difficult to read. It is not a systematic treatment of poetry, and its purpose, though somewhat mockingly set out at the start, remains elusive. It seems by turns to be a critique of English poetry, a justification for the act of writing poetry, a call to poets to fulfil their moral obligations to reader, nation and God, and a theory of what poetry is. I have drawn out the potentially subversive nature of Sidney's comments on divine and 'right poetry' and their implications for the definitions of Scripture and literature, and it may well be that the complexity and ambiguity of the text both allows for such subversion and obscures it. Certainly, both subversion and subversive readings of Scripture may be found in the poetry handled in this study, as well as, and in the same words as, attempts to move readers to moral action. The Song of Songs, with its radical lack of narrative and its intensive figurative language and poetic techniques, alongside its lack of direct divine reference, is a piece of poetic Scripture that invites such readings, and that continues to beg the question of the relationship between Scripture and literature.

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