

“I am a wall and my breasts are towers”: Female Resistance to Patriarchal Oppression in the Song of Songs

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Abstract

Feminist theorists Alicia Ostriker and Phyllis Trible argue that as a non-patriarchal text free of gendered hierarchy and sexual stereotyping, the Song of Songs is the most prominent example of countertext in the Hebrew Bible. In challenging such theorists, I argue that the Song depicts not a utopia of gendered equality, but an empowered female protagonist resistant to the surrounding patriarchal society, which functions similarly to social order throughout much of biblical literature. Patriarchy in the Song is evidenced by the consistent assertion of male dominance through male regulation of the Shulamite's sexuality, and the dehumanization of the female body. The Shulamite is not a liberated female figure but instead an active combatant to the forces of patriarchy which seek to control her. In critiquing these forces within the Song, we can both complicate an idealized depiction of the Shulamite, and identify the social barriers that limit her liberation and necessitate her radical resistance.

Introduction

*I am a wall
And my breasts are towers.
But for my lover I am
A city of peace. (8:10)*

The dominant presence of the female protagonist's voice in the Song of Songs is undeniable. She not only openly expresses her love and desire for her male lover, but projects a self-empowerment rarely seen in female biblical characters. In the above verse she responds to an attempt by her brothers to sequester her from male suitors, who will seek her out for her sexual capacities. The Shulamite (as she is called) refutes these claims upon her, instead proclaiming the strength and power of her own body: she is more than a sexual object. Throughout the Song, she is at war with multiple impinging patriarchal forces, although she finds peace in the rare harmonious relationship with her lover.

Feminist theorists Alicia Ostriker and Phyllis Trible argue that the Shulamite offers a rare example within the Hebrew Bible of a liberated and empowered female figure.¹ They point to the

¹ Each subsequent reference to "the Bible" in this paper refers to the Hebrew Bible, which includes *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*. It is also called the *Tanakh*. Both Ostriker and Trible refer to the Hebrew Bible, which includes the Song of Songs.

mutual love and desire between the Shulamite and her male lover as evidence of a feminist ideal. Both Tribble and Ostriker position the Song as counter to the rest of the Bible, in that the Song transcends patriarchy although it resides within an otherwise patriarchal biblical tradition. For Tribble, patriarchy denotes the destruction of harmony and mutuality between the two sexes, where the relationship between male and female is characterized by domination and submission.² For Ostriker, patriarchy is largely structural, involving institutions of law, genealogy, sovereignty, and authority. Such institutions enforce a systemic gendered hierarchy, in which female is subverted to the second sex and male reigns superior.³ Although both Tribble and Ostriker perceive the Song as counter to the patriarchal structure of the rest of the Bible, each interprets the poem differently, molding their interpretations for their own distinct feminist agendas. Amidst her reading of the Song as “the most remarkable countertext in an otherwise firmly patriarchal Hebrew canon,”⁴ Ostriker nevertheless must construct an allegorical interpretation of the Song utilizing the Shulamite’s voice, in order to advocate for the full participation of women in Orthodox Judaism. In contrast, Tribble conducts an intertextual analysis, comparing the construction of desire and sexuality within the Song to that of Genesis. She concludes that the Song functions as a redemption of the disobedience in Genesis. The Song provides an idealized picture of depatriarchalized, heterosexual love and thus, liberation for women from being the subordinated sex.⁵

² Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 161.

³ Alicia Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies,” in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner & Carole R. Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 43.

⁴ Ostriker, 43.

⁵ Ilana Pardes refers to the trend of feminist biblical critique of the Song, pioneered by Phyllis Tribble, as a project to “depatriarchalize” biblical literature. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 20-21. Tribble argues that it is possible to translate the Bible without sexism, thereby countering traditional misogynist readings. She notes: “In various ways [Genesis 2-3 and the Song of Songs] demonstrate a depatriarchalizing principle at work in the Hebrew Bible. Depatriarchalizing is not an operation which the exegete performs on the text. It is a hermeneutic operating within Scripture itself. We expose

Trible's analysis of the Song is particularly useful to my argument because of her focus on female sexuality. Tribble argues that contrary to the division of the sexes established in Genesis, in the Song desire is mutual and the sexes are equal. Tribble argues that this is evidence of the absence of patriarchy, and the liberation of female sexuality. As a direct challenge to Tribble, I argue that female sexuality is actually a platform upon which the structures of patriarchy become most evident in the Song. Tribble is one of the foundational feminist biblical critics of the Song, yet she sacrifices much in her aim to paint the Song as representative of an unapologetically liberated and empowered female figure. In nuancing Tribble's analysis I assert that liberation cannot be fulfilled through the individual expression of desire alone; it must involve an attack on systemic oppression. The Shulamite may be equal to her lover, but she does not exist in a feminist utopia as Tribble might like to believe.

Ostriker's analysis is useful because of her interpretation of the scene of violence in the Song. Many feminist theorists choose to avoid this scene all together because they are unable to justify it within an interpretation of the Shulamite as fully liberated. In her allegorical interpretation, Ostriker acknowledges that the Shulamite is still engaged in a struggle for liberation, however she dismisses the workings of patriarchy even in this acknowledgement. I utilize Ostriker's reading to highlight the necessity in analyzing how patriarchy functions in the Song, and how doing so aids in identifying the risk the Shulamite takes in resisting patriarchal oppression. Ostriker's discussion of the assault on the Shulamite opens a door. However, in her eagerness to establish the Song as counter to the rest of a patriarchal canon, Ostriker too sacrifices an opportunity to challenge male power claims upon the female body.

it; we do not impose it." Phyllis Tribble. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy Of Religion* 41 (1973): 48.

In contrast to the arguments presented by these theorists, I will present a nuanced feminist position, displaying that patriarchy is still very much present throughout the *Song of Songs*. By patriarchy, I am referring to a structure of gendered hierarchy and dominance, in which the female body is considered the property of male authority figures, and functions to serve and maintain male ordered social power structures. Within patriarchy, there is no place for the agency of female-bodied people. In essence, I define patriarchy as the very thing that both Ostriker and Tribble independently claim is absent from the Song. I will critique not the agenda each of these theorists seeks to satisfy, but their holistically pro-feminist readings of the Song. I use the terminology of ‘pro-feminist’ to refer to interpretations of the Song as unequivocally free of patriarchy and thereby nonsexist; that is, interpretations which affirm the complete absence of gendered hierarchy and heteronormative gender roles, along with the presence of feminine empowerment and liberation.⁶ I argue that a pro-feminist reading actually does a disservice to the project of deconstructing and analyzing patriarchy’s presence within the Song, and denies the Shulamite’s radical role as resistor to oppression. Patriarchy is evident in the domination, ownership, and regulation of the female body and female sexuality by male actors, as well as the environmental restrictions on the lovers’ relationship. The Shulamite’s resistance to the control of her sexuality, and acts of self-care and preservation in the face of patriarchal oppression are what position her as contrary to other female characters and their sexuality throughout biblical literature. She must be praised for resisting patriarchy, but she is not yet liberated. By idealizing the society which frames the harmonious lovers in their garden and disregarding each

⁶ The term ‘pro-feminist’ is my own, and I will use it to describe interpretations such as those delineated by Tribble, Ostriker, and Marcia Falk. Marcia Falk, “Song of Songs,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 528.

contestation to the Shulamite's liberty, Tribble and Ostriker only disguise the presence of patriarchy in the Song so that it persists unchallenged.

In this paper I will detail how female sexuality functions in biblical literature, contrasting this with its role in the Song. I will then present Tribble's analysis of female sexuality in the text, utilizing her argument as the starting point for my own delineation of patriarchy's persistence in the Song. I will then introduce Ostriker's reading of the scene of sexual assault, following by my own nuanced reading of this scene as evidence of both patriarchal oppression and feminine self-defense. In conclusion, I will argue that in the Song, the Shulamite acts as a resistant force to patriarchal oppression. Patriarchy is evident in the attempts by various male actors in the Song to dominate her body and regulate her sexuality. In overlooking this manifestation of oppression, Ostriker and Tribble sacrifice the opportunity to highlight why the Shulamite's love is radical: she is not engaged in a relationship of mutual love with an unsanctioned partner in the midst of isolated utopia. Instead, she does so despite the oppressive patriarchal society that shrouds their garden oasis. The Shulamite's actions and voice challenge the patriarchal social order which dictates female sexuality and the female body throughout biblical literature. However, we must acknowledge the continuing presence of that social order in the Song if we are to determine how she might move from resistance to liberation. If not, we only perpetuate patriarchal norms and commit violence to the text in reducing the Shulamite to an idealized caricature. Her active love and resistance are not without risk. In the character of the Shulamite we can find wider truth: resistance to oppression comes at great personal expense to the oppressed, but ultimately such sacrifice may be necessary in order to uproot unjust power structures.

As an erotic love poem between two young lovers, the question has often been asked, why was the Song of Song canonized and included in the Bible? Within both Jewish and Christian traditions, this question has historically been answered with religious allegory: the Song is a metaphor for the love between God and Israel, or Christ and the church.⁷ However, feminist biblical scholars have refuted this interpretation, choosing to read the Song as a poem of sexual awakening and mutual love, and emphasizing the active voice of the female protagonist. This is the interpretation embraced in the translation referenced here, by Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, which I selected because of its recent publication, and extensive commentary and notes on translation. “The Shulamite,” the female protagonist, is named as such in the text, though the male lover most often refers to her as “my love”, “my dove”, or “my perfect one.” There is little consensus as to the origins or meaning of “the Shulamite.” Bloch and Bloch note various possible explanations for the name as referring to “from the village Shunem in the Jezreel plain,” alternatively as, “the peaceable one or complete, perfect one” determined by the root *slm*, or as “a feminine name corresponding to the name Solomon.”⁸ The male lover remains unnamed, referred to by the Shulamite most often as “my love” or “my beloved,” and is referenced by Ostriker and Tribble as either the “man” or the “lover.”

Phyllis Tribble uses literary analysis in her interpretation of the Song. She declares that any feminist analysis must include “a critique of culture in light of misogyny. This critique affects the issues of race and class, psychology, ecology, and human sexuality.”⁹ Tribble refutes misogynist biblical readings, reinterpreting both Genesis and the Song of Songs through an anti-patriarchal lens focusing on sexuality. She depicts the Song as a depatriarchalized foil to Genesis

⁷ David Carr, “Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and its Interpretation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 233.

⁸ For further discussion of the origins of “the Shulamite” see Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, trans., *The Song of Songs* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 197-198.

⁹ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 7.

2-3 (in which human sexuality is created and corrupted in the Garden of Eden.) In the Song, “Another consequence of disobedience is thus redeemed through the recovery of mutuality in the garden of eroticism.”¹⁰ In other words, where in Eden mutual desire was destroyed upon disobedience and replaced with male domination (“her desire became his dominion”), in the Song this imbalance is redeemed. Tribble states that, “in the Song, male power vanishes,” as desire is mutual and the relationship between the lovers egalitarian. Tribble emphasizes the Shulamite’s agency, independence, and equality to her lover as evidenced by her dominant voice throughout the poem, as well as her expressions of love completely removed from the issues of marriage and procreation. Within her interpretation, Tribble neglects the environment of the Song, deriving a pro-feminist reading exclusively from the Shulamite’s voice and the inclusive harmony between the lovers. In doing so, she fails to recognize the Shulamite’s acts of resistance against the patriarchal forces within the Song, as well as the structure of those forces.

Alicia Ostriker analyzes the Song as both a literary and religious text, particularly meaningful for contemporary Jewish women. Her feminist critique of the Song is situated within a social and political context specific to the twenty-first century orthodox Jewish community. Like Tribble, Ostriker emphasizes the gendered equality between the lovers, and the harmony between humans and nature in her reading of the Song as countertext within a patriarchal canon.¹¹ Ostriker boldly claims that in light of “the absence of structural and systemic hierarchy, sovereignty, authority, control, superiority, submission, in the relation of the lovers and in their relation to nature”,¹² “[the Song] is not a protest poem, it is not anti-patriarchal; rather, it lives in

¹⁰ Ibid., 160.

¹¹ Countertext, a term coined in this context by Ilana Pardes, which both Pardes and Ostriker use “to denote any biblical text, brief or extended, which in some sense resists dominant structures of authority, divine and legal, as defined by the Bible as a whole and by the history of its interpretation.” Ostriker, 43.

¹² Ostriker, 50.

an alternative dimension, as if patriarchy didn't exist."¹³ Ostriker also reminds us that the Song includes no reference to God, nation, law, or genealogy, as well as "no representation of hierarchy or rule, no relationship of dominance and submission, and (almost) no violence."¹⁴ Within this claim, that the text presents an alternative to classic biblical patriarchy all together, Ostriker falls into a trap similar to Tribble. While she does address one instance of domination in the Song, she does so in the context of political allegory, focusing on the Shulamite's response as a call to action as opposed to analyzing the violent act itself. She provides no analysis of the forces of oppression with which the Shulamite interacts throughout the poem, and in doing so disregards the Shulamite's actions of resistance.

Both Tribble and Ostriker insist that power structures are virtually absent from this supposedly non-patriarchal text. Although obvious macro structural forms of patriarchy are absent from the poem, a gendered and sexual hierarchy is still at play. The male characters in the Song interact with the Shulamite within a patriarchal paradigm. The Shulamite's voice and actions offer resistance to patriarchy, and it is the men with whom she interacts who necessitate this resistance. Although their readings are distinct, both Tribble and Ostriker focus on the lovers at the expense of considering the society depicted in the Song more broadly—the society that the lovers must live within, and which compromises their idealistic relationship.

Feminist theorists argue for conflicting interpretations of the Shulamite's sexuality, but certain characteristics cannot be disputed. Within the Song, the Shulamite's sexuality is never deployed for procreation, nor executed within marriage. Her expressed sexuality is both loving and erotic. Disagreement arises around whether or not the Shulamite's sexuality is restricted by societal and individual repression, how the male characters in the Song understand her sexuality,

¹³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

and whether her desire is ultimately fulfilled or not. These conflicting feminist interpretations might be most neatly framed by the question: does female sexuality in the Song reflect representations of female sexuality in other biblical literature? Where does it align and where does it deviate? Supported by theorists such as Ilana Pardes and Cheryl Exum, I am complicating both Tribble and Ostriker's assertion that female sexuality in the Song deviates from how female sexuality is portrayed throughout the Hebrew Bible. While her individual sexual expression and relationship to her lover is unique within biblical literature, the world around the Shulamite and its societal construction of female sexuality is consistent with the canon. To deny this is to deny an essential source of the Shulamite's resistant power.

Renita Weems, of the *Women's Bible Commentary*, interprets the lovers' relationship in a similar, decontextualized fashion to Tribble: "The Song of Songs advocates balance in the female and male relationships, urging mutuality not domination, interdependence not enmity, sexual fulfillment not mere procreation, uninhibited love not bigoted emotions."¹⁵ What both Tribble and Weems fail to confront is that the relationship between the lovers is not the only human bond within the Song, nor is it the only evidence of sexuality. They have taken the conditions of the relationship between the lovers (idealizing these as well) and carelessly transposed them over all male-female relationships in the Song, where they no longer apply. The Shulamite's garden may be Eden-like, but one cannot deny the punishment and threats she is subjected to with each instance of disobedience to the rules outside the garden.

In addition, Weems makes the argument that, "With the Song, women find in the Bible permission to initiate, enjoy, and long for the erotic."¹⁶ I find the use of "permission" to be a curious term here, when we consider that the lovers consistently leave each other at dawn,

¹⁵ Renita J. Weems, "Song of Songs," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. (London: SPCK, 1992), 160.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

presumably to protect themselves from what would be harsh punishment for their illicit relationship. Perhaps in her active resistance, the Shulamite inspires women to defy societal rules, but she certainly does not have permission, and is clearly hiding because she is aware of the violation of norms. She is an inspiration to rebel and to pursue love and desire, but she is not yet an example of liberated woman.

There are numerous ways to approach this text from a feminist perspective. While theorists such as Renita Weems, Phyllis Trible, and Alicia Ostriker argue that the construction and deployment of female sexuality in the Song is counter to that in the rest of the Bible, others such as Ilana Pardes argue that female sexuality in the Song is still shaped by patriarchal forces much as it is in the Bible. I add my voice to this perspective, displaying how the societal construction of female sexuality within the Song is consistent with other biblical literature. The primary difference resides in individual expression by the female protagonist. In order to determine how female sexuality in the Song is consistent or divergent from its construction throughout the Bible, we must turn to an examination of this theme in other Hebrew biblical literature.

Female Sexuality in the Bible

Marriage is not mentioned explicitly in the Hebrew Bible; instead a marital bond is expressed by a man “taking” a woman. She is then incorporated into his household. Women are passed from familial ownership and become the property of their husbands. The central purpose of this union is procreation and companionship. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* entry on women in the biblical period: “Once a woman was betrothed, her fiancé, and then her husband,

had exclusive rights to her sexuality. The patrilineal nature of Israelite society, with land and property transferred across generations via the male line, is likely the reason for the stringency in biblical legal precepts dealing with a woman's sexuality."¹⁷ Thus, within a biblical context female sexuality is regulated by, and deployed within heterosexual marriage. Marriage does not necessarily concern erotic pleasure or romantic love.¹⁸

Under biblical law genealogy is paternal. It is only under rabbinic law that Jewish identity is passed down through the mother. Under biblical law a child's status is determined patrilineally, meaning that an Israelite man could marry a foreign woman and their children would be considered Israelite.¹⁹ It therefore becomes pertinent that men regulate their wives' sexual activity, so as to ensure the genealogical purity of their progeny. Both infertility and unfaithfulness can threaten or disrupt paternal lineage. Female sexuality, when harnessed for procreation within marriage, acts to maintain patrilineal social order. When expressed outside of these structural norms, it can be a source of social disorder. A bride's virginity is important for the same reason: to ensure the paternity of the children she will bear for her husband. The bride's family is invested in protecting their daughter's virginity to maintain her worth and respectability for her husband.²⁰

Traditionally, female sexuality in the Bible is associated with procreation, and heralded particularly for its part in producing a lineage of sons.²¹ Sons are necessary to continue the

¹⁷ Carol Meyers et al., "Woman," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Gale Virtual Reference Library.

¹⁸ Raymond Apple et al., "Marriage," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Gale Virtual Reference Library.

¹⁹ Historically, those in the biblical period are referred to as Israelites. It is not until the 3rd or 4th century that Rabbis start to refer to Israelites as Jews. After Babylonian exile Jew replaced the term Israelite, the term originated from the descendants of the kingdom of Judah.

Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 82 and 305.

²⁰ Anson Rainey et al., "Family," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Gale Virtual Reference Library.

²¹ David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 29-32.

family line, and to act as heirs to their fathers. There are multiple biblical examples of female barrenness, in which God intervenes to deliver a son, thereby ensuring that these matriarchs fulfill their primary role. Sarah, wife of Abraham, gives her handmaid Hagar to Abraham to conceive in her place, because she is infertile. Eventually, God declares that she will conceive and in her old age she gives birth to Isaac.²² Rebekah, wife of Isaac, is barren for years until God answers Isaac's prayers on behalf of Rebekah, and she becomes pregnant with Jacob and Esau.²³ These examples underscore the divinely sanctioned purpose of the female body: to deliver male sons.

Then there are biblical examples of barren women whose prayers for fertility are answered by God. This occurs in the case of Rachel, even after she gives her handmaid to her husband Jacob to conceive in her place,²⁴ as well as in the case of Hannah, barren for years until her prayers are answered. She vows that any son she bears will dedicate himself to serving God.²⁵ In other instances, women take a proactive, subversive role in response to the reproductive failings of men, and in doing so preserve a genealogy that would have otherwise been disrupted. Ruth, a Moabite woman, marries into the family of Elimelech of Bethlehem. After all of the Elimelech sons die it seems the family is fated to die off.²⁶ Upon her mother-in-law Naomi's instruction, Ruth seduces Boaz (a relative of the Elimelech family). According to levirate law, Boaz is the next in line to redeem the family's inheritance, meaning it is his responsibility to conceive the child, thereby providing for his deceased relatives. Boaz marries

²² Gen. 16:1-16, 17:15-21, 21:1-3. (The Anchor Bible.)

²³ Gen. 25:20-26.

²⁴ Gen. 29:28-31, 30:1-7, 22-24.

²⁵ Sam. 2:20-21.

²⁶ Ruth 1:1-5.

Ruth, who is then rewarded for her loyalty to her mother-in-law and fulfillment of reproductive duty: she bears the child who is the ancestor to the future King David.²⁷

In similar circumstances, Tamar acts outside social conventions and seduces her father-in-law Judah while in disguise, after he fails to complete his promise of marrying her to his third son after his first two have died.²⁸ In this instance levirate law fails. Levirate law refers to the condition by which a widow must marry and conceive with the brother or nearest relative of her dead childless spouse in order to perpetuate his lineage and inheritance.²⁹ Upon failure of the levirate law, Tamar takes extreme action in seducing Judah to fulfill her procreative duty. Tamar bears Judah's child, thus preserving his family line, and she is rewarded with male sons.³⁰ While both Ruth and Tamar defy societal conventions concerning female sexual behavior (seduction, possible sexual violation, acting outside the binds of male ownership), their transgressive sexual actions ultimately serve the patriarchal agenda determined for the female body: to produce sons and perpetuate lineage.³¹ Their transgressions are sanctioned.

In all of these examples, despite barriers to reproduction, women persevere in fulfilling their sexual roles. Whether within societal norms or in defiance of them, all of these women ultimately act to perpetuate a paradigm in which female sexuality is deployed exclusively for procreation. These women are not forced; they fully accept and seek to fulfill their reproductive role in patriarchal society. Contrary to these examples, in the Song of Songs the Shulamite's sexual actions are inspired by erotic desire, and not fertility. Ostriker emphasizes the unique role of love in the Song as compared to the rest of the Bible: "...the Song depicts the joys of love unconnected with marriage or procreation. This is in sharp contrast to the normative modes of

²⁷ Ruth 3:1-14, 4:1-10, 4:13-17.

²⁸ Gen. 38:6-19

²⁹ Biale, 18.

³⁰ Gen. 38:24-30

³¹ Biale, 14.

sexuality in the Bible, in which women are property and wives are essentially breeders. Here the lovers mutually seek, mutually praise, mutually enjoy one another.”³² In addition to this distinct display of love, the dichotomy between the Song and the rest of the Bible only deepens when we consider the actions of the female protagonist in particular: the Shulamite acts upon individual impulse, outside the confines of either marital or reproductive duty. She does not just respond to her lover, but initiates action as well.

This is not to say that the patriarchal social structure of the Bible is absent from the Song; it is not. Male actors do seek to regulate and own her body, as if she is a reproductive object and not an individual. However, the Shulamite resists these attempts in some instances. Furthermore, the sphere of love and eroticism she inhabits with her lover is inherently resistant to the traditional biblical social structure. The Song is not necessarily a complete anomaly within the Bible as many feminist theorists claim, but the Shulamite certainly is an anomaly amongst female biblical characters.

Tribble Reads Genesis and the Song

Phyllis Tribble begins her literary analysis of human sexuality in the Bible with Genesis 1:27, in which God creates humankind on the sixth day of creation. Tribble reads Genesis 1:27 as the simultaneous creation of two sexes, male and female, who are distinct yet equal. Sexual differentiation does not imply division: the sexes are not identical, but they are harmonious and equal in power, and thus united.³³ Tribble underscores that while Genesis 1:27-28 depicts the creation of one species and two sexes, and delineates the tasks set out for humankind

³² Ostriker, 44.

³³ Tribble, 18.

(procreation and dominion over the earth), these tasks are not gendered. Neither task is explicitly assigned to one sex. Tribble then interprets Genesis 2-3 through this understanding of human sexuality as differentiated yet not hierarchical. Although the dominant canonical understanding of Genesis 2-3 asserts that woman is created from the body of man, who is thereby her superior, in “A Love Story Gone Awry,” Tribble offers a different reading.

According to Tribble’s reading, prior to the creation of woman in Genesis 2-3 the first earth creature is “not identified sexually”—this creature is not the first *man*, but the first human being. God then created a second “earth creature” as an equal companion for the first; a companion “who is neither subordinate nor superior; one who alleviates isolation through identity.”³⁴ Sexual differentiation arises only after the creation of this second human. The sexuality of one is defined by that of the other: “After God operates on this [first] earth creature, to produce a companion, its identity becomes sexual...it results in two creatures where before there was only one...For both of them sexuality originates in the one flesh of humanity.”³⁵ Tribble makes a clear distinction between the first creature prior to the creation of its companion and afterward—it is only afterward that sexuality arises. While this sexuality differentiates the creatures, it also unites them as the complimentary figures of a fulfilled humanity and Eros. Originally “Sexuality [was] the recognition not of division but of the oneness that is wholeness, bone of bone and flesh of flesh.”³⁶ Thus, Tribble paints a harmonious portrait of human sexuality at its most nascent state, emblematic of the simultaneous differentiation between and unity of male and female.

However, the sexes do not remain equal companions for long. Tribble proceeds to describe the corruption of sexuality. After the act of disobedience (the eating of the forbidden fruit

³⁴ Ibid., 90.

³⁵ Tribble, 98-99.

³⁶ Ibid., 90.

inspired by the serpent, initiated by the woman, and passively agreed upon by the man) God condemns female sexuality to a relegated position—to be associated with painful childbirth and serving the desires of men. The sexual unity and fulfilled Eros that preceded disobedience is destroyed and a stark division is born:

The woman ate; she gave to her man and he ate (3:6). At this turning point, distinctions within one flesh become oppositions. Division followed, yielding “opposite sexes.” To defend himself, the man turned against the woman and betrayed her to God (3:12). Yet, according to God, she still yearns for the original unity of male and female: “for your man is your desire.” Alas, however union is no more; one flesh is split. The man will not reciprocate the woman’s desire; instead, he will rule over her... The man dominates the woman to pervert sexuality. Hence, the woman is corrupted in becoming a slave, and the man is corrupted in becoming a master.³⁷

Following Genesis, Tribble argues that this is the manifestation of female sexuality that prevails throughout the Bible. The sexes are firmly differentiated and occupy distinct roles, in which man dominates. In the place of fulfilled, harmonious Eros come the punishments of labor and pain. The woman is subjected to providing man with offspring, and the man is appointed master. Both are barred from the garden, and condemned to pain and labor. The man is charged with toiling the earth for sustenance, as now natural abundance and nourishment has been replaced with famine. The woman is condemned to suffer the pain of childbirth.³⁸ Prior to the act of disobedience, the union of man and woman did not concern procreation. Instead, they would unite “for the one flesh of sexuality...from two come the one flesh of communion between female and male. Thus is Eros consummated.”³⁹ The disobedience results not only in a gendered hierarchy, but also the perversion of sexuality, which no longer results in consummated Eros but instead primarily serves a reproductive purpose. This was not the original divinely determined manifestation of human sexuality, but it dictates the relationship between man and woman

³⁷ Ibid., 128.

³⁸ Tribble, 130.

³⁹ Ibid., 104.

following Genesis.

Trible then pivots Genesis against the Song. If Genesis is a love story “Gone Awry,” the Song provides a vision of how humanity might have been had the first of humankind not disobeyed God’s word. She emphasizes the equality and mutuality between the Shulamite and her lover, identifying God’s withdrawal in the presence of human love. Eroticism, love, and work are all intertwined in a sensuous celebration of inclusive and harmonious Eros, where the pain demanded of God’s first creatures is absent. Throughout her analysis, Trible focuses exclusively on the lovers, framing their love as redemptive of the disobedience in Eden:

In Eden, the yearning of the woman for harmony with her man continued after disobedience. Yet the man did not reciprocate; instead, he ruled over her to destroy unity and pervert sexuality. Her desire became his dominion. But in the Song, male power vanishes. His desire becomes her delight. Another consequence of disobedience is thus redeemed through the recovery of mutuality in the garden of eroticism. Appropriately, the woman sings the lyrics of this grace: ‘I am my lover’s and for me is his desire.’⁴⁰

Thus, Trible finds redemption in the reversal of desire. Whereas, in Genesis desire came to be symbolic of a power dichotomy between the sexes, in the Song mutual desire provides evidence of sexual equality. This analysis is comprised largely of a comparison between the relationship of man and woman in Eden, and that of man and woman specifically in the garden in the Song. After all, it is within the garden where the Shulamite and her lover most often express their erotic lyrics. Yet Trible makes a broader claim: “in the Song, male power vanishes.” It is with this transposition of the dynamic between the lovers over all relationships in the Song, that Trible’s argument falters.

Trible goes on to strengthen her claim, stating that in the Song, “...there is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex. Specifically, the

⁴⁰ Trible, 160.

portrayal of the woman defies the connotations of ‘second sex.’”⁴¹ With this assertion, Tribble expands the contrast between the Song and the Bible, so that it concerns not just the lovers, but the portrayal of the sexes throughout the entire Song. She privileges the central romance, blind to the social system in which it is situated. Her interpretation decontextualizes the lovers, amplifying their mutual desire so much so as to disregard the patriarchy that persists beyond the garden. Yes, within the garden the lovers express mutual love, but Tribble seems to claim that the reciprocal desire between the lovers alone is enough to challenge the patriarchal hierarchy established after disobedience in Eden. She does not address the male lover’s claims to ownership over the Shulamite, nor the ways in which her body is subjected to the sexual and reproductive demands of other male actors throughout the Song.

If Eros has been reestablished in the Song, it is limited to the erotic relationship between the lovers—but this should not erase the harsh reality that the lovers must face each time they separate. While it is true that their relationship, and the Shulamite’s voice, dominate the narration of the poem, Tribble conveniently neglects the various male responses to this voice, instead choosing to imagine the Shulamite as if she exists in a vacuum—in an Eden-like garden removed from society all together, free of pain, labor, and domination.

Patriarchal Claims to the Female Body

As stated previously, there are certain aspects of sexuality within the Song, which distinguish it from other parts of the Bible—primarily the erotic motivation of the lovers, as well as their mutual love and desire. However, the unmitigated praise of the Song as a counter to female sexuality in the rest of the Bible is based on a superficial examination of the text. Such an

⁴¹ Ibid., 161.

analysis is fully dependent on the two lovers, but fails to acknowledge that their clandestine relationship is threatened and restricted by the reality of the patriarchal world around them. In addition, such an interpretation infantilizes the Shulamite, depicting her as unaware of the societal challenges to her erotic desire and garden oasis. In disregarding the role of male actors in the poem, pro-feminist readings such as those by Tribble and Ostriker fail to credit the Shulamite with resistance to oppression.

My reading of the Song challenges Tribble's idealism. I argue that the environment and male actors in the Song preserve a traditional biblical understanding of female sexuality. The only dissenting factor is the Shulamite's eroticism in her relationship with her lover, as well as her active resistance to patriarchal control. The world around her functions much as it does throughout biblical literature. Her garden may be Eden-like, but paradise does not extend past those walls. It is instead violently disrupted beyond them.

Although not consistent throughout the Song, there are a variety of examples in which male players assert ownership of, or domination over the Shulamite. In the subtlest example of patriarchal claim, her lover claims ownership over her "garden" (or her fertility) following profuse praise of her beauty and invitation to enter. This claim to ownership is repeated in several verses (4:15-5:1, 8:14), and while it appears sanctioned by the Shulamite, the claim is not reciprocal. The more severe examples of ownership and domination come from the Shulamite's brothers and the watchmen. These men control and abuse the Shulamite's body and sexuality in order to maintain regulation of patriarchal societal norms. The brothers attempt to prevent the Shulamite from interaction with suitors, while the watchmen punish the Shulamite for disrupting public order in the streets—delivering punishment in the form of physical violence. Through

violence, the watchmen both assert male dominance over the public sphere, and objectify the female body.

These examples complicate a purely pro-feminist reading of the text. The male regulation of the female body as revealed in the Shulamite's relationship with these male actors demonstrates a heteronormative and patriarchal order. These instances of male domination and female subordination reflect the traditional, oppressive gender roles established after disobedience in Genesis, which position the Shulamite's female body as a locus of power assertion for men.

Although the Shulamite and her lover exhibit mutual erotic desire and appreciation for each other's beauty, there are at least two instances where the male lover expresses either the desire for ownership, or explicit ownership of his beloved. In his first spoken part in the poem he yearns to have the Shulamite as solely his:

My love, I dreamed of you
as a mare, my very own,
among Pharaoh's chariots. (1:9)⁴²

Although the lover may be expressing such a desire out of devotion for his beloved, his expression exists within a patriarchal paradigm. He imagines her not as a wild and free, but as a domesticated female workhorse used to pull the Pharaoh's chariot. Regardless of whether or not "Pharaoh" is self-referential (implying the royal authority of the male speaker), it is clear that the mare is nothing more than utilitarian, although cherished for her beauty and her passivity. The speaker dreams not that his beloved ride atop a chariot, but that as his animal property she be corralled—beautiful, but beneath male control. If anything, he will ride her. To him, this scene evokes love and devotion.

⁴² Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, trans., *The Song of Songs* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 1:9. All subsequent in-text references are to scene and line of this edition.

The Shulamite is equally devoted to her lover, but she does not express such devotion through a desire to *own* him. The concept of male ownership is reiterated in the Song as the Shulamite invites her lover into her garden, where he reaps the benefits of her plentiful offerings.

The Shulamite speaks first, followed by her lover:

*...O south wind, come,
breathe upon my garden,
let its spices stream out.
Let my lover come into his garden
And taste its delicious fruit.*

I have come into my garden,
My sister, my bride,
I have gathered my myrrh and my spices,
I have eaten from the honeycomb,
I have drunk the milk and the wine.

Feast, friends, and drink
Til you are drunk with love! (5:1)

Here one could argue that the lover's claim of ownership and divulgence is not patriarchal because the Shulamite has invited him into the garden. However, in her invitation she delineates it as "his garden," suggesting that she too conceives of this fertile land as his property. He lays claim to everything the garden has to offer: he is seduced by her scent, filled by her sustenance, and drunk from her wine. He offers nothing in return, and she owns no part of him. It is his desire for possession that has been fulfilled, although upon her invitation. The love is mutual, but the possession of sustenance and body is not.

In line with her reading of the Song as redemptive of the corruption of sexuality in Genesis 2-3, Tribble argues that the garden in the Song reflects the original paradise of Eden, and thus the essence of gendered equality. She refers to 5:1, the above mentioned stanza: "Male and female first became one flesh in the garden of Eden...Now in another garden, the lovers themselves praise at length the joys of intercourse. Possessive adjectives do not separate their

lives. “My garden” and “his garden” blend in mutual habitation and harmony. Even person and place unite: the garden of eroticism is the woman.”⁴³ In emphasizing the lovers’ union within the garden, as well as the seamless harmony between human and nature, Tribble overlooks a subtle power imbalance. As the keeper of the garden, the Shulamite provides for her lover. As soon as he enters, it becomes “his garden,” which he then refers to as “my garden.” There is no ambiguity in his ravishing of the Shulamite’s offerings. As Tribble writes, “the garden of eroticism is the woman,” and it is her male lover who indulges in the fertile fruit she bears.

The above stanzas in particular leave much to the imagination. For example, it is unclear whether the lover enters the garden upon the Shulamite’s invitation, or if he already inhabits the garden. If the Shulamite does in fact invite her lover in, does he then have exclusive rights to her garden? Has she lost the freedom to invite anyone else in? These unanswered questions only add to the complexity of the power dynamics between them. Although it is clear that their love for each other is mutual, gender roles still influence their relationship. We are left to wonder where the limits of sexual equity lie.

Further evidence of male domination can be seen in the reoccurring symbolism of the garden throughout the Song. In 1:14 the Shulamite describes a night with her lover, in which her love is like “a sheaf of henna blossoms / in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.” It is unclear whether her love refers to her lover, or to her feelings of love for him, yet either way she situates this erotic scene within the fertile oasis of Ein Gedi.⁴⁴ Both characters frequently describe themselves, each other, and their love and eroticism through depictions of nature, such that their blossoming lustful love parallels the awakening of spring (2:8-2:13).

⁴³ Tribble, 153.

⁴⁴ “Ein Gedi is a fertile oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea. The association between the vineyard and female eroticism found throughout the Song is evoked here by the parallelism of “my breasts” and “the vineyards.”” Bloch and Bloch, 147.

This nature/love parallel is echoed in the Shulamite's repeated plea to the Daughters of Jerusalem: "swear to me...that you will never awaken love until it is ripe" (2:7). The refrain occurs three times throughout the poem, as the Shulamite imparts her knowledge to a female audience: like the fruit of the earth, love has its own path of growth, do not attempt to hurry its natural timeline. Because the refrain concludes a lustful and loving encounter between the lovers we can assume the Shulamite has heeded her own word. Their love is ripe, meaning that it is mutual and has grown to maturation—it is not just juvenile love, nor mere lust. Their love is as fertile as the vineyards of Ein Gedi. However, noting the absence of institutionalized marriage and reproduction, allusions to fertility are more logically understood to mean a meaningful love that fulfills the lovers as they grow together and in the garden, as opposed to fertility directly connected to birthing new life. So perhaps in her appeal, the Shulamite is warning the Daughters not to engage in love unless they are sure of these qualities: mutuality and maturity. As women vulnerable to the offenses of a patriarchal society, this may serve as a form of protection from abusive love.

Despite the reciprocated love between the protagonists, the state of equality between them has certain limitations. It is the male lover alone who feasts in the garden. He is likened to an apricot tree, where the Shulamite has "often lingered, tasting the fruit," but she never feasts upon his fruit as he does hers (2:3). Her fertility and eroticism sustain him, and he goes so far as to claim this fertility as his. The consumption is one-sided. Their love may be painted as a fertile oasis, but when he enters her garden, the equilibrium is compromised: "He feasts / in a field of lilies," as she provides (2:16, 6:3).

In addition to sexual satisfaction or sustenance, the garden oasis also serves as refuge from the city. It is only in the garden and in the Shulamite's "mother's house" (3:4, 8:1-2), both

female determined private spaces, that the lovers seem to be completely at peace—protected from the external forces which threaten their union. Thus, it is the Shulamite who provides both the privacy and sustenance, which acts as physical and emotional protection from a ruthless environment, only to then have the lover take claim of her nourishment. And so, male regulation of the female body infiltrates the private sphere as well as the public, as we will see in the following examples.

The Shulamite's brothers demand a more absolute control of her sexuality than the lover, and they are more forcefully resisted as well. In the opening stanzas of the poem, the Shulamite voices her brothers' anger with her for not guarding the vineyards. According to translators Chana and Ariel Bloch, "'Vine' and 'vineyard' evoke her sexuality... (both Hebrew words, *gepen* and *kerem*, are grammatically feminine). 'Not having guarded' her vineyard is usually taken to mean either loss of chastity or neglect of beauty because of work outdoors."⁴⁵ Other theorists interpret the vineyards as a metaphor for the Shulamite's body,⁴⁶ for female sexuality,⁴⁷ or for her person generally.⁴⁸ Later in the Song, the chorus of the brothers corroborates this interpretation of the vineyards as the Shulamite's chastity or body:

We have a little sister
 And she has no breasts.
 What shall we do for our sister
 When suitors besiege her?

If she is a wall, we will build
 A silver turret around her.
 If she is a door, we will bolt her
 With beams of cedarwood. (8:8-8:9)

⁴⁵ Bloch and Bloch, 141.

⁴⁶ Pardes, 140.

⁴⁷ Falk, 527.

⁴⁸ Tribble, 157 and Ji-Eun Park, "Quills of the Strange Women: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Women in the Proverbs and the Song of Songs." (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2009), 119.

Once again the brothers seek to control the Shulamite primarily to preserve her chastity, just as they admonished her for failing to do so (i.e. guard the vineyards) earlier. She does not ask for this protection; they assume it as their duty. Perhaps the brothers recognize the looming physical threat suitors or other male figures potentially pose for their sister, and they are concerned primarily for her safety. Regardless, their protection is restricting.

In attempting to keep their sister from suitors, the brothers not only arrest the Shulamite's control of her own sexuality, but also act to preserve patriarchal order. Under their gaze she is young, desexualized, and powerless. As "she has no breasts" she is not yet a woman, and therefore not yet ready to serve her role in society as a wife and mother. The implication is that because she is not ready for suitors, her sexuality must be controlled by her male family members. As referenced earlier, within biblical tradition family members would be invested in preserving a daughter's virginity so that she might serve as a suitable bride. Once promised to a husband, he would gain exclusive rights to and ownership of her sexuality, but her sexuality could never go unregulated. If unregulated her chastity might be tainted by an improper suitor.

The brothers envision their sister as their territory, and they are prepared to protect this territory from an oncoming affront. They assume the duty of guardianship, yet they objectify her in the process, relegating the Shulamite to the status of family property. The brothers perceive suitors as a foreign threat; they will not ask for the Shulamite but "besiege" her. The brothers imagine their sister as inanimate (a wall, a door), and thus helpless in the face of war. Because they believe she cannot act on her own (and most likely prefer that she refrain from doing so), they assume the duty to barricade her against inevitable attack. More specifically, the brothers are concerned with a suitor jeopardizing her chastity. It is presumed that this is what any suitor seeks, and in their infantilizing of her it is apparent that the brothers find this unacceptable. (It

remains unclear as to whether this judgment is based upon their sister's age, familial overbearing, or simply that the brothers have not yet approved of a prospective suitor.) And so the barricade serves a double purpose: just as their "silver turret" and bolted "beams of cedarwood" are meant to deter suitors, the brothers wish to confine the Shulamite as well. Whether or not they acknowledge that their sister is a sexual being, in their promise to secure her chastity from ravenous suitors, their walls and bolts just as firmly act to restrain her sexual expression and keep her from pursuing her lover. As they would have it, their sister should have no say over her body, which is in fact not hers but family property.

At the start of the poem, when the brothers are angry with the Shulamite for not guarding her own vineyard (1:6), their anger could be attributed to knowledge of her unregulated sexual expression. In failing to guard her vineyard, the Shulamite has expressed eroticism inspired by desire, and not for the purposes of building a family. This is both an abuse of family property (the chastity her brothers seek to guard), and contradictory to the patriarchal regulation of female sexuality, which should be deployed within marriage only. The message remains similar regardless of whether we read the vineyards literally or metaphorically: the brothers are angered by the Shulamite's failure to guard the fertile ground owned by her family. Once more, fertility connotes both land and body—they are concerned with protecting family property as well as lineage. Her body is as much property of the family as the vineyards. Just as the lover feasts upon the fruits of her garden, her brothers aim to protect and control their fertile familial property.

What is interesting to note is that although the brothers are initially angered by the Shulamite's failure to guard her own chastity, in the verse above (8:8-9) they do not consider the need to admonish her sexual desire. Instead, their domination acts to shield her from the sexual

desire of male suitors. In other words, they will not permit her to be a sexual being until they deem it proper time, and at that time her sexuality will serve for procreation and the family needs. Although the Shulamite ultimately deflects her brothers' attempted domination, their persistence throughout the Song is not insignificant. Each time the brothers speak it is to condemn, or seek to control their sister's sexuality. Their actions are intrinsically patriarchal.

The brothers' attempts to corral the Shulamite give way to perhaps the most obvious example of the Shulamite's resistance to male domination in the Song. Let us revisit this example:

*I am a wall
and my breasts are towers.
But for my lover I am
a city of peace. (8:10)*

Here the Shulamite subverts her brothers' claims to her body. She inverts the use of militant architecture as corporeal descriptor: the walls and towers no longer act to restrain her, to keep her bolted inside and locked away, but are redefined to express her power and autonomy. Ilana Pardes writes, "In her response the Shulamite thus challenges her brothers' perception of virginity. She rejects their possessiveness, their treating her as an object whose value depends on blankness, on having "known no man." She turns her nobility into a mark of subjecthood, power, independence, and self-containment."⁴⁹ Pardes illuminates the Shulamite's rebuttal of her brothers' sexual policing and guardianship (their silver turret and beams of cedarwood), which serve only to limit her agency. Yet, the Shulamite does not shun sexuality all together, but redefines its parameters, rejecting the notion that her only worth resides in an unblemished chastity. The Shulamite confidently reclaims control of her body and her sexuality. As opposed to a mere sexual symbol, here her breasts symbolize empowered womanhood. They serve not as

⁴⁹ Pardes, 142.

sexualized body parts appealing to the eyes of suitors, but as beacons of her strength and self-protection. She derives pleasure from empowered sexuality.

Furthermore, she chooses to invite her lover inside her protected walls. For him alone does she let down her guard. For her lover she is “a city of peace.” This is an expression of autonomous love and desire (in itself radical where female desire should be reserved only for the father of a woman’s children), as well as an acknowledgement that their love is threatened by external forces. She is a city of peace, but a city nonetheless, implying that they must love behind protected borders. The Shulamite does not deny that there may be a threat to her safety in the advances of suitors. Yet, in defiance she proclaims her ability to defend herself. Contrary to her brothers’ perception, she is not a delicate object naïve to impending patriarchy. She is well aware of the threat, and confident in her ability to confront it if need be. Once again, she is resistant and empowered, but not yet liberated.

The Shulamite’s adamant resistance to her brothers is all the more revolutionary upon examination of perhaps the most contested scene of the Song: the attack by the watchmen. Although the watchmen subject her to a violent act of patriarchal oppression, ultimately the Shulamite’s self-empowerment is not erased. In this scene the lover calls upon the Shulamite, presumably in her home, and she wants to open for him but is hesitant. When she finally does, he has inexplicably vanished. The Shulamite then runs through the city in search of her lover, and it is here that the watchmen attack her:

Then the watchmen found me
 As they went about the city.
 They beat me, they bruised me,
 They tore the shawl from my shoulders,
 Those watchmen of the walls. (5:7)

This is not the first time the watchmen appear in the Song.⁵⁰ The events surrounding their first appearance (3:2-3:4) mirror those of their second. In both instances the Shulamite is in the midst of searching the city for her lover, when she encounters the voiceless watchmen. In the first scene the Shulamite passes the watchmen, asking if they have seen her lover, and before they respond she finds him. In the second scene (depicted above), she searches for her lover and before she can find him the watchmen attack her. Although the stanzas mirror each other lyrically, they build to starkly different climaxes. After the Shulamite finds her lover in the first instance, she brings him to her mother's house, where they are enveloped in the safety of the private maternal home. This resolution only underscores the danger of the public, male dominated space. This danger is made clearly apparent in the second instance, when she does not find her lover or retreat to her mother's house, and is then subject to the watchmen's violent abuse.

According to Ostriker, "As has often been observed, it is impossible to ascertain whether 5:2-8 is a 'real' event or a dream. Perhaps it is in some sense both."⁵¹ Regardless of how we read the event, the gendered violence is unquestionable. The implication remains the same: as soon as the Shulamite escapes her fertile, nature-rich environment and enters the man made city she is at risk. She is unaccounted for under public patriarchal order. Within the city, the watchmen regulate public order, which the Shulamite has violated as a young woman roaming the streets alone. By the rules of this order, an unaccompanied female becomes public property—that is, the

⁵⁰ One could make the assumption that the watchmen actually are the brothers. However, I will assume they are separate characters on the basis of voice. On both occasions when the watchmen are explicitly mentioned they do not speak, only act. When the brothers appear they consistently speak in a first person plural voice.

⁵¹ Ostriker, 52.

property of any male who may wish to stake claim to her body.⁵² The watchmen take claim through physical, and possibly sexual abuse.

The distinction between the Shulamite's two encounters with the watchmen is significant. In the first instance, she is reunited with her lover before the watchmen can act. She is reclaimed and protected by her male companion, before external public order is enforced. In the second instance, the watchmen impose male control, because her lover never appears. Either way, she is never permitted to walk the city alone for long. The watchmen assume the role of overseer, similar to that played by her lover in the garden (though to a much milder extent.) However, in the city the Shulamite has far less agency than in the fertile oasis. No part of the city is nourishing; she is far removed from her own private terrain. The city is emblematic of a more structured society, and once she physically steps into this society she is subject to its constructs. Her behavior does not comply with societal expectations for women, and male claims of ownership over her body are suddenly violent in response—distinct from the claims of her lover. Although the watchmen appear to be guards of the city, they do not deliver the punishment of a civil society, nor any form of protection. Their enforcement is cruel, physical violence, and solidifies the arrest of female agency and the objectification of woman in the public sphere.

As in the scene of the watchmen's attack, there is a pattern within biblical literature of unaccompanied women in the public sphere being raped or threatened with rape as a means of control over their bodies, an assertion of male domination of public space, or as punishment for disobedience. In the Song, the scene of sexual violence could be interpreted as male repression of the perceived threat of a rogue female body. An unaccompanied woman in public is threatening to patriarchal societal order because it implies the potential for sexual expression

⁵² This interpretation is grounded in a comparison with similar instances of sexual violence throughout biblical literature—examples of which will be discussed further below.

outside of marriage and reproduction, as well as the potential contamination of lineage. Such a woman has acted outside the confines of the societally sanctioned female duty. To the watchmen it is unclear whether the Shulamite is owned by a man (spouse or family), and they perceive her sexuality to be unclaimed. There exist no explicit guards of her chastity, yet she serves no reproductive agenda either. Her presence in public raises the possibility of female assertion—the assertion of desire, the female body as agent as opposed to object or property, and the prospect of reproduction removed from the strict rules of lineage.

Other biblical examples of rape involve similar notions of contested ownership over the female body. In this respect, male perception of female sexuality in the Song does resemble male perception throughout the Bible, perhaps with the exception of the male lover. However, in the following examples the female body and female sexuality are not so much a threat to patriarchal order, as a platform for its reinforcement. Sexual violence is utilized as a symbol of control amongst men of different factions vying for power. The violence is not condemned in these stories; communal retaliation occurs instead because of the infiltration of male foreigners claiming rights to a female body. This threatens local male power.

In Genesis 34 Dinah is raped after stepping out in public unaccompanied: “Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit some of the women of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, head of the region, saw her, seized her, and slept with her by force.”⁵³ Shechem dominates Dinah sexually as soon as she steps into the public realm of his city. He then asks her family for her hand in marriage, thereby seeking to legitimate his claim to her body, but her family rejects him. Dinah’s brothers plunder and destroy the city, murdering all male inhabitants “in reprisal for their sister Dinah’s defilement.”⁵⁴ They are angered by the

⁵³ Gen. 34:1-2.

⁵⁴ Gen. 34:8-14, 25-28.

disgrace brought upon their family, not because their sister has been violated, but because the violator was a foreigner—an uncircumcised man. They cannot transfer ownership of their sister to a foreigner, because to do so would be to disrupt their family's Israelite lineage. Through co-opted ownership he obstructs Dinah's role of producing Israelite sons.

From Shechem's point of view Dinah is an unclaimed female body available for his sexual advances within the public sphere he rules. Forced sexual domination is utilized to impose gendered order where it has potentially been disturbed. However, in raping Dinah, Shechem also threatens communal order. This violation leads to violent conflict: the community whose lineage has been threatened retaliates. The female body acts as a site of performance for public values. Sexual violence towards an individual woman is met with moral ambivalence at most. The more pressing issues here are societal and communal anxieties concerning identity and lineage, which are revealed through the rape and the male response to it.

The rape in Judges similarly leads to social disorder and violence. A Levite of Ephraim travels through Gibeah, the tribal territory of Benjamin, with his concubine and servant. While visiting with a welcoming stranger there, the townspeople attempt to harm him because he is of another Israelite tribe. In order to protect his guest, the host offers Levite's concubine up instead and the Levite throws her outside. She is raped by the townspeople and later dies. The event spurs a civil war amongst the tribes of the Israelites.⁵⁵ Once again, the act of sexual violence inflicted upon a woman is of little consequence to male family members or owners. In both of these examples rape is met with violent retribution because communal (in this case, tribal) boundaries and the rules of hospitality are violated. In fact, the women are hardly mentioned beyond bodies that have been manipulated.

⁵⁵ Jud. 19:12-29, 20:1-14.

Similarly to the aforementioned examples, in the Song the watchmen assert male power over the female body by means of sexual violence in a public setting. However, there is no communal retaliation for this violence either from the Shulamite's lover or her brothers—the potential owners of her sexuality. Apart from the brothers and her mother's house, there is no mention of lineage, family, or genealogy within the Song. Thus her body is not inscribed with the reproductive duties of lineage as the bodies of other female biblical characters are. Her brothers are concerned with her chastity, but even their presence invokes no mention of name, tribe, or clan. In a sense this is liberating; perhaps this absence of lineage supports the expression of sexuality severed from fertility. However, this also means that when the Shulamite is sexually violated she is not assured response or protection from a community. Of course, neither Dinah nor the concubine are assured protection either, which only underscores the devaluation of the female body within biblical literature. There exists no physical protection for these women, nor concern for their fair treatment as human beings.

While the Shulamite is largely detached from the macro structural reproductive duty to which most female biblical characters are subject, she remains vulnerable to interpersonal misogynistic violence. There is no community invested in her reproductive capacities nor any manifestation of masculinity which is threatened by her violated sexuality, as in the examples of Dinah and the concubine. On the one hand, this absence underscores the vacuum of structural patriarchy within the Song. On the other hand, the Shulamite still suffers gravely. To ignore her personal trauma at the hands of male perpetrators is to once again ignore the plight of woman as individual—as more than a body or piece of property. The Shulamite is engaged in a relationship of mutual love and eroticism, however she is fully aware of the risk involved in such an engagement. She repeatedly seeks out her lover despite this threat, and attempts to both resist

and protect herself from violence where possible. Her acts of resistance are significant, and even more so when we acknowledge that male actors utilize and abuse her body as a platform for resolving power struggles, just as in the cases of other female biblical characters.

Female Sexuality in the Public and Private Realms

In addition to a regulation of the female body, Ilana Pardes remarks on the consequences of the watchmen's attack for female desire in particular: "The fact that these are male guards who harass only the Shulamite underscores the patriarchal character of the society within which the amorous dialogue takes place. A woman who acts upon her desire runs the risk of being abused and shamed."⁵⁶ Pardes' analysis supports a strong emphasis on setting in the Song. Pardes shows us that the dichotomy between the public and private realm is a consistent governing factor in the regulation of female sexuality within a biblical context. Although resistant, the Shulamite is not able to escape this dichotomy. Within the idealistic private world of the garden, the Shulamite and her lover express their desire for each other liberally. However, once her desire manifests publicly in her search through the city for her lover, she is punished.

Immediately preceding the watchmen's attack, the lover calls upon the Shulamite in her mother's house. After some hesitation she opens, only to find that he has vanished. With this ensues her search through the city for him, and then the assault. The scene at the door is charged with sexual energy, like many of the encounters between the Shulamite and her lover. However, this scene is distinct because of the Shulamite's hesitance to answer to her lover, and because of the potentially public setting. If she is to answer him, he must come inside or she must step out in public.

⁵⁶ Pardes, 132-133.

“Open, my sister, my friend,
 My dove, my perfect one!
 My hair is wet, drenched
 With the dew of night.”

“But I have taken off my clothes,
 how can I dress again?
 I have bathed my feet,
 Must I dirty them?”

My love reached in for the latch
 And my heart
 Beat wild.

I rose to open to my love,
 My fingers wet with myrrh,
 Sweet flowing myrrh
 On the doorbolt. (5:2-5)

The Shulamite hesitates to reveal herself and answer her lover’s call, as she has already undressed and is in the safety of her mother’s home. However, she is ultimately overcome with erotic desire, her heart aflutter and fingers wet with myrrh. The flowery language of desire here is consistent with the language of Eros throughout the Song. It is the Shulamite’s hesitance which sets this scene apart, and notifies the reader that the Shulamite is aware of the risk in answering the door, or as Pardes notes, “the anxiety and shame that accompany the pleasures of exposure, especially when the female body is at stake.”⁵⁷ Outside the confines of the garden she is more cautious with her expressions of devotion and lust. This caution serves as an essential means of self-protection.

Upon opening the door and finding that her lover has vanished (no explanation is provided), the Shulamite decides to act despite the dangers, inspired by her devotion to him. The attack strikes when she acts upon desire to seek out her lover, thus literally crossing the private threshold into the public. The watchmen are not merely regulating an unaccompanied female

⁵⁷ Pardes, 137.

body (public property), but an expression of female desire within the public sphere. As biblical tradition tells us, this defies patriarchal order. The Shulamite's hesitance to reveal herself, to proceed uncovered was grounded in real physical threat. She understands the parameters of the garden oasis and the stark contrast between the garden and city.

Desire Unfulfilled

Perhaps because the eroticism in the Song is removed from marriage and procreation, pro-feminist readings have argued that it displays uninhibited female sexuality, and fulfilled desire. As Tribble highlights, if in Genesis woman was condemned to unreciprocated desire for her husband and to serve his purposes alone (“for your man is your desire”), in the Song female desire is an expression of autonomous eroticism—an expression returned by a lover unconcerned with procreation or lineage (“I am my lover’s and for me is his desire”).⁵⁸ And yet this celebration of fulfillment is questionable, particularly if we consider the physical movement of the lovers throughout the narrative. (It is also important to differentiate between expressed desire and fulfillment or satisfaction.) The text is riddled with the flowery language of erotic desire, and possible consummation, however neither Tribble nor Ostriker points to an instance of sexual climax in the Song. The desire is there, but the lovers are constantly in flux, and with each encounter ultimately they must separate. This is not to say that fulfillment only comes with a traditional sexual climax, or a sustained sexual encounter, but that the constant physical movement of the lovers implies a tension and societal resistance surrounding their relationship. This tension leads us to infer that the lovers are unmarried, or that their union is unsanctioned at

⁵⁸ Tribble, 128 and 160.

minimum; if it were any different their love would not need to be so clandestine—hidden by the cloak of night.

By physical movement I refer to the fleeting encounters of the lovers (2:8-10, 3:2-4, 4:6, 5:3-6), the hidden nature of their love (8:1), and the Shulamite's warnings to her lover to flee (2:17, 8:14). Their paradise is not consistent, but constantly interrupted, as in this instance when the Shulamite calls to her lover:

*Before the day breathes,
Before the shadows of night are gone,
Run away, my love!
Be like a gazelle, a wild stag
On the jagged mountains. (2:17)*

Though the lovers unite happily within the garden, their oasis is ephemeral. This in itself is emblematic of a societal threat to their love, as well as an unfulfilled desire. If the world of the Song were limited to the garden the lovers would have no need to flee in an attempt to protect their illicit union. In the very last stanza of the poem the Shulamite repeats this warning to her lover:

*Hurry, my love! Run away,
My gazelle, my wild stag
On the hills of cinnamon. (8:14)*

This concluding stanza signifies that nothing has changed: though they remain dedicated to each other, the lovers must ultimately depart at the end of the Song. External forces restrict a permanent union between them, and thus a truly fulfilled desire. Aware of the potential threat they may be under due to their illicit relationship, the Shulamite issues these panicked warnings to her lover, thereby hoping to protect both of them. He must leave her at dawn; if he does not there may very well be consequences.

Pardes emphasizes this tension between desire and fulfillment, and credits the Shulamite with knowledge of the patriarchal world surrounding the oasis she inhabits with her lover. The Shulamite is not blinded by her lust, but in fact fully aware of the violence it could inspire. Pardes writes, “the Shulamite is eager to celebrate her ripeness, to take pleasure in her budding powers.”⁵⁹ However, the celebration is never fully possible: “The Shulamite may seek to transcend the city walls at night and sleep in the fields with her loved one, but fulfillment is deferred. Here as elsewhere, she both abides by the Law and challenges it, guards her virginity and opens the door to her lover.”⁶⁰ Thus, fulfillment is not only limited by oppressive external male actors (the brothers, the watchmen), but also by the Shulamite’s own means of self-protection with these actors in mind. Pardes emphasizes that the Shulamite is eager to “celebrate her ripeness” and express her own sexuality, and she repeatedly comes close to fulfillment, or promises as much in the future. The Shulamite is limited not by a personal value in virginity, or even a promise of chastity to her brothers, but instead by the shadowy yet persistent threat of societally imposed violence. Although they appear only twice, the watchmen represent a violent, public manifestation of patriarchy that prevents a completely liberated relationship with her lover.

It is also interesting to note that it is always the male lover and not the Shulamite who flees. He is the wild stag who bounds across the hills, or disappears inexplicably into the night. Cheryl Exum argues that this is further proof of the gendered inequality within the Song: “Why is the man such an elusive lover? ... Does his freedom of movement reflect a social reality that she has interiorized, since this is how she thinks of him? Not only does he appear to enjoy an autonomy she lacks, he also has a sexual freedom she does not share, for his chastity, unlike

⁵⁹ Pardes, 142.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

hers, is not an issue.”⁶¹ While the Shulamite must take precautions to protect both their relationship and her own body, the lover travels freely through private and public realms. The temporality and setting of their encounters are entirely dependent on the male lovers’ actions, and it is his flighty presence which ultimately leads to the Shulamite risking her own well-being as she transgresses the protection of the private sphere, and into the public in search of him.

By arguing that the Song exemplifies female sexuality counter to its position in the rest of the Bible—as uninhibited, fulfilled, and free of domination—pro-feminist readings not only deny the presence of patriarchal world order, but also disregard the Shulamite’s awareness of this reality and role as an active resistor. In considering the entire world of the Song, as opposed to the relationship between the lovers exclusively, female sexuality in the Song functions much as it does throughout the Bible: as a battlefield for male domination concerned with fertility, and as a force in need of control for fear of its disruptive potential in society. The difference between the Song and the rest of the Bible lies within the character of the Shulamite, but does not concern societal perception of female sexuality more broadly. While the Shulamite is able to express eroticism for her lover within their garden haven, ultimately her desire remains unfulfilled—restricted by the ever-encroaching patriarchal world she resides within.

Ostriker’s Call and Response

In her allegorical reading of the watchmen’s violent attack upon the Shulamite, Ostriker does not emphasize the presence of violence. She does acknowledge that the scene represents a rupture in the Eden-like non-violence of the Song, but she does not dwell on the significance of

⁶¹ J. Cheryl Exum, “Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs,” in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner & Carole R. Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 30.

the gender dynamics at play, nor on the societal implications of the watchmen's actions.

Referring to the watchmen's attack Ostriker writes, "Within the larger structure of the Bible, the Song is like a loophole through which we peek into an alternative existence. Within the Song, this episode is like a loophole through which we peer back at existence as we know it."⁶² By this, Ostriker acknowledges that it is this scene of violence, and not the idealistic world of the rest of the Song that most resembles a modern Orthodox Jewish society as Ostriker experiences it.

In emphasizing this point, Ostriker refers to the experience of Jewish women, both biblical and historical, who act against Jewish tradition. She asks, "For what happens—according to respected Jewish tradition—to a woman who goes public with her spiritual need, whose yearning is larger than a kitchen?"⁶³ She then proceeds to cite examples such as the learned Beruria of Talmud, versed in Torah and eventually driven to suicide by her husband Rabbi Meir as punishment for daring to transgress traditional gender roles. This is Ostriker's preliminary response to the episode of violence against the Shulamite; that perhaps it reflects a reality within Judaism—the reality of women who disobey tradition. Ostriker does not explicitly delineate the structures of this tradition, nor name the perpetrators of this violence against women, literal or figurative.

Ostriker moves on to the Shulamite's response to the assault, in which she refers again to her search for her lover:

Swear to me, Daughters of Jerusalem
If you find him now
You must tell him
I am in the fever of love. (5:8)

Immediately following the watchmen's attack the Shulamite appeals to the daughters to help her find her lover. (The daughters are a group of women the Shulamite repeatedly addresses.

⁶² Ostriker, 52.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 52.

Occasionally, they respond to her, but more often they are a silent audience.) The Shulamite and her lover are eventually reunited, at which point their erotic union continues much as it did before. Ostriker identifies this stanza as an appeal for justice:

When the Shulamite appeals to the daughters of Jerusalem with the solemnity of an oath, she should awaken our longing for justice. *Justice, justice shalt thou seek*. When she cries that she is sick with love—sick because of frustrated love (5:8)—she should remind us of our own condition within the Jewish world. She begs us to be her allies. We ought to answer her call.⁶⁴

Ostriker interprets this stanza as the Shulamite's call for allyship from others similarly subjugated. Within her allegorical reading, the call evokes resistance to the reality of spiritual and institutional exclusion faced by modern Orthodox Jewish women.

It is important to contextualize Ostriker's argument politically. Published in 2000, Ostriker's paper reads as a reflection of millennial politics within Jewish feminism and feminist biblical studies. According to editor Athalya Brenner, when Ostriker writes of 5:2-8 (the watchmen's attack) as a "poem of spiritual yearning, our exclusion by tradition and a plea for inclusion which appeals not only to desire but to justice,"⁶⁵ she is referring to the late second wave feminist movement within Orthodox Judaism, which confronted (and continues to confront) access for Jewish women to spiritual and communal paths where they were previously excluded.⁶⁶ This included the full participation of Jewish women in community, spiritual, ritual, and family life, women assuming religious leadership positions and being ordained as rabbis, women reading from the Torah, creating new understandings of Jewish spirituality, debating

⁶⁴ Ostriker, 53.

⁶⁵ Ostriker, 37.

⁶⁶ Ellen M. Umansky, "Spiritual Expressions," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 358.

gender-neutral Hebrew within religious texts, and other issues pertinent to a feminist understanding of Judaism.⁶⁷

Considering this political context, Ostriker's analysis of this scene in the Song reads as an allegory for the confrontation between patriarchal Orthodox Judaism, and Jewish women resisting aspects of this tradition. She understands the male lover as representing God ("the Holy One, the blessed name, our lover"), and the watchmen as representative of Jewish tradition.⁶⁸ As the Shulamite wants to answer her lover, Jewish women want to answer God's call (i.e. participate in the public ritual of prayer or spiritual life), yet Orthodox tradition continues to impose limitations on their relationship to the divine. Ostriker is primarily concerned with reading the Song as a "plea for inclusion"—a call for female access to the spirituality of Judaism.⁶⁹ She is less concerned with the physical violence towards and policing of female bodies and sexuality, either as symbolic of male domination or as present in the Song as literature. Whether or not we interpret the watchmen as an allegorical representation of an exclusionary tradition or evidence of patriarchy within the Song as literature, domination of the female body remains pertinent to their identity. In disregarding this aspect of their character, Ostriker relieves Jewish tradition from any responsibility to participate in deconstructing patriarchal oppression, and simultaneously excuses the gendered violence the watchmen perpetuate.

Ostriker does not read the Shulamite's plea as an attempt to bypass tradition all together to establish an autonomous relationship with the divine. Instead, in her imagining of justice, Jewish women will fight for their inclusion within Orthodox Jewish tradition so that they can

⁶⁷ Idana Goldberg, "Orthodoxy and Feminism," in *New Jewish Feminism*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), 287-296.

⁶⁸ Ostriker, 53.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

answer God's call. With this reading, Ostriker belittles the Shulamite's active resistance to patriarchy. Instead of acknowledging that the exclusion of women from full participation in religious life is structural (a facet of patriarchal tradition, i.e. the watchmen's violence), Ostriker places all of the responsibility for change on Jewish women (i.e. the Shulamite), which implies that any passivity on the part of women should be relinquished. Furthermore, she presents no resolution to justice seeking beyond the inclusion into an oppressive institution. The institution itself is never questioned.

Ostriker concludes her analysis with another task for the oppressed woman. Once again, Ostriker imagines the scene between the lovers at the door, prior to the attack, as emblematic of the losses to the Jewish community, due to the "exclusion of Jewish women from the ongoing creative and intellectual life of the Jewish people."⁷⁰ She depicts the Shulamite's hesitation as symbolic of this loss, and of Jewish women's fear in answering a spiritual call: "And we want to open, but we are afraid, and when we go to the door it is too late, and we regret our hesitation...But the Song is timeless, the beloved still knocks. How long will it take us to answer fearlessly?"⁷¹ In this appeal, Ostriker focuses on the Shulamite's fear, but not its cause, and she does not acknowledge the potential for violent retaliation from a male dominated tradition in the radical action of answering God's call. Ostriker finds no value in the Shulamite's hesitation at the door, and certainly does not view this as an instinct of self-defense.

In a sense, Ostriker demands that the Shulamite (Jewish women) sacrifice personal safety in the act of resisting the oppressive order of tradition. Although Ostriker embraces risk on the part of the Shulamite, she makes no parallel request for justice seeking or change of any form from the oppressor. She lays no responsibility on the watchmen, who instill the dominating order

⁷⁰ Ostriker, 54.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

preventing the Shulamite from fearlessly answering the Holy One's (her lover's) call, and she does not credit the Shulamite with attempting to protect or care for herself either. As made evident by the Shulamite's hesitation in answering her lover at the door, she is aware of the danger in venturing out in public, and harbors societally anxiety concerning her nakedness. Nevertheless, she takes a chance in the face of known threat, and her fears come to fruition. Upon recognition of the very real basis for the Shulamite's original reservations, we should applaud the form of resistance she does utilize: she does not blame herself or cower in shame after her attack, but instead seeks the care of her lover and friend.

In belittling the scene of violence and emphasizing the Shulamite's voice both before and in response to the attack as evidence of feminine justice seeking, Ostriker misses an opportunity to challenge the oppressor. Perhaps Ostriker is disenchanted with accountability: she does not think tradition can radically change. However, the result is a disregard for the societal structures in the Song, which necessitate that the Shulamite fight for justice in the first place. While it is true that the oppressed are the only ones who can instigate change within the violent system that oppresses them, such change will be ineffective if it only asks that the oppressed be included in the class of oppressors. Instead, justice seeking must involve an understanding of the structures maintaining oppression, a condemnation of those structures and their effect on the oppressed, and ultimately a deconstruction of this social order.

Ostriker's final question, "How long will it take us to answer fearlessly?" places all responsibility for action upon subjugated women, and passively blames women for their inaction. I believe a more appropriate and affirming question for the victimized Shulamite would be as follows: how can we deconstruct the patriarchal order which inspires this fear, and how can we

care for ourselves throughout this fight? This applies whether we read the Shulamite as representative of Jewish women in particular, or those victimized by patriarchy more broadly.

While Ostriker argues that the Shulamite takes a stance against oppression through her call to the daughters of Jerusalem, I would argue that she is appealing for support in a healing process following the attack—a healing process, which may precede justice. Oftentimes, the primary interest of anyone who has suffered trauma is a desire to heal. Executing justice (or revenge) upon the perpetrator of such trauma may not be an initial concern, particularly in instances of sexual violence. Ostriker does not entertain this possibility. Instead, she associates the Shulamite’s voice with a biblical mantra: “Justice, justice shalt thou seek.”⁷² What Ostriker fails to emphasize is that in her response immediately following the assault, the Shulamite is only concerned with finding her lover. This forms the substance of her appeal to the daughters. When the daughters question this instinct, asking, “How is your lover different / from any other, O beautiful woman?” (5:9), the Shulamite responds with a praiseful description of him ending in:

This is my beloved
And this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem. (5:16)

In response to the violence inflicted upon her, the Shulamite does not seek retaliation against the watchmen, or inclusion in the public sphere. She is preoccupied with self-care above all else, which is in itself an act of resistance within a society that devalues and dehumanizes her. For the Shulamite self-care comes in the form of the love and comfort of her beloved, who is not just a lover, but a caring friend as well. The fact that such healing is necessary only further elucidates the presence of patriarchal violence within the Song, as well as the Shulamite’s resistance to this violence. The world depicted in the Song cannot be simplified to the idealized garden alone.

⁷² Ostriker, 53.

The Patriarchal Game of Control

Female sexuality in the Bible is intimately intertwined with themes of procreation, lineage, and male domination. Consistent with such biblical themes, throughout the Song, the lover, brothers, and watchmen are all engaged in a patriarchal game of control for the Shulamite's body and sexuality. This control takes various forms, as all attempt to be her sole owner. While the Shulamite and her lover express mutual love and desire for each other, she does relinquish control to him at points, thereby satisfying his desire to exclusive ownership of her. This does not necessarily imply that his desire for ownership is malicious, nor that it nullifies his love for her. He wants to own her, but out of love in addition to erotic desire. In fact, in staking claim to the Shulamite and her garden, the male lover may in fact be acting to protect her within the game of male domination.

Previously, I referred to two instances in which the lover expresses explicit ownership of the Shulamite: 1:9, in which he refers to her as his mare, and 5:1 in which he stakes claim to her garden. In stark contrast to the Shulamite's resistance to her brothers throughout the Song, in these scenes the Shulamite presents no objection. She embraces her lover, despite the risk involved in their illicit union.

Assuming the lovers are unmarried, we can then infer that according to biblical tradition the Shulamite is still the property of her male family members—her brothers. As family members, the brothers are concerned with protecting the Shulamite's chastity, and thereby her value as family property. Ilana Pardes argues that the brothers seek to guard the Shulamite “in the face of coming dangers, that is, in the face of her coming sexual ripeness.”⁷³ However, in the brothers' game of control Pardes also infers, “an incestuous desire to defer the moment in which they will

⁷³ Pardes, 140.

have to hand over their beloved sister to another guard—her spouse.”⁷⁴ Thus the brothers’ hunger for domination clouds their perception of reality. Clearly their sister feels ready to unite with her spouse (whether the brothers know of him or not), but her agency is compromised because of the motivation of her familial male owners, who seek to preserve her supposed virginal state.

The watchmen occupy a different arena of domination, and deploy distinct means of authority as well. They seek to control the Shulamite’s body and sexuality, similar to the other male figures, however, they are also invested in asserting male domination of the public sphere. They physically dominate the Shulamite only when the control of both the lover and the brothers falters. Thus, we see there are multiple levels of tension surrounding the Shulamite’s sexuality. On the one hand, the fleeting encounters between the lovers (though erotic and loving) imply that the two are not permitted to be together; the garden is a haven, but it is not the totality of the society in which they live. Officially, the Shulamite remains under the guardianship of her brothers (1:6, 8:8-9). In the moments when the Shulamite is neither in the garden nor in her family home, but in the city, we witness the consequences faced when a female body is suddenly without male ownership. It is here that the threat of the watchmen strikes.

The beauty of the Song is that patriarchal society often seems peripheral to the effervescent flora and fauna, and the erotic union of the lovers. It is within a close reading of this harmonious love relationship, as well as the Shulamite’s active voice, that theorists such as Phyllis Tribble and Alicia Ostriker locate their pro-feminist analysis of the Song as countertext to the Bible. However, the Shulamite is not just remarkable in her expressions of love and sexuality free of the confines of reproductive duties or marriage. In her affirmations of her own strength, rebuttal of her brothers’ sexual regulation, wariness concerning the public sphere, and actions of both self-care and self-defense, the Shulamite is revealed to be not a liberated female character,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 141.

but one actively resistant to the impinging forces of patriarchy which seek to oppress her through control of her body and sexuality. When we read her lyrically dominant voice through this lens of resistance as opposed to idealized liberation, her character suddenly becomes all the more radical.

The Shulamite is not just a rare example of an actively desiring woman in the Bible. She does not inhabit a utopia of sexual harmony free of domination or subordination, absent of all remnants of patriarchy, as both Tribble and Ostriker argue. Such qualifications more accurately describe the garden, although neither is that arena untouched by gendered hierarchy. In its entirety, the Song of Songs depicts a society much more realistic and ominous than that of the Eden-like garden alone. Despite her transcendent voice and nearly fearless love, the game persists: the violence of patriarchy threatens the Shulamite's autonomy beyond the garden walls, and her body remains a prized possession. In this way the Song is not countertext to the Bible. The patriarchal social order which characterizes the majority of biblical literature is kept alive in the oppressive sexual regulation imposed by each male character within the Song. And so the Shulamite's powerful voice, and acts of resistance truly are emblematic of her radical self-empowerment. By recognizing the patriarchy surrounding her, we only uplift the Shulamite further, and allow for a nuanced feminist reading of her character. She is not yet free. She is a warrior and lover, fighting the patriarchal society which seeks to limit her, and embedded in the tension between private and public realms, desire and fulfillment, domination and liberation.

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