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Drunk with Love

By Alicia Ostriker

The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary by Ariel Bloch and by Chana Bloch, afterword by Robert Alter; Random House, 253 pp., \$27.50

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine" is the famous opening of the Song of Songs in the King James Version of the Bible. "*Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses!*" is Ariel and Chana Bloch's rather more imperative translation. Either way, we are plunged into a breathlessly seductive love scene. The remainder of this short biblical book is essentially an erotic dialogue between lovers who alternately yearn for, recall, invite, and celebrate each other's embraces in language rich with metaphors which are both explicit and cryptic, and which have generated continuing scholarly disputes over their meaning.

The poem's setting is a world of fertile nature into which the lovers seem to blend:

Like a lily in a field
of thistles,
such is my love
among the young women.

*And my beloved among the young men
is a branching apricot tree in the wood.
In that shade I have often lingered,
tasting the fruit. (2:2-3)*

Or it is the sumptuous fantasied setting of a royal court that is interchangeable with a male body:

*His arm a golden scepter with gems of topaz,
his loins the ivory of thrones
inlaid with sapphire. (5:14)¹¹*

The man is sometimes a shepherd, sometimes "my king," while the woman is at times an enclosed garden, at times a princess, at times "my myrrh and my spices,...the milk and the wine." (5:1) The lovers are sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by friends. Neither is named, although the woman is once referred to as "the Shulamite," which might mean either "woman from Jerusalem" or "woman of peace," and is taken by some commentators to mean "woman from Shunem," which is the birthplace of the biblical Abishag, a woman famous for her beauty.

The man at one moment seems to be playing the part of King Solomon, and at another to be scorning Solomon's wealth as inferior to the "vineyard" of his beloved's body. He calls her "my sister, my bride," although it is clear that they are neither siblings nor married; they call each other "beloved" and "friend"; they compare each other to doves, deer, a mare, a wild stag. An elliptical refrain which occurs for the first time during a scene of lovemaking, "*Now he has brought me to the house of wine/and his flag over me is love*" (2:4), reinforces the imagery of love as belonging to a fruitful natural world:

*Daughters of Jerusalem, swear to me
by the gazelles, by the deer in the field,
that you will never awaken love
until it is ripe. (2:7, 3:5)*

Like its images, the origins of this poem remain mysterious. Traditionally attributed to King Solomon, its author or authors are unknown. Scholars have dated it anywhere between the tenth and the second century BCE. Written in a Hebrew partially tinted by Aramaic—which according to the Blochs argues for a date around the third century BCE—it contains Greek and Persian loan words, including the Persian *pardes* (enclosed garden or orchard), from which we derive the English "paradise." Its praise of parts of the body in metaphoric lists is a device in Persian poetry, while its setting and some of its phrases recall Greek pastoral.

The Song may or may not be a set of popular wedding songs or be connected with fertility rituals. A woman, or women, may or may not have composed it in whole or in part. It may or may not have originated as far back as Sumerian poems celebrating the sacred marriage of the goddess Inanna, "queen of the universe," and her consort Dumuzi. Marvin H. Pope, who in his comprehensive commentary in the Anchor Bible Song of Songs (1977) surveys these and other speculations, observes numerous parallels in Hindu as well as ancient Near Eastern poetry.

But how is it, a contemporary secular humanist might ask, that the Song of Songs came to be included in the Bible? What is an erotic poem doing in sacred scripture? The question is an ancient one, and raises the larger question of what we mean—or might mean—by "sacredness" and indeed by "scripture." We know that a debate occurred at least once regarding the Song's canonical status, for we have two famous quotations from Rabbi Akiva (d. 135 CE) on the topic. "The whole world," he is supposed to have exclaimed over the heads of a dubious rabbinical committee, "is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy." To Akiva also, however, is attributed the warning: "Whoever warbles the Song of Songs at banqueting houses, treating it like an ordinary song, has no portion in the World to Come." Thus at the

same time as the Song was declared sacred, it was declared off-limits to secular interpretation.

The text of the Song has been construed in rabbinical commentary for two thousand years as an allegory of God's love for Israel, or as a coded narrative of the history of Israel's covenant with God. Christian commentary has taken it to represent the love of Christ for the Church, or for the individual Christian soul, or the "mystical marriage" of God and the Virgin Mary. Both Jewish and Christian mystical writings have been deeply indebted to its representations of longing and ecstasy.

The reader today may wonder whether these allegorical interpretations have ever quite blotted out the text's fleshly passion from the minds of its singers, readers, and interpreters. Akiva's admonition informs us that the Song must indeed have been sung in taverns, with or without theological approval. Late in the first century CE, the Blochs tell us in their astute introduction, on the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement, unmarried girls of Jerusalem would go out to the vineyards to dance and sing for prospective husbands, chanting verses from the Book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs. This suggests that Jews in the early Christian era were less inclined than we are to differentiate between spiritual and bodily love.

Perhaps it also suggests that they regarded Israel's survival—dependent in the post-exilic era on bodily love, assuring the birth of future generations—as itself sacred. In his recent book *Carnal Israel* (1993), the Talmud scholar Daniel Boyarin analyzes Talmudic endorsements of marriage and sexuality as God-given, convincingly arguing that the pervasive body-spirit dualism of Western thought originally derives from Hellenic rather than Judaic culture, and comes to dominate Judaism only in the Middle Ages. In any case, although we may mock the prim theologians who insisted on purely allegorical, "non-carnal" interpretations of the Song, we should, as the Blochs point out, also thank them: "When we remember how many great works of antiquity have been lost—the poems of Sappho, for example, have

come down to us only in fragments—we must be grateful for the protective wrap of allegory, if indeed it helped to preserve the Song intact."

In one sense, the apparent anomaly of the Song of Songs is not anomalous at all. That the Hebrew Bible is a set of widely various texts composed over a period of centuries if not millennia, and redacted for several centuries more, is assumed by all current biblical scholarship. While fundamentalists and literalists continue to treat scripture as a book with a single message, contemporary literary commentary on the Bible emphasizes its heterogeneity. Robert Alter remarks in the introduction to his and Frank Kermode's *Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987) that scripture incorporates radically diverse conceptions "of history, ethics, psychology...of priesthood and laity, Israel and the nations, even of God." Harold Bloom points out in *The Book of J* (1990) that the narrative voice in much of Genesis is far from pious. Anson Layton's *Arguing With God* (1990) examines numerous passages, from Genesis to Job, which challenge or reject the assumption of God's goodness. Some feminist scholars, from Phyllis Trible in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978) to Ilana Pardes in *Countertraditions in the Bible* (1992), discuss biblical passages centering on women which range in length from a phrase to a book. Biblical literature, in all these accounts, is far from monolithic.

Still, by any plausible measure, the Song of Songs remains unique in the Hebrew canon, for its concentration on sexual love apart from marriage and procreation, its egalitarian representation of the lovers, the absence of any mention of God, law, the father's house, or the nation of Israel. In numerous ways it resists the structures of authority, divine and legal, supported by the Bible as a whole and by its history of interpretation. Where the curse of Eve in Genesis declares that a woman's desire shall be toward her husband, and he shall rule over her, the woman in the Song proudly announces, "*I am my lover's/he longs for me*" (7:11).

As the Blochs observe in their introduction, the woman speaks more lines of the dialogue, including the opening and final ones. She is, as well, more aggressive, more introspective, and more philosophical than her lover. Hers is the quest for the beloved in the city streets, hers the adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until it is ripe. It is her fantasy that her lover might be like her brother, suckling from the same mother's breasts; and it is she who says that love is fierce as death and that the attempt to purchase it should be despised. Elsewhere in the Bible we are admonished to fear God. In this text it is the woman who can be awesome, even terrifying. The lover sees her neck as "a tower of David/raised in splendor,/ a thousand bucklers hang upon it,/all the shields of the warriors" (4:4). Her glance dazzles the lover, her presence is as cosmic as sun and moon, "daunting/as the stars in their courses" (6:4).

Two brief moments imply possible limits to the woman's freedom. In 1:6 she elliptically recalls her brothers' anger at her; they set her to guard the vineyards, but she has not guarded her own. Is the tone here regretful, apologetic, mocking, defiant? Is it merely teasing? In 5:8, when she seeks her lover through the nocturnal city streets—we do not know if this episode is a dream or a "real" event—the watchmen find her and beat her. A verse later, she seems unharmed as she engages in boastful dialogue with the daughters of Jerusalem over the beauties of her lover. Nothing in the Song suggests that woman is the second sex—in contrast to her normal position in scripture. Yet one does not, in reading the Song, think of the female as dominant over the male, thanks to the aura of pleasure enveloping both.

Nor, marvelously, does one think of humanity as sovereign over animals and plants, or of the pleasures derived from artifacts and architecture as altogether distinct from those of taste and smell, or of eating and drinking as distinguishable from sex. When the Blochs remark, "One might be tempted to call the Song subversive, were it not the least polemical of books," one could perhaps respond that the very absence of argument makes

it the more deeply subversive. The Song is not a story, not linear, although generations of interpreters have tried to find its "plot." Because it is so overwhelmingly metaphorical—and metaphor creates not definitions but ripples of meaning—it eludes fixed meanings and dogmas. (In the Gospels, the equivalent literary device is the parable, which also demands a leap of participation from the reader, and which also retains a core of mystery.) In its language and structure, then, the Song replicates the radical openness which we see in the relationship of the lovers.

Despite innumerable translations of the Song into English by committees of scholars as well as by individual writers, the moment is ripe for another. The King James Version remains unrivaled for its sheer lusciousness, but is often obscure or inaccurate. Modern translations aiming at accuracy and accessibility are often flat. A recent attractive version by the poet and biblical scholar Marcia Falk is lyrically alluring and intense, but will be too free for many readers. Falk's introduction explains that she did not strive "to be literal" but "to create a fresh version" equivalent in impact to the original. Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch have achieved a satisfying balance between the literal and the free.

Chana Bloch is a poet and Hebrew translator, Ariel Bloch an expert in ancient and modern Semitic languages. Their bilingual edition is indebted to Falk as well as to scores of other translations and commentaries (their bibliography runs to fifteen pages), yet it has a crisp energy that mirrors the poem's springtime mood, and a phrasing that captures the impulsiveness and the delight of the lovers in each other and in their mutual imaginative play. Above all, it is clear.

Some of its clarity derives from the translation's lyric structure. The original text of the Song takes the form of prose, strongly cadenced but without line divisions. The King James Version prints it as prose, with a dreamlike blurring of distinctions—as the speech of one lover glides into and is mirrored by the other's, and as one episode slips into the next without apparent boundaries—which contributes to its erotic charm. The strategy of the

Blochs, who like Falk divide the Song into independent poems, enhances the text's dramatic quality and vividness, and reflects the belief of most scholars today that the Song was originally a set of individual lyrics. In addition, the Blochs' confidence in the physicality of the lovers encourages attention to precise location and action. The close of chapter 6 in the King James Version, for instance, is obscure and somewhat abstract:

Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee. What will ye see in the Shulamite? As it were the company of two armies.

For the Blochs this is the beginning of chapter 7, and the Shulamite is not somewhere in the middle distance but dancing for an audience:

*Again, O Shulamite,
dance again,
that we may watch you dancing!*

*Why do you gaze at the Shulamite
as she whirls
down the rows of dancers?*

One sees how much more vivid the scene is, and the way it pulls the reader into proximity to the lovers and those around them. It also makes better sense than the King James Version, as the remainder of chapter 7 will be the man's reply, describing the woman from her sandaled feet upward to the thicket-like hair that has "caught" him. A few lines later, the King James Version translates 7:2-3: "The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman. Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor." The Anchor Bible translation commits the following blooper:

Your curvy thighs like ornaments
Crafted by artist hands.
Your vulva a rounded crater;
May it never lack punch!

Falk puts 7:2-3 in boldface, indicating that she reads it as spoken by a chorus watching the Shulamite dance:

Your thighs—two spinning jewels,
Your hips—a bowl of nectar
brimming full

This translation has the excitement of a dance, but it adds a "spinning" not present in the Hebrew, changes "navel" to "hips," and subtracts the subtle idea of the thighs as a work of beautiful craftsmanship. Ariel and Chana Bloch's version suggests both stillness and action:

The gold of your thigh
shaped by a master craftsman.

Your navel is the moon's
bright drinking cup.
May it brim with wine!

Their "moon," not present in other versions, derives from *sahar*, a word which appears nowhere else in the Bible, but for which there are Syriac and Arabic cognates signifying moon and month.

Other much-contested phrases are both scrupulously and powerfully rendered. "*I am dark, daughters of Jerusalem, and I am beautiful!*" (1:5), instead of the familiar "I am black but comely," registers the ambiguity of the Hebrew *ve-*, which usually means "and" although it may mean "but." It also captures the woman's ambiguous tone, which might be either defensive or proud. In 2:14, when the lover attempts to catch a glimpse of the beloved, standard translations that ask to see "thy countenance," "your face," "your form," lose the plural sense of *mar'ayik*—literally "your sights," "your views,"—and hence the full eagerness of the young man's coaxing:

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the shadow of the cliff,
let me see you, all of you!

The recurrent term *dodim*, often translated as "love" or "lovers," is for the Blochs an explicit reference to lovemaking, demonstrating what some other commentators have managed to overlook: that desire, in this poem, has already been satisfied, and that new encounters are happily anticipated. No *post coitum tristam* here, because no shame in the first place. And although a tender delicacy is their groundnote, the lovers are unafraid of boisterousness. Where many translations

of *shikru dodim* (literally "get drunk on lovemaking") in 5:1 employ some variant of "Eat, O friends, and drink; drink deeply, O lovers" (Revised Standard Version), which implies a scene of feasting, the Blochs' lover rowdily commands his friends to "drink/till you are drunk with love!"

The obscure verse 6:12, which scholars consider the most difficult line of the entire Song to translate because some of its locutions occur nowhere else in the Bible, has received widely diverse readings. Here are a few:

King James: "Or ever I was aware, my soul made me like the chariots of Am-min-a-dib."

Jerusalem Bible: "Before I knew...my desire hurled me on the chariots of my people, as their prince." (A note explains this as meaning "that by a spontaneous impulse Jahweh places himself at the head of his people.")

New English Bible: "I did not know myself;/she made me feel more than a prince/reigning over the myriads of his people."

New American Bible: "Before I knew it, my heart had made me the blessed one of my kinswomen."

Jewish Publication Society: "Before I was aware, my soul set me/Upon the chariots of my princely people."

Anchor Bible: "Unawares I was set/ In the chariot with the prince."

The line follows immediately after the lover's evocation of gardens and fruit imagery, which everywhere in the Song stands for the Shulamite and her sexuality. We are led to expect an erotic encounter, just as in 6:2-3 when the lover "*has gone down to/his garden, to the beds of spices, to graze and to gather lilies,*" we are soon told that "*He feasts/in a field of lilies.*" Here is the Blochs' version of 6:12:

Then I went down to the walnut grove
to see the new green by the brook,
to see if the vine had budded,
if the pomegranate trees were in flower.

And oh! before I was aware,
she set me in the most lavish of chariots.

The surprise of this rendering is that the puzzling chariots can be seen as the woman's lap or even her genitals, and the line can become a metaphor for her startlingly assertive lovemaking.^[2]

One may question some of the Blochs' choices. The mysterious half-shy, half-formal third-person opening in the King James version, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine," in which the shift to second-person address is like a turning from others to the lover, becomes (as mentioned above) "*Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses!*" Though more exciting, this is less literal, and the sense of a society surrounding the lovers is lost.

In the dreamlike sequence of 5:2-4, the woman rises from sleep at the lover's voice outside her door calling to her to open. The King James Version implies sexual arousal—"My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him." The literal sense is "in-nards," and Marvin Pope points out in his introduction to the Anchor Bible that "hand" is a euphemism for the phallus in a passage of Isaiah and elsewhere. Perhaps "bowels" will no longer do, but the Blochs' "*My love reached in for the latch/and my heart/beat wild*" forecloses the sense of genital stirring. And at the Song's end, it is unclear to me why the translation changes the literal "Run away, my love, and be like a gazelle or wild stag on the mountains of spices," to "*Hurry, my love! Run away/...on the hills of cinnamon.*" Why "hurry?" And why "cinnamon," since "spices" have occurred earlier? Still, these are only a few rough threads in what is mostly silk and velvet.

In addition to the charm of their translation, the Blochs provide extensive notes. Here, for every textual ambiguity, the authors give the Hebrew with transliteration, a literal translation, a summary of previous versions and interpretations, and an explanation of their own. These notes are almost as pleasant to browse in as the poem itself. Alter's afterword, too, is valuable. I especially liked his attention to the Song's profuse use of sexualized images of food and fragrance, and his observation that behind the poem's physicality is

"an implicit metaphysics of love" which encompasses the intimate and the cosmic:

*For love is as fierce as death,
its jealousy bitter as the grave.
Even its sparks are a raging fire,
a devouring flame.*

*Great seas cannot extinguish love,
no river can sweep it away. (8:6-7)*

Next to Genesis, no book in the Hebrew Bible has had a stronger influence on Western literature than the Song of Songs. From the *Romance of the Rose* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, writers have echoed its language and its representation of love as a cosmic force. This attractive and exuberant edition helps to explain much of its power, while leaving its mystery intact.

Notes

^[1] Here as throughout Ariel and Chana Bloch's translation, the man's speeches are set in roman type, the woman's in italics; speeches understood to be by the woman's brothers or by the chorus of "daughters of Jerusalem" are in boldface.

^[2] The scholarly soundness of this reading depends on interpreting the Hebrew *nafshi*, my soul or my self, as a reflexive attached to the verb for "to know" or "be aware," thus freeing the feminine verb *shamatni* to mean simply "she put/placed me." A reasonable bit of poetic extrapolation here is the "lavish" where other interpreters take the enigmatic *ammi-nadib* to connote royalty.

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The Mysterious 'Song'

By Gerard Launay, Reply by Alicia Ostriker

In response to "Drunk with Love"
(OCTOBER 23, 1997)

To the Editors:

In reading the review of the Blochs' *Song of Songs* [NYR, October 23, 1997], there were two glaring factual errors. Alicia Ostriker argues that the "strategy of the Blochs" mirrors that of Marcia Falk in "divid[ing] the Song into independent poems." Nothing could be farther from the truth. Marcia Falk does indeed split up the Song of Solomon into 31 separate and discrete poems. In contradiction, the Blochs argue persuasively that this is incorrect and that due to the consistency of characterization, themes, poetic voice, and imagery, the Song is a single poem. This distinction is of fundamental importance in understanding the Song of Solomon, and I think that the Blochs have the better argument.

On a minor key, Ms. Ostriker also contends that the Blochs' version which interprets "sahar" as moon is unique, not appearing in other versions ("Your navel is the moon's bright drinking cup"). If Ms. Ostriker had bothered to familiarize herself with the Bloch bibliography she would have discovered the reference to the translation of Diane Wolkstein, which clearly also interpreted "sahar" as moon.

The Bible is the word of God. It is important to get it straight.

Gerard Launay

Alicia Ostriker replies:

Some translations of the Song of Songs print it as one continuous text, others as a set of individual poems. The Blochs' translation, like Marcia Falk's, does the latter; it also distinguishes typographically (through the use of italics and boldface) among supposed speakers within the Song, as of course the Hebrew does not. Regarding the Song's origins and its many ambiguities, the Blochs like other contemporary scholars offer a range of suggestions and suppositions while recognizing the limits of our knowledge. On a most important point of contention, however, they argue that the Song is originally and essentially a secular work—a human lovesong rather than a divine one—which might or might not mean that we may also experience it as "the word of God."

Wolkstein's appealing translation of 7:3, which I overlooked in my review, is "Your womb is a moon-shaped goblet/ never wanting for wine."