(Boy)
(11) Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon.
    He gave the vineyard to keepers;
    each would bring in for his fruit
    a thousand pieces of silver.

(12) But my vineyard is before me.
    You can have the thousand, Solomon,
    but two hundred go to those who keep its fruit.

(Boy)
(13) O you who dwell in gardens—
    my companions attend—
    let me hear your voice!

(Girl)
(14) Bolt away, my beloved, and be as a gazelle
    or as a young roe
    on the mountains of spices.

Commentary

I will not attempt to summarize the vast body of commentary devoted to this short poem or to discuss all the interpretations suggested for the various verses. I mention particular commentators not because they were first to suggest an interpretation—it is in any case often impossible to know who was first—but rather to refer you to sources where an idea is explained in context more fully than it is here. Full references to commentators cited here appear in the Bibliography. Pope’s commentary (1977) provides a comprehensive summary of the history of interpretation and a broad selection of the interpretations offered for each verse. Ginsburg’s commentary (1857; reprinted 1970) includes an extensive survey of the history of interpretation up to 1856, which is updated to 1970 in Blank’s prolegomenon.

I discuss the composition and structure of the book in chapter 4. For the convenience of exegesis I subdivide the Song into units and these into sections. Since I doubt the existence of a comprehensive schema that would determine the division of the Song, I describe the segmentation as I proceed, attempting to determine units and sections in accordance with the natural continuities of dialogue and event. I point out pauses and breaks in the poem’s movement, discussing as units passages where there is significant continuity of story or dialogue.

The format of the translation identifies couplets by indenting the B-stitch, which may be parallel to its corresponding A-stitch or grammatically subordinate to it. Couplets are the basic unit of composition in parallel verse (Geller, 1979:6). Triplets are sequences of interlocking couplets, with at least two parallel stichs: A B’ B, A A’ B, or A A’ A” (ibid., p. 14). Triplets are marked by a further indentation. This format also helps identify other structural relationships among the stichs, such as quatrains.

Units:

1:1 (p. 95); 1:2–4 (p. 96); 1:5–8 (p. 100); 1:9–17 (p. 104); 2:1–7 (p. 106); 2:8–17 (p. 111); 3:1–6 (p. 117); 3:7–11 (p. 120); 4:1–7 (p. 127); 4:8–5:1 (p. 132); 5:2–6:3 (p. 139); 6:4–10 (p. 150); 6:11–7:7 (p. 154); 7:8–14 (p. 161); 8:1–5a (p. 165); 8:5b–7 (p. 167); 8:8–10 (p. 171); 8:11–12 (p. 174); 8:13–14 (p. 176).

Title

1:1 The Song of Songs, which is by Solomon.

This opening verse, a title, attributes authorship of the book to Solomon. Though the title uses the older relative adjective סֵפֶר (only שֶפֶר- is used in the body of the book), it is a later addition. Solomon is not the speaker, the subject, or the center of interest in this poem, nor is there anything in the Song itself imputing authorship to him. Solomon is mentioned only incidentally, as an example or byword (for 1:4,12 and 3:7,9,11, see ad loc.), or even the object of mockery (8:11–12). The title is the first known step in the appropriation of the book to religion, for it associates the poem with an ancient wise-man who was believed to have written other works in the Holy Spirit. Yet the title is not in itself evidence for an allegorical interpretation or even for an understanding of the Song as wisdom. Solomon was the logical candidate for the authorship of this book because his name is mentioned in it and because he was famous both for the number of his wives and for his songs.

The headings of two Egyptian song groups seem to attribute authorship to individuals: nos. 31–37, a song attributed to the “Great Entertainer” (fem.) and nos. 41–47, a group of short songs into whose heading Nakhtsopek inserted his own name. In both cases, it should be stressed, the precise meaning of these headings is uncertain and we cannot be sure that the headings (at least before Nakhtsopek’s usurpation) were intended to indicate authorship.

The title of Canticles identifies the book as a “song” in the singular. Unlike the singular “song” or “saying” in the headings of some Egyptian texts (see p. 16), the singular is unambiguous in Hebrew. Whoever added the title to Canticles saw it as a single song. And unlike its attribution to Solomon, the view of the Song’s unity is unlikely to have been biased by religious needs or traditional presuppositions, for while there are understandable reasons to give the book a halo of Solomonic authorship, there are none, as far as I can see, to
call a recognized collection a single song. It would not have diminished the book’s status to call it “Songs of Solomon,” just as the Book of Proverbs was named “Proverbs of Solomon.”

Most commentators agree that šēr haššīrim is a superlative (GKC §133). Some of the examples commonly brought to demonstrate this type of superlative construction are admittedly not quite appropriate, because they involve nouns that imply hierarchies in which the superlative is what stands at the top (or bottom) of the hierarchy: thus šmey haššānyāyim (I Kgs 8:27) are the heavens above other heavens, melekh melakim (Ezek 26:7) is a king who rules over other kings, ‘ĕbed ‘adārīm (Gen 9:25) is a slave subjugated to other slaves. The word “song” does not imply such a ranking. Better analogies are nouns that imply qualities, such as ăd ‘ədyāyim, the most ornamental ornament (Ezek 16:7); ‘rbi sib’ot goyim (Jer 3:19), the most glorious of the glories of the nations; h’wēl h’rḥalim (Qoh 1:2, etc.), the most absurd of absurdities; qodeš haqq’dašim (Exod 26:33, etc.), the holiest of the holy places. The quality implied by “song” is musicality. Šēr haššīrim means something like “the most musical of songs,” “the most harmonious of songs.” In this sense it is “the sublime song.”

*šēr lišlomoh modifies the preceding bound structure as a whole (cf. Ruth 4:3; II Sam 2:8; Gen 41:43), not the nomen rectum (haššīrim); for the construction see König, 1897:§282d.

1:2–4

(Girl)

(2) Oh that he’d kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your caresses are better than wine!

(3) As for scent, your oils are good:
“Oil of Turaq” is your name.
That’s why maidens love you.

(4) Take me with you, let us hasten!
The king has brought me to his chambers.
We will be glad and rejoice in you;
we will praise your caresses.
More than smooth (wine)* do they love you.

*1:4 miyyeynu (MT miyyayin)

1:2–4 The girl expresses her desire. Her love is already in full force at the start of the song. The structure of this unit is symmetrical: both vv. 2–3 and v. 4 have two couplets plus a concluding solitary stich.

In her enthusiasm, the Shulammite projects her love for the youth onto other girls (1:3b and 4b). She emphasizes the “objective” nature of his excellence by including the presumed actions of other girls in her paean through the use of the first-person plural: “We will be glad and rejoice in you; we will praise your caresses.” In similar fashion the boy in the “The Stroll” praises a girl’s beauty by declaring the effect she has on the general male public: “She makes the heads of all the men turn about when seeing her” (no. 31). (Nowhere, however, do the speakers in the Egyptian songs include themselves in the broader group of admirers by the use of the first-person plural.) The Shulammite shows a complete lack of jealousy toward other girls, thus revealing her confidence in the boy’s love.

The third-person forms in v. 2a (“Oh that he’d kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”) and v. 4b (“The king brought me to his chambers”) are seemingly intrusive, but they should not be eliminated by changing the verbs to imperatives and making all the possessive suffixes into second-singuals (thus Budde, BHK). The lovers often address each other in the third person, sometimes switching back and forth rapidly from third to second person (e.g., 1:12; 2:1–3; 4:6; 6:9; 7:11). Third-person address carries a special tone of respect; see “Grammatical Person” in chapter 6.

(1:2) Oh that he’d kiss me: There is a pun hidden here, yisḵaqeni, “Oh that he’d kiss me,” suggesting yaḵqeni, “Oh that he’d let me drink.” Yisḵaqeni ties in with n’siqot, “kisses,” yaḵqeni with “wine.” The same word play, but this time with both words made explicit, is found in 8:1–2.

with the kisses of his mouth: This phrase is not pleonastic, for not all kisses are with the mouth. A gesture of affection frequent in the ancient East (including the Far East) was the nose kiss, in which the couple would rub faces together and smell each other’s nose (Meissner, 1934:915ff.). But the most intimate and sensual kiss was the mouth kiss, and this is what the Shulammite calls for. Miṭnqeqot is literally, “some of (min) the kisses”; miṭn here is partitive, not instrumental.

cresses: I render dodim as “caresses” because “lovemaking,” which is more precise, often seems awkward in the translation. Dodim also refers to sex acts. (These acts may even be devoid of love, like the dodim the harlot tempts a youth to enjoy [Prov 7:18], or the harlotrous couching—miṣkab dodim—of which unfaithful Jerusalem is accused [Ezek 23:17].) But dodim includes more than sexual intercourse. When the Shulammite praises her lover’s dodim in 1:2, she is elaborating on the sweetness of his kisses. When she says, “We will praise your dodim” in 1:4, she is declaring that she will tell of his kisses and caresses, as she in fact does.

LXX mistranslates ḭydym in this verse and 1:4; 4:10; and 7:13 as “breasts”. Peshitta translates thus at 4:10 and 7:13.

better: Tob in reference to wine means “sweet” (Pope). I translate by the more general term “good” (“better”) to bring out the way tob is repeated with different subjects.

(1:3) As for scent, your oils are good: The lamed of bereqh means “with
regard to,” “as for”; see GKC §143e. *Lamed* introduces a casus pendens here as in Num 18:8 and Ps 119:91. This is not the emphatic *lamed*, for that would appear before the predicate, and moreover the non-coordination that would result between the singular *reha* and the plural *tobim*, while possible, would be awkward. 6QCant reads *šmynm ṭwbym*, which does not provide satisfactory syntax.

“Oil of Turqa” is your name: *Turqa* is apparently a type of oil, perhaps named after a place (thus TaMaKh). This word is often emended to *muraq*, “poured” (which is how LXX and Aquila understood the word), but the oil’s being poured would not enhance the praiseworthiness of the boy’s name. For *šm* 6QCant reads *mr* before a lacuna, restored by the editors as *mrqht* (Baillet, 1962:113).

(1:4a) The king brought me to his chambers: an enigmatic phrase, if taken literally. Why does the king suddenly appear and take the girl away to his chambers? Is she still there? The commentators, especially those favoring the drama theory (see “Drama” in chapter 6, and chapter 4, n. 8), usually assume that King Solomon brought the maiden to his palace. This assumption requires the creation of a complex story-line around the supposed event (Delitzsch, Ginsburg, and Harper, for example, do this). But subsequently in the Song there is no allusion to such an event, which, had it occurred, would be in the center of the drama. Commentators who regard the Song or this unit as a wedding song identify the king as the bridegroom, on the rather shaky parallel of 19th century Syrian wedding songs, where the bride and groom were (according to Wetzstein) called king and queen (appendix to Delitzsch, 1885:165). Nor does the statement in Pirqey de R. Eliezer §16, “a bridegroom resembles a king,” show that it was customary to *call* a bridegroom “king.”

“The king” indeed refers to the youth, but not because “king” is an epithet for a bridegroom; the couple are not at their wedding. Rather, “king” is simply a term of affection. In a similar vein, the Egyptian girl in no. 13 calls her lover “my prince” and the girl in no. 17 calls hers “prince of my heart.” Similarly the girl in no. 8 says, “I am the Mistress of the Two Lands [i.e., the queen of Egypt] when I am with you.” The lovers are called kings, princes, and queens because of the way love makes them feel about each other and about themselves.

*brought me*: Peshitta and Symmachus render “bring me” (imperative), apparently seeking to smooth out the second/third-person enallage, but see comment on 1:3 and “Grammatical Person” in chapter 6.

(1:4b) We will be glad . . . smooth wine: *Nazkiraḥ dodeyka miyayin, meyšarim* ṭebuka is generally translated along the lines of RSV: “We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.” But the noun *meyšarim* is problematic. It is generally taken as functioning adverbially in the sense of “rightly,” “correctly.” Now, *meyšarim* may mean physical evenness or levelness (as in Isa 26:7) or, more frequently, ethical righteousness (e.g., Prov 2:9; 8:6). But it does not mean morally neutral correctness or justifiability, the sense required by the usual translation of these verses. Ibn Ezra, however, explains *meyšarim* as “an epithet of wine” (*toʾar yayin*) and regards the comparative term of *miyayin* as applying to *meyšarim* as well. He is, I believe, basically right, except that his explanation requires understanding *meyšarim* in itself as a name for a type of wine, whereas the other occurrences of *meyšarim* in conjunction with wine (Prov 23:31; Cant 7:10) do not show the word functioning in this way. Gaster (1961) emended the word to *nimmyeyn*, “new wine,” presumably cognate to Ugaritic *mr* and Aramaic *myrart*, and changed *ṭebuka* to *ṭhaba*, “your love,” producing: “(We will extol . . . ) more than new wine your caresess.” But this proposal requires making two emendations, creating a hapax lemmemon in the process, and assuming the existence of a noun form that does not occur elsewhere in the singular. Other proposals, such as Tur-Sinai’s interpretation of *meyšarim* as sexual potency and Dahood’s translation of *meyšarim* as “gullet” (Dahood, 1966:300), assume unattested meanings and produce texts that are hardly more meaningful than the MT. 6QCant reads *myšyمركز ṭwbym*, which is not a satisfactory text either, since neither *myšyمركز* is not an adjective, nor is it something that might be modified by “beloved.”

The word *meyšarim* is associated with wine in two other passages: Cant 7:10, *wḥikkak kʾyeʿen ḥaṭob—holek ḫmodation* *bmeysarim*, “‘And your palate is like the best wine’—‘flowing smoothly to my beloved,’” and Prov 23:31, *ʾal tereʾ yayin ki yitʾaddam, ki yitten bakkosʾ eyono, yithalake bmeysarim*, “Do not look at wine when it gleams red, when it goes forth its sparkle in the cup, flowing smoothly.” The only translation of *bmeysarim* and *bmeysarim* that fits both these verses well is “smoothly.” This usage is quite clear in Prov 23:31, where the next verse defines the word by contrast as it describes the after-effects of wine: it bites like a serpent’s venom. The adverbs formed from *meyšarim*, namely *bʾmeysarim* and *bʾmeysarim*, show that *meyšarim* by itself means “smoothness” and may be used in particular of the smoothness of wine. This sense accords with the root-meaning of the word (YŠR = “straight”).

With this in mind I would divide our verse after *dodeyka* and point *yayin* as yeyn. I read: *nagilah wʾnʾšeḥak ḫak, nazkiraḥ dodeyka, miyayen meyšarim*. I use this term while aware of Barr’s strictures against the “root fallacy” (1961:100–106). I understand the important heuristic concept “root-meaning” as a lexical abstraction. The assumption is that if most words with the same consonantal skeletons have a certain notion or referent in common, it is probable—that by no means certain—that another word with the same root will share that notion or referent. We can take a “root-meaning” as a starting point, asking to what extent it fits the context under discussion. Lexical extrapolation of this sort makes no assumptions about the ontological status of roots.
Šarim ֶּהְבַּעַה. “We will be glad and rejoice in you; we will praise your caresses. More than smooth wine do they love you.” Yeyn meyšarim, lit., “wine of smoothness,” is equivalent to English “smooth wine.” Natzirah, lit., “we shall mention,” here implies “praise,” as in hasdey ֵדונָּה ֶדֶנָה responders, “I will praise the mercies of God” (Isa 63:7), ֶאַזֶּרֶת הָּאָזֶרֶת ֶבְּכּוֹל הַדּוֹר הָדוֹד, “I shall praise your name in every generation” (Ps 45:18), and more.

1:5–8

(Girl)

(5) Black I am—but lovely—
    O girls of Jerusalem,
like tents of Kedar,
curtains of (Salmah).1

(6) Pay no mind that I am swarthy,
that the sun has gazed upon me.
My mother’s sons were mean to me,
made me keeper of the vineyards.
    My vineyard I could not keep.

(7) Tell me, my soul’s beloved:
where do you graze,
where do you rest (your flocks) at noon?—
lest I be like “one who wraps herself up”
by your companions’ flocks!

(Boy)

(8) If you don’t know,
most beautiful of women,
go on out in the tracks of the flock,
and graze your kids
by the shepherds’ camps.

*1:5 Salmah (MT ‘Slomoh)

In this dialogue, the Shulammite first presents her problem to the girls of Jerusalem. Like many a girl before and after her, she saw herself ripe for romance before her family did. Her brothers placed upon her tasks that have resulted in some loss of beauty and restricted her to the confines of the family, not allowing her to develop independently as a woman. But that is in the past. Now she is determined to tend her own vineyard, and so she immediately turns to her lover and asks him where he can be found—where he “grazes” (sc. his sheep) and “rests” (them) (lit., “causes to lie down”) during the noontime rest when she can visit him. At present, at the time of this dialogue, they are together. She asks him about his everyday practices so that she will always be able to find him. Otherwise she will have to wander among his fellow shepherds, exhibiting behavior that will make her look like a harlot, and does he want that? She is genuinely concerned with how people will view her, but her request also has in it a note of pique. The boy teases her back: If you don’t know the answer to that question, then, very well, go visit the shepherds, for (he implies) you should know where I “graze” (R'H) and “cause to lie down.” The youth is playing with the sexual connotations of “graze” and “cause to lie down,” words the girl used in her question. She herself made this deliberate and playful misunderstanding possible by not supplying objects for the verbs “graze” and “cause to lie down” in v. 7. She, too, it would seem, is playing with words, for she knows the answer to her own question. Later she will declare, “My beloved is mine and I am his: he grazes (R'H) among the lilies” (2:16).

Lovers’ pique is treated in a humorous vein in several Egyptian songs as well: nos. 1, 15, 46(7), and 47. Similarly, songs nos. 6, 7, 10, and “The Stroll” (nos. 31–37) take a humorous view of some other emotions occasioned by love.

(1:5) Black I am—but lovely: There would be no point in the Shulammite’s complaint if black were the desired color, nor would she need to explain her swarthy complexion by telling what her brothers did to her (see Pope for a detailed discussion of the “black but beautiful” versus the “black and beautiful” interpretations). This blackness, of course, has nothing to do with race. The darkness caused by the sun was associated with a lower social status, for only those who could afford not to work outdoors could retain a fair complexion. She suspects that the other girls might look upon her with disdain because she has had to work in the fields. Such scorn would originate in social, not racial, prejudices. This declaration is not a refusal to be judged by the onlookers’ standards, which tend to set blackness and loveliness as opposites. That is, she is not implying, “I am black and I am beautiful” (contrary to M. Falk, 1962:110). An emphatic “and” such as this interpretation assumes would require w'gam or w'tap rather than the simple conjunctive/adversative waw. Furthermore, if the Shulammite wished to defend blackness, she would not need to explain what happened to make her black. Rather, the tone of her words is defiance of the resulting attitudes of her comrades, who do not think as highly of her or take her as seriously as she thinks they should.

Girls of Jerusalem: QQCant reads bnṭy for bnwṭ, probably a dittography of yod and not (contrary to Baillot, 1962:113) an archaising form.

Kedar: QDR means “dark” and plays on “black” in the preceding phrase.

curtains: a metonymy for tents; see 1 Sam 7:2 (sing.) = 1 Chr 17:1
( plur.) and the parallelism between “tent” and “curtains” in Jer 4:20, 10:20, 49:29, and Isa 54:2 (Ginsburg, Pope).

salmah: Point salmah for Mt S*olon, “Solomon”; thus Pope, Würt- wein, Gerleman, et al.). Salmah is an Arab tribe. (The Targumim translate Kenite as salmaṭ or salmaṭaḥ, Num 24:21; Judg 4:17; etc.). The tents of these tribes serve as an image for blackness, not loveliness. The phrase “but lovely” is parenthetical. The next verse shows that she is now concerned mainly with her swarthiness, and the comparisons in v. 5b are meant to make that point clear.

(1:6) Pay no mind that I am swarth; yaš tir’uni še- is frontal extraposition of the subject of the subordinate clause (thus Ehrlich, comparing Gen 1:4; the construction occurs here with še- in place of ki).

that the sun has gazed upon me: The sun is spoken of as having eyes and having “gazed” (SZP) on her. The translation “that the sun has gazed upon me” (so most) is preferable to “for the sun, etc.” (a causal clause), because the cause of her swarthiness does not need further explanation; it could only be a suntan. She is asking them to pay no heed to the fact “that the sun has gazed upon” her and named her. The alliteration of šin is striking; a similar alliteration appears in 1:2–3.

were mean to me: Niṅ̄rū means “rebuke,” “be angry against,” or the like (Isa 41:11; 45:24). There is a play on niṅ̄rū (HKH) “be hot,” which brings to mind the sun’s hot gaze. Her brothers “grew hot” against her, and the sun too scorched her.

My vineyard: “Vineyard” is meant literally in 1:6b, 7:13, and 8:11. Elsewhere it alludes to the girl. Here “vineyards” means actual vineyards, while “my vineyard” (with the emphasized possessive) must be interpreted figuratively, for we are hardly to suppose that the girl owned her own vineyard or that she would complain in this context about a financial loss that her brothers caused her. Rather, we are to understand that she has not been able to tend to her own needs as a woman, but has been forced to stay within the confines of her family. Pope understands “vineyard” as a designation of the maiden’s body, specifically to her sexual parts. It is more likely that “vineyard,” like “garden,” does not stand for genitals, but rather for the young woman as a whole. Taking “vineyard” as a reference to genitals foists upon the girl a genital focus foreign to this song and absent from the Egyptian songs as well. Canticles and the Egyptian songs are concerned with the total experience of the lovers and the nature of their love.

I could not keep (loʾ naṭariti): NTR not in the sense of preventing entry, as if the girl were confessing promiscuity, but in the sense of tending and cultivating, like the synonymous root ŠMR in Gen 2:15, which Onkelos translates with NTR.

(1:7) my soul’s beloved (šeʾahbah napši): Napši as a subject of a verb focuses on the speaker more than ṣ̄ni does. Pope’s translation, “my true love,” also reflects this extra intensity.

graze (tirʾeh): Or “feed.” Three homographic roots are fused in R*H: (1) desire and will (from Aramaic RY); (2) friendship and companionship, as in raʾyah, “darling, companion,” and reʾim, “companions, lovers” (a by-form of R*); and (3) feeding, both as a transitive verb in the sense of pasturing flocks and as an intransitive verb meaning “to eat.” Our poet makes frequent use of words from this “root” and plays with it in various ways. The youth is a shepherd (reʾeh) who “grazes” or “feeds” (reʾeh) among the lilies (lips?) of his companion (raʾyah). She desires him and he her, and he “eats”—enjoys sexual pleasures—with her. (The sexual connotation of “eating” is clear in 5:1; see also Prov 30:20. The sexual connotation is clear too in the phrase reʾeh zonot, “consort with harlots,” Prov 29:3.)

rest (ṣallamah): a calque of Aramaic dilmah.

like “one who wraps herself up” (orʿyah). Not to be emended to toʾraʾyah (or ṭorʾiyah), “one who goes astray” (BHK, Gordis, and many modern commentators), even though Targum, Symmachus, Peshitta, and Vulgate understood the word in that sense. The emendation only blunts the thorn in the girl’s words. Harlots who carried out their business among the shepherds would wrap themselves in veils (Gen 38:14–15; observe that Tamar’s having covered her face is given as the reason for Judah’s thinking her a harlot, not as the reason for his failing to recognize her; see Pope and Tur-Sinai on Cant 1:7). Of course veiling was not in itself the mark of a prostitute. The Shulammite herself wears a veil (4:1; 6:7)—although a different word, sammah, is used). But prostitutes might identify themselves as such by putting on veils in certain situations (such as in places frequented by shepherds) or in certain ways: observe that Tamar not only “covers” herself (KSH; Rebecca does this too, Gen 24:65); she also “wraps herself up” (waititiʾallap, Gen 38:14). The Shulammite for her part threatens to be like one who “wraps herself up.” (TH, usually used of covering oneself with a mantle or other large garment, is a near-synonym of ḫP). The Shulammite here warns her lover that if he does not tell where he “grazes” and “causes to lie down” (tarbis), she will have to go searching for him and will seem like a loose woman.

(1:8) If you don’t know (im loʾ tedʾi lak): The ethical dialect, which lays emphasis on the will of the actor rather than on the act (cf. Job 5:27), suggests here a willful element in her ignorance: im loʾ tedʾi means “If you don’t know” (for whatever reason), while im loʾ tedʾi lak means “If you won’t know”—though you could and should.

go on out in the tracks of the flock, and graze your kids by the shepherds’ camps: spoken in a mock pouting tone: if you really don’t know what the sole object of my desire is, where I “graze” (reʾeh with its threefold sense), then,
very well, go after the sheep; me you will not find, but only the other shepherds. Reši at g’diyotayik may indeed have a sexual connotation (as Pope, following Delitzsch, suggests), but this is hardly proved by Judah’s payment of a goat kid to Tamar in Gen 38:17. Perhaps g’di is an idiom for breasts. In 1:14 “Ein Gedi” (“the spring of the kid”) is in synonymous parallelism with “my breasts.” The sentence “and graze your kids by the shepherds’ camps” seems to be an idiom that more or less paraphrases “lest I be like ‘one who wraps herself up’ by your companions’ flocks!” (v. 7b), but I know of no similar usage elsewhere.

I:9–17

(Boy)

(9) To a mare in Pharaoh’s chariotry
I compare you, my darling.

(10) lovely are your cheeks in bangles,
your neck in strings of beads.

(11) Bangles of gold we will make for you,
with spangles of silver.

(Girl)

(12) While the king is on his couch,
my spikenard gives forth its fragrance.

(13) To me my beloved is a sachet of myrrh—
between my breasts he’ll spend the night.

(14) To me my beloved is a spray of henna—
in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.

(Boy)

(15) How beautiful you are, my darling,
how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

(Girl)

(16) How beautiful you are, my beloved, indeed delightful!
Indeed, our bed is verdant.

(17) The rafters of our house are cedars;
our beams are cypresses.

The lovers express mutual admiration as they lie under the trees in a bower that the girl views as a house of royal luxury. He praises her (vv. 9–11, six stichs) and she him (vv. 12–14, six stichs). Then his words of praise (v. 15) are echoed in hers, as she praises both him (v. 16a) and their “house” (v. 16b–17) in a dialogue of six stichs.

(1:9) To a mare. Suatî is the feminine absolute with an archaizing suffix. Pope suggests that the comparison alludes to the practice of setting loose a mare in heat among the war-horses to cause havoc in battle, as happened at the battle of Kadesh in the time of Thutmosis III. But such an allusion is unlikely here. Even given Pope’s explanation that cavalry customarily used stallions and not mares, rekeb does not necessarily refer to war chariote; see I Kgs 1:5; II Kgs 5:9; Jer 22:4; and Isa 66:20; in all of which (and perhaps in Gen 50:9 too) the chariots are, as BDB says, “for dignity and display.” One Egyptian text, which Pope himself quotes, tells about the fondness of a prince (later to become Amenhotep II) for a pretty mare of Pharaoh’s stables. Such mares could be included in the term “Pharaoh’s chariote.” Egyptian horses were famous for their excellence, and the best were naturally reserved for the royal stables. Song no. 39 uses “a royal horse” as an epitome of speed. Furthermore, the youth in Canticles immediately specifies the basis of the comparison, namely the girl’s ornamented beauty, not her sexually arousing effect on males.

I compare you (dimnitik): present tense; the comparison follows.

(1:10) lovely are your cheeks in bangles . . . . She is as lovely in her jewelry as the royal horses of Egypt are in their decorated bridles and harnesses. The exact meaning of tor, “bangle” (so Pope), is uncertain, but the Targum uses tora to translate šaphah, the “lip” or collar of the priestly ephod (Exod 39:23). It is thus likely that tor is a circular or semicircular ornament (so Ginsburg, who derives it from TWR, “to go round”). The Egyptians wore ornaments that partially encompassed the cheeks and hung down over them; see isg. 9.

(1:11) Bangles of gold we will make . . . . Since her cheeks are lovely in bangles, we will make her especially precious ornaments from gold and silver. By saying “we” the youth seems to invite others to share in his admiration of his beloved, just as she included others when praising him (1:3–4, and cf. the youth in nos. 31 and 35).

(1:12) While the king is on his couch (m’shib): Meseb = “couch,” as in mishnaic Hebrew. Such a couch could serve for feasting and for sex (b. Shab. 62b, 63a). ‘ad še- is also a mishnaic usage. As elsewhere “king” is an affectionate epithet of the youth (TaMaKh); see on 1:4. His couch is the bed of boughs mentioned in v. 16.

my spikenard gives forth its fragrance: A simple boast about her spicery would have been possible. Her “spikenard” is her lover (thus Ibn Ezra, Murphy [1981], and Ginsburg). He is her spikenard just as he is the “sachet of myrrh” and the “spray of henna” lying between her breasts. All the while she is on his couch and lying close to him, she enjoys his fragrance.
Origen observes that spikenard emits its scent only when rubbed. Spikenard is the Valeriana jatamansi, a very expensive spice (Mark 14:3–6). Rubbing or squeezing the hairy stems produces the fragrant spice. Thus “my spikenard gives forth its fragrance” may have an additional erotic implication.

(1:13) between my breasts he'll spend the night. Yalın, it should be noted, means to spend the night. (LYN can mean to abide for a longer period [usually said of abstract qualities; see, e.g., Isa 1:21; Job 19:4, 41:14], but it never means to spend a shorter period of time.) The sentence can also be translated: “To me my beloved is a sachet of myrrh, which spends the night between my breasts.”

(1:14) in the vineyards of Ein Gedi: adverbial modifier of “he'll spend the night.” “In the vineyards of Ein Gedi” is a metaphorical restatement of “between my breasts.” Ein Gedi is a luxurious oasis nestled in a ravine.

(1:15) Your eyes are doves: “... that is to say, her eyes seduce and powerfully incite love in the heart of those who desire her, like doves, which are the most enticing of all animals in matters of desire” (TaMaKh). The common denominator of eyes and doves is their softness and gentleness, and perhaps also the oval shape of both. See further on 4:1.

(1:16) our bed (‘arēnu): Like meseb and mitjāh, ‘ereš designates a couch that could be used for feasting; see Amos 6:4.

(1:17) The rafters of our house: qorot batteyenu, with the nomen rectum in the plural, as in mishnaic Hebrew (Ehrlich).

2:1–7

(Girl)

(1) I'm (just) a crocus of Sharon,
    a valley-lily.

(Boy)

(2) Like a lily among brambles,
    so is my darling among girls.

(Girl)

(3) Like an apricot tree among trees of the thicket,
    so is my beloved among boys:
    I delight to sit in his shade,
    and his fruit is sweet to my palate.

(4) He brought me to the house of wine,
    and his intent toward me was love.

(5) Put me to bed among fruit clusters,
    spread me (my bed) among apricots,
    for I am sick with love.

(6) His left hand is under my head,
    and his right hand embraces me.

(7) I ask you to promise, girls of Jerusalem,
    by the gazelles or the hinds of the wild:
    do not disturb, do not bestir love,
    before it wishes.

This unit recapitulates the motifs of 1:9–17 as follows:

Exchange of praise: 1:9–11, 15–16a
Reclining together: 1:12–14, 16b–17
    on the couch: 1:12, 16b
    in the “house”: 1:17
    in each other’s embrace: 1:13–14

Vv. 1:9–17 and 2:1–7 belong to the same scene. The scene comes to its conclusion in the adjuration in 2:7, where the girl asks her comrades not to disturb her lovemaking. The adjuration is a sort of fade-out here and at 3:5 and 8:4 (though the latter two verses are not the last verses in their respective units), leaving what follows to the reader’s imagination. Compare the ending of “The Crossing” (no. 20G), where too a sensuous description of the lovers’ bed implies future pleasures in it.

(2:1) I’m (just) a crocus of Sharon: This is not self-praise. Self-praise would not be in character for the girl or the poem. (The self-praise in 1:5 is defensive and balanced by mention of her swarthiness.) If “I’m (just) a crocus of Sharon” were a boast of beauty, it would be discordant. Rather it is an expression of modesty (thus Ginsburg, Tur-Sinai), though perhaps the maiden is also fishing for a compliment. She says: I’m just a little flower, hardly noticeable among the thousands of flowers that cover the valley.

a valley-lily (sošamut ha’tmaqim): The use of the plural “maqim indicates that the phrase is generic, “a valley-lily” rather than “a lily of the valleys,” for a single lily could only be in one valley. Similarly the parallel h‘basselet haššaron is more strictly translated “a Sharon-crocus.” The Shulammite does not live in the Sharon, but is likening herself to one of the crocuses that grow there.

(2:2) Like a lily among brambles: The boy turns the modest self-appraisal to highest praise: you surpass all the other girls as the lily surpasses the brambles.

(2:3) Like an apricot tree: As in 1:16, the girl here models her praise of her lover upon his praise of her. Tappuah here, as the parallelism shows, refers to the tree and not to the fruit. The tappuah is not the apple, for cultivated apples are a relatively recent development, while the wild apple, which is not indigenous to Palestine anyway, is scarcely edible. Tappuah is probably the apricot (Moldenke, 1952:184, 88).
I delight to sit in his shade; lit., “I delight and I sit,” the first verb virtually governing the second (Ginsburg, Gordis). Past tense is possible, but she seems to be speaking of present experience in this unit (see especially 2:4–5). This statement explains the comparison between the boy and the apricot tree: the Shulamite delights in sitting in his shade alone in tasting his fruit. Apricot trees offer these pleasures; brambles do not. To taste sweet fruit is to enjoy kisses of the mouth; see 5:16 and 7:10. For “his shade” and “his fruit” we could as well translate “its shade” and “its fruit.”

The images the Shulamite uses to describe their relative positions are balanced in an egalitarian fashion. In 1:13 he is a sachet of myrrh nestled between her breasts, an image that pictures her as the dominant and sheltering party, whereas in 2:3b he is the tree in whose shade she sits, so that he is now the dominant and sheltering member of the pair. The boy is not a “sturdy chestnut tree” nor she his “clinging vine.”

(2:4) He brought me to the house of wine: The “house of wine” is commonly identified as a tavern or banquet hall, the banquet being presumably for a wedding or some sacral celebration, depending on one’s interpretation of the Song’s overall function. But this is not their wedding, nor is there the slightest suggestion of ritual feasting. And neither a tavern nor a public banquet is an appropriate setting for the lovemaking of the couple in this song, a major theme of which is separation from the city (see “Love in the Garden” in chapter 7).

Beyt hayyayin is simply any building or structure where wine is drunk. In this case it is the structure described in 1:16b–17: “Indeed our bed is verdant. The rafters of our house are cedars; our beams are cypresses.” Their house, the “house of wine,” is a bower under the trees in the field or orchard. It is, in a sense, a banquet house, but it is a very modest one. In 1:4 this structure is called the king’s chambers. (Heder [1:4] and bayit occur in synonymous parallelism [3:4, etc.] and can function as interchangeable members of the same image [Exum, 1973:55].) Such booths for lovers’ tryst are mentioned in the Egyptian love songs; see “Love in the Garden” in chapter 7. His intent toward me was love: In other words, he intended to make love to me. Degel is cognate to Akkadian diglu, “glance,” “intent,” “wish” (from daglu, “to look”); see Pope. tib‘bah here means the act of lovemaking, as in Prov 5:19 and Jer 2:33, rather than the emotion of love, for that emotion is already alive in both lovers and does not need to be the object of intention.

(2:5) Put me to bed…spread me (my bed)…: Since she is “sick,” albeit “love-sick,” she must lie down. SMK (here in piel, as occasionally in mishnaic Hebrew; see Jastrow, Dict.) indicates putting to bed or preparation of a bed (Ps 3:6); this is the root of šnika, “rug,” “blanket” (Judg 4:18). RPD, whose root-meaning is “to spread,” likewise indicates preparation of a bed (thus Tur-Sinai; see also Job 17:13), and bty ūhrpd means “sleeping house,” in Lachish Letter IV, 5. RPD is probably a by-form of RBD; cf. Prov 7:16. It was customary to lie on spread rugs for sleeping, but the Shulamite wishes to lie among fruit clusters and apricots (b‘ meaning “among,” as in 2:3a). Following close upon the comparison of the youth to an apricot tree, mention of the fruits naturally makes one think of the youth’s caresses. The girl wants to be surrounded by the sweet fragrance of his lovemaking. Certainly she is not calling for aphrodisiacs (contrary to Pope). This love-sick girl hardly needs artificial stimulants.

šešot does not necessarily refer to raisin cakes. G. R. Driver (1950:144) explains šeshah, on the basis of the Arabic cognate, to mean “inflorescence,” first with reference to the inflorescence of the palm, then specifically with reference to raisin cakes. But there is no reason to restrict the word to palms or raisins. On the contrary, ʿāšeq nāhim in Hos 3:1 suggests that šeshot requires further definition if it is to specify raisin cakes. Here it may be defined by the parallel tappuṣin and refer to the apricot in blossom.

Egyptian love songs nos. 6, 12, and 37 describe the symptoms of love-sickness, in particular weakness and loss of control over the body (nos. 6, 37). There (as in 5:8) the love-sickness is caused by the beloved’s absence. Here his presence causes much the same symptoms.

The imperatives, ostensibly directed to the girls of Jerusalem, are a sort of rhetorical imperative, a strong way of expressing a wish for what is already the case, as if to say: may I be snugly bedded among my beloved’s caresses. V. 6 makes this image explicit: she is held in his embrace.

(2:7) I ask you to promise…: lit., “I adjure you…” This adjuration recurs in 3:5 and 8:4, each time immediately following a statement that the couple is embracing or is about to embrace. Pope interprets the adjuration as a request to the girls not to sti up sexual desire by means of aphrodisiacs before the proper time, which time has now arrived. In other words, by this adjuration she is now actually requesting stimulants. But there would be no point in such a request. The Shulamite’s desire is already well aroused, and she has no need of aphrodisiacs, now or later. In any case, there is no point to a repeated request not to excite love until it is willing, when the request is from the mouth of a girl who (as Pope says) is never averse to love anyway.

What does she want the girls of Jerusalem to do? The only thing they could do that they should not do is disturb the couple, and this is indeed what the Shulamite is charging them not to do. “Love” here refers to the act of lovemaking, as in 2:4b, Prov 5:19, and (most unambiguously) Jer 2:33; see also no. 11, n. e.

by the gazelles or the hinds of the wild: Mesopotamian magical spells mention the gazelle as the epitome of sexual potency: for example, “By the love (power) of the gazelle, seven times . . . copulate with me” (e.g., Biggs, 1967:26). But it is difficult to see this significance here, especially since the
gazelles mentioned in the spells are male. The best explanation is that of Gordis (1961:26–28), who argues that ṣebā'ot and ṣawlot haśšadeh are circumlocutions for titles of God, the first for ("lohey") ṣebā'ot, (God of) hosts, the second for ḫel šaddy, El Shadday. (The first term is more likely a circumlocution for YHWH ṣebā'ot, which Tsevat, 1965, has explained as a phrase compounded of two nouns in apposition, "Yahweh, [is] Armies." ṣebā'ot can therefore imply a name of God.) The author uses these animal names to avoid divine titles in a secular context. We see here the first sign of a tendency, which became important in the Talmudic period, to substitute for divine names and titles in oaths various words, sometimes meaningless words such as bāḥerem ("by the fish net") and b'hayey hayqayiq ("by the life of summerfruit"), see the discussion in Lieberman, 1942:125–27. Gazelles and hinds are thus mentioned because of the sound of their names, but their beauty too makes them appropriate to the context, as in Prov 5:19, "a hind of love and a roe of grace" (Ginsburg).

Ṣadeh, usually translated "field," in conjunction with animals means the wild, uncultivated countryside (Gen 2:19, 20; Exod 23:11, 29; etc.)

disturb, bestir. Ta‘iru and tʷor‘ru signify disturbance of some sort (thus Gordis and many others), not excitement or arousal of desire. There is no case where WR is clearly used of sexual arousal. It is often used of waking or arousing a sleeper. Ta‘iru and teworru are chosen for this verse because the way one disturbs lovemaking is to wake the couple in the morning; compare the girl’s complaint against the dove in no. 14 for disturbing her and her lover.

before it wishes: elliptical for "until it wishes to be disturbed, woken up."
The point is not that the girls of Jerusalem should wake the couple at the proper time, but that (at least) they should not disturb them before then.

As Pope points out, "love" is implicitly personified by the use of the verb ĤPS here.

This unit (2:1–7) at once recapitulates the motifs of the preceding one (1:9–17) and goes beyond it. After the exchange of endearments between the lovers in 2:1–3a, the Shulammite tells her comrades: I delight in my beloved’s caresses, so he brought me to this little "house of wine" intent on making love. Now I am love-sick, overwhelmed by desire, and wish to lie down surrounded by the fruits of love. He is now embracing me, so please leave us to ourselves and do not disturb our lovemaking.

The girls of Jerusalem serve primarily as a sounding board for the Shulammite. Their main function is to be present to be spoken to (see chapter 8). But now they are to leave. Their presence is reminiscent of that of the "young people" in "The Orchard." The little sycamore invites the girl: "Come, spend time where the young people are: the meadow celebrates its day. Under me are a festival booth and a hut . . . ." Other young people are present at first, but at some point they leave and the lovers remain alone: "The beer hut is disarrayed from drink, but she has remained with her brother . . . But my lips are sealed . . . ." (no. 30). The poet of Canticles, who is also discreet, delicately closes the scene here, as at 3:5 and 8:4, with only a suggestion of what is to follow.

2:8–17

(Girl)

(8) Listen! My beloved—
he’s coming now!

Bounding over the mountains,
leaping over the hills.

(9) My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young roe.

Now he stands behind our wall,
peering in through the windows,
glancing in through the lattice.

(10) My beloved spoke and said to me:

(Boy)

"Arise, my darling, my beautiful,
and come away.

(11) For see, the winter has departed,
the rain has passed and gone its way.

(12) The blossoms have appeared in the land,
the time of song has arrived,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

(13) The fig tree sweetens its young fruit,
and the vine is in bud, giving off fragrance.

Arise, my darling, my beautiful,
and come away.

(14) "My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff—
let me see your form,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
your form is lovely."

(Girl?)

(15) Catch us foxes,
little foxes
that spoil vineyards,
for our vineyards are in bud.