The Song of Songs is a text about bodies. However, body images throughout the Song have been difficult for interpreters to handle. In order to understand the body imagery in the Song, scholars have taken up allegorical and evocative readings, used the erotic as an interpretive key, used the grotesque as an interpretive key, read the Song in its Ancient Near Eastern context, and read the Song through gender.\(^1\) Nonetheless, the body in the Song’s imagery remains odd and, for some, disturbing. The difficulty and foreignness of the description of each lover’s body has also troubled people’s notion of the Song as a love poem.\(^2\)

A significant feature of the body imagery in the Song is the inclusion of *wasfs*, present in Song 4:1–7, Song 5:10–16, and Song 6:4–10. *Wasf* is an Arabic word that refers to a poem which describes, using a series of images, the parts of the body (usually a female body) in a systematic order.\(^3\) This paper will focus on Song 5:10–16 because it’s the only *wasf* in which the male lover’s body is described. In Song 5:9, the Shulammite describes her lover because the daughters of Jerusalem ask: ִלְכַּבֵּל דִּבְרֵי לְכַבֵּל (Why is your love better than other loves?). The presence of the daughters of Jerusalem is significant because by speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem, the Shulammite is inviting the readers into the Song and allows us to participate as viewers.\(^4\)

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Whether or not the readers use an erotic look, which gazes with the lovers’ permission, or a voyeuristic gaze, which objectifies uninvited, isn’t always made clear from the text itself.\(^5\) Instead, we need to decide how to interpret the relationship of our gaze to the lovers in the Song. Regardless, the presence of the erotic in the Song is undeniable, although never forthright. The Song’s ability to evade direct descriptions of erotic encounters tugs the readers along as we follow along, reading after the lovers.

Furthermore, while scholarly work on the presentation of gender in the Song has been focused on the Shulammite and the construction of femininity, masculinity is also a troubled and unstable category in Song 5:10–16.\(^6\) Meyers points to the fact that the architectural imagery used for the lover is more decorative (and therefore feminine) while the architectural imagery used for the Shulammite elsewhere are military constructions (and therefore masculine).\(^7\) Exum makes a similar observation regarding the lover, noting how he takes on a “decidedly female sense of adornment” in Song 5:10–16.\(^8\) The observations of Meyers and Exum point to the potential of studying the construction of masculinity in this passage. Furthermore, studying masculinity is critical for understanding the social constructions of power and breaking the idea that masculinity can be equated with neutrality.\(^9\)

A more nuanced treatment of the masculinity would consider the following two points. First, scholars have been too quick to dismiss the presence of the erotic in Song 5:10–16. Rather

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5 Exum, *Song of Songs*, 23.
6 It has also been extremely positive, sometimes uncritically so. While less prevalent now, the notion of the Song as a site of genuine equality between men and women has not faded from academic writing.
than reading the male lover as detached and unfeeling, his presentation in this passage is no less erotic than that of the Shulammite’s throughout the Song. Second, the gaze applied to the lover in Song 5:10–16 is one typically applied to women, rendering his masculinity unstable. I will first take a close reading of Song 5:10–16 and note places in which the erotic has been overlooked. Next, I’ll consider how the tactility of the Shulammite’s gaze and the lover’s construction as a statute contributes to the intimacy between the lovers, contrary to established academic opinion. Finally, I’ll discuss the inherently gendered gaze of the wasf as a poetic form and discuss the implications of the lover’s destabilized masculinity.

Close Reading of Song 5:10–16

Previous scholarship has not been fully attuned to the intimacy and eroticism present in Song 5:10–16. Therefore, I will offer my translation and interpretation of this passage.

My love is dazzling and ruddy / distinct from multitudes

His head is like refined gold / his locks tousled and black like ravens

His eyes are like doves / over channels of water / bathing in milk, dwelling over fullness

His cheeks are like the garden of spices / a tower of fragrance / his lips are lilies/ dripping flowing myrrh

His hands a gold circuit / full of precious stones / his belly a plate of ivory / studded with sapphires

His legs, pillars of marble / fixed over pedestals of refined gold / his appearance is like Lebanon, choice like cedars
His mouth is sweetness and all of his is desirable / such is my beloved and such is my friend / Daughters of Jerusalem

Starting with Song 5:10, the notion of uniqueness found in the phrase חככו ממתקיםulative and לכל מחמדים זה דודי וזה רעי (distinct from multitudes)¹⁰ is also found in language used for Shulammite. Looking to Song 6:8-9:

ששים המלכות ושמותי פילגשים ועלמות אין מספר
אחת היא יונתי תמתי
אחת היא לאמה ברה היא ליולדתה ראוה בנות ויאשרוה מלכות ופילגשים ויהללוה

There are 60 queens / 80 concubines / but uncountably many young women
She is one perfect dove / she is one to her mother / she is pure to she who bore her / maidens see her and bless her / queens and concubines praise her

Both the Shulammite and the lover think of each other as distinct from multitudes. This mutual description heightens the intimacy of their relationship because their feelings for one another are only shared between the two of them so all others are closed off from their interactions.

In verse 12, many interpreters agree that יונים על אפיקי המים (doves over channels of water) refers to the lover’s iris and חלב (milk) refers to the whites of his eye. However, מלאה (fullness) has been translated and interpreted in a variety of different ways.¹¹ I would argue that the מלאה can refer to eyelashes because the eyelashes frame the eye. Also, creating an association between מלאה and eyelashes creates an image of full eyelashes, which could act as a sign that the lover is attractive. Furthermore, this description of his eyes gives the feeling that the Shulammite is imagining the lover’s eyes as wide open and taking her in.

¹⁰ We also see a similar sentiment in Song 2:3: כפפה ביצי ישר פי דוד בנים (Like an apple tree in the trees of the forest, thus is my beloved among the sons).
¹¹ Fishbane gives the interpretation that the dove-like irises are like gems fixed in a brimming pool, similar to arms inset with precious stones and a torso inset with sapphires in Song 5:14. Murphy interprets מלאה as eye sockets, although he also notes interpretations from Pope and Gerleman. Michael A. Fishbane, The JPS Bible Commentary: Song of Songs: the Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 148; and Roland Edmund. Murphy and S. Dean. MacBride, The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1990), 178.
We should note that while both the eyes of the Shulammite and her lover are compared to doves, the Shulammite imagines the lover’s eyes to be open in Song 5:12 while her lover imagines the Shulammite’s eyes to be מבעד לצמתך (from behind your veil) in Song 4:1. This could merely indicate a difference in gender norms of the time period. However, it could also indicate that while the Shulammite wants to be gazed upon by her lover, the lover is trying to mitigate the impact of the Shualmmite’s gaze. In particular, looking at Song 4:9 and 6:5:

4:9
משעטך באחורי לבשתני כה אחותי לבשתני

You have captured me, my sister, my bride / you have captured me with just one of your eyes

6:5
חר狒בש שמה מנה והכחיש

Turn your eyes away, they blind me

Taken together, these lines indicate that the lover finds the gaze of the Shulammite overwhelming, which is why he imagines her eyes behind a veil. In contrast, the Shulammite finds pleasure in being gazed upon by her lover.

In verse 13, M. L. Case makes the argument that certain phrases in the Song are describing oral sex. In particular, the phrase נטפות מור עבר (dripping flowing myth) alludes to oral sex. Adding to Case’s argument, we might also consider the opening image of this verse: לחבר (His cheeks are like the garden of spices / a tower of fragrance). To make sense of the significance of his fragrant cheeks, we should take note of Song 4:6:

4:6
ה 함수 גבותו ואל המור הר אל יל אללבים ונסו חומת פעד

Until the days breathe / and the shadows flee / I will walk myself to the mountains of myrrh / and to the hills of frankincense.

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12 The description of the Shulammite given by her lover in Song 4:1 is as follows: עינייך יונים מעבר (Your eyes are like doves / from behind your veil). Meyers has pointed out the shared dove imagery between the lovers in her article “Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs”
The "myrrh" and "frankincense" have been interpreted to be the Shulammite’s pubic area, which taken from a lateral view also has a mountain-like shape. Therefore, in Song 5:13, the lover’s cheeks smell like spices because he’s had sex, and in particular oral sex, with the Shulammite. Furthermore, in Song 1:13 when the Shulammite is speaking, she says:

"יִלְּתָי שְׁתֵּי בֵּית לַי הַדוֹר הַמֵּר צָרָה"

My beloved to me is a bundle of myrrh, resting between my breasts

Taking the lover’s cheeks as perfumed because of oral sex creates the image of him lying between the Shulammite’s thighs in Song 5:13, which is a visual parallel to him lying in between the Shulammite’s breasts in Song 1:13. Furthermore, ילין from Song 1:13 specifically connotes spending the night, which increases the eroticism of this scene. The lover’s face is surrounded by the Shulammite’s two breasts in Song 1:13 and in Song 5:13 it’s implied that his face is surrounded by the Shulammite’s two thighs. This creates a feeling that the lover’s mouth has tracked down the Shulammite’s body, which matches the downward direction of the Shulammite’s gaze in Song 5:10–16.

Finally, verse 16 is notable for two reasons. First, the phrase חכו ממתקים (His mouth is sweetness) implies that the Shulammite’s wish in Song 1:2 was fulfilled:

"מוֹתָדָדָדָדָדָדָדְךָ כָּל פָּרוֹת בְּמֵשֶׁכֶת יְשֵׁכֵנָה"

Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth, for your love is better than wine.

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She adjures her lover to kiss her and after some time has passed, she now knows that his mouth tastes like—implying that he complied with her wishes. The phrase מתקים in this verse also recalls Song 2:3 which states: (and his fruit is sweet to my mouth) because the root מתק is the same in both lines. This speaks to the fact that images of eating and drinking in the Song are tied to expressions of love. For example, Song 5:1 states:

I came to my garden, my love, O bride/ I gathered my myrrh with my spice / I ate my honeycomb with my honey / I drank my wine with my milk / Eat, lovers, and drink / become drunk on love

Love is made concrete in the Song through eating and drinking. The loves are seen here literally consuming love, and the descriptions of eating translates love as an abstract notion into a physical action. Therefore, the mixing of love, eating, and drinking alongside the presence of oral sex picks out the mouth as a focal point for intimacy in the Song.

Through this specific idea developed that ties love and consumption together, taking מתקים in Song 5:16 and ופריו מתוק לחכי in Song 2:3 together implies that Song 2:3 contains of a description of oral sex as well because the Shulammite’s mouth ties the two verses together. In particular, the phrase בצלו חמדתי וישבתי (and I desire and dwell in his shadow) in Song 2:3 depicts the Shulammite in a lowered position as she’s describing the taste of her lover’s fruit, indicating that oral sex is mutually exchanged between the two lovers. Therefore, the phrase חכו ממתקים וכלו מחמדים (His mouth is sweetness and all of his is desirable) in Song 5:16 could imply that the

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15 Note that in Neh 8:10, מתקים (with the same pointing in Song 5:16) is translated as sweet wine.
16 Case also discusses how ובשושנים הרעה לי (he who grazes among the lilies) in Song 2:16 and 6:3 is an explicit expression and depiction of oral sex. Therefore, evidence that oral sex is mutually exchanged is not only alluded to by the lover’s perfumed cheeks, but also more directly described as an act of consumption—similar to the descriptions used for the Shulammite.
sweetness of his mouth is extended across his entire body. Similar to how the Shulammite’s eyes tracks over her lover’s body, her mouth has also tracked across her lover’s body.

The second notable feature of Song 5:16 is related to Trible’s assertion that the harm of Genesis 3 is undone in the Song of Songs and there is a return to the garden of Eden of Genesis 2. The most notable example she discusses related to the phrase תשוקתך וההוא ימשל בך, which she translates as: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Trible points out that this phrase is recalled and undone in Song 7:11: אני לדודי ועלי תשוקתו (I am my beloved’s, and his desire is before me). Furthermore, Trible discusses how the abundance of plant imagery in the Song indicates a return to the perfection of the garden of Eden. In particular, she talks briefly about Song 2:3 and 5:16 to make the point that the tree imagery from Song 5:16 expands upon that in Song 2:3 to portray the joy that the Shulammite’s lover embodies.

Furthermore, we can build upon Trible’s argument regarding the relationship between Song 2:3 and 5:16 further. The abundance of plants in the Song does recall the general paradise sentiment in Gen 2:9 that כל עץ נחמד למראה וטוב למאכל (every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food”). The language of Song 2:3 and 5:16 also reflects a return to Eden by specifically addressing a phrase in Gen 3:6 (similar to how Song 7:10 addresses Gen 3:16). In particular, the rootipmap is significant in Gen 3:6, which states:

וחזרה האישה כשшла עץ למאכל ושלום השמימה והשלל
להשכילה ותוקח מהריה לוואלח ותשנה מהבשה ותאכל

And the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desired to become prudent and she took from its fruit and ate, and also gave it to her husband who was with her and he ate.

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18 Trible, "Love’s Lyrics Redeemed," 117.
19 Trible, "Love’s Lyrics Redeemed," 112.
This is because in Gen 2:9 we have:

ויצמח יהוה אלהים מן האדמה כל עץ נחמד למראה וטוב למאכל

And the Lord God made to spring up from the ground every tree that was desirable to the sight and good for food.

Therefore, the same root נחמד used in Gen 2:3 to describe the greatness of God’s creation is used in Gen 3:6 to indicate that things are about to fall apart. We see that נחמד in Gen 3:6 becomes corrupted and takes on a negative edge because it describes a harmful human desire. However, in Song 2:3 and Song 5:16, נחמד is used again, but used in the same sense in Gen 2:9:

בצלל נחמדתי וישבתי ופריו מתוק לחכי

With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

חכו ממתקים וכלו מחמדים

His mouth is sweetness and all of him is desirable

Therefore, the Song indicates a return to Eden because the root נחמד is redeemed. It no longer indicates negative human desire, but rather is used to depict as a full-hearted celebration of human desire in the Song of Songs.  

The Tactility of Sight and the Shulammite as Artist

Similar to the Shulammite, nature imagery is also used to describe the lover’s beauty. However, scholars have instead primarily focused on how the imagery used in the description of

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20 Carr similarly discusses how Genesis 2 is a celebration of sexual desire and its positive role in the development of the first humans.
21 And the Lover as Galatea
22 For example, in Song 5:11 קוצותיו תלתלים שחרות כעורב (his hair tousled and black like ravens) and Song 5:12 עיניו כיוונים (eyes like doves)
the male lover differs from that of the Shulammite. In particular, descriptions of his golden head, marble legs, and limbs freckled with jewels have led scholars to note that the description of the lover in Song 5:10–16 renders him similar to a statue. Scholars have tried to make sense of this presentation in two ways. First, Exum argues that the presentation of the lover in this passage indicates that the imagery used by the Shulammite is relational. For example, she describes her lover as gold because he is precious to her, the way gold is precious to her. More commonly, other scholars have given rise to the interpretation that the lover’s presentation as a statue indicates that compared to the Shulammite, he is removed and unfeeling. However, this interpretation ignores the weight of gaze, how gaze itself has an almost physical presence. In particular, it ignores the erotic dynamic to the Shulammite’s gaze and the tactile quality of sight in this passage.

The construction of the lover as a statue calls upon the inherently erotic relationship between a viewer and an art object. The act of looking at a piece of art (the art object) both emphasizes the distance between the viewer and the object and also brings the viewer closer to the object. Distance is emphasized because you can literally see the physical gap between yourself and the object. However, a certain kind of intimacy is also created because when you look upon an art object, your gaze makes contact with the object itself. In the realm of film theory, Barker discusses how “in the relationship between the viewed and viewer, the distinction between touching and touched is always blurred.” When two objects are in contact with one another, each can play the role of the touching and the touched.

24 Black, Brenner, Brettler, Carr, Exum, Falk, Polaski, Soulen, etc.
27 Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 32.
Applied to the realm of art, while your gaze makes contact with the art object, the art object also makes contact with your gaze. This blurred distinction between touching and touched means that the relationship between what’s being looked upon and the looker is fundamentally erotic because there is an “intimate and close contact between touching and touched.”

Looking at an art object is an intimate experience not only because it feels like you (via your sight) are actually physically touching the object, but also because the art object touches you back. The point of contact between your gaze and the art object is therefore a point of mutual contact. Furthermore, the intimacy of viewing is heightened between an artist and an art object. The viewing roles between the artist and art object are also reversible. Clearly, artists look upon their artwork. However, as artists look at their art, they also feel seen by the things they create because they’ve endowed their time and their energy into the object. Because artists have a closer relationship to the art object than most viewers, they also see themselves reflected back when viewing their artwork.

When we look at art, we are simultaneously aware of ourselves both in our bodies (where the gaze starts) and at the location of the art object (where the gaze lands). Therefore, “artwork and spectator should not be considered as isolated entities, but as mutually invested in one another.” Although we can lose sense of our separateness from art when gazing upon it, we don’t lose our distinct sense of ourselves. Instead, when engaged in the act of observing another person or object, we become more aware of ourselves and the space we inhabit. At the point of mutual contact between gaze and art object, we experience an out of body observation of

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29 Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 34.
self and are able to “perceive ourselves more tangibly” because it feels like the art object is bearing witness to our existence. Therefore, looking at an art object is a means of rendering the object as well as ourselves “render each other real, sensible, [and] palpable.”

The tactility of sight (the blurring of the practical boundaries between the senses of sight and physical touch) is readily apparent in Song 7:2 when the male lover is gazing upon the Shulammite. As the lover describes the Shulammite’s thighs, part of her briefly becomes likened to an art object as well. He says:

Song 7:2
מה יפו פעמיך בנעלים בת נדיב חמוקי ירכיך כמו חלאים מעשה ידי אמן

How beautiful your feet are in sandals / noble maiden / your upper thighs curves like ornaments / made by an artisan’s hands

Here we can observe that the Shulammite’s upper thighs are likened to a hand-crafted decorative art object, suggesting an interplay with sight and touch that’s developing using the lover’s gaze and an artisan’s hands. As his sight tracks over the Shulammite’s thighs, the artisan’s hands do so as well. Because the lover’s gaze touches the Shulammite at the same time as the artisan, we are meant to conflate the touch of the artisan with the gaze of the lover. The deliberate mixing between gaze and touch links these two senses and so by looking at one another, they are also touching one another. This has a twofold effect. First, it further emphasizes the tactile quality of sight and heightens the eroticism of the scene because the time the lovers spend looking at one another is also time they spend touching one another.

Second, relevant to Song 5:10–16 in particular, the interplay between an artisan’s hand and a lover’s gaze implies that gaze can act as an artist. In Song 5:10–16, rather than an artisan’s

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34 Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 34.
35 Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 34.
hands constructing a piece of art, the Shulammite’s gaze acts as an artist builds her lover. As the Shulammite’s gaze tracks along her lover’s body, piece by piece he is gradually revealed to us. The interplay between hands and gaze indicates that in a certain sense, the lover is literally being constructed before us as a statue. The construction of the lover as a statue doesn’t indicate that he’s far removed from the situation. Instead, because the Shulammite’s gaze takes the role of an artist, she recreates the sense of intimacy between artist and artwork for herself and her lover. In particular, the Shulammite’s gaze taking the role of an artist implies a heightened intimacy with her lover as seen between an artist and an art object. Additionally, because of the tactility of her sight alongside the interplay of hands and eyes in Song 7:2, it seems like as the Shulammite’s gazes tracks along her lover’s body, her hands do so as well, contributing to the sensuality of the scene.

As the Shulammite’s gaze constructs her lover as an art object, she is able to materialize him from her memories, even in his absence. This ties back to the idea that through gaze, people and objects can “render each other real, sensible, [and] palpable.” Because the lover is being rendered as a statue, he is in a certain sense literally being made more real and palpable to the Shulammite. This tangibility endowed upon him gives him a sense of immediacy that further fosters a feeling of closeness between himself and the Shulammite.

The mutuality of gaze and touch discussed earlier is also present in this moment. As the Shulammite looks at her lover, her gaze makes contact with his body, his body makes contact back, and the distinction between touching and touched is blurred. At this point of mutual contact, a feeling of closeness is created by minimizing the distance between the Shulammite and

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36 Brenner also makes note that object-like descriptions in 7:2 and 5:10–16 directly recall one another.
37 Compared to the intimacy between a normal viewer and an art object.
38 Barker, The Tactile Eye, 34.
her lover. Because of this mutual point of contact between the Shulammite’s gaze and her lover’s body, touch (via gaze) is also exchanged between the two. Furthermore, this point of mutual contact means that the lover is being witnessed by the Shulammite and the Shulammite is also being witnessed by her lover, similar to how artists feel witnessed by their artwork. This indicates that the Shulammite feels seen by her lover since she has created the feeling of being gazed upon by her lover in this passage.

The Shulammite acts as a viewer as well an artist in this passage. She, alongside the readers and the daughters of Jerusalem, is a viewer because she’s looking at the body of her lover. This gaze also invites outsiders to view him as well. A critical aspect of the Shulammite’s gaze is her intent in looking. She isn’t just neutrally gazing upon a pile of materials. She’s looking upon her lover, whom she finds beautiful. By looking at him and describing him, her gaze allows his body to become visible and she renders him accessible to the daughters of Jerusalem and therefore to the readers of the Song.

As the Shulammite describes her lover, she is also inviting the reader into this pleasurable experience of gazing upon him as well. He’s attractive to her, and through her description of him he also becomes attractive to us because we’re looking at him as well. By rendering him a statue and making him tactile, she pulls him into the present and allows us to know him as well. Through her desire, she materializes him into our imaginations with her words and with her gaze. However, the readers understand that we are meant to act as viewers, but not as participants in this scene. Although the Shulammite invites other women to share her intimate gaze in this moment, the Shulammite is the one who ultimately controls our ability to see the lover.39 The

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39 Exum, *Song of Songs*, 22. Additionally, the Shulammite address the daughters of Jerusalem at various points in the Song, not just in Song 5:10–16.
readers do not have direct access to the lover’s body. Instead, we are farther removed and must view him through the Shulammite’s eyes.

Wasfs, Gender and Gaze

Two significant discussions within scholarship on the Song center around wasfs and the gender dynamics of gaze. However, there has been no contact between these two research areas even though the construction of gaze in wasfs ties into the gendering of gaze. A significant feature of Song 5:10–16 is the fact that it’s a wasf. Traditionally, wasf poems deal with female beauty rather than male beauty. The most significant previous discussions of wasfs within biblical scholarship have been given by Soulen, Falk, and Brenner.40 In particular, these efforts in studying wasfs have been attuned to how the reader is supposed to interpret the imagery presented in this poetic form. Related to wasfs, Exum has also commented on the fact that the “woman of Canticles not a complete woman, but a collocation of body parts.”41 Exum focuses on the idea that because the body in its entirety is absent, the Song is an attempt to reconstruct the missing body.42

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Soulen (222) argues that in trying to understand the wasfs, we need to move away from realism as an interpretative principle and instead view the wasf as a means of producing the emotions of each lover in the reader. Falk (229) pushes Soulen’s argument further by proposing a strategy that addresses how emotions are evoked. Finally, Brenner (237) makes an argument that the wasf of Song 7:1–10 is distinct from the wasfs of Song 4:1–1 and Song 5:10–16 because the one in Song 7 is a parody of the genre.

42 Exum, “Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know About Song of Songs,” 194.
Separately, many scholars have discussed the gender dynamics of gaze in the Song.\footnote{In particular, the discussion of whether or not a male or female gaze operates is prevalent in scholarship.} Of particular interest to this paper is Polaski, who discusses how the Shulammite is always readily available for the lover’s gaze, while the male figure is not always available for her gaze.\footnote{Donald C. Polaski, “What Will Ye See in the Shulammite? Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs,” \textit{Biblical Interpretation} 5, no. 1 (1997): pp. 64-81, https://doi.org/10.1163/156851597x00049, 74.} Polaski argues \textit{wasfs} are especially strong instances of Shulammite’s availability.\footnote{Polaski, “What Will Ye See in the Shulammite?”}, 72. In contrast, the male figure is described in the third person, while she is described in second person (and therefore more direct) terms and so he is less accessible to the Shulammite. Polaski also argues that the male gaze is operative throughout the Song.\footnote{Polaski, “What Will Ye See in the Shulammite?”}, 76. At places where the Shulammite’s gaze examines the male figure, her gaze assigned a grammatical masculine gender.\footnote{Polaski uses Song 6:5a: \textit{הרהיבני} \textit{שהם} \textit{מנגדי} \textit{עיניך} \textit{הסבי} (“Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me”) as an example, noting how the masculine plural pronoun instead of the feminine one is used for the Shulammite’s eyes.}\footnote{Peter Brooks, \textit{Body Work, Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative} (London: Harvard UP, 1993), 8.} I agree that \textit{wasfs} represent moments of particular availability for the lovers viewing one another. Having the lover materialize part by part builds anticipation and contributes to the eroticism of a scene. As Brooks discusses, “each individual feels himself or herself as discontinuous, and the erotic—the attempt to know another [...] marks an effort to know, if only momentarily, a kind of continuity with others.”\footnote{Brooks, \textit{Body Work}, 11. Brooks specifically discusses this phenomenon in modern narrative. However, the connection between sexual desire, gaze, and knowledge is also relevant throughout the Song .} There is an intimate connection between knowing someone, viewing someone, and desire. To represent the body is to see the body and to see a body is to know a body.\footnote{Brooks, \textit{Body Work}, 11. Brooks specifically discusses this phenomenon in modern narrative. However, the connection between sexual desire, gaze, and knowledge is also relevant throughout the Song .} \textit{Wasfs} as a means of representing the body is also a means of knowing the body and experiencing continuity with another person. Exum similarly describes how both lovers “describes the loved one part by part, organizing the body in an effort to know
“it” which is an indication that the lovers delight in each other’s bodies. Through wasfs, the lovers become available to one another.

However, I disagree with the blanket statement that the lover evades the Shulammite’s line of vision and is unavailable to her. While it is true that the lover is not literally being looked upon in this scene because the Shulammite is recounting what he looks like to the daughters of Jerusalem, she is still recalling a memory of gazing upon him. Therefore, by gazing upon him in her imagination, she makes him present in her line of vision. Additionally, the Shulammite’s use of third person rather than second can tie back to the idea that her gaze is acting as an artist constructing her lover as an art object.

These two discussions taken together indicate a general awareness that the itemization and objectification of each lover (via wasfs) is an important aspect to the construction of gaze. It is significant that while the imagery used for the Shulammite and the lover is different, both are “being itemized by the other, and each is being visually scrutinized by the other.” However, none have made note of the specific gender dynamic that the gaze of a wasf operates on. This itemization of the body (and subsequent objectification) is a gaze that’s typically been applied to women.

As Mulvey discusses in her famous essay in the realm of film studies, gaze is split between “active/male” and “passive/female”. In particular, women connote a “to-be-looked-at-ness” and are displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of others as erotic objects. To this end, women are viewed upon both by the characters on screen and by people in the audience. The

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50 Exum, Song of Songs, 21.
presentation of a woman as an erotic object to be looked upon is achieved through various fragmented close ups of her body parts (legs, waist, neck, etc.) looked upon.\textsuperscript{55} Mulvey’s initial idea has since been developed and further complicated,\textsuperscript{56} but her original point still stands for our discussion of Song 5:10–16. Not only are wasfs typically applied to female beauty, the inherent organization of a wasf maps directly onto the way women in film have been eroticized. Much like a film, which breaks down a woman into a series of close-up body shots, the wasf does the same. Moving from body part to body part, we also see an eroticized, objectifying gaze being used on each lover, including the male lover in Song 5:10–16. Therefore, in Song 5:10–16, when the Shulammite is part by part rendering her lover attractive to the daughters of Jerusalem, she imbues him with femininity by using a stereotypically male gaze on the lover.

We can also extend Polaski’s notion of availability and wasfs. Polaski restricts the idea of viewing availability to the Shulammite. However, through the erotic gaze of the Shulammite in the form of a wasf, the male lover is an object that is available for to the daughters of Jerusalem and the readers of the Song to look upon, similar to how women in film are available to the characters on screen and the people watching the film. Not only is the application of a wasf onto the lover an indication that he is being looked upon the way women are looked upon, his presentation as a statue further ties into his objectification as an erotic object. This is significant because in patriarchal societies, the male body is never the object of an erotic gaze.\textsuperscript{57} If spectatorship is gendered male, then men can’t be looked upon as an erotic object.\textsuperscript{58} However, in Song 5:10–16, the Shulammite uses a male gaze to look upon her lover as an erotic object.

\textsuperscript{55} Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 12.
\textsuperscript{57} Brooks, Body Work, 17.
\textsuperscript{58} Brooks, Body Work, 17.
Taking a closer look at the gender dynamics of gaze reveals how the masculinity of the lover has been destabilized in Song 5:10–16. The representation of the lover as a statue in this passage is significant for negotiating gender as well. Bahrani discusses the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed in art and the role of gaze in this process. The construction of gender is linked to visual art because gender becomes naturalized through representation.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, art is not just a reflection of gender norms in society, it also participates in creating and perpetuating what gender is.\textsuperscript{60} Any kind of representation is inherently linked to power, so gender-neutral images do not exist.\textsuperscript{61,62}

In visual imagery, any representation of a physical body is connected to “an entire range of cultural tropes.”\textsuperscript{63} The concept of an ideal body structures societal norms regarding gender — for masculinity and femininity both. In Mesopotamian statuary, the frontal display of a passive, unclothed body as nude expresses femininity.\textsuperscript{64} This frontal positioning indicates that the female body is more accessible to the gaze of the viewer and therefore she is displayed for viewing.\textsuperscript{65} In contrast, nude male figures are always in action and aren’t presented in a frontal isolated composition.\textsuperscript{66} In Song 5:10–16, the presentation of the lover as a statue gives the reader a frontal view. Taking cues from Mesopotamian art, this frontal presentation is a further indication

\textsuperscript{59} Zainab Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia} (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 32.
\textsuperscript{60} Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon}, 30.
\textsuperscript{61} Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon}, 39.
\textsuperscript{62} Instead, there exist images or art objects that are declared to be neutral, which reflects that fact that masculinity is perceived as an absence of gender. Masculinity’s ability to go unnoticed and be set as the norm indicates how gender, and society as large, is structured around this concept.
\textsuperscript{63} Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon}, 40.
\textsuperscript{64} Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon}, 42.
\textsuperscript{65} Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon}, 83.
\textsuperscript{66} Bahrani, \textit{Women of Babylon}, 55.
that the lover is presented as available for viewing (and therefore feminine) to the Shulammite, the daughters of Jerusalem, and the readers.  

It’s significant that this negotiation of masculinity is located at the lover’s body because as Graybill has noted, the question of masculinity is often displaced away from the male body.  

Women usually provide bodies that are acted upon and so masculinity is destabilized and thought through via feminine bodies. This displacement makes other configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality possible.  

However, in Song 5:10–16, the lover’s masculinity is destabilized because the Shulammite gazes upon him. A more feminine presentation of the body is made possible through the way in which the lover’s body is seen and described. An alternative presentation of a masculinity in the form of an ideal man is created through the Shulammite’s gaze, but this construction is still located at the lover’s body.  

The obvious question that arises from this negotiation of gender is related to power. The Shulammite’s gaze has taken a masculine construction to gain access to her lover. Another interesting aspect to her gaze is its scope. Scholars have noted that the Shulammite spends a significant amount of time being looked upon by her lover. There are two wasfs dedicated to the description of the Shulammite where the lover is in control of the gaze, and only one of him where the Shulammite is in control. However, the lover looks upon the Shulammite only. In contrast, the Shulammite is also able to gaze upon herself. As Sheppard notes in Song 1:5, the Shulammite can “become the object of her own gaze: she is by her own estimation, black and  

67 Brenner makes note of how the Shulammite in Song 4 seems to be presented as a frontal bust. Her discussion of the presentation of the lover as a statue in Song 5 also alludes to the idea that he’s a frontally presented statue.  

68 Graybill’s discussion pertains to prophets in particular.  


70 Graybill, Are We Not Men, 37.
beautiful.”\textsuperscript{71} It is not the lover’s gaze which has access to both lovers in the Song, it is the Shulammite’s. The Shulammite’s gaze has access to both herself and her lover, indicating that her gaze has a wider range than that of the lover. Taken together, there is something unconventional about the Shulammite’s femininity as well.\textsuperscript{72}

Furthermore, we can also consider the idea that the sexuality of the lovers is fluid within this passage as well. As Burrus and Moore note, the “Song continues to be read unselfconsciously through the prism of an unproblematized heterosexuality.”\textsuperscript{73} However, the pervasiveness of oral sex, coupled with the destabilized gender identities of each lover, can lead us to take a queer reading of the Song and actively work against a lens of unthinking heterosexuality.\textsuperscript{74}

Although the body in the Song will continue to resist our complete understanding, we can add more nuance to our consideration of the body, particularly the lover’s body. Taking a careful look at the presentation of the lover in Song 5:10–16 reveals that the existing literature does not fully account for the complexities of gender, sexuality, and intimacy located at the lover’s body. Through the gaze that is placed upon him, the lover takes on elements of femininity and is therefore rendered similar to an object. However, at the same time, his description as an art object contributes to the very human intimacy developed between the lover and the Shulamite. The tension between these two ideas indicates that the relationship between the Shulamite and the lover similarly resists easy understanding, which will be fruitful for future research.

\textsuperscript{72} Meyers has also noted that traditionally masculine imagery is used to describe the Shulammite.
\textsuperscript{74} Graybill also discusses how queer doesn’t just refer to a sexual orientation. It also refers to when a text acts in a strange or unexpected manner.
Bibliography


