‘Eating Sex’ and the Unlovely Song of Songs: Reading Consumption, Excretion and DH Lawrence

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> [*L’Apéritif:]* I left her with figs stuffed in my trouser pockets and in my jacket, figs in both of my outstretched hands, and figs in my mouth. I couldn’t stop eating them and was forced to get rid of the mass of plump fruits as quickly as possible. But that could not be described as eating; it was more like a bath, so powerful was the smell of resin that penetrated all my belongings, clung to my hands and impregnated the air through which I carried my burden. And then, after satiety and revulsion— the final bends in the path—had been surmounted, came the ultimate mountain peak of taste. A vista over an unsuspected landscape of the palate spread out before my eyes—an insipid, undifferentiated, greenish flood of greed that could distinguish nothing but the stringy, fibrous waves of the flesh of the open fruit, the utter transformation of enjoyment into habit, of habit into vice.
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> —Walter Benjamin, ‘Fresh Figs’

L’Hors d’œuvres

In her book *Carnal Appetites* Elspeth Probyn devotes a chapter to ‘Eating Sex’.[1] The *amuse bouche* to her essay comes in the form of a brief treatment of Bill Clinton, whose brush with oral sexuality neatly illuminates for Probyn the social alliance between the gastronomic and the erotic. If Clinton did ‘not have sex with that woman’ as he clamed, then Probyn asks what Monica Lewinski was imagined to be *doing.* ‘If oral sex isn’t sex, is it eating? And conversely,’ Probyn wonders, ‘when is eating sex?’

What Probyn’s subsequent discussion indicates is that the lines are not at all clear. Hands stuffed into galline cavities, tenderized rumps, and the toasted soldiers taking turns on the soft-boiled yolk are each suggestive of a disquieting crossover. So too is the sugary pet name and the aphrodisiac oyster (with its salty remembrances-cum-precursors); the dilemma of breast versus thigh; the virgin cocktail; the bun in the oven—and so on and so on *ad nauseum.* Probyn’s point is that sex and eating both consist in pointedly

[1] Elspeth Probyn, ‘Eating Sex’ in *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 59-77.

sensory relationships that 'connect us with surfaces, textures, tastes, smells, insides and outsides'. Both activities also open out the allegedly closed body to the wider world, reminding us that the body is part of a network of processes and not a discrete 'thing'. And yet, paradoxically, food and sex have also served historically to police boundaries and re-enforce our perception of ourselves as closed sites through our register of personal tastes and proclivities: you are what you eat, *mon petit choux.*"[2] In short, food is a way into theorizing the vicissitudes of sexual identity and praxis, and vice versa. As Clinton perhaps knew, to control definitions of sexuality one needs to control how we codify orality and represent the (female) body's fluxing relationship with the world.

For the reader of the Hebrew Bible, this set of connections has obvious significance since so many Hebrew texts combine sex and eating, though we do not always think of them in quite that way. It would be difficult for instance to separate out the orchard of Genesis 1-3 from the first human pair. This couple emerges from the same loam as the trees, errs by means of their fruit and is punished for eating under taxonomy of gendered politics. In the end they go out into creation to 'be fruitful' and to multiply and to till the fertile ground. It would be similarly problematic to parcel off the dietary requirements of Leviticus from the prescriptions about childbirth and bodily discharges against which they are framed (). This is to say nothing of Leah and her mandrakes (Gen. 30), or Noah, Ham and the curious incident of the post-diluvian vineyard (Gen. 9.20–21). In this essay I wish to focus however on the most obvious biblical examples of sexualized food: the Song of Songs.

[2] Probyn's approach to the connectedness of the body, sex and identity is rooted in a conception of the body that gained general critical consensus at the end of the last century. It has been most famously articulated by Bourdieu, Deleuze and Guattari, and Spivak. (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1908]; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [London: Continuum, 2011 (1987)], 44-48, 165–184; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* [New York and London: Routledge, 1988]). These works emphasise the body as a fluid and open site, culturally regulated so as to re-enforce particular ideological assumptions. The body's boundaries tend to take on social significance for this reason, with complex mores around the activities that transgress them—most obviously, eating, excreting and coitus. See Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de Passage* (London: Routledge, 1909); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1966]), pp. 141–172; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008 [1990]), 117-194.

In the Song, amorous foodstuffs abound: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your lovemaking is better than wine' (1.2); 'Your cheek behind your veil is like a half of a pomegranate' (4.3); 'Your lips distill nectar, my bride, honey and milk are under your tongue' (4.11). According to Roland Boer, the female protagonist has ejaculations of pomegranates in 4.13.[3] According to the male lover, his companion's nose circuitously smells of apples in 7.9b.[4] 'Eat friends', the lovers cheerfully exhort us in 5.1, 'drink, and be drunk with love!'

These examples beg consideration alongside Probyn's analysis and in this article I experiment with the comfiture of the lovers' affections to revisit some essential questions regarding the poem's depiction of love and sex. My central argument is that the poetic foodstuff is not a symbol of the mingling and fusion of the lovers (as is often claimed) but a wrinkle in the text where we can glimpse a breakdown in the poem's Arcadian tone. Several voices have begun to question the Song's bucolic credentials—led by Black, Brenner, Boer and others—and questions have begun to emerge about whether 'literal' readings of the poem are allegories in modern guise. This article integrates the foodstuff that has long been utilized in romantic readings of the Song into this more skeptical view of the poem. I wish also to suggest that this emerging critical reading tradition is preempted in the work of DH Lawrence. Lawrence prophesied the putrefaction of the Song's orchards long before the professional biblical scholar emerged suspicious onto the scene. Lawrence's work therefore has a considerable amount to teach us about the way love is constructed in the poem's world—and how it might be deconstructed.

I begin with a survey of the scholarly attention already devoted to the Song's food imagery.

L'Entrée

In her 2001 *Semeia* article 'The Food of Love', Athalya Brenner argues that while the Song is a pointedly vegetarian venture (and therefore laudably bloodless by general biblical standards), the poem nevertheless maintains

[3] See discussion in Roland Boer, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), n.165.
[4] See discussion on this point in Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 84-85.

direct equivalencies between certain sorts of produce and certain sorts of gendered identity.[5] These smack more than a little of patriarchal power: the Song's female protagonist is primarily associated with fruit and with the land that produces it while the male is an eater of that bounty—a devourer of women. Cary Ellen Walsh's reads the Songs food imagery too, though she is a good deal more optimistic. Walsh focuses on the nourishing and sustaining qualities of the Song's sex, contending that it consciously trades against the Edenic command to be 'fruitful' and multiply. The poem replies therefore to the patriarch's pressure to sire offspring with a kind of sexual frivolity, inverting Genesis's sense of what constitutes legitimate 'fruit'. For Walsh, the orality of the sexual encounter in Song of Songs thereby deflates the usual phallocentrism of biblical sexual discourse. The phallic desire to penetrate the vaginal opening is answered by an oral sexuality; its sex is not an act of bodily infiltration but of mutual consumption, opening fixed to opening: 'your kisses are better than wine' (1.2).[6]

In a monograph devoted to queering the relationship between food and sex in the Bible, Ken Stone expresses broad assent to Walsh's reading,[7] though he also makes the point that the social proscriptions that attach to both food and sex make the issue more complicated than we might immediately think when following either Brenner or Walsh's work. Food cannot simply be supportive of or antagonistic to love because the social coding of both food and sex moves around a great deal in culture. Sometimes sex is 'fucking'; sometimes snacking is lavish. Moreover, sex and eating necessarily relate to the way we formulate our senses of self and identity and can therefore attach to identity quite differently in different contexts. Like Probyn, Stone understands eating and sex as activities that work at the borders that 'we' police around 'our'selves.[8] They each combine a kind of psychic danger with a subconscious pleasure: the pleasure derived from breaking the body's borders and the fear of losing cohesion through that breach. The coterminous

[5] Athalya Brenner, 'The Food of Love: Gendered Food and Food Imagery in the Song of Songs', Semeia 86 (2001), 101-112.
[6] Cary Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 2000).
[7] Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts*: *Food Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2005).
[8] In this he is reading along with both Kristeva and Butler, indeed; see my comments at n.2.

sensations of danger and pleasure underwrite the relationship of the lovers in the Song of Songs, Stone suggests. The poem's ecstatic exclamations and its furtive toying with the numerous social structures that would seem to want to hinder the lovers' union (cf. 2.14; 5.7; 8.1–2; 8.8) replays these contradictory impulses. Sexuality is not 'good' or 'bad' in the poem by virtue of the food through which it is conjured. Sex and food establish socially conditioning borders in the poem on the one hand, and, on the other, they provide imagery that transgresses those borders, sometimes most graphically and sensationally.

One pattern that emerges in these works is the common use of food as a kind of interpretative schema. The type of foodstuff in play allows for a standardized decoding of the Song's love, which is imagined to be operating somewhere behind the poem's heavily laden table. Food has become a kind of Derridean supplement. It makes up for the lack of literally rendered 'sex acts' in the Song by providing a code through which we can understand them and a mask for their absence. The Song's sexual politics thereby become egalitarian or patriarchal by virtue of its use of foodstuffs (vegetarian or carnivorous respectively).

However, it would be more accurate to say that the ideas of food and sex are coterminous in the poem. When the male lover imagines his girlfriend as a fruit laden tree and himself as a sampler of her delectable breasts, for example, he is neither sexualizing the act of eating nor imaging fruit-flavored sex:

> Your height resembles a Palm Tree
> And your breasts its clusters.
> I think[9] I will climb that Palm;
> I will grasp its fruit branches.[10]
> May your breasts be as clusters of the vine
> And the scent of your nose as apples
> and your palate[11] like the good wine
> flowing smoothly to lovers[12],
> gliding over scarlet lips.[13]

[9] Lit. 'I say', insofar as 'I say to myself/I think'. See Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2005), 214.
[10] סנסניו, literally 'fruit stalks', usually used of dates.
[11] Sometimes translated 'taste' as in 2.3 (הך), but more literally the soft part of the mouth: roof, gums, palate.
[12] Along with Gordis and Exum, I take לדודי as an apocopated plural for מלדודי. (Exum, *Song*, 214).
[13] For notes on this translation see Keith N. Schoville, 'The Impact of the Ras Shamra Texts on the Study of the Song of Songs' (PhD., University of Wisconsin–Maddison,

Within the confines of its own signifying economy, the poem creates the poetic motion of sexual intimacy through the imbibing of wine and fruit, and it fashions the sensory experience of this 'meal' through the power of a sexual register. Strictly speaking, food is not garnishing sex here. Nor is coitus flavoring the bounties of the poem. Eating is a modality through which sexual intimacy comes into being as a poetic concept in the Song while sex is the poem's only way of discussing the sensory experiences of eating. Each idea is a re-organized substrate of the other. [14]

Indeed, an issue that is seldom acknowledged in the scholarship around the Song's food is that what is at stake in the relevant passages of the Song is not *food* so much as the activity of *eating* it. It becomes easy to conflate the two in analysis when in fact they are not quite equivalent. If food stands in for the lovers' bodies, then understanding the sexual politics of the Song on its culinary terms would require a close reading not of the nature of the food (meat, fruit, or liquid) but of how the text models the *act* its consumption. In other words, by fixating on the nature of the foodstuff we have created a value system of eating in the poem (vegetarian: romantic; carnivorous: patriarchal) without ever considering eating in the text on its own terms. Naturally, the aforementioned scholarship does not ignore eating entirely. Brenner's material carries a critique on the 'devouring' of women and Stone's focus on the transgression of bodily borders recognizes the dynamic in-process nature of the Song's bodies. But both stop short of providing for *eating* the same detailed interpretative model that we have for *types* of fare in the text.

Eating is after all as much of a focus in the text as the foodstuffs themselves, if not more so. In 5:1 honeycomb is not described nor used as a point of reference. It is 'eaten' (אכלתי), just as wine and milk are 'drunk' (שתיתי). As readers we are exhorted to 'eat our fill', as the NIV renders ושכרו שתו.[15] In chapter 2, it is 'taste' that is again at issue, or more specifically the impact of the food on the palate (הך is used both here and in 7.9). Indeed, we

1969), 99. This reading is adopted by Michael Fox (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], 163), and alluded to (though not in the end utilized) by Exum (*Song*, 214).

[14] See Meredith, *Journeys in the Songscape: Space and the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 160-165.

[15] Which Fox nicely renders as 'drink yourselves drunk […on caresses]'; *Song of Songs*, 133.

only know what type of fruit the woman has consumed because she mentions the tree. The object itself is never a focus of the poem's attention. A few verses later, she is to be revived by *partaking* of apples and raisins (2.5).[16] The lover is not just like milk and honey (4.11)—they issue from under her tongue, presumably turning her kisses into light, saccharine meals.

A possible exception to this trend might be those references to food which coincide with the description of the woman's body: the pomegranate cheek-cum-temple (4.3); the belly of wheat and the vulva that 'never lacks wine' (7.2). These stand-alone images are more obviously depicted as 'items' than as vehicles to display sexual consumption. But of course as long as we view these objects *as food* we are keeping the idea of eating them in view, particularly in chs. 4 and 6 and 7 where these foodstuffs are used to 'build' lovers. For this apparently strange poetic technique of creating figures out of foodstuffs is what we 'really' do every day to manufacture and sustain our own bodies at the cellular level. In a very material sense, pomegranates, wheat sheaves and blended wines *do* become cheeks and bellies and vulvas and affect. The Song has simply substituted poetic rumination for metabolic chemistry.

Fiona Black has seized the poetic potential of bodily process in the Song more fully. In her book *The Artifice of Love,* Black deals at length with the idea of the Song's lovers as 'grotesque' figures, beings in process. Speaking of the bodily depictions in Song of Songs 4, 5, 6 and 7, Black points out that the edibility of these substances is only one small part of their poetic potential anyway. A pomegranate might signify via many of its aspects: scent, taste, colour, or even the particular way it lapses into putrefaction.[17] Readers will tend to decide for themselves and indeed Black is exercised by the way that potentially unsavory connotations have been weeded out of interpretation, even when the Song's is being obviously 'grotesque' (vid. comments about sheep who have not miscarried [4.2]; baths of expressed milk [4.5; 5.12]; sexual fluids [4.15; 5.2,5]). She terms this pattern an 'Hermeneutic of Compliment'.[18] It can be seen almost everywhere.[19]

[16] For discussion on the translation issues around this point see Meredith, *Journeys in the Songscape,* 52 n.74.
[17] Black, *Artifice of Love,* 46-48.
[18] Black, *Artifice of Love,* p. 25.

Overall, Black argues that the romance of the poem is something of an 'artifice', a readerly production that extends from the critic's love affair with the text rather than from the poetry itself. Like the bodies depicted in the Song, the poetic corpus is not closed but in process, exceeding itself. It draws in the critic until a love for the poetry becomes mistaken for a love within the poem. What I wish to advance below is a reading that follows on fairly directly from Black's argument. What I want to focus on here, however, is one particular set bodily 'process' (that of digestion and excretion), as a broader, almost philosophical category that re-engages with the mechanics of the text and the process of reading. My argument is that the Song's relationship with the 'real' world beyond the edge of the page is not necessarily one that facilitates connection. It also invokes considerable separations and excretions. One can see in it a vision of love as a road to isolation. One can therefore see in the Song's interpretative history a kind of loneliness that has been mistaken for love.[20] Eating, digestion and excretion

[19] Black identifies it in the work of Munro, Murphy, Faulk, Soulen and Brenner among others. See Munro, Jill, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Murphy, Roland, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); Falk, Marcia, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982); Soulen, Richard, 'The *waṣfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutics', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, pp. 21-224; Brenner, Athalya, *Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

[20] Such an approach sits alongside the recent questions that have been raised about the so-called 'literal' interpretation of the Song, specifically over whether such readings—which have always sought to displace the idea of the poem as an allegory— might be more than a little allegorical themselves. Roland Boer, no stranger to the dark arts of sexual reading, [20] has set out the problem with characteristic efficiency: 'How this can be literal reading is beyond me, for it merely substitutes one allegory for another, a carnal allegory for a divine allegory. The Song has as much to say *directly* about human sex and love as it has about divine love—that is, almost nothing. So interpretations that take, in all senses of the word, the Song literally as about sex between human beings must make allegorical moves comparable to the long-standing patristic and medieval tradition, which took it as an allegory of God's love for Israel or the Church' (Boer, *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2013], 34.) Boer's solution to the problem is to read the Song along with David Harvey. Boer identifies in the poem's production of foodstuffs an 'allocatory economy' which stands in opposition to a capitalist 'economy of extraction'. This allocatory economy is characterized by the spontaneous production of edible treats. '[T]he land, animals, plants and women produce food and young inexplicably', says Boer (p.45) The Song boasts 'a fecund, sensual and pulsating world, eager to get on with the job of sprouting, pollinating, mating, and reproducing' (p.42). In short, the poetic landscape is autonomously bucolic, human love entirely aside. The Song does not even 'fall

are process bound up with both connection/assimilation and with isolation/excretion and as such they open up the Song to such a reading. Shifting our focus from the Song's food to its dynamics of eating, therefore, is key.

Sorbet

One theorist who has written insightfully on the practice of eating is Noelle Châtelet. In her volume *Le Corps à corps culinaire* (cited also by Probyn), Châtelet highlights the bodily transformations that eating entails and the way it sanctions a form of social amnesia:

> [the idea] that everything we absorb (air-sustenance-water-sperm) entirely traverses us to come out later transformed (gas-excrement-urine-baby) never ceases to amaze us and the astonishment increases when we consider the fact that matter not only metamorphoses in another reconstituted matter, but also in energy, intelligency or stupidity, in short a series of social and affective gestures which we perform forgetting (or pretending to forget) that the spaghetti and the rosé eaten the night before serve a function.[21]

Châtelet's middle-class mid-week fayre reminds us that eating is not merely a mouth-concept, as Stone and Walsh's readings of the 'border' I think imply, nor is it simply a symbolic quantity that can be directly translated into gender (as Brenner models for us, and which Stone rightly cautions us against). Eating is a visceral *motion* that makes life and discourse possible. Importantly, the enabling function of this 'motion' is hidden by a socially conditioned amnesia. We choose to forget that our talking or walking, our writing or painting or singing is food that has been translated by the machinery of the body into life. Earlier we considered Brenner's criticism of the 'consuming male' who eats the woman in the Song of Songs. Châtelet's bodies, whatever their gender, can never be merely machines of consumption in this way. They are necessarily machines of production too, producing gestures and emotions, 'intelligency or stupidity' through the translation of food into a language called life. Indeed, Châtelet is clear that eating is a kind

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back', he says, on a deity who drives these processes; love, like the plants and the animals, is 'self sufficient and self-producing. In counterpoint, I would argue that since the entire poem is rendered in direct speech the Song can never escape the human world. The 'autonomous' processes Boer identifies are nothing of the sort: they are 'extracted' from the world by the characters' creative actions as they interpret the world through their relationship, which they impose upon it.

[21] Noëlle Châtelet, *Le corps à corps culinaire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), 33; cited in Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, 31.

of language. It is, she says, 'an actual dialogue between the eater and the world, a type of privileged and symbolic language.'[22] Literal language produces meaning when it is consumed; it establishes identities; its political potential is forgotten because of its quotidian nature. So too with eating.

Châtelet's provides us with a model for understanding the Song's eating that goes beyond a mere register of synthesis through mutual ingestion. She instead presents eating as a language of transformation and translation, eating as an exercise in 'pretending to forget'.

Le Plat Principal

This way of understanding eating has particular resonance with the Song, which boasts the same features. The poem is engaged constantly in acts of transformation and translation and the history of its interpretation has been marked by readerly amnesia. How do these broad features of the text intersect with its focus on eating?

Let us take Châtelet's two ideas in turn. The Song's protagonists are always transmogrifying each other and their world into something else. On reflection, this will to transform their lover seems a curious mode of expressing desire. Why will what you love the most into the shape of something lesser? What kind of desire does that express? This conjuring

[22] Cited in Hélène Cheynet, 'De la fête au symptôme: Le Boire et le Manger dans quelques oeuvres de Hemingway.' *Le Populaire à table: Le Boire et le Manger aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Eds. Mireille Piarotas and Charles Pierreton (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université Saint-Etienne, 2005), 155-166 (161). Hilary Kovar Justice makes use of precisely this point too. Justice peruses a veritable menu of *fix prix* critical understandings of food (17-18). She finds the distinct notes of classic semiotic problems there: in Roland Barthes ('Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food'); and in de Certeau ('…food is not presented to humans in a natural state. Even raw or picked from a tree, fruit is already a *cultured foodstuff*, prior to any preparation...'). Justice concludes that '[i]f food is culture and culture is civilization then Hemingway's choice of food as a site at which to interrogate civilization—its ruptures and reunifications—proves theoretically sophisticated indeed (17). As we shall see below, so too with DH Lawrence who uses food as a theoretically sophisticated site at which the interrogate both sexuality and the Bible. See Hilary Kovar Justice, 'The Consolation of Critique: Food, Culture and Civilization in Ernest Hemingway', *The Hemingway Review*, 32.1 (2012), 16-38 (17; trans. Justice/Bouynot); Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption' reprinted in *Food and Culture: A Reader*. 2nd edn. Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008 [1961]), 28-35 [32-33]) and (Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Volume 2: Living and Cooking. Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 [1994]), 167, original emphasis.

seems yet more strange when we consider that the lovers often turn each other into food to be consumed. Their language of *poetic* transformation thus becomes a transformative 'language' in Châtelet's sense, the lover becoming fuel for the body to be transformed, 'translated' again into action and affect and, one presumes, into excrements.

One might claim that this talk of excrements is a little far fetched, but such an objection actually brings us back to the issue of readily amnesia. As we have seen, when biblical scholars speak about food in the text they make a range of logical assumptions about nourishment and the biological processes associated with it: consumption, comingling; the violence (or otherwise) of preparing meals; biting, tasting, and so forth. Along with Châtelet, scholars tend to forget about a variety of other processes which they could infer along the same lines, equally connected with eating and equally secondary to the text: excretion, digestion, putrefaction, the threat of death which each meal staves off, etcetera. Black identifies in Song scholarship the trope of the Hermeneutic of Complement, a mode of reading by which scholars assume a beauty for the poem's female protagonist and read out of its metaphors anything that might conflict with that view, no matter how ambiguous or bizarre the imagery might be. Something similar seems to hold of the lovers' erotic diet. Scholars are perfectly happy to presume certain bodily functions for the characters based on their consumption of food but not others. Why? Usually this is because the ignobilities of the human digestive system do not easily attach to one's fundamental assumptions about what the poem is *supposed* to depict. However, once we adopt the relatively simple exegetical principle advocated by Châtelet of refusing to read out of food its nature as a single nodal point in a necessarily interdependent matrix of social and biological processes, a wider set of questions emerges.

For instance, there remains a series of interpretative problems around the politics of absorption and metabolism in the text. When the male lover transforms the woman into a tree in order to climb her and drink the juices of her vinous breasts or when he poetically transforms her fluids into natural sugars that issue from under the tongue, his readers are not simply presented with sexual mingling. That is, we are not merely confronted with one liquid body merged with another. Instead, the woman has penetrated the male lover. His body has become openable and the traditional invasive structures of heternormative sex have been momentarily reversed. This surely has

implications for feminist readings of the text (and not necessarily favourable ones). For now however let us merely follow the morsel downwards.

The consumed woman is absorbed by the male. Absorption is after all the very point of a drive like hunger, which commentators understand to be in view in the text as proxy for sexual appetite. So while it would be convenient to imagine the eaten women simply disappearing, he has in fact absorbed her, appropriated her *as a mode of staging himself as a bodily subject*. Masticated, vigorously ground down, 'gliding over scarlet lips' (7.10), the woman becomes part of this cannibal man's very substance. In one sense, the female protagonist is in these instances a huge, poetic teat for her lover, whose strength, vigor, growth and energy are entirely provided for by the nourishing qualities of the woman's apparently limitless form. After all, there is no eating in the poem that does not coincide with sex. [23]We might say therefore that the edible female body of the poem is only ever the eating male body waiting to happen. The female body is always waiting to be assimilated into 'energy, intelligency or stupidity, in short a series of social and affective gestures' which we read forgetting 'or pretending to forget' that the wheat and wine consumed/consummated the page before serve only to make the male's body a function of the female's destruction. She is absorbed and translated into male action by virtue of his diet of lovemaking.

The poem acknowledges only four types of male bodily activity: more eating, sleeping, moving away from the half-eaten woman, and, most crucially, speaking—speaking her body into being again so he can return to feast on it in the following paragraph.[24] The Song's love affair is veritably vampyric in that sense. Or else it is subtly bulimic, locked into a cycle of binging and purging. Which is to say, á la Black, that the notion of 'love as eating' can be read as discomforting, saddening, and dangerous simply by modulating the logic of our reading.

[23] It all depends how far we want to push the imagery of course and some, no doubt, would suggest that such a utilitarian reading of the trope is pressing things a little too far. This is a reasonable accusation, though we might perhaps reflect on the arbitrariness of (or worse, the cultural predetermination to) think of food imagery as being more 'naturally' attached to ideas of taste, appreciation, gastronomic fervor and oral intimacy than to ideas that highlight its practical form and purpose.

[24] Here I am borrowing from Exum's sense of the 'poetic conjuring' that occurs in the Song (Exum, *Song of Songs,* 6).

It is perhaps too simple to assume then that the female bodies of the Song are symbols of sexual gratification because they are 'devoured'. The Song's female protagonist images what the male must destroy in order to constitute himself and to maintain that constitution. Indeed, I would suggest this brings us perhaps closer to Kristeva's theorizing of abjection than the kind of danger/delight reading proposed by Stone; the woman must be consumed in order to constitute the male, whose masculine identity is made present precisely through the action of continually translating feminine identity through her entry into the male.

Le Salade et le Fromage

However, the male's eating is not the whole story. The female protagonist is also sustained by sexual cuisine at several points in the text, though these episodes are admittedly more ambiguous. For instance, when the female lover is 'faint with love' in the wine house[25] of 2:4–5, and her lover must feed her with apples and support her with raisins to ward off the sickness, are we supposed to understand the woman's love-sickness to stem from a lack of amorous attention (resolved by 'eating' her lover)? Or is she sick from too much love? In other words, is she fed to survive her overwhelming love or to manage her loneliness? Perhaps it makes little difference in the end. For in either case the food does not signal the sexual mingling we have been led to expect. Instead it underlines the lovers' individuality and physical distinctness; food either sustains the woman through her loneliness as an isolated subject or else it sustains her by means of a devouring of her consort: one body used up in stabilizing the identity of the other, as we saw above.

Brenner argues that there is exegetical significance in the fact that the female tends only to *taste* the male ('his fruit was sweet to my taste', 2:3; 'his mouth (דבר) is delicious', 5:16). This makes the woman's a less violent appropriation of her lover's body, certainly, but even the action of timorous sampling is fundamentally political. As Georg Simmel once observed, the taste bud is an instrument of final ownership: 'as the morsel is going into my

[25] There is a clear rationale for linking the spatiality of these two verses in that the wine-house of v. 4 is at the very least tacitly linked to the grape-based delicacies she is then found gorging on, or, following Pope, being braced against for love-making. See Pope, Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 378. Full discussion in Meredith, *Journeys in the Songscape,* 52, n.74.

mouth, pricking up my tongue and taste buds, and then sliding down on its route to digestion and finally defecation, you cannot be anything more than a witness.'[26] Even tasting is an act of ultimate exclusion.

In fact, we could pick up Brenner's examples of the 'tasting' in 2:3 on precisely these terms. "Like the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste." When the Song's female lover compares the male to an apple tree amongst the trees of the forest and sits in his shade to 'taste' the sweetness of his fruit, she is at once picking her lover out from amongst the other trees in the wood, and, also, singling herself out as the sole beneficiary of his harvest. In picking him and tasting his fruit, she precludes both the other trees from mingling with her body and the rest of the world from sampling him. Taste becomes intimacy but intimacy in turn becomes exclusion. For Brenner this may be 'just' or 'only' taste but tasting involves turning the tongue into an instrument of ownership as effective and declamatory as the phallus that Walsh and Stone seek to displace. The sense of exclusion is especially difficult to ignore since none of the nutritional, utilitarian nuances of 'eating' are retained by the verse. 'His fruit is sweet to my taste', she says, with a curiously redundant first-person possessive. What these observation amount to is the sense that food attaches to the establishment of the Self in the text. This politics of self emerges precisely because it carries with it the enduring power of rejection, however adept we have become at reading it out of our treatments of the text.

Leaving issues of metabolism to one side and returning to Châtelet's functionalist approach to eating, I would argue that there also remains a question for Song scholars about excrement. For surely something should be said about how the poem's characters treat the possibility of atrophy and decay (which the very notion of physical sustenance betrays), or else something should be said about how we are to understand the curious erasure of deterioration and by-product from the Bible's vision of love.

As I have already suggested, the lover's principal mode of survival as a poetic subject in the text is to transform their partner into food so they can

[26] George Simmel, 'The Sociology of the Meal', trans. M. Symons, *Food and Foodways* 5.4 (1994), 345-50 (346).

be consume them and then secondarily change them into poetry. This movement replaces in the Song the usual linear transformation of foodstuff into faeces. Poetry is the inassimilable remainder of each lover's relationship with the other, a byproduct which they churn out in streams with decided regularity. This recasts those of us who consume the text as readers in some gruesome ways. Not only must we consume the poetic excrementa of the lovers, we must forget that we are doing so in order than we can transform it into 'love'—another sort of selective ingestion to be sure, and one that fits the agrarian theme of the text quite nicely. We consume the poem's love/shit recognizing 'love' as the fertilizer, for want of a better word, that fed the creative mind behind the poem when in fact that transaction could be easily reversed: love is what we produce as a side effect of the poetry, a kind of *excrementa erotica*.[27]

These observations apply most obviously to the Song's overtly gastronomic passages; the lovers eat, consume and excrete poetry. But the same observation could be made of the poem as a whole. Even when the fruit and the pulses have been put away and the lovers are talking of locked doors and city streets or the wilderness, the processes consumption, (re)production and excretion are always in play. It is the modus of the characters' relationship. They speak/produce, listen/consume, speak/excrete. This feature of the text that owes more than a little to its being exclusively structured around direct speech. Speaking, producing, reading, consuming are in the end all mistaken by the text, or its readers, as equating to love. This brings the Song back into contact with Châtelet's sense of eating as a kind of language, and to Probyn's sense of sex as a kind of meal. Writing, reading, loving and eating coincide in the text as we read. This process produces poetic characters through a series of excremental transactions that as readers we 'pretend to forget'.

[27] George's Bataille once noted that there is in de Sade's work a similar link between the exponential production of meaning and and the exponential production of disgust. As de Sade writes 'Verneuil makes someone shit, he eats the turd, and then he demands that someone eat his. The one who eats his shit vomits; he devours her puke'. Cited in Georges Bataille, 'The Use Value of D.A.F De Sade' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. and intro. A. Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, with C.R. Lovitt and D.M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 95.

Le Dessert

One place where these concerns connect most viscerally is in the middle period of D. H. Lawrence's poetry, in particular his 1923 volume *Birds, Beasts and Flowers.* It is a book that picks up an array of biblical texts and tropes.[28] The poem 'Figs' considers Eve in Eden; in 'Snake' we meet the demonic; 'Grapes' addresses Noah's drunkenness; in 'Almond Blossom' we visit Gethsemane; in 'The Ass', Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt; the eponymous beasts of Lawrence's title are those of the four evangelists, who each receive a composition—as does Bibbles: a tellingly named dog who returns to his own vomit. Predictably, the volume is not what one would call confessional in its tone. Sandra Gilbert calls *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* a 'sophisticated and subversive engagement' with biblical themes.[29] I am interested here in Lawrence's poem 'Medlars and Sorb-Apples' for that reason.

Sorbs and Medlars are fruits that must be allowed to begin to enter the first stages of decay before they become edible. Accordingly, the poem uses images of rot, putrefaction and 'autumnal excrementa' to explore sexual relationships outside the register of bucolic springtime, with which readers will no doubt be more familiar.

Critics tend to associate 'Sorbs and Medlars with the garden Eden because of its two lovers and its strong sexual overtones, and indeed because of the interpretative bias towards Genesis that runs through interpretations of *Birds Beasts and Flowers*.[30] But the poem perhaps has a more direct relationship with the Song of Songs, a poem whose imagery is easily mistaken for that of Genesis 1-3. The Song begins with a simple a direct declaration of love in the second person: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of

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[28] D. H Lawrence, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (London: Martin Secker, 1923); Sandra Gilbert, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn., 1990 [1972]), 229-31; see also Terry White, *D. H. Lawrence and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 171.

[29] Sandra Gilbert, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn., 1990 [1972]), 229-31;

[30] See 'The Cosmology: The Cross and the Tree of Life in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers'* in Virginia Hyde, *The Risen Adam: D.H. Lawrence's Revisionist Typology'* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Apocalypse Now (and then). Or, D.H. Lawrence and the Swan in the Electron' in *The Cambridge Companion to D.H. Lawrence* ed. Anne Fernihough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 235-252 (246); White, *D. H. Lawrence and the Bible*, 172.

his mouth/for your lovemaking is better than wine!' (1.2). 'Medlars' too opens in direct declaration ('I love you, rotten/delicious rottenness') and with an opening 'kiss' ('I love to suck you out from your skins''. As with the Song, this kiss quickly descends into the plummy notes of viniculture ('…the same flavour as Syracusan muscat wine/or vulgar Marsala'). As the poem goes on we see that 'Medlars' is preoccupied with the pointedly sexual relationship of a primordial couple rather than with the twin issues of rebellion and deity (that we find in 'Figs', for example) and that Lawrence's page is filled with not just with mythic gardens but with punnets of suggestive fruit, 'nut kernels' (cf. Song of Songs 6.11), and 'spasm[s] of farewell' (cf. 'if you see my lover, tell him I am sick with love', 5.8). These play out a subversion of the Song's images rather more obviously than they recall Eden's. Indeed, we know Lawrence thought of the Song in exactly this way at around this time in his life. In 'The Overtone' (from *St Mawr and Other Stories*, 1925), Mrs. Renshaw's tells a 'bitter psalm' that directly inverts the Song's bounties until they become 'little abortions of growth': sex made abject.[31]

Abjection is certainly Lawrence's focus in Medlars:

> 'What is it?
> In the grape turning raisin
> In the medlar, in the sorb-apple
> Wineskins of brown morbidity
> Autumnal excrementa;
> 'What is it that reminds us of white gods?'

Answering his own question as the stanzas go on, Lawrence sets up an opposition between love and the usual tropes of growth, unity or fruitfulness. Instead, he focuses on love's power to institute a kind of purifying decay. Just as rotting fruit sloughs off its flesh to reveal the 'nut kernel' inside, so sexual intimacy creates a 'wonderful' isolation in its aftermath. In other words, what 'Medlars' seems to explore is the moment after orgasm when one returns to oneself vividly aware of being trapped behind one's own eyes—separate after all. Lawrence discovers in the emblem of the rotting medlar a sense of sex as

[31] Lawrence, David Herbert, *St Mawr and Other stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 [1925]); for discussions see Wright, *D. H. Lawrence and the Bible*, 180.

a process of abject excretion that defines and overwhelms the emotional highs of sexual pleasure.

> A kiss, and a vivid spasm of farewell, a moment's orgasm of rupture.
> Then along the damp road alone,
> 'til the next turning.
> And there, a new partner, a new parting,
> a new unfusing into twain,
> A new gasp of further isolation,
> A new intoxication of loneliness, among decaying, frost-cold leaves.

Each 'new partner' brings with them an intimacy that ends in sudden estrangement—'a new parting/a new unfusing'—which in turn brings a growing sense of intoxicating isolation. Figured as a process of decay, love thus becomes a means of finding a pure self that is 'ever more exquisite, distilled in separation' like the fruit stone left after the fibrillar flesh has rotted away. As with the Sorb Apple, each putrefying moment hastening the ripeness of the true prize: the discrete and lonely seed/self.[32]

In English vernacular it is common to speak of rotting food having 'turned' and the image of the turn in fact takes on particular importance in 'Medlars' through Lawrence's invocation of Orpheus and Eurydice, who appear amid all this rotting fruit. In Greek mythology, Orpheus leads his lover back from the underworld to freedom having bargained for life with Hades. Glancing back at the last moment he breaks the terms of his bargain and loses her again to the world of the dead. His turn towards her turns her back to the underworld. Lawrence re-imagines Orpheus's turn in the second half of the poem. Leaving Eurydice at the gates of the Underworld Lawrence's Orpheus basks in the moment of blissful separation, what he calls 'the ego sum of Dionysos/The *sono io* [it's me] of perfect drunkenness'. In her excellent treatment of Lawrence's use of Orpheus, Helen Sword describes 'Medlars' on these terms as celebrating the 'the known, egoistic depths of the

[32] This reading comes close to anti-social hypotheses in Queer theory. In Leo Bersani's *Is the Rectum a Grave*, for instance: "the self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power. It is possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self. But sex as self-hyperbole is perhaps a repression of sex as self-abolition. It replicates self-shattering as self-swelling, as psychic tumescence." Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays* (Chicago and London: university of Chicago Press, 2010), 218. See too Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

self."[33]Lawrence has fermented the turned fruit of the Song's garden and combined it with the politics of the orphic turn to identify love and sex as sites of virtual excretion.

Naturally, Lawrence is not *refashioning* or reimagining love in 'Medlars' any more than he is challenging the basic properties of fruit and vegetables. He is instead calling attention to the abject qualities of the natural world as a way of foregrounding the disquieting but essential obverse of human sexual relationships. Lonesome selves are established by orgasm just as they are with eating; Lawrence realizes the connectedness of these processes, and, particular the way that the Song of Songs has a kind of shadow side that kind be exploited by re-framing the way we see its food-sex imagery.

For the Song might be seen as being predicated on a series of 'deaths' very much in the vein of 'Medlars'. Indeed, even the most ardent romantic reader of the poem would recognize the presence of death and decay in the poem. The most prominent appearance of death is of course in 8.1, ''love is strong as death, its jealousy as unyielding as the underworld'. Most often in scholarship the tone of this verse has meant that the poem's allusions to death have been relativized within a more comforting vision of an imperial love ascendant. Death is present to the extent that it is shown to be weaker than love in the end. As Cheryl Exum notes,

> 'though death is mentioned only once, and that near the poem's end, everything in the poem converges upon and serves to illustrate the affirmation that love is as strong as death. The proof is the poem. Perhaps all literature is a defense against mortality; certainly the Song of Songs is.'[34]

Similarly, Pope has discussed at length the idea that the poem as a whole is an active response to the fear of death, which aims to hold it at bay by invoking a faultless love.

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[33] Helen Sword, 'Orpheus and Eurydice in the Twentieth Century: Lawrence, H. D., and the Poetics of the Turn' *Twentieth Century Literature* 35.4 (1989) 407-428 (418 n.42). As Lawrence no doubt knew, and as Helen Sword insightfully reminds us, *Jamque vale!*, the great exclamation made by the speaker to his lover in 'Medlars', 'are among Eurydice's last words to Orpheus in Virgil's *Georgic*, the earliest recorded account of the myth.' On this see also Andrew von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 140–148.

[34] Exum, *Song*, 3.

The Song is not perhaps as universally successful in holding atrophy at bay as commentators suggest, however. Everywhere Lawrencian decomposition is present. The lovers have aged (8:1) and live in a world where further aging is possible (8.8). Skin can become damaged (1.6) and the lovers can become exhausted or ill (2.5, 5.8). We should note that these maladies tend to set in *precisely* because of love Perhaps love has not withstood atrophy then. Perhaps it is not 'as strong as death' so much as adept at rhetorically colonizing death's powers, claiming death's effects as its own. We could understand the plethora of ripe fruit we have already sampled from the poem to suggest decay too, ripeness being only one more socially constructed stage en route to putrefaction—just as eating, in fact, is an act of staving off our own self-confessed degenerations through the appropriation of the rot of some comestible or other, which keeps our own at bay.

I would argue that even those aspects of the text that seem to eschew death more successfully are in thrall to it. We might be tempted to think that in the lovers' universality, in the timeless circularity of the poem, in the aforementioned refrain of 8.1, the text is more or less effective in conjuring a deathless world. But such a world only serves to highlight the social function of the poem as a reaction to the inevitability of death, and heightens our sense that someone has tried to render an evergreen world because death inevitably reigns beyond it. Like the subject of Lawrence's poem, the biblical Song has created sexual relationships to distill itself, to isolate itself, to separate itself out from the world of death as a protected space. But as its lovers' idealized relationship marks out the poem's world, we see the Song as a text intoxicated by its own loneliness, to bastardize Lawrence, lying separated in the midst of 'decaying, frost-cold leaves.' Like Lawrence's Orpheus, the Song is blissfully alone, having banished death and grown intoxicated on the 'ego sum', the '*sono io*' of its turn away from reality. In the end it is not the lapsing of romanticism we find in Lawrence's vision of the Song but a restatement of the bleak politic that necessarily underwrites the kind of absolute love commentators encourage us to find there.

Le Café et l'Digestif

Needless to say, in abjecting death the Song of Songs establishes itself as a discrete deathless world. But it cannot ever be rid of this inaugural negation. Its world of life, and food and consumption hints always at a decay the poem

cannot name. Thus reading the poem becomes a movement by which we distil an ever more isolated readerly identity for ourselves, repeatedly merging with the text's vision of love and then 'coming to' in the real world like a lover sated. We continually 'pretend to forget' that what the text aims to persuade us of is our loneliness and the inevitable failure of the kind of love it espouses is what makes the poem necessary in the first place. Lawrence's version of the Song's economy of consumption and excretion is not subversive at all, perhaps, but a more honest appraisal of its politics. As a text it wants to be alone, preserving the same distilled self-identification as we find in 'Medlars'. For us to *read* that 'love is strong as death…as unyielding as the underworld' is to realise that the poem itself is, to quote Lawrence's inversion of the sentiment, *living* a process of 'going down the strange lanes of Hell, more and more intensely alone'—like a morsel swallowed. Reading, we situate the poem as a kind of excretion from the real world and we pretend to forget that we in turn have been excreted from its vision of love, itself a consuming, orphic affair with the Self. '*Jamque vale!'*

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