



ON FEMININITIES IN
THE SONG OF SONGS
AND BEYOND
“THE MOST
BEAUTIFUL WOMAN”

VITA DAPHNA ARBEL

LIBRARY OF HEBREW BIBLE/
OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES

716

Formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

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The Most Beautiful Woman

Vita Daphna Arbel

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2022
This edition published 2023

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021947578

ISBN: HB: 978-0-5677-0006-3
PB: 978-0-5677-0009-4
ePDF: 978-0-5677-0007-0

Series: Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, volume 716
ISSN 2513-8758

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

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*For the most beautiful people in my life—Vita, Ester, Alter-Avner, Hanna, Micha,
Nira, Aliza, Zmira, Menashe, Omer, Efrat, Rachel, Reed, and Stella, with love.*

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| List of Plates | viii |
| Acknowledgments | ix |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1 On Ideal Femininity, Patriarchy, and Female Eroticism | 21 |
| 2 On Many Shades of Femininity | 65 |
| 3 On Conformity and Resistance through Dressing and Undressing | 95 |
| Conclusion: <i>The Most Beautiful Woman</i> in the Song and Later Generations | 129 |
| Bibliography | 143 |
| Index of Biblical and Other Ancient Sources | 171 |
| Index of Authors | 173 |
| Index of Subjects | 175 |

Plates

- 1 *Le Cantique des Cantiques I.* Ivan Vdovin / Alamy
- 2 *Le Cantique des Cantiques II.* Ivan Vdovin / Alamy
- 3 *Le Cantique des Cantiques III.* Ivan Vdovin / Alamy
- 4 *Le Cantique des Cantiques IV.* Ivan Vdovin / Alamy
- 5 *Le Cantique des Cantiques V.* Ivan Vdovin / Alamy

Acknowledgments

Few books of the Hebrew Bible have yielded such a diversity of readings and interpretations as the Song of Songs. Among them, an exciting array of examinations have focused on the Song's female protagonist, *the most beautiful woman*. In this book, I take great inspiration from this rich scholarship. With attention to theorizing the intersections between biblical texts and gender criticism, I aim to expand these analyses and further investigate the enormous variability associated with this emblematic figure, as well as the complex manner in which the notion of femininity is constructed, altered, and transformed in the Song.

Many have contributed to this investigation. While I cannot acknowledge everyone by name here, I offer my warmest thanks for their support and inspiration, academic and otherwise. I extend my heartfelt thanks to my friends and colleagues at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem who provided significant feedback, challenged me, and deepened my reading of the Song. A special thank you goes to Rachel Elior, for an ongoing stirring exchange of ideas over many years, and to my friends, Z. E. B. and A. B. whose thoroughly original and most delightful insights have lifted me up into new realms of thought.

I am very thankful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the generous funding of this project. I would also like to convey my extreme gratitude and appreciation to the amazing Dania Sheldon for her excellent and committed help with all stages of the manuscript preparation and editing and to thank Kristen Carter for her erudite, enthusiastic research assistance. My many thanks extend to Dominic Mattos, Claudia Camp, and the team at Bloomsbury T&T Clark. My warm appreciation goes to the anonymous readers for their supportive critical comments and discerning suggestions on my manuscript.

Finally, and above all, I am deeply grateful for sharing my path with Menashe, Omer, Efrat, Rachel, Reed, and Stella. My love and thanks to you go far beyond words.

Introduction

This book engages with a captivating and complex figure who has operated as a powerful signifier of ideal femininity throughout the ages: *the most beautiful woman*, the main female protagonist in the ancient biblical Song of Songs (Song 1:8, 5:9, and 6:2). Approaching the Song as a unified single poem and drawing particularly on gender criticism, among other critical methods, I treat the female protagonist as a culturally constructed and idealized “woman” and offer a comprehensive investigation of the remarkable multiplicity surrounding her representation throughout the ancient poem. I further suggest that this representation of the emblematic *most beautiful woman* conveys a nuanced complexity that is integral to the social construct “femininity” and arguably gives access to what that concept meant in the cultural discursive context in which the Song emerged. Finally, I consider the lasting impact of this composite representation upon the Song’s audiences in later generations.

More specifically, the overarching thesis of this book is that the complete, unified Song does not represent its female protagonist as a solid figure with a stable persona, set of characteristics, role, or subject position. Instead, it constructs her as a multifaceted figure who is made to balance or hold together a web of overlapping performances of “being a woman”; some of these embrace patterns of power or submission—codes stereotypically understood as “masculine” or “feminine”—or models considered “patriarchal” or “liberated,” or behavior regarded as normative or subversive.

In the course of this exploration, I draw attention to the following: the Song’s shifting conceptualizations of femininity and female sexuality; the multipart performances allocated to *the most beautiful woman* throughout the complete poem; the effects that the Song’s inclusion of several competing, context-dependent patriarchal paradigms and social expectations have on her overall construction; the diverse relationships between power, hierarchy, and women’s agency that the Song encompasses; the manner in which its representation of

its female protagonist both corresponds and responds to the cultural values and constructions of femininity at the time; and finally, the gendered significance of this striking plurality for the Song's audiences, both ancient and more recent.

The Most Beautiful Woman

Situated at the center of the poem, the Song's female protagonist is often identified as "the most beautiful woman" (Song 1:8, 5:9, 6:2) but is never named. As Adele Reinhartz has remarked, anonymity often points to the universality and paradigmatic nature of biblical figures.¹ Similarly, Fiona Black has maintained that "[the] lack of identity is important ... [as] it means a certain unanimity and universality."² Such observations guide my treatment of *the most beautiful woman* as an emblematic representation of "woman."

This figure is recurrently characterized not only as a beautiful woman, but as *the most beautiful woman*, the one who far surpasses all other women in beauty. In this book, I am not investigating what constitutes beauty according to the Song, a question that has been sufficiently treated in important studies.³ Instead, I consider this marker—"the most beautiful woman"—as indicating a superlative similar to the designation "The Song of Songs" at the opening of the Song. Accordingly, I treat *the most beautiful woman* not only as emblematic but also as an idealized figure that embodies exceptional, supreme attributes, characteristics, and modes of behavior associated with prioritized notions of femininity in both the discursive context of the Song and beyond.

Several significant insights further guide my reading. First is Cheryl Exum's discerning assessment regarding the constructed and mediated nature of the Song's seemingly authentic voices and characters. As she has alerted us, "there are no real women in the text ... it is a text, an artistic creation, and the man and woman/men and women are literary personae, literary products."⁴ Embracing this position, I treat the Song's protagonist as a culturally constructed literary representation of "woman" and, as noted above, a signifier of "ideal femininity."

A pointed observation made by Athalya Brenner about the plurality assigned to the Song's female (and male) protagonists has further stirred the way I approach *the most beautiful woman*. Addressing the multitude of voices, sources, backgrounds, and preconceptions that are "allowed to flourish in the Song," Brenner has asserted, "The horrific female of 6:10 ... has little in common with the timid, imploring interlocutor of 1:7 ... There is more than one female beauty ideal (rural as against urban, for instance; fair as against dark) ... the dark

woman of 1:5-6 is not necessarily the ‘Shulammite’ of ch. 7.”⁵ While my approach differs fundamentally from that of Brenner, who has attributed plurality to several different figures in support of her rejection of “unified” readings of the Song,⁶ her reference to the Song’s multipart female protagonist has nonetheless encouraged me to explore various facets of this aspect further.

Francis Landy’s insightful view on the Song’s pervasive ambiguity similarly motivates my discussion throughout the book. As he has observed, “within the limits of its paradoxes the Song is wholly enigmatic ... There is no single truth in the poem, only an inexpressible reality. Yet the poem tempts our imaginative, constructive efforts through its prodigality with clues, the promise of the brilliant fragments of narrative that compose it.”⁷ In accordance with this nuanced observation, my discussion particularly engages the intriguing ambiguity surrounding *the most beautiful woman*, considers her many-sided, inconsistent representation, and ponders its gendered and ideological significance.

Indeed, what makes *the most beautiful woman* so fascinating for my examination is that her overall portrayal is contradictory and riddled with cracks. While this complex characterization is not always obvious, a careful reading suggests that she personifies persistent paradoxes, inherent ambiguities, ambivalent characteristics, fluctuating subject positions, and conflicting gender codes. My aim in this book is neither to resolve the multiple or shifting connotations attached to this figure into a single interpretation nor to pin the text down to one coherent reading or counter-reading of *the most beautiful woman*. Rather, I approach the female protagonist through the Song’s ambiguities, overlapping descriptions, competing discourses, parallel conceptions, and contradictions. All these I consider valuable keys that help elucidate composite, nuanced notions integral to the social construct of “femininity,” which this foundational ancient text both assumes and forges.

On the Song of Songs—a Brief Overview

The “Song of Solomon,” “Canticles,” or “Song of Songs” (שיר השירים), as it is originally termed in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, is an ancient Hebrew love poem, considered one of the most enigmatic books in the canon. Although its superscription, “the Song of Songs which is Solomon’s” (Song 1:1) (which arose from a later editorial process), associates the Song with the historical King Solomon (tenth century BCE), scholars still debate the authorship, provenance, and date of this ancient poem (ranging from the tenth century BCE to the

Hellenistic period, third century BCE), as well as its literary style, structure, content, unity, place in the canon, and Hebrew dialect's origin.⁸

Distinguished by its asymmetrical structure, the Song lacks a clear plot and unfolds through parallel monologues, dialogues, and choruses, without clarity or the leading voice of a narrator. It also includes inconsistent references to rural and urban locales, northern and southern settings in ancient Israel, and dissimilar perspectives, viewpoints, and ideological stances. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Song has presented a significant hermeneutical challenge throughout the centuries, as its long history of readings attests. The Song has received more wide-ranging interpretations than perhaps any other biblical book, including allegorical, cultic, cultural, dramatic, gender, feminist, historical, linguistic, literary, mystical, poetic, political, psychological, and spatial/cartographic, to name just a few.⁹ Gender criticism will primarily guide my examination in this book.

Feminist and Gender Readings of the Song's Female Protagonist

To place the discussion within a broader context, let us briefly review previous key feminist treatments of the Song's female protagonist. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, C. D. Ginzburg noted that the Song does not present female inferiority (1857),¹⁰ but critical feminist study of the Song only developed much later. While it is difficult to determine with certainty when such work began, Phyllis Trible's 1973 article, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," offers an early, defining contribution.¹¹ Her rereading of the Song as a reversal of the male dominance recorded elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible has inspired subsequent research, including Marvin Pope's major Anchor Bible commentary (1977)¹² and a broad range of significant feminist interpretations, presented from a variety of perspectives.¹³

Within this important and vast body of interpretation, one may identify several typical approaches. A large number of studies have promoted "appreciative" readings of the Song, emphasizing patterns of power associated with its female protagonist and examining issues such as its dominant female voice, possible female authorship, celebration of female desire, counter-patriarchal stances, and egalitarian gender relations. In accordance with principles of women's emancipation, such studies have further emphasized the Song's unique characterization of its female protagonist as independent, authoritative, and sexually liberated, contrary to the prevailing patriarchal stances in its discursive context of biblical Israel and that culture's androcentric literature.¹⁴

From a different perspective, commentators have critiqued the deferential “hermeneutic of compliment,” in Black’s disparaging words, that is employed in such feminist interpretations. Taking on a variety of more critical approaches, a number of readers have directed attention to disconcerting, problematic issues embedded in the Song¹⁵—for instance, the Song’s treatment of female sexuality as shaped by patriarchal agendas; the poem’s depiction of violence against the female protagonist; its prioritization of heterosexuality; its conceptualization of the female protagonist through the male gaze as sexualized, objectified, displayed, and controlled; and the pornographic as well as satirical and “grotesque” presentation of her body and conduct.¹⁶

A few readings of the Song have also treated the inconsistent characterization of *the most beautiful woman*, yet not from the perspective of gender. For instance, this variability has been associated with the Song’s lack of unity¹⁷ and with its poetic style and genre.¹⁸ From a different angle, the disparate representations of the Song’s female protagonist have been linked to an ongoing tension between patriarchal traditions and female countertraditions.¹⁹ Yet another perspective views the Song’s portrayals of *the most beautiful woman* and her lover as representative of all lovers in all their diverse attitudes and experiences of love—and ultimately, as representative of love itself.²⁰

Evidently, these studies as well as the array of additional feminist examinations of the Song have yielded significant insights and meaningful observations. This book both takes inspiration from this rich scholarship and seeks to enhance it by exploring levels of meaning that have not yet been fully investigated. Bringing gender theoretical approaches into dialogue with the Song, it thus centers on the poem’s multifaceted representations of *the most beautiful woman*, approaches this dissonance from the perspective of gender, addresses the possible ideological stances buried within it, and considers the overall construction of the Song’s emblem of femininity without a preconceived assumption about what femininity means, aiming instead to take cues from this remarkable composite ancient poem itself.

Reading Strategies and Methodologies

Approaching the Song

Because of its specific focus, this book does not treat issues such as the Song’s authorship, provenance, dating, transmission, shared cultural themes, exegetical traditions, history of interpretations, unity versus disunity, or the origin of

its Hebrew dialect, topics that have been thoroughly examined in prominent studies. Rather, drawing on leading scholars, the book considers the Song as a single, unified literary unit, a long lyric poem about love and sexual desire, and focuses primarily on its constructed *most beautiful woman*.

Indeed, while a number of scholars have doubted the unity of the Song, regarding it as a collection of unrelated love poems with multiple authors, others have made a strong case for its unity.²¹ Directing attention to recurring terms, themes, phrases, associative sequences, steady characters, internal structure, and the Song's overarching chiasmic structure—which would not be expected in a collection of poems—readers have put forward extensive arguments to substantiate its literary unity.²² For instance, Roland Murphy has identified repeated refrains, themes, words, phrases, and elements of dialogical structure rooted in the poem.²³ Michael Fox has detected four distinct aspects that point to its unity, including a network of repetitions, associative sequences, consistency of character portrayal, and narrative framework.²⁴ From a literary-structural perspective, attention has been directed to the Song's cohesiveness as well as the connection between the individual poems in each of its units, as Elie Assis, for instance, has asserted: "The Song of Songs is a unitary work, which has a beginning, a middle part and an end. The book is a single organism and if any of the individual poems were lacking, it would be incomplete."²⁵ In his recent study, Christopher Meredith has applied spatial theory to the Song and demonstrated how units assumed to be distinct are nonetheless linked through spatial continuity.²⁶

Claiming the Song's unity, Landy has offered further elucidation: "The only irrefutable ground for rejecting the unity of the Song, that it lacks logical sequence, rests on a false premise, namely that logical sequence is an indispensable requirement of lyric poetry."²⁷ Considering numerous stylistic and structural indications of a unity of authorship and style, Exum has similarly argued:

The main objection to unity is the absence of any demonstrable logical sequence or an obvious structural organization or perceptible narrative development. The Song, however, is a lyric poem, not a dramatic one, and lyric poetry is a discontinuous form. We should therefore not expect it to display the kind of narrative development that produces, say, a plot, or even any progression at all.²⁸

Embracing this position, I treat the Song as a single, unified lyric poem, a lyric expression of human love between male and female lovers, and consider its intricate, complex construction of its key female protagonist, which is remarkably embedded in several single poetic scenes, as well as throughout

the complete poem. In a detailed literary close reading, I thus direct serious attention to the Song's overall construction of *the most beautiful woman*, take into account subtle themes, gaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies hinted at in its dominant coherence, and thereby bring to the surface her multifaceted representation in all its significant complexities and intricacies.

Transdisciplinary Perspective

While my examination involves a careful contextual reading of the Song, I also take the position that diverse theoretical perspectives help to illuminate vital aspects of and meanings in texts from several angles, asking varied questions that often cannot be posed within the framework of a single discipline and thus producing a richer understanding of the topics addressed in this book. For this reason, the overall perspective I adopt in this book is transdisciplinary. Throughout my examination, I draw on and merge several critical tools and methodological perspectives on the historical study of ancient texts, ranging from philological approaches to methods developed in literary studies, the social sciences, historical-cultural studies, and gender/feminist criticism.

Gender Criticism: Key Observations Employed

Notably, however, I draw on gender criticism as the primary analytical category. While “gender criticism” designates a huge and heterogeneous body of work—one that obviously neither agrees on every point nor is concerned primarily with women and femininity—this book principally employs several select interrelated observations about formulations of femininity and the female subject that are particularly beneficial for thinking about the Song's *most beautiful woman*:

- Joan Scott's famous understanding of gender, in this case femininity, as a historical category of analysis. Although the “category of analysis” idea has been debated, Scott's concept disrupts the notions of fixity and normalization associated with gender, challenges rigid concepts of “female,” “women,” or inherent “feminine traits,” and emphasizes the context dependency and diverse constructions of these notions in changing historical-social circumstances.²⁹ This understanding informs my discussion throughout the book.
- An understanding of patriarchy as context dependent, fragmented, and divided. This view contests a monolithic “patriarchal approach” that ignores

the variability of male dominance and norms in specific historical-cultural contexts, overlooks their dissimilar formulations of idealized femininity, and does not offer tools to go beyond description and/or denouncement.³⁰

This understanding provides new insights in my discussion of patriarchy, female eroticism, and idealized femininity in Chapter 1.

- An understanding of gender identity, in this case femininity, not as a biological, natural, and homogeneous category but as performative and historically constructed in multiple ways by virtue of fluctuating social conventions and culturally prescribed roles of womanhood.³¹ While this understanding draws primarily on Judith Butler's concepts of performativity, it is important to point out that it departs from her main focus on drag or gay performance insofar as it treats the concept of gender multiplicity in the context of femininity. This understanding proves particularly relevant for my discussions of shades of femininity, in Chapter 2, and conformity and resistance through dressing and undressing, in Chapter 3.
- An understanding of "women's experience" as relative, fluid, and variable. This view rejects appeals to standardized "women's experience" as authoritative evidence; such appeals privilege particular forms of feminine experience as the norm, essentialize the category of "woman," naturalize differences, and generalize about diverse histories.³² I use this particular understanding to shed light on the imagery I discuss in Chapter 3.
- Needless to say, gender criticism treats constructions of men and masculinities and of women and femininities beyond a heterosexual matrix. In this book, however, I devote primary attention to notions of women and femininities. That said, however, it is important to note that neither the masculine gender role nor its associated characteristics are exclusive to men. Thus, I treat notions of masculinities in relevant discussions related to the Song's characterization of *the most beautiful woman*, especially when exploring shades of femininity in Chapter 2.

Obviously, I do not claim that the approaches employed here lead to a definitive reading of the Song or present the utmost insights into its representation of its protagonists. This ancient poem contains a linguistic, literary, thematic, and conceptual richness that transcends any single interpretation. I do posit, however, that by employing these reading strategies, the book offers insights into levels of meaning in the Song that have not been fully explored and are well worth further consideration: the remarkable construction of *the most*

beautiful woman embedded in the Song's framework, the multiple paradigms of femininity it embraces, and the gendered and ideological significance of this representation in the discursive context of the Song and beyond. I discuss these issues in four chapters. Aiming to foster a dynamic analysis, each responds to and examines a different aspect of conflicting imagery, ambiguous depiction, or perplexing representation associated with the elusive female protagonist in the Song. The order of the chapters is intended, in part, to develop and extend the analysis.

The first chapter, "On Ideal Femininity, Patriarchy, and Female Eroticism," treats the conflicting representations of the female protagonist as being both sexually free and restricted. In contrast to prevalent interpretations that often associate the former with women's emancipatory principles and countertraditions and the latter with limiting patriarchal principles, I direct attention to the variability of distinct sociohistorical patriarchal cultures and their diverse conceptualizations of idealized femininity and female sexuality. As a heuristic "case-study," I focus on the patriarchal cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and biblical Israel—whose cultural and discursive contexts partially shaped the Song—consider the potential impact of their fused ideologies of femininity on the Song's sexually liberated and constrained *most beautiful woman*, and reflect on the implications this intricate representation appears to reveal.

Needless to say, our available sources from biblical Israel and Mesopotamia cannot be used as simple exclusive evidence of their two distinct homogeneous gender ideologies. With this understanding, the chapter focuses on long-lasting and prevalent discourses that evidently reveal relatively stable and persistent paradigms of femininity that predominantly circulated in these two patriarchal cultures over a vast period of time. The former typically associated "esteemed femininity" with notions of procreation, guarded sexuality, patrilineal line, and male honor, while the latter predominantly associated "esteemed femininity" with notions of sexual allure, eroticism, seduction, and male pleasure.

In dialogue with that evidence, the chapter suggests that the Song's representation of its female protagonist as at once sexually inhibited and unbound does not necessarily reflect a tension between oppressing patriarchy and liberating feminine views. Rather, it appears to convey an intriguing interweaving of two gender paradigms shaped in the patriarchal world of biblical Israel and Mesopotamia, which, in turn, are adopted, juxtaposed, and negotiated throughout the Song's construction of *the most beautiful woman*.

The chapter concludes by suggesting that paradoxically, the Song's construction of its emblematic female protagonist in accordance with these two authoritative,