

Nature, Bodies, and Beauty in the Song of Songs and its Cultural Environment

Presentation Abstracts

The Poetic Aesthetics of Levantine Iron Age Ivory Art

Amy Gansell

Well established parallels between the Levantine Song of Songs and Mesopotamian literature support the Song's roots in a broad Near Eastern tradition of the early first-millennium BCE Iron Age. Motivated by these textual connections, I engage a perspective of poetic aesthetics to explore the Song's relationship to the art of this cultural environment. I define "poetic aesthetics" as the figurative expression of cultural ideals articulated through words and/or images that stimulate awe and pleasure. In particular, I consider how the poetic aesthetics of the Song may correspond to the nature, bodies, and beauty manifested in Levantine ivory art. These masterfully carved ivory works depicted a repertoire of lifelike and fantastical imagery that ornamented lavish furnishings and luxury objects. I conclude that the poetic aesthetics shaping both the Song and Levantine ivory art evince utopian or paradisaical elements of elite ideology that transcended media, kingdoms, and religions. Thus, the poetic aesthetics of Levantine ivory art could operate as visions of power and prosperity both in elite Levantine spaces and the Mesopotamian palaces of the Assyrian empire to which they were imported.

Inhabiting the Breast: Wild Mountain Animals and Shared Bodies and Spaces in Song 4:5-8

Anne Létourneau

In Song 4:5, the lover's "descending" description of his beloved's beauty focuses on her breasts, which are compared to the twin fawns of a gazelle. In the next verse, leaving the animal simile behind, the breasts morph into a space for the lover to explore: two mounts of aromatic resins, myrrh and frankincense (v.6). Two verses later, the woman is found in the mountains of Lebanon, with lions and leopards, as the lover pleads for her to come down (v.8).

In this paper, it is specifically the inhabitants of this breast/mountain nexus that I wish to investigate. I want to examine how the metaphoric baby gazelles (v.5), as well as the "naturalistic" lions and leopards (v.8) constitute pockets of non-human intimacy in/for the "young woman-as-landscape" (James 2017). I contend that, not only do they participate in the shaping of her wild beauty, especially her breasts/mountainous refuge, but through their "companionship" with the woman, they also enhance her untamed characterization as a lover. To analyze these entanglements and their effects on the erotic fabric of the Song, I intend to draw on the idea of intercorporeality, as used in feminist animal studies, as well as Akira Mizuta Lippit's notion of *animetaphor*.

Visual Body Blurring: The Diffusion of the Lovers' Bodies from Visual and Material Perspectives

Bruno Biermann

While visual culture has frequently played a role in the interpretation of the Song of Songs—most notably in the work of Othmar Keel—an imbalance remains between textual and visual approaches in the study of its metaphors and imagery. This paper argues that integrating perspectives from visual and material culture can deepen our understanding of the Song of Songs as a text that both subverts social realities and simultaneously relies on culturally established conventions, practices, and images.

Focusing on Song of Songs 8, I explore how bodily closeness and the blurring of physical boundaries are central to the text's poetics of desire and presence in the face of absence (Cheryl Exum). Chapter 8 is often regarded as the climax of the composition, particularly the iconic verses 8:6–7, which are framed by motifs of nature, the mother's house as a site of the lovers' encounter, and social conflict with the brothers. Drawing on material and visual culture from the ancient southern Levant, I examine the theme of suckling at the mother's breast (8:1). Rather than interpreting this textual "suckling scene" merely in terms of milk as a kinship-performing substance (cf. Cynthia Chapman), I argue that it belongs to a broader discourse on the dissolution of bodily boundaries—a theme also reflected in the seal metaphor of 8:6.

By approaching these images through the lens of visual and material culture, this paper highlights how the Song of Songs engages in a complex negotiation of intimacy, embodiment, and social norms.

Beautiful Towers, Terrifying Doves: A Closer Look at the Female Lover's Disruption of Beauty Ideals

Karina Atudosie

The female lover in the Song of Songs has often been perceived as an archetype of feminine beauty in the ancient world. However, the female lover is also portrayed as possessing a terrifying allure and inspiring awe in the male lover (for example, Song 6:4-5), which resists a simplified, romantic reading of the Song. Building on Anne Létourneau's study of the confluence of humanity and non-humanity of strong and desirous women in Wisdom literature, and Fiona Black's reading of the Song's grotesque bodies, this paper looks in more depth at instances where the female lover's characterisation and description presents a more nuanced understanding of gender by disrupting expectations of femininity and masculinity. In so doing, I explore the ways in which the Song intentionally plays with dichotomies to show how the female lover's beauty incites both arousal and terror, and how her body exists both in nature and is made *of* nature, yet is also bound to the social, political, and military domains. This paper thus analyses and interrogates the boundaries of human, non-human, and quasi-divine connections to further destabilise romantic readings of the female lover's femininity by examining her complex gender portrayal.

Plant-Based Beauty: The Song's Use of Plants and Trees in Constructions of Beauty and Sexual Allure

Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme

In the Song, the lovers are frequently described through images of plants and trees. For instance, the male lover is an apple tree (2:3), a cluster of henna blossoms (1:14), his figure tall like the cedars of Lebanon (5:15); the female lover is a lily (2:2), her figure like a palm tree (7:8), and her breasts like clusters of grapes (8:8). This poetic use of plants and trees is not unique to the Song. We find similar imagery in Mesopotamian literature, such as the Sumerian 'love songs', and in ancient Greek poetry and narrative. In this presentation, I wish to explore the Song's use of plants and trees in its constructions of beauty, bodies, and sexual allure. I do this in conversation with M. Eleanor Irwin's work on Greek poetry and epic, and with Christie Carr's work on Sumerian love poetry. I am interested in two questions in particular: First, what can this type of erotic *flora*-based imagery tell us about constructions of beauty, attraction and sex appeal in the Song and its cultural environment, and secondly, within this general tendency, does the Song construct eroticism with plants and trees, plant-based sex if you will, in its own unique way?