

On Stakes, Publics and Voices:
A Response to the Papers in the *Let Me Hear Your Voice* Conference.
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It has been a wonderful experience to hear these thought provoking and insightful papers, and I wanted thank Elaine and Simi for inviting me and for offering me the opportunity to reflect on them in a sustained way now. I'm also grateful for the demonstrations that are going on outside. We have found them noisy and frustrating, but they are a reminder of that very *public* that we have been intent on tracking—are they not? As always, publics are inconvenient, unexpected, noisy, just, unjust: all of those qualities, and more. Actually, I think the demonstrations have been rather good for us! For me, they signal that it is important to remember to face outward as we do the work we do with the texts we work with. I am also grateful for my task at hand. The papers I have heard over the past two days have been inspiring and thought provoking. It has also been quite the challenge to hear them, to hear discussions, and then to try to draw it all together in a singular response. It follows that what I offer here is by necessity *of the moment*. I am not at all sure how this translates once a response like this is transcribed and posted for posterity. Imperfect as they are, then, I offer these observations, which are a collection of a number of interconnected themes that have piqued my interest. I think they can be summarized in four questions.

What Is at Stake?

What is at stake when we try to reconstruct the literary history or make determinations about the essential literary-historical parameters of a text such as the Song of Songs? This is an important part of the Song's history of interpretation (and its present), but as ever I am drawn to ask about the interests that particular scholarship serves. Two papers, Simi's and Martti's, in particular help to highlight explicitly what is in the background of many others papers, which is our inherited assumption that there is an Ur-text, an original, that, if we apply the right tools and questions to it, its contours and purpose might become clearer to us. This matter has become a fairly demarcated line in our field recently (see debates by Aichele, Moore, Hendel and others over postmodernism), but it is perhaps not the place to propose debate on that at just this moment. I raise it here, however, because I wonder if this question has implications for our work on the female voice and public discourse. What I do not want to convey here is that I think these readings are "wrong" or ill-conceived; on the contrary, they really seized my imagination and made me think deeply about the text's contours. What I am suggesting, though, is that these questions led me to entertain the idea that if we want to occupy the radically ethical positions on biblical texts that we might be called to in our current times, we are going to need to think critically about what interests our scholarship serves, sometimes despite our best intentions. Responsible reading?

Simi's paper caught my imagination in its foregrounding of the *manufactured* nature of the Song's world, particularly in its presentation of the layerings that go on here: there is dreaming, which itself is a visual simulation of *life*, and there is the reporting on dreaming—that is to say, the reporting on the simulation of lived experience. To this

layering, I could add more: there is the *literary* construction of the dream—different, I think, from the reporting on it; it breaks with the poetic patterning of the Song, and establishes its own pattern. There is the readerly interpretation of the scene as a dream or reverie, over against the equally plausible interpretation that it is a “real” (or wakeful) moment in the Song (whatever that might mean). There are also, of course, the reception-historical treatments of the dreams, some of which have been fairly disastrous from a gender-critical point of view (a woman’s sexual fantasy to be dominated by observers, in the case of 5:2-8, being my personal favorite). These dynamics are, of course, in addition to Simi’s own construction of the Song, which has the relationship of the lovers unfolding through grammatical decisions and patterns. Martti’s tracing of Assyrian parallels for the Song sheds light on other kinds of layerings; these come from what he has argued is a stream of tradition that makes representations of women’s bodies in the context of erotic poetry. Indeed, the case he makes for the lengthy traditional interest in these themes is compelling, as is the diversity in themes themselves and the breadth of the picture that the poems creates—including what are at times contrasts in the way the woman might be represented.

Why am I so taken with these layerings, laboring to elaborate them here? The sheer volume of interpretive *possibility* that they indicate is important; in my view, this is something that numerous features of the Song allow. The text’s fluidity—in voice, in imagery, in temporality, in space—invites... no, demands that we situate ourselves differently in its presence. I see this fluidity as a call to action, in fact. If texts invite you to interpolate yourself in them, what will be your response? The questions of what traditions seek to create and why they share and seek to perpetuate them are essential ones. From my own thinking, this is less a literary-historical question (since I tend to focus more on readers’ work in the process of navigating the Song), and more of an ideological one, with implications for how we might use the Bible to think through contemporary matters of sexuality and gender equity. When human cultures persist in placing the erotic, amatory body in specific frameworks, that should get our attention. When readings of those texts put observations about the woman’s voice (Simi), or about complimentary traditions showing the woman’s figuration (Martti), or offer a framing for imagery that elides difference and vulnerability (Kelli), or offer intertexts that plug into patriarchal interpretive frameworks in the service of the mainstream (Karl, Deborah)—and employ them in the service of coherence, composition, tradition, and so on, I wonder if such methods will always fall short of the interpretive possibility that we seek, which is to fully privilege voice and women’s emergence into the public sphere. Let me be clear: these readings, I suspect, fully intended this; they sought to privilege voice, or autonomy, or wholeness, or difference in reception history. And yet, in deference to the original text, and all the accoutrements we have adorned that with—I wonder if that framing has meant they must at the final moment homogenize, instead of radicalize. They cannot ultimately make such space possible or accessible, but instead find themselves serving heteropatriarchy, through its textual tools, such as coherence, tight literary composition, perceptible traditions, and so on. Why is this so? Should we make the assertion: “It is just working with the text!” OR should we be thinking more closely about whether some tools serve certain ends (political ends) better than others?

Feminism and Women's Voices in Public

This brings me to my second question and an observation about the opportunities that we have perhaps *not made* enough of in our work on the Song collectively in the last two days. The conference description declares its aims as

“to bring *The Song of Songs* into a public dialogue shaped by the complex concerns of the current moment. It provides a forum for religion in the public sphere, with *The Song of Songs* at the center of inquiry. This inquiry will move in two directions with a reciprocally informing dynamic: How might the text be a recoverable resource for public thought? How do currents in contemporary thought newly condition and challenge our understanding of this unusual ancient poetry?”

It is a low-blow sort of thing to do (but I am not the only one!), you might be thinking, to read the conference description back at the participants and ask, “well, what of it?” But permit me this moment, if you will, because I think the stakes are too high to simply walk away with an observation that some of the papers managed to foreground matters of public discourse and leverage the woman's (or Song's) place in it, and some did not. Again, let me clarify, my interest is not in finger pointing, but it is in asking why might this be. I only know one or two of you well enough to be able to gauge your politics, but certainly what I hear from discussion is that we would all find such an endeavor important. So. My question is: what got in our way?

Is it, as I was just pondering, that we would need to radically change our methodology to be able to do this fully? Perhaps yes. Perhaps there are more apt methods suited to this kind of political work—Rhiannon and Yvonne's work seems to indicate so. Is it also because, as Elaine suggested early on, feminism has lost its interest in the book, or has more generally in the field faded into disuse? I feel (I hope!) that is not the case. But I do think it might be true that we need to re-articulate feminism, to situate it better in its shifting, gender-critical space, to explore more recent feminist tools, such as intersectionality, for such a project, for instance, to better foreground our own politics and where we are situated with respect to the task at hand. I noticed that we kept getting stuck as a community of readers, on questions of authorship, of voice, of gaze. I would expect such things at a Song of Songs conference. Whose gaze/ Whose voice? Is it a man writing a woman? Why would he write her this way? Is it a woman writing her own experience? Why does she get caught up by her context, impeded by the watchmen? Why can we not look away from 5:6-8? These persistent questions (persistent in the field as well as in our midst), speak surely to the text, but they also speak to us and our own preoccupations with female sexuality in patriarchal contexts, in our desire to see things as not quite good enough. Rhiannon and Yvonne made this point in a discussion after one of the papers, Rhiannon lamenting that we cannot just seem to bring ourselves to talk about the good stuff. Even in places where we might be recovering textual receptions that appear to do the opposite, we seem to bring these moments back to the shit pile, almost despite ourselves. Hildegard's obvious radicalness still serves the patriarchal work of the church; Genesis Rabbah's 85% success rate still floats it in a sea of rabbinical despair. Only: they don't. Hildegard's work is subversion (even if it is despite herself); the rabbis have tripped themselves up, and their knees will stay dusty, even if they get back up).... What would it take for readers rhetorically to leave those subversions as paramount? This

is an interpretive decision, one that diligently refuses to fit the work of reading back into the mainstream.

As we keep bringing up #MeToo and #ChurchToo, and as Anna drew our attention to Christine Blasey Ford and the Shit List, I found myself thinking that something was not quite right in the comparison between the then and the now. I can see the attraction, to link examples of repressions of women's voices in the face of sexual violence to our plucky heroine, for she too was violently repressed. But mostly, she was not. And so I wonder if the better comparison, and indeed the liberation for us from our own depressing focus on the beating scene, is to emphasize the sex (or the near sex) and to think about women's sexual liberation. Yes, Rhiannon asks where's the thwacking and thumping and sliming in conjunction with queer spaces... but I think we could also ask: where's the coming and sucking and screwing and slipping and humping and the juicy bits of it all? Our feminism needs to be about all of that; about plurality and categories and behaviours that trouble the binaries in which we find ourselves straightjacketed, our interpretive sex on Saturday nights. And if the sexual climate of today—of America, I'm going to say—is invoked, then I think the ebullient, multifocal sexual expressions of that public should be explored, as might the other repressions of women's sexual freedoms that abound (a fuller picture); our eye needs to be on *Roe v. Wade*, on the policing of girls' clothing in public schools, on bathrooms, on child marriage, as Yvonne as intimated, and much more.

Manufacturing publics?

Rhiannon's astute observations about the publics that the Song manufactures (along with the counterpublics that she proposes) and Yvonne's politic enervations of the Song are the logical next places for my third question, which was: *What does it mean to manufacture publics, and more specifically, to do so with literary figurations of the body and the constructions of emotion?* As we learned, publics indicate the worldmaking that Rhiannon has mentioned, but also the implication of numerous discursive and disciplinary partners, which may be inferred in her analysis. Publics are manufactured, they implicate lived realities, which are always filtered through variables such as history, social convention, and sexual mores. They are also, I would emphasize, somewhat artificial, by which I mean that they are intentionally constructed for certain ideological aims and play with imagination as much as they might gesture towards reality. Of course, queer counterpublics are just as precariously balanced between lived realities and artifice as heteronormative publics are. The performance of erotic vomit ("we knew we could no longer look away") is instructive in this regard, and I think, significant. Where binary oppositions (queer, heteronormative; reality, the imagination) might help to show what needs addressing, they really can trip us up. It is in the interstices that we need to be exploring, I think, as we seek to bring the ancient into the contemporary context as a resource. And where, I know, queer spaces are meant to represent those interstices, my fear is that they become just a sort of methodological opposite and not more.

There are two places where I think we might find the interstitial most effectively. I think of the body imagery—of course—which is linked to readerly desire—as I've argued, the

Song draws readers in through its lack of clarity. But I also think of emotion, since in my recent work on affect I have come to understand emotion as political and eminently mutable in its abilities to transmit feeling and have it shape the social and the public. On the imagery: The most useful aspect of the grotesque when I used it was its multivalence; the intention was never to convince readers about ugliness over beauty, but to allow them a space where they could stop in ambivalence for a bit, and see how it bumped up against their own experience, but also intermittently challenged and confirmed some of the many competing currents in work on the Song. (I like Yvonne's phrase, poetics of anti-matter.) I wanted to use the imagery (the Song) as a text to think with—to see what it tells us about ourselves as readers, but also what it tells us about human love. In the end, it is not so much the nature of the imagery that we must determine as it is to what purpose it is put. So we are back to readerly decisions about the kinds of methods we employ and what we seek to get out of them; as you heard yesterday, I want to ask Kelli how her reading for wholeness avoids going down a path that can't get us to a place when we can think about resources for religion in the public sphere. It seems to me that bodies are one of the contact points for religion in the public sphere, and so the question becomes for me: how can the Song's odd/beautiful bodies translate? Are they a resource, or just too contentious to be useful?

I would have to say the same about the pursuit of emotion, which is an important place to push into in Song scholarship, and I am happy to see it being done here. I found Sarah's paper really energizing and thought provoking, but I also find myself in some disagreement. Love in Sarah's estimation, in its perfect form, is selfless, serves others, prompts peace, and cannot (she says unequivocally) be thought of as wounding. But it isn't these things; love does wound—of course it does. I cannot see that love precedes interest, because human beings are always interested parties. Sarah Ahmed's conceptualization of love sees it as fundamentally political—fundamentally *interested*—as it has been pressed into service, for example, to author political dissent, or to feed disturbing forms of nationalism. And so, if I am going to think about *love* as a resource for our public discourse work, I want to think about it in the kind of world-making that Ahmed has elaborated. In particular, where Sarah has found herself in a space where she must argue that the vulnerability of the abuse is a place where the woman's passivity is revealed, I want to push back, not from some outraged feminist position (though there is that), but from the practical perspective that I don't think that the passive, vulnerable Shulamite is the most useful persona for us to take forward as a resource in our commitment to bring the Song into the public sphere. So... if not only this, then what is the figure to take forward? I gesture here not towards the impossible place that Yvonne indicates (the truly open and perfectly free), but the complex, full personhood of the woman, who is wounded, who is jealous, who is peaceful, who is selfless, who is *interested*.

Publics and Privates?

Should we therefore start to think about scholarly-sexual publics too? This brings me to my fourth question:

How are we to understand the relationship between the public and private, as mediated by this literary construction of a human relationship, and as it bumps up against the

contexts of readers' real relationships? One of the fascinating things about Song scholarship for me, especially feminist scholarship, has been the fact that we seemed to become romantic fools as we engaged with it. Or, we ended up positioning ourselves hyperbolically in relation to it, sometimes to make a political point, as I have done in the past, or as Rhiannon has done here in her paper. In my work on the grotesque, I tried to foreground this readerly positioning. I think it is time to come back to this question in a collective and self-aware way, especially if we might engage on a shared project around public discourse. What is *our* public? How do our own positions and complications impact our methodological choices and our desires for the text? I am not proposing, as Alice Bach so memorably phrased it, (sex-)autobiographical work that is “self-serving and icky,” but I am hearing Rhiannon’s challenge, and using it to call also for an interrogation of the publics that background our readings and towards which we direct them. (Yvonne has begun the gargantuan task of this in her paper, showing the sheer vastness of such a job—and for me, the need to tailor that history and present to specific reading contexts and projects. Karen just mentioned the creation of new institutions in her paper earlier; these are also the sorts of politics I mean.) The conference’s call for attention to religion in public discourse needs to be unpacked. Where? What public? As someone said, the idea of public is huge; it is endless. So what do we mean by that? In the Ivy League? In post-Brexit-Britain? In Canada, post TRC and with decolonization on the horizon (that’s a minefield!).

As for scholarly sexual publics—what are those? If we think backwards, we might recall the reception historical moments in 19th century biblical scholarship, as we turned towards the literal, where the erotic relationship between the lovers could be titillatingly explored, so long as we gave our readerly assent to their marriage. This sexual public had to do with time and place, with the tentative steps of the historical critical method. What are our scholarly sexual publics now? I suspect they are largely... missionary positioned. Most are not queer, and where they are (as with Moore or Boer), they seem to be pressed into the service of the mainstream eventually, or sidelined by the discipline. Our sexual publics are usually white, European, middle-or upper-classed, adorned in binary flannel PJs, a largely lights-off sort of affair. I hope that we will find an opportunity to interrogate these more closely, to think about how they impact what we seek, but also how they might, with coaxing, allow us to challenge what we find out there in the public sphere.