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'I sought him but I did not find him': The Elusive Lover in the Song of Songs

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Abstract

Despite the tendency in much Song of Songs scholarship to view the relationship of the lovers in the poem as harmonious, egalitarian and unproblematic, the repeated absence of the male protagonist in parts of the woman's speeches (most notably in chapters 3 and 5 of the Song) might be seen as a challenge to such interpretations. This article foregrounds the theme of absence in the woman's speeches in the Song of Songs, exploring the implications of this theme for the characterization of the female protagonist, and for the relationship of the lovers in the poem.

Keywords

Song of Songs, absence

'The Song of Songs is the great love poem of commingling—of different realms, different senses, and of the male and female bodies.' Thus Robert Alter has eloquently and exuberantly characterized the vision of love inscribed in the Song of Songs, seemingly a beautiful and extraordinary biblical paean to eros.[1] Indeed, it is the very qualities that Alter identifies in the Song—the sense of harmony and balance that emanates from the lovers and pervades the poetic landscape, their unity and reciprocity, their fusion in love—that makes the poem so unique and exceptional in the patriarchal context of the Hebrew Bible. Alter is

1) R. Alter, 'Afterword', in A. Bloch and C. Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 119-131 (p. 121). His sentiment is echoed throughout Bloch and Bloch's commentary on the Song, upon which Alter is reflecting.

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not alone in foregrounding and celebrating these aspects of the Song of Songs. Commentators from Phyllis Trible onwards have marvelled, wide-eyed and delighted, at this remarkable portrayal of mutual desire, paying homage again and again to this short but significant biblical text that seems to depict an unproblematic, uninterrupted, and entirely fulfilling sexual relationship, and in so doing, advocates equivalence and equality between the sexes.[2] Alicia Ostriker, for example, sees in the Song 'an absence of structural and systematic hierarchy, sovereignty, authority, control, superiority, submission, in the relation of the lovers…'[3] Renita J. Weems argues that 'the Song of Songs advocates balance in female and male relationships, urging mutuality not dominance, interdependence not enmity, sexual fulfilment not mere procreation, uninhabited love not bigoted emotions'.[4] For Carol Meyers, 'a gynocentric mode predominates' in the Song,[5] and Marcia Falk thinks that 'the Song seems to describe a nonsexist world, and thus it can act

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2) See P. Trible, 'Love's Lyrics Redeemed', in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 144-165. In fact, this love affair with the Song of Songs stretches back in time much further, though its significance has historically been quite different; see Stephen Moore's analysis of the Song and its readers in 'The Song of Songs and the History of Sexuality', in *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 21-89. David Carr has suggested that the apparently egalitarian portrayal of love found in the Song of Songs allowed its earliest readers to radically reimagine their relation to God, described in terms of a violent and repressive gender-based hierarchy elsewhere in the Bible (most notably in the prophetic marriage metaphor), as a more balanced and healthy relationship, one based upon mutuality and love, and thus the Song served an important religious function; see D. Carr, 'Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation', *JBL* 119 (2000), pp. 233-248.

3) A. Ostriker, 'A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext', in A. Brenner and C.R. Fontaine (eds.), *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 36-54 (p. 50).

4) R.J. Weems, 'Song of Songs', in C.A. Newsome and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 156-160 (p. 160).

5) C. Meyers, 'Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 197-212 (p. 208).

for us as an antidote to some of the themes of biblical patriarchy'.[6] Indeed, it is a wonderful world, borne out of a truly Arcadian relationship, that these commentators have seen in the Song of Songs.[7]

A paradigm shift is occurring, however, in feminist scholarship on the Song of Songs, and, befittingly in a postmodern interpretative context, commentators are devoting more attention to some of the discordant aspects of love in the Song, to its problematic moments, its inconsistencies, to the inevitable vulnerabilities of the lovers in the poem. Increasingly, scholars are acknowledging the semiotic and emotional impossibility of maintaining that state of unending, unproblematic and entirely congruous desire that previous commentators on the Song have insisted upon, for desire, by its very nature, depends upon a

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6) M. Falk, 'The Song of Songs', in J.L. Mays (ed.), *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 525-528 (p. 528). In fact, such sanguine interpretations are commonplace in Song of Songs scholarship. See also, for example, A. Brenner, *The Song of Songs* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); F. van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Imagination of Power and the Power of the Imagination: An Intertextual Analysis of Two Biblical Love Songs: The Song of Songs and Hosea 2', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion*, pp. 156-170; Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*; R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); C.E. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, The Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

7) There are, of course, dissenting voices. David Clines, for example, sees the Song as a beguiling text, the work of a male author who appropriates a woman's voice to produce an erotic, perhaps pornographic male fantasy, in which a woman, who is constructed entirely by the male gaze, is forward in love, initiates sexual encounters, and does nothing else apart from think about her lover; D.J.A. Clines, 'Why Is There a Song of Songs, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?', in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 205; Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 94-121. Donald Polaski argues that the female protagonist of the Song of Songs is constituted as a subject only by internalizing the male gaze to which she is constantly subjected; D.C. Polaski, 'What Will Ye See in the Shulammite? Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs', *BibInt* 5 (1997), pp. 64-81. Daphne Merkin thinks that the Song tells of the risks of passion and desire frustrated; it warns women to avoid the vulnerabilities to which lovers are subjected and advocates denial and restraint; D. Merkin, 'The Women in the Balcony: On Rereading the Song of Songs', in C. Büchmann and C. Spiegel (eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), pp. 238-251.

deficiency, a lack, a need. In *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs*, Francis Landy, for example, has drawn attention to the enigmas and tensions in the Song's construction of desire, to the dissonance and countercoherence everywhere, and necessarily, evident in the poem.[8] Cheryl Exum has discussed the male protagonist's concerns about the power dynamics between himself and his lover in the Song; in her totality he finds her overwhelming, even intimidating, and so he fragments her, considers her little-by-little, piece-by-piece, in his *wasfs*. He engages in a discourse of power, one conspicuously absent in the speeches of the female protagonist, telling the woman, 'You have captured my heart, my sister, my bride, you have captured my heart with one glance of your eyes…' (Song 4:9), and imploring her, 'Turn your eyes away from me, for they overwhelm me' (Song 6:5).[9] Using the grotesque as a hermeneutic tool, Fiona Black has suggested that the cryptic and difficult poetic descriptions of the body, so ubiquitous particularly throughout the speeches of the male protagonist, might be understood as expressions of the lovers' vulnerabilities, their doubts, the tensions and conflicts in their relationship, the drive to possess, the inescapable complexities of human desire.[10] Following this scholarly trajectory, I would like to foreground

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8) F. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Bible and Literature Series; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).

9) J.C. Exum, *Song of Songs* (Old Testament Library Series; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 15-22 and *passim*. Similarly, taking their cue from Edward Burne-Jones, Cheryl Exum and Fiona Black have foregrounded some of the Song's 'negative moments'—the anger of the woman's brothers in 1:6, the problematic beating and stripping of the woman by the watchmen in 5:7, and, significantly for my purposes, the separations of the lovers, the frustrated desire for union, that is Burne-Jones's focus in his stained glass window depicting scenes from the Song of Songs. Black and Exum see in Burne-Jones's window 'a challenge to biblical interpretation to reassess its comfortable assumptions about the biblical book and to re-examine what it has been reluctant to see'; F.C. Black and J.C. Exum, 'Semiotics in Stained Glass: Edward Burne-Jones's Song of Songs', in J.C. Exum and S.D. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (JSOTSup, 226; Gender, Culture, Theory, 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 315-342 (the quotation is from p. 342).

10) F.C. Black, 'The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs', PhD thesis, University of

a recurrent and potentially disruptive motif in the Song of Songs, that of the absent lover, and consider some of the possible implications of this theme for the characterization of the female protagonist, who articulates her lover's absence, and for the relationship of the lovers in the poem.

> Your absence is reality for me, I don't know any other. This is when I know that you are not there, that you are away from me, have gone away from me, are going to go away from me…
>
> Jacques Derrida, 'Envois'

Though the theme of absence recurs, overtly, on at least two occasions in the Song of Songs, the attention that this theme has received in the scholarly literature is somewhat scant and perfunctory.[11] In fact, as far as I am aware, the only interpretations of the Song to consider the

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Sheffield, 1999, and 'Beauty or the Beast? The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs', *BibInt* 8 (2000), pp. 302-323.

11) Tod Linafelt discuss the Song's 'night scenes' in 'The Arithmetic of Eros' (*Interpretation* [July 2005], pp. 244-258), concluding that their significance revolves around the encounters between the female protagonist and the watchmen of the walls (Song 5:7), who represent the third, necessary point in the (quasi-Girardian) triangle of desire that Linafelt sees in the Song, and who come between the lovers, effect their separation, and so incite and intensify their desire. Fiona Black also deals with the Song's 'searching scenes' as she calls them, in an insightful discussion about the Song's margins and centres ('Nocturnal Egression: Exploring Some Margins of the Song of Songs', in A.K.M. Adam [ed.], *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* [St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001], pp. 93-104), where she reflects upon the Song's most shocking and troubling incident, the stripping and beating of the woman by the watchmen in Song 5:7. She argues that these scenes, culminating with the abuse of the female protagonist, constitute the forceful containment of a woman who, in a patriarchal world, consistently transgresses the boundaries of acceptable male/female roles and behaviour, and the resultant abjecting of the woman from her place at the centre of the poem. Both of these studies, though, have as their focus the encounters with the watchmen rather than the absence of the male lover. In 'In the Eye of the Beholder: Wishing, Dreaming, and *double entendre* in the Song of Songs', in F.C. Black, R. Boer, and E. Runions (eds.), *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation and Biblical Interpretation* (Semeia Studies; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 71-86, Cheryl Exum considers the double entendre possibilities of Song 5:2-8, but, like Linafelt and Black, her focus is not on the absence of the male lover but on the pos-

absence of the male protagonist as a serious aspect of the poem's amatory technique come from critics whose forays into the world of biblical studies are only occasional: Julia Kristeva has characterized the lovers in the poem as 'lovers who do not merge but are in love with the other's absence',[12] and Edward Burne-Jones has seemingly foregrounded the absence of the male protagonist in his stained glass window depicting selected scenes from the Song of Songs.[13] Perhaps this is because, for many scholars, and indeed for many subjects of desire, absence is simply a fundamental aspect of desire, and as such its exploration as a theme in the Song of Songs is hardly surprising or conspicuous. After all, like Aristophanes' hermaphrodites, the original humans divided by the gods, thereafter eternally seeking their matching other halves, the desiring subject wants what they do not have, that which they lack, that which is absent. Sexual desire in particular cannot be sustained when the state of union with the loved being is an uninterrupted, perpetual possibility; it is precipitated by separations, deferrals, absences, all of which further incite desire, make the heart grow fonder.[14] Perhaps, then, for the female protagonist of the Song of

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sibility of his presence in a sexual encounter on the figurative level of the text; see below.

12) J. Kristeva, 'A Holy Madness: She and He', in *Tales of Love* (trans. L.S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 83-100 (see especially pp. 88-90; the quotation is from p. 89). For Kristeva, this aspect of the poem resonates with the religious significance she affords the text, aptly evoking, for her, both the invisibility, the radical transcendence, of the Jewish God, and his simultaneous immanence, his presence in ritual and daily aspects of life. The absence of the male protagonist is also complicated, in Kristeva's reading, by the power of the 'Shulamite's' speech, her amatory discourse, through which she speaks herself and her lover into existence, effects their union as well as their separation, and makes herself an equal to her lover's sovereignty.

13) Following Black and Exum's reading of Burne-Jones's window, in 'Semiotics in Stained Glass'.

14) On the necessity of absence in constructing desire, see C. Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 21-71 and *passim*. The crucial importance of absence in Jacques Derrida's understanding of desire is revealed in his performative and lyrical 'Envois', the very existence of which presupposes the separation of the lovers and represents the inevitable attempt to master this absence and overcome it. See *The Post Card from Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (trans.

Songs, the absence of the loved one, as Derrida suggests, is her reality, and, in comparison with her biblical counterparts, not such a bad one at that: it is his absence, or the possibility of his absence, and her reflection upon it, that constitutes her as a desiring subject, thus making her unique among biblical women ('unique is she, my dove, my perfect one'), and enabling the feminist readings mentioned above, which almost invariably transform the Song of Solomon into the Song of 'the Shulammite'.

There are, however, some peculiar features of the particular portrayal of 'amorous absence', to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes,[15] in the Song of Songs that warrant a closer look. Most obviously, as I have mentioned, the discourse of absence is a gendered one in the poem, articulated only by the female protagonist. As such, the woman's musings on her lover's absence provide us with a window into her psyche, and are thus probably more revealing about her characterization than they are about the male protagonist's characterization or his actions, particularly in light of the lyrical, almost dream-like nature of the Song of Songs, in which narrative logic is suspended and the boundaries between wishes, fantasies, dreams and what could be called poetic reality are blurred and unstable.[16] In Song 3:1-4 and 5:2-8, where the theme receives its fullest expression, the elusive behaviour of the male protagonist can be read not only as a poetic expression of desire, a tantalizing interruption of the unity of the lovers that is evident elsewhere in the poem and an exciting precursor to their union, but also as a moment of crisis in the woman's perception of her relationship, an expression of her perceived vulnerabilities in love, and as her attempt to come to terms with these vulnerabilities and deal with them.[17]

A. Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 1-256. Similarly, see R. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (trans. R. Howard; London: Vintage, 2002).

15) See Barthes's musings on 'amorous absence', *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 13-17.

16) See Exum's analysis of this phenomenon in *Song of Songs*, pp. 45-47, and 'Wishing, Dreaming and *double entendre*'.

17) A potential problem with treating the searching scenes as significant primarily for the characterization of the female protagonist is that it attributes the absence of the male protagonist and, more importantly, the problematic beating and stripping of the woman in Song 5:7, to the woman herself, holding her responsible for it, ultimately explaining it as a psychological manifestation of her anxieties about her relationship.

In Song 3:1-5, the woman is in bed, possibly dreaming or perhaps just thinking about her lover, when she gets up to search for him in the city. Unable to find him, she asks the watchmen of the city to help her, but as it happens their help is not required, because as soon as she encounters them, she finds her lover; happily, the couple are reunited, and the scene ends with the woman's familiar refrain to the women of Jerusalem, imploring them not to arouse or awaken love until it wishes. The woman retells this story in Song 5:2-8, with some significant differences. This time, sleeping but with a wakeful heart, the female protagonist hears her lover knocking at her door. By the time she opens to him, though, he, inexplicably, has left. Again, she searches for her lover, and again she encounters the watchmen, but this time, unexpectedly and disturbingly, they beat her and strip her of her wrap, and her search for her lover is apparently unsuccessful. Now the woman implores the women of Jerusalem to tell her lover, if they can find him, that she is faint with love. As Black points out, the woman's lovesickness, perhaps a welcome malady elsewhere in the poem, here becomes painfully ironic, for the woman has indeed been wounded in her quest

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Several scholars have attempted to explain Song 5:7 (away) via comparable arguments: D. Garrett, for example, has suggested that the beating represents the woman's anxiety over the loss of her virginity (*The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993], pp. 409-412). Of course, the construction of the Song of Songs is a little more complex than such interpretations allow for: responsibility both for the elusive male protagonist and for the beating and stripping of the woman in 5:7 lies with the poet, who has created a woman who speaks these things into existence. Song 5:7 has been the bane of many interpreters' visions of the Song of Songs; for me, the most thorough and convincing treatment of this difficult scene is that of Fiona Black, who sees in Song 5:7 the radical de-centring of the female protagonist (see n. 11, above). I think that the significance of Song 5:7 is complex and multiple, imparting information about the poem's protagonists and their relationship, as well as, perhaps, reflecting the patriarchal context in which the Song was conceived, where the de-centring of a woman, particularly a transgressive, disruptive woman such as the Song's female protagonist, was necessary and inevitable. I proceed with caution, then, recognising the potential pitfalls of reading the searching scenes primarily in terms of the characterization of the female protagonist, and not excluding alternative and complementary interpretations from my discussion.

for love.[18] The correspondence of these incidents, the repetition of the man's absence in the woman's speeches, reveals that it is a preoccupying concern for the woman. On both occasions, the absences of the male protagonist seem quite puzzling in the context of the poem, and the woman cannot endure it—she is compelled to try to overcome his absence, their separation, by going out and searching for her lover. The recurrence of the man's absence in ch. 5, along with the increased violence the woman suffers here while searching for her lover, underscores the seriousness of the man's elusive behaviour for her and reveals her considerable anxiety focussed around the possibility of his absence. These, clearly, are not simply conventional episodes in a love story designed to stimulate the lovers' desires,[19] and to incite readerly desire, to engage readers and invite them into the world of the poem.[20] Moreover, these searching scenes, or seeking and finding scenes as they are more commonly and palatably referred to, are distinctive in comparison with their surrounding context in terms of poetic style and structure. In these scenes, the woman is telling stories, as Exum points out, with a definite, easily discernable plot.[21] Their narrative currency in the context of the rest of the poem, which is lyrical, meandering, indirect,

18) Black, 'Nocturnal Egression', p. 99.

19) Though some commentators have noted, in their discussions of Song 5:2-8, that the theme of the 'excluded lover', a variation on the theme of amorous absence, has a long literary tradition predating the Song, evident in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cultures: see M.V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 282-283; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, pp. 168-169; M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible, 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 522-524, and the references there.

20) See F.C. Black, 'What is my Beloved? On Erotic Reading and the Song of Songs', in Black, Boer, and Runions (eds.), *The Labour of Reading*, pp. 35-52. Barthes's distinction between *pothos*, desire for the absent being, and *himéros*, the more urgent desire for the present being, is relevant here (*A Lover's Discourse*, p. 15). A form of absence may well be a necessary condition of desire, but what is at issue in the Song is the particular way that absence is depicted; a physical absence is not necessarily the most effective way to convey the yearnings of lovers, and thus the significance of the elusive lover in the Song of Songs lies, I suggest, else-where.

21) Exum, *Song of Songs*, pp. 14-15 and *passim*.

and often oblique, disrupts the poetic rhythm of the Song, and differentiates these scenes quite sharply from the rest of the poem.[22] In this way, these searching scenes are emphasised, they stand out. The woman's bold and restless pursuits of her lover, her eager and risky quests to unite with him, convey an urgency that is missing from the speeches of the male protagonist, which, though intense in their own way, are more languid and reflexive, consisting primarily of extended descriptions of the woman's body.[23] The dissimilarity of these scenes from the surrounding context, and their similarity to each other, encourages the reader to connect the scenes, to associate them with each other, and to read the second searching story as a continuation, or as a retelling, of the first, so that the effect of the searching scenes becomes cumulative. Furthermore, we might also note that, though the lyrical, meandering movement of the Song does not relate events in a linear fashion, in terms of the reader's increasing knowledge of the lovers' relationship as the poem develops, and in light of the development of Song 3:1-4 in Song 5:2-8, which, as narrative moments in the poem, give the impression of the passage of time, the woman's preoccupation with her lover's absence, and the underlying anxiety about her relationship that this preoccupation signifies, does not ease, as we might expect with the passage of time in a relationship. Instead, given the violence that the female protagonist suffers in ch. 5 of the Song, and her apparent failure in her search for her lover, it seems that her anxiety spikes in these verses, momentarily intensifying.[24]

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22) Black, 'Nocturnal Egression', pp. 98-99.

23) I am convinced by Exum's proposal that the Song is an artistic unity arranged into six speeches or sections of dialogue; Song 1:2-2:7; 2:8-3:11; 4:1-5:1; 5:2-6:3; 6:4-7:9[10H]; 7:10[11H]-8:14. The first and final sections, which are dialogues between the male and the female protagonists, form an inclusio which frames four extended speeches spoken alternately by the female and the male protagonists; see Exum, *Song of Songs*.

24) This assumes that the reader starts at ch. 1 and reads through to the end of the Song, which, admittedly, readers who see the Song as an anthology rather than a unity may not necessarily do. On the treatment of time in the Song, see J.M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 117-142.

> The other is in a condition of perpetual departure, of journeying; the other is, by vocation, migrant, fugitive…amorous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves: an always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*. To speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute; it is to say: 'I am loved less than I love'.
>
> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Barthes's musings on 'amorous absence' provide a possible explanation for the woman's creation of an elusive lover: could she love more than she is loved?[25] Or does she fear that this is the case? As Barthes demonstrates throughout *A Lover's Discourse*, his own performative text of desire, this is, surely, a fundamental source of anxiety for lovers in love, an acknowledgement of the inherent vulnerabilities that their condition entails. The female protagonist's discourse of 'amorous absence' not only gives expression to this fear, it is also, I suggest, a strategy for coping with it: by imagining that her lover is absent, affecting their separation, the female protagonist displays a degree of resistance to the merging of her own identity and her lover's that is evident elsewhere in the poem, severing their interdependence, if only momentarily. Because, as Francis Landy has demonstrated, the lovers in the Song of Songs are not distinct, separate entities, with easily distinguishable identities at many points throughout the poem.[26] Instead, they form a composite personality, created by a complex interplay of related images, which are applied to both of the lovers and which create intricate associations between their bodies, their emotions, their desires—their identities. Parts of the lover's bodies correspond, for example—they both have dove-like eyes, for instance, both are fragrant, like myrrh and frankincense, and both of the lovers form parts of the garden in the Song, which both represents the characters and provides a setting for their romantic liaisons. The integration of the lovers in the Song of Songs is confirmed and compounded by the mingling of their voices, through the dialogic structure of the poem. The merging of the lovers'

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25) Francis Landy suggests this possibility: 'She [the female protagonist] loves him, but he [the male protagonist] is only in love with Love', *Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 69.

26) This is a major part of Landy's project in *Paradoxes of Paradise*; see especially pp. 61-133.

identities both foreshadows and symbolically represents the sexual union of the lovers, but, at the same time, this merging of their identities also limits the possibility of the characters taking on separate identities as individuals. Because the characters are lovers, in a poem that is only about their relationship, this is hardly surprising. But in this context, the woman's searching stories, her creation of an absent lover, can be seen as a reassertion of her own, individual identity. After all, the woman's searching scenes, uniquely in the Song, feature only one of the poem's main protagonists—the woman. Although the male protagonist is the subject of the woman's searching stories, he, obviously, is not there.[27] Through these speeches, the female protagonist creates scenarios in which she, independently, decides to go out and search for her lover; she interacts with other characters, the watchmen and the women of Jerusalem; in other words, she creates a personality for herself that is separate from that of her lover. This assertion of her own, individual identity can be seen as a level of resistance to the merging of the identities of the lovers, and thus the mutual dependence of the lovers that is evident elsewhere in the poem.

Furthermore, these aspects of the woman's characterization, her anxieties, her vulnerabilities, her desire to distance her lover, are discernable elsewhere in the poem as well. The lovers, for example, assume various different roles and personas at various points throughout the poem, which are usually understood by commentators to be reciprocal and dependent, a poetic technique which emphasises the unity and mutuality of the lovers. However, these supposedly balanced images do not always function in such a complementary way. Through her image of her lover as king, and more specifically as Solomon, for example, the woman effectively separates herself from her lover, distancing herself from him by elevating him to such a high status that a gulf forms between them; his position becomes incomparable to her own position. For throughout the woman's speeches, she is a keeper of the vine-

27) By contrast, as Michael Fox notes, there is no scene from which the woman is absent throughout the Song (Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, p. 309): she is always available, to her lover, to the reader, either through her own speech or through the man's gaze, and his detailed descriptions of her body, conducted in the second person and thus implying her presence.

yards, a rose, a lily; it is the man who rates her higher than a multitude of queens (Song 6:8), able to capture a king, likely himself, in the tresses of her hair (Song 7:5). This, however, does not tell us anything about the woman's own self-image; it only communicates to the reader the way she appears to her lover, and in terms of her own assessment, she imagines that her lover is, socially at least, in a position far superior to herself.[28] In Barthes's terms, then, the woman's concept of her own place, and the man's place as king in her imagination, cannot permute, because these places are fundamentally unequal. Related to this are the occasional self-defining statements made by the woman (Song 1:5-6; 2:1; 8:10),[29] which could perhaps be understood as another method of distancing her lover, her attempt to create and assert an identity which is not dependent on the voice of the male protagonist. The woman's discourse of 'amorous absence' may also be evident in her only *wasf* (Song 5:10-16), spoken in the third person and thus implying the man's absence, which is often interpreted as different, possibly less passionate and sensuous, than the male protagonist's comparable descriptions of her.[30] In the woman's description of her lover, only his hair and

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28) Perhaps this is the result of the woman, or, more accurately, the poet, having internalised patriarchal social constraints placed on women; see J.C. Exum, 'Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs', in Brenner and Fontaine (eds.), *The Song of Songs*, pp. 24-35 (p. 31); I. Pardes, '"I Am a Wall, and My Breasts like Towers": The Song of Songs and the Question of Canonization', in *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 118-143.

29) Landy thinks that the woman is preoccupied with self-definition; *Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 68.

30) See, for example, R. N. Soulen, 'The *wasfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 214-224 (p. 216, n. 1, though I am thoroughly unconvinced by his explanation for this, that the subject matter in 5:10-16 is 'limited', and perhaps even that the poetess to whom he ascribes these verses [without explanation] has a 'different' [read: inferior] erotic imagination from the male poet who composed the male speaker's *wasfs*); Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*, pp. 71, 79-80; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, p. 172; Clines, 'Why Is There a Song of Songs?', p. 120; Black, 'Beauty or the Beast?', p. 319; J.W. Whedbee, 'Paradox and Parody in the Song of Solomon: Towards A Comic Reading of the Most Sublime Song', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 266-278.

face are animate; his body is remote, sculptured, statuesque.[31] By contrast, when the man describes the woman's body, he imagines that almost every part of her is alive, animate, familiar. Thus, like the image of the man as king, the woman's description of her lover's body here might also be understood as a method of distancing him, of holding him at arm's length. Similarly, the female protagonist occasionally makes direct statements which seem to chase her lover away: 'Turn, my lover, be like a gazelle or a young stag, upon the mountains of Bether' (Song 2:17), and, more emphatically, 'Flee, my lover, be like a gazelle or a young stag, upon the mountains of spices' (Song 8:14). These commands, seemingly problematic for many scholars, are usually avoided either by means of creative translations of סבב 'turn', and ברח, 'flee', so that they have the woman call her lover *to* her rather than send him away,[32] or, more commonly in scholarly works, by interpreting the mountains of Bether and the mountains of spices as metaphors for the woman herself, so that again, the image is of union rather than separation.[33] While this interpretation is possible, it is certainly not definite, and the wholehearted acceptance of such an interpretation by many scholars fails to take seriously the ambiguity of the verse, the possibility that the woman is dismissing her lover.[34] Rather, the woman's state-

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31) See Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, p. 185, who link the woman's description of the man's body here to the description of the idol in Dan. 2:31-33. Landy, too, describes her *wasf* as 'stiff and tense…there is a certain ambivalence, an over-conscientious definition' (*Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 71); Whedbee discusses '…the image of the male who appears bigger-than-life, standing somewhat awkwardly as a gargantuan, immobile, distant figure', 'Paradox and Parody', p. 274.

32) See, for example, Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, p. 34; NRSV; KJV.

33) See, for example, Murphy, *Song of Songs*, pp. 139, 194, 200; Exum, *Song of Songs*, pp. 131-33.

34) This possibility seems all the more plausible in light of the etymology of בתר, which suggests 'mountains of separation'; see Murphy, *Song of Songs*, p. 139; BDB, p. 144, and the fact that the woman never uses the metaphor of mountains to describe herself elsewhere in the poem (although the male protagonist uses this metaphor to refer to her in Song 4:6, and, in any case, it is possible that the woman uses mountains as a metaphor for herself in these verses only). Landy acknowledges the possibility that she dismisses her lover when he talks about the paradoxical behaviour of the woman, who 'pursues him [her lover], wheedles him, yet chases him away' (*Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 71).

ments could encapsulate both possibilities; they express both the woman's desire for her lover, her invitation to lovemaking and her yearning for the fusion of their identities on the one hand, and her concurrent anxieties about her relationship, her vulnerabilities in love, her need to be separate from her lover and establish a separate identity on the other hand.

> Absent or present…(you are always there, over there, in the course of going back and forth), all this amounts to the same…
>
> Jacques Derrida, 'Envois'

> I am my lover's and my lover is mine,
> he who grazes among the lilies.
>
> Song 6:3

Foregrounding one aspect of the Song of Songs, though, like the theme of absence, is, in a sense, at odds with the whimsical, unpredictable, at times incoherent nature of the poem, with its use of enallage, its abrupt transitions from scene to scene, place to place, its oscillation between narrative moments and a dense and difficult metaphorical mode, all of which creates 'a complex jumble of different lyrics and snatches of story'.[35] Indeed, as deconstruction has problematized the metaphysical opposition of absence and presence, so too the boundaries between absence and presence in the Song of Songs, like so many of the apparent boundaries in the poem, are blurred, hazy, unstable. So, while on the one hand it is possible to talk about the conspicuous nature of the theme of absence—since, as we have seen, it is recurrent, and stylistically unusual—the theme is, on the other hand, simultaneously veiled, obscured, problematized, by other aspects of the poem. The female protagonist, for example, has an effective strategy for dealing with her lover's absence: as both Cheryl Exum and David Clines have pointed out, she is able to create him with her speech, conjure him up with her language, and he suddenly appears, materializing for the woman and

35) H. Fisch, 'Song of Solomon: The Allegorical Imperative', in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 80-103 (p. 89).

for the reader.[36] The woman utilizes her skills of conjury immediately after both of her searching stories, creating her lover in his Solomonic guise in Song 3:6-11, and conjuring him up through her *wasf* in Song 5:10-16. Both acts of conjury culminate with the evocation of the lovers' union, with the image of Solomon's wedding, 'the day of his gladness of heart', in Song 3:11, and the revelation in Song 6:2 that the male protagonist is not absent after all, he has gone down to his garden, a metaphor for the woman herself throughout the poem, to graze there and to gather lilies. As soon as the man's absence is actualized in the poem, then, the woman re-creates him; as soon as her anxiety is acknowledged, she wants to reunite with her lover. The more troubling of the two searching stories, Song 5:2-8, where the woman is stripped and beaten by the watchmen, describes not only a missed encounter, but, on a figurative level, it also describes a sexual encounter, so that the male protagonist is simultaneously both troublingly absent and most definitely present for the female protagonist.[37] The poet, then, by both emphasising the theme of absence and providing alternative ways of reading this theme, reveals the woman's vulnerabilities, her anxieties in love, which, for lovers, are inevitable and inescapable.[38] And the

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36) For Cheryl Exum, this is one of the pivotal poetic devices utilized in the Song of Songs to describe the relationship of the lovers; see Exum, 'How Does the Song Mean?', pp. 51-56; *Song of Songs*, pp. 6-7; Clines, 'Why Is There a Song?', p. 104. Cf. also Albert Cook's discussion of the female protagonist's 'finding-by-praise' of her lover in *The Root of the Thing: A Study of Job and the Song of Songs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 134.

37) See Exum, 'Wishing, Dreaming, and *double entendre*'; *Song of Songs*, pp. 190-192. The double entendre possibilities of these verses are widely recognised, though some scholars attempt to overcome the ambiguity and clarify exactly what happens. Pope, for example, thinks that Song 5:2-8 should be read as a sexual encounter (*Song of Songs*, p. 519); Murphy and Fox, on the other hand, argue in favour of a missed encounter (Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, p. 171; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, pp. 144-145, who thinks that 'interpreting these verses as a euphemistic description of coition produces a rather ugly picture of a male who lies with a female and immediately abandons her for no particular reason'). The point, I think, lies in the indeterminacy of the verses, and the possibility of multiple, conflicting readings; see also Black, 'Nocturnal Egression', p. 99, n. 24.

38) The anxieties of the male protagonist, too, are displayed throughout his speeches, though they are expressed quite differently, as one would expect in such a sensitive and artistic work as the Song of Songs. His discourse of power, discussed above,

poet also shows the reader that these anxieties are not all-consuming for the female protagonist; that in fact, the woman's anxieties fit quite happily with her intense desire to unite with her lover, her delight in him, her fulfilment and renewed longing for her lover, aspects of her relationship which are everywhere evident throughout the poem. Perhaps, then, this aspect of the Song, its attentiveness both to the heady intoxications of love, the desperate yearnings of lovers, their exquisite moments of union, and to the simultaneous vulnerabilities they suffer, their crises, their agonizing moments of doubt, is the locus of the Song's endless appeal, for it creates a vision of love that is at once beautiful and exuberant, perceptive and realistic.

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could, for example, be understood in terms of his anxieties, his vulnerabilities. See also in this regard the important work of Black, 'The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs', and Black, 'Beauty or the Beast?'.