

○ SOUR GRAPES, FERMENTED SELVES

MUSICAL SHULAMMITES MODULATE SUBJECTIVITY

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How might a strange intersection of disparate fields – biblical criticism and New Musicology – generate mutually sustentant fruit? ‘Seeds’ for the latter, I propose, would lie in reading musical settings of the Song of Solomon with interpretive lenses that New Musicologists have been developing since the late 1980s. In this essay, musical settings of the Song are read from this perspective in hopes that such new musicological ‘exegeses’ may add discursive breadth to the latest biblical critical discussions about the Song’s thematics. This paper places two pop music settings of the Song ‘in conversation’ with opposing sides of a recent debate over the Song’s erotic content: feminist (biblical) scholars conventionally framed the Song and its heroine’s romantic pursuits as odes to the joy of egalitarian heterosexual love; more recent provocateurs have queered its pitch to accommodate s/m fantasies of a bottom’s ‘pain-filled pleasures’ (Boer, Moore and Burrus). Steeleye Span’s ‘Awake, awake’ (1977) and the Pixies’ ‘I’ve Been Tired’ (1987) curiously anticipate these polemics. Steeleye’s electric folk and the Pixies’ post-punk alternative styles seem respectively to honour and revile this canonical text and its mysterious *animatrice*. The former’s music and lyrics reproduce the harmonious, linear *pas de deux* that readers coerce from the text. By contrast, the latter’s soundscape drags the pair through musical grunge. However, reread via New Musicology’s sense of music as a culturally inflected ‘technique of the self,’ study of text-music relations, the songs’ historical contexts, and the social meanings of musical genre recast these two settings as fraternal twins. Additionally, the Shulammite’s *musical* peregrinations produce new allegorical registers within the canticle, and broaden in unlikely directions the scope of the sonically rendered ‘sacred erotic,’ now disruptively reconfigured within popular music.

INTRODUCTION

How might a strange intersection of disparate fields – biblical criticism and New Musicology – generate mutually sustentant fruit? ‘Seeds’ for the latter, I propose, would lie in reading musical settings of the Song of Solomon with interpretive lenses that new musicologists (Brett, Kramer, McClary, Subotnik, Cusick et. al.) have been developing since the late 1980s. Taking their cues from Theodor Adorno, these scholars have reconceptualised music as a forcefield of competing social energies that inevitably modulate human subjectivity.¹ I shall read musical settings of the Song from this perspective in hopes that such new musicological ‘exegeses’ may add further nuance, complexity, and discursive breadth to the latest biblical critical conversations about the Song’s thematics. What follows is one sample of such interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation, culled from the realm of popular music.

A playful debate has arisen over the erotic content of the Song of Songs. Feminist (biblical) scholars conventionally framed the Song and its heroine’s romantic pursuits as odes to the joy of egalitarian heterosexual love.² More recent provocateurs have queered its pitch to accommodate s/m fantasies of a bottom’s ‘pain-filled pleasures’ (Moore and Burrus 2003, 49).³ Two popular musical settings of the Song from the 70s and 80s curiously anticipate these polemics. Steeleye Span’s electric folk ‘Awake, awake’, and the Pixies’ post-punk alternative ‘I’ve Been Tired’ seem

respectively to honour and revile this canonical text and its mysterious *animatrice*. Steeleye Span's music and lyrics arguably reproduce the linear *pas de deux* that readers coerce from the text; no melodic ruptures, jagged intervals, dissonant or misleading harmonies evoke its violent beating scene, the Shulammite's anguish, or the grotesqueries that in fact compose the lovers' bodies.⁴ By contrast, the Pixies (pleasurably) drag the pair through musical grunge, charge the woman with incest, and scream her into oblivion.

Yet such analysis would be good-pop/bad-pop agitprop. Reread instead via New Musicology's sense of music as a culturally inflected 'technique of the self,' rather than from a textually hermetic perspective (ie, simply identifying how the music evokes the text's moods and events), generic differences between 'normative' and 'deviant' musical Shulammites recede to allow appreciation of their affinities. Additionally, as biblical scholars can easily predict, the Song's own poetic ellipses and its Shulammite's enigmatic contours⁵, now heightened by music's equally polysemous curves and gestures, will problematise listeners' dichotomous first impressions. Closer study, therefore, of 1) text-music relations, 2) the songs' historical contexts, and 3) the social meanings of musical genres will allow me to reframe these two settings as fraternal twins. As well, Shulamith's *musical* peregrinations will produce new allegorical registers within the canticle, and broaden in unlikely directions the scope of the sonically rendered 'sacred erotic,' now disruptively reconfigured within popular music.⁶

MISLEADING FIRST IMPRESSIONS: STEELEYE SPAN'S 'AWAKE, AWAKE'

'AWAKE AWAKE'

1. Awake, awake oh Northern Wind

Blow on my garden fair

Let my lover come to me

And tell me of his care

For now the winter it is past

Likewise the drops of rain

Come lie in the valley of lilies

Midst the roses of the plain

2. He took me to a garden fair

And there he laid me down

His left hand lay beneath my head

His right did me surround

His eyes were palms by water brooks

His fingers rods of gold

His head upon my breast did lie

His love did me enfold

3. Her hair is like a flock of goats

Across the mountain side

Her breasts are like the grapes upon

The vine where I shall bide
Her mouth is sweeter far than wine
And warm to my embrace
No mountain side can hide my love
No veil conceal her face

4. My lover's hand was on the door
My belly stirred within
My fingers wet with myrrh
I pulled the bolt to let him in
With my own hands I opened
But I found I was alone
My soul failed for my lover had
Withdrawn himself and gone

5. I'll get me to a mount of myrrh
And there I'll lay me down
For waters cannot quench my love
In floods it cannot drown
My love is clear as the sun
She's fair as the moon
Oh stir not up nor waken love
Lest it should come to soon

6. Awake, awake oh Northern Wind
Blow on my garden fair
Let my lover come to me
And tell me of his care
For now the winter it is past
Likewise the drops of rain
Come lie in the valley of lilies
Midst the roses of the plain

Lyrics: With its pretty tune, symmetrical verses, euphonious harmonies, and steady beat, Steeleye Span's 'Awake Awake,' recorded in 1977, seems nothing more than a bucolic love duet. But closer analysis of the edited text and modal counterpoint conveys a more ambiguous state of affairs. First of all, the most famous passages of the Song—those describing foreplay (verse four), the praise of each lover's beauty or *wasfs* (verses two and three), and that of love's invincibility (verse five) are originally spread across several chapters in the bible, but abridged here. This condensation masks to some degree the biblical couple's unpredictable, hide-and-seek withdrawals. For although Steeleye's Maddy Prior and Tim Hart are physically together singing, the lines sung do not definitively indicate that the lovers themselves are. The antiphonal style also brings the lovers into seemingly close proximity, but the passages chosen from the bible speak of absence and doubt: in verse four, while either awake or possibly asleep in a dream, the

Lady opens to her lover only to be abandoned; in verse five, he is not sure whether the time really is right for love's advent. And while Shulamith's prayer to the north wind (with back-up chorus) in verse one seems to have been swiftly answered by her beloved, both in verse two ('he took me to a garden fair') and then by his actual vocal entrance in verse three, the lovers' continued separation is implied by the fact that each singer depicts their partner in the third person. Only in the final verse do their voices join others' to bid the wind reunite them. In it, the two sing a unison plea, but their reunion never transpires.

Music: Treatment of the modal harmonies (or counterpoint)⁷ within the piece is conventional, and initially gives little indication of romantic malaise, but here too, first impressions are deceptive. There is a standard 'modulation' to the fourth degree when the man enters in verse three and this harmonic shift serves to reciprocate and redouble the lovers' ardour. However, despite such heightened responsiveness, for tonally trained ears the *modal* harmonies lend a hint of melancholy to all the verses, and this *Sehnsucht* lingers to the very end via the weak final cadence with added sixth. Like the non-linear biblical 'narrative' that initially inspired the song, such plaintive, open-ended counterpoint conventionally suggests no consummation of desire. Thus, not only the edited text, but also the modal setting actually do lend some ambiguity to this soundscape, and thereby honour aporia within the original Song.

Conversely, it is the formal properties and instrumentation of this song that sugar-coat the lovers' chagrin. The antiphonal structure between the two singers evokes a balanced mutuality. The rhyme scheme and eight-line verses parcel desire in manageable instalments even when both lovers express their respective uncertainties. Any insecurity is muted because in every verse the melody's contours pitch gentle sighs of desire where leaps from the fifth to first degrees are prepared and resolved over the course of four symmetrical phrases. Recurring motifs in both the melody and instrumental hooks and riffs curtail any outbursts of frustration from the lovers, as do the book-end refrains. Such formal circularity as well as motivic and thematic unity exude resolution. Additionally, the dramatic *a capella* texture of the closing verse telegraphs a definitive sense of ending that belies the lovers' inconclusive fate. For some listeners, moreover, its hymn-like connotations seem to sanctify an otherwise romantically unsatisfying denouement.

The accordion and lead guitar also veil the lovers' separation and ambivalence; playing together they exchange a sinuous, rather cheerful repartee, chaperoned by a walking bass line and steady backbeat. While this instrumentation adds a much-needed timbral sensuality to the piece, these interludes do not heighten the erotic intrigue with either foreign harmonic excursions or experimental improvisation, but instead they open space for measured dancing, recapitulate key motives, and generate a deceptive forward movement.

And so, while biblical scholars may appreciate the ambiguous undertow sketched earlier, these subtler faultlines will be lost to those who initially hear 'Awake, awake' as a standard love duet in which musical lovers commune spiritually if not physically, thereby endorsing the fairy tale that love conquers all. Furthermore, if the more euphonious elements of form and style that I have just outlined are filtered through a conventional mindset that automatically categorises all versions of the Canticle as epithalamia for actual weddings or allegorical ones (Yahweh to Israel or Christ to Soul/Church/Mary), 'Awake, awake' will be received as a theologically wholesome ditty. Historical contextualisation of this setting at the level of genre, however, can

sully these first impressions and heighten the enigmatic character of Steeleye's Shulammitte which, in my view, the text and harmony/counterpoint do convey to some degree.

FROM HAPPY COUPLE TO FOLK-REBEL SHULAMMITE: STEELEYE'S CONTEXT

In the 1970s, the genre of electric folk/folk rock⁸ scandalised both British upper-class folk traditionalists and Marxist second-wave revivalists who sought in their respective ways to transmit the more 'authentic' versions of ballads and worker songs that their first-wave predecessors had recorded and archived in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Successive generations thus rescued this precious national heritage, first, from the culturally destructive forces of the Industrial Revolution, and later, from commercialism and the invasion of American music. In doing so, these 19th- and 20th-century purists were salvaging an 'unspoiled counterpoint' and an alternative to both art music and popular music of the time (Sweers 2005, 48). And although the second-wave revivalists of the 1950s and 60s (emblematically represented by A.L. Lloyd and Ewan McColl, and by the proliferation of folk clubs they helped inspire) were more honest than their 19th-century forebears about the inevitably mediated nature of such recuperations (Brocken 2003, 65), many eventually became the new guardians of 'authenticity' and therefore denounced folk's electrification (Sweers 2005, 37f.). (Lloyd was a notable exception here.⁹) In short, whether conservative or Marxist, folk aficionados scorned any use of accompaniment in folk music-making, and 'automatically equated electric music with commercialism and thus with mediocrity' (Sweers 2005, 44). Any form of experimentation was suspect. Consequently, Steeleye's electrified folk and textual licences (eg, its reprise of an opening verse at the end of a song) reflected an obvious 'lack of respect' for musical ancestry, and furthermore, their whole project constituted 'cultural exploitation,' because they were sharing labor songs with mainstream, non-working class audiences. Steeleye and other electric folk bands were not honouring these songs' 'original socio-aesthetic function' (Sweers 2005, 59f.). No pretty ditty, Steeleye's Shulamith was blasphemous after all – too commercial, electric, American.

The peculiar mixture of British tradition and commercial pop in 'Awake, awake' produced a hybrid Shulammitte who was at home neither among folk 'fundamentalists' (Brocken's term) nor hard core rockers. Thus recontextualised as iconoclastic misfit between folk club *a capella* performances of 'Green Grow the Rushes Ho' and the Punk/New Wave pop scene, the song's musical confusions belie the surface pastorate we may initially hear. Instead, Shulamith's rewired silhouette actually throws into question this traditional heterosexual tale of love and its moralising testament to the latter's invincibility, even forecasting perhaps their obsolescence; for as hipper folkies 'channel' biblical lovers while serenaded by rock musicians, is this configuration of cultural signifiers – old text, old tune yet hybrid genre, juiced ensemble – recycling a myth as tenable or adolescent? And which option has been amplified? Such a musically generated subtext suggests gentle self-mockery or coy ambivalence. The surface pleasantries of 'Awake, awake' – its antiphony and unison finale feigning the lovers' reconciliation – may domesticate the Shulammitte, but perhaps the mottled genre she finds herself in frees her from the more sanitised guises she might otherwise have assumed in folkies' hands. In all these faultlines, this Shulammitte's more rebellious style and spirit ultimately do justice to the indeterminacies of both the biblical text's messages and its protagonist's fate.

SHULAMITH GOES GRUNGE: THE PIXIES' 'I'VE BEEN TIRED'

Lyrics: Ten years later (1987), rather than voicing her own point of view, a third-person Shulammitte haunts romance as one man's nemesis. In the Pixies 'I've Been Tired,' she surfaces after a lengthy dialogue that singer Black Francis (aka Charles Thompson) recounts having had with a crusading seductress whom he eventually rebuffs. From his jaded account this female left-winger activist tries several ploys to win his affection: sob stories from the 2/3 world, a reciprocation of his love for Lou Reed, an indecorous bid to talk politics over beer in mixed company, an empathic solicitation of intimate confessions, and a coital tongue in the ear. His violent reply sneers at these advances – a combination of Woody Allen neurosis and Archie Bunker misogyny in its threefold fear of castration, death, and devouring women (or the *vagina dentata*):

One, two, three:
She's a real left winger 'cause she been down south
And held peasants in her arms
She said 'I could tell you a story that could make you cry'
'What about you?'
I said, 'Me too'
'I could tell you a story that will make you cry.'
And she sighed 'Ahhh.'
I said 'I wanna' be a singer like Lou Reed.'
'I like Lou Reed' she said sticking her tongue in my ear,
'Let's go, let's sit, let's talk; politics go so good with beer,'
'And while we're at it baby, why don't you tell me one of your biggest fears?'
I said, 'Losin' my penis to a whore with disease'
'Just kidding,' I said, 'Losing my life to a whore with disease.'
She said, 'Excuse me please?'
I said, 'Losing my life to a whore with disease,'
I said, 'Please ...'
I'm a humble guy with a healthy desire'
Don't give me no shit because...'
I'VE BEEN TIRED' (6x)

Enter the Shulammitte, hastily sketched as an unrequited love or *femme fatale*, and the probable cause of the protagonist's castration anxiety, his 'don't-give-me-no-shit' defensiveness:

I tell a tale of a girl, but I call her a woman
She's a little bit older than me
Strong legs, strong face, voice like milk, breasts like a cluster of grapes
I can't escape the ways she raise me
She'll make you feel like Solomon, be one of your babies even if you had no one

Hardly the allegorical emblem of connubial bliss, she is the cagey older woman plying a girlish innocence and a sacred sensuality. The internal rhyming and grammatical incorrectness (or slang) of 'Can't escape the ways she raise [sic] me' is ominously ambiguous: has there been

incest (the Song actually contains a passage that can be read as such)¹⁰ or, in her diabolical hands, is genital arousal simply irresistible (due in part to the ‘majestically’ ego-boosting side effects she can induce: ‘*She’ll make you feel like Solomon etc*’)?

At this point, the latest seductress returns to pollute this second episode of recollection with another invitation to the man to bare his soul. Like a ghostly revenant, she threads herself between two eerie lead guitar licks that echo the bass line’s fixated three-note motif, now a major third higher. This taunt and then instrumental whining spill into a confusing denouement, couched no less in biblical rhetoric: the tormented male ‘takes’ his sleep in spite of any clear consummation of the burning desire in his ‘fiery loins:’

(‘And while we’re at it baby, why don’t you tell me one of your biggest fears?’)
Took my sleep after settin’ my loins on fire
But that’s OK because ...

I’VE BEEN TIRED (6x)

I’VE BEEN TIRED/REALLY TIRED (9x)
T-I-R-E-D spells it
Spells it

Who ‘lit’ his loins? Both women ... neither? The fire is never explicitly quenched, but he says ‘that’s ok,’ because for this weary, decidedly unconventional pop-song male, sleep is preferable to sex, and the two temptresses are seemingly banished from his psyche with rejuvenated volleys of ‘I’ve Been Tired.’ The Shulammitte has become a sonic conduit for lamenting love’s extinction rather than singing its eternal return.

Music: Along with this seemingly blasphemous textual reconfiguration of the Shulammitte, the actual music’s lack of melody, fickle harmonies, abrasive timbres, and quirky 6/4 time signature hardly cast a flattering silhouette. The harmonic ‘progressions’ do not undergird set verse patterns and are mostly implied over a manic three-note *ostinato* bass vamp of G, A, and C.¹¹ Implied harmonies rarely offer aural security. Moreover, there is no bass line for the first eight lines of the song and this also provokes disoriented uneasiness and anticipatory tension in auditors. The lead guitar interludes after the choruses fluctuate undecidably between two chords, and abruptly shift the harmony to g minor. Adding to listeners’ aural unrest, all the guitar motifs fixatedly trace two- or three-note figures that deny any desired forward, ‘narrative’ movement. The colicky conclusion of the piece offers no compensation via harmonic resolution. Sleep came, but that’s all, and so the two- and three-chord vamps converge in a final frustrated tirade before the music grinds to a halt like a slowly derailed train over a decidedly non-tonic C major chord (ie, fourth degree of G major).

The music’s textures heighten the malaise: the rough-grained vocals of Thompson’s falsetto and Deal’s leering interjection, Santiago’s whining guitar riffs, Lovering’s Gatling backbeat hardly make the above morass more palatable.

FRINGE BENEFITS: SHULAMITH'S INDIE CONTEXT

Thrust into this environment, and compared to her folk rock makeover, the Shulammitte seems violently disfigured. But her proto-grunge baptism actually conveys some of the more dissonant qualities within the biblical canticle where incest is in fact implied, the Shulammitte is possibly beaten and also abandoned by lover, friends, and family.¹² There too, no reliable story line produces a definitive record of her plight. Readers often ignore as well the literal reality that both lovers' bodies (hers more than his) are composed of grotesque features (Black 2000). Thus the Pixies' soundscape arguably evinces the canonical ugliness that conventional readings of the Song overlook. Situating this setting within the history of pop music helps one further appreciate the aptness of the bastardised text and shocking sonorities. Given its 80s birth date, we could read the seeming misogynist scapegoating of the Shulammitte more sympathetically as simply a product of its time: AIDS had literally conflated sex with death, and so the song's sullen jabs may voice the incursion of a more general fear infecting everyone's 'healthy desire' during that decade; botched foreplay inevitably attends free love's demise. Correlatively, the two verses could be read as a bemused patchwork of biblical prohibitions and punishments for sexual licence, coupled to a refrain that voices the mental exhaustion that such obsessions with 'purity and danger' induce. (The religious right had certainly resurrected the former in its response to AIDS.) Or perhaps Shulamith relays a parodic jumble of romantic clichés now scorned by disgruntled white males after the sexual revolution – nostalgic Lou Reed wannabes who pigeonhole exasperatingly sexy, liberated women as left wingers and dominatrixes. The Pixies' penchant for irony makes all these alternatives distinct possibilities.¹³

The drive to coerce meaning from this stream of consciousness (the latter itself a framing label) detracts from the baser pleasures that Pixies admirers 'normally' enjoy. More to the point, and as with Steeleye Span, a desire to experiment further explains this eclectic assembly of compositional means. Surrounded by the flashier musical accoutrements of Michael Jackson, glam rock, and metal, the Pixies created something extraordinary out of the ordinary ('Gouge' 2004)¹⁴ – eschewing technology and virtuosity, yet still shocking people as their punk forebears had done. Thompson's influences were themselves a hybrid of folk and rock; as a child, he acquired his mother's taste for Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and Peter Paul and Mary ('Gouge' 2004), then later absorbed the sounds of Iggy Pop, Husker Dü and punk rock (Sisario 2006, 13). For audiences bored by Britpop and metal, and countering what David Bowie termed 1980s American 'sludge' ('Gouge' 2004), the band introduced a welcome alternative aesthetic of playful anarchy. And yet, while the Pixies' sound and songs were hailed (by the likes of Bono, Bowie, Thom Yorke, and PJ Harvey among others) as 'totally new', without 'reference points', distinctly 'uncoverable,' such that they forever 'change[d] the format for delivering harder rock', their musical forms and their primary desire solely to entertain (rather than craft political statements) made them 'not much different than Abba' ('Gouge' 2004).¹⁵ Music critic Ben Sisario (2006) summarises the unlikely stylistic combinations that garnered such formidable praise:

[T]he Pixies represented a peculiar pinnacle of the art of rock n' roll. They played bitingly melodic miniatures, little spasms barbed with noise and Surrealistic lyrics. There was scant precedent for the prickly kind of pop the Pixies played ... It's a series of opposing forces that fit together incongruously but exquisitely: a bouncy yet firm bassline ... joined to a demented choir of punky

guitars; Thompson's harsh primal scream beside Deal's coy and smoky harmonies; explosive, grating riffs in songs crafted from prime bubblegum (3).

And so, like Steeleye Span in their respective context, the Pixies' hybrid aesthetic acquired a subcultural following. Fans absorbed these unconventional stylistic means to cultivate alternative identities within the social and imaginative space the band's music created.

UNLIKELY PROXIMITIES: MUSICO-BIBLICAL ALLEGORIES OF SELFHOOD

It is in their shared countercultural nonconformity, audible only by historically contextualising these pieces and by attending specifically to the social meanings of genre, that these two Shulammites become allies. Moreover, these broader readings also suggest that the songs' respective hybridities do justice to the biblical text's own ambiguities. Of additional interest to biblical scholars, both groups' unsettling fusions of musical conventions offered fans new resources for identity formation in the 70s and 80s, and it is these, I propose, that produce new allegorical thematics within the biblical text. This allegorical potential is only perceptible, however, if music is understood as equal among other very powerful 'sources of the self' (Taylor) – a hermeneutic approach first developed by Theodor Adorno and then later adopted by many New Musicologists.

To explain: by studying music's relation to human sexuality – a connection that theologians have neglected, suppressed or simply ignored – New Musicologists contend that music has always functioned as both a sculptor of and metaphor for sexual relations. As such, music constitutes a site where personal and social formation is negotiated and contested. Via repertoires of musical conventions, much like those in film and literature, composers arouse, manipulate and channel our desires, thereby reinforcing and often transgressing cultural norms of sexuality and gendered behaviours. Their compositions often become 'fabrications of sexuality' (Heath qtd. in McClary, 1991, 8) as music's body mimes in space and time a plethora of human erotic impulses – both physical and emotional. Musical works are thus reframed as sonic composers of human sexual identity or, more basically, as 'models of the self performed', concretised and mediated through pitch, rhythms, and instrumental textures (McClary 1994, 77). Additionally, as a socialising force and discursive practice, musical conventions characteristic of particular styles and historical periods are often codified by musicologists within *narrative* plotlines that further constitute allegorical models of the self performed – taking shape more teleologically as it were, through space and time. (Even purely instrumental works such as the sonata and symphony are read in these terms.) These narrative associations compel 'vertical' readings on top of the perceived 'horizontal' unfolding of music's sonic, ie, 'literal', developments. From this perspective, while Steeleye's and the Pixies' musical reconfigurations of the Song may not reiterate or embellish its usual allegorical messages, each band's selective enlistments of the Song implicate the Shulammitte in musically transmitted models of (gendered) subjectivity that I would denominate allegorical.¹⁶

Part of this socialising work entails the construction and transmission of alternate forms of aural and corporeal pleasure like those of Steeleye Span and the Pixies. These in turn help reconstitute fans' values and priorities in directions resistant to hegemonic definitions of normative subjectivity. Both Steeleye and the Pixies flouted not only their mainstream 'parents' aesthetics, but also the ideologies of authenticity promoted by folk and rock purists respectively, and the musical vocabularies that inculcated 'the priorities and values of [their folk and rock] communities'

(McClary 2000, 26). So for example, electric folk and folk rock offered oppositional, even dialogical techniques of the self that accommodated performers' and fans' creatively tensile desires to identify on the one hand with their British forebears' heartaches and struggles, while on the other developing more adventurous identities through innovation and a respectful iconoclasm. Thus Steeleye's Maddy Prior viewed the band's experimentation as actually honouring the course of tradition itself: 'Some people thought we were ruining the songs, but tunes and lyrics have been recycled, stolen and changed forever. That's what makes the tradition a living instead of a dead thing' (qtd. in Sweers 2005, 44). And guitarist Tim Hart deferentially placed confidence in the source material's own superior 'stamina': 'It's a fairly robust sort of music, and it's lasted for hundreds of years – it doesn't matter what you do with it, because it's going to outlast you anyway' (ibid, 106). Thus, 'Awake awake's Shulammitte played a part in both fans' and performers' more prodigal self-fashioning.

A decade later, the Pixies' eclecticism offered expressive means for articulating and sustaining even more vagabond identities; in a world suffused with AIDS, Reaganomics and MTV, the band nourished the 'cyborg' metabolisms of postmodern selves. Thus Donna Haraway (1990): 'In the late twentieth century ... we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs' (191). That is to say, our self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, daily work, and other creative activities are constantly processed and reflected back to us through machines/technology. As a result and for the sake of survival, cyborg selves need to be comfortable with the endless 'construction and deconstruction' of all boundaries (223), and embrace 'partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity' (192). Adept at navigating these creative tensions, cyborgs eschew 'innocence' in order to remain 'oppositional' and 'utopian' (ibid). The Pixies' perversely pleasurable mix of 'postpunk, bubblegum, and surrealism' (Sisario 2006, 36) could be harnessed to such ends.

One aspect of identity construction that Steeleye and the Pixies' new forms of pleasure destabilised was gender stereotypes. Their hybrid musical vocabularies thus constitute subversive 'signifying practices' similar to those that Susan McClary (2000) identifies at work in disco, and in the later musical codes of rap and the gender-bending musics of Prince and kd lang. All of these styles rejected rock's sharply dichotomised masculine and feminine sexual personae:

1960s rock ... [was] fuelled ... with ideas such as progress, authenticity, and rebellion. It was also largely a product of white, male, middle-class youths and entrepreneurs who took the blues and fused it with the familiar nineteenth-century ideals of individualism (152). ... In order to speak from subject positions other than those privileged in rock ... these new artists [disco, rap, Prince, kd lang] had to clear spaces within old conventions, by means of rereadings, fusions, or deconstructions. For the dominant modes of representation available in pop music at the time had been tailored for the purposes of rock, and those musical forms were implicated in a project designed to naturalize a particular kind of white, heterosexual masculinity (153).

Steeleye Span and the Pixies participate in this (ongoing) alternative trajectory. Additionally, each foregrounds not only 'the constructedness' of musical styles, but also the naivete attending any genre's alleged articulation of 'natural, centered or authentic' identities (ibid). More specific-

ally, where folk musicians might function culturally as rockers' effeminate others, folk rockers (still effeminate to some no doubt) redefined masculinity across this divide. A decade later, Thompson created a different 'gender trouble' insofar as his falsetto, hysterical screaming, and refusal of the manly technical virtuosity required for hard rock and metal nevertheless garnered him resounding admiration from the virile likes of iconic rockers Bono, Thom Yorke, and Kurt Cobain ('Gouge' 2004). Particularly in 'I've Been Tired', he 'dislocates rock's image of the masculine' (McClary 2000, 157).

In their signifying power as culturally inflected 'models of the self performed,' we retrieve a musically induced, as yet undocumented, allegorical meaning in the Song. Steeleye Span and the Pixies' destabilising fusions of musical conventions reformulate the biblical Shulammite's allegorical content as a tale of decentered subjectivity. In the process, the sacred erotic becomes a 'residual narrative'¹⁷ within more popular means of identity construction.

QUEERER PITCHES: TRANSPOSING SACRED EROTICISM

Having produced unlikely proximities between these two initially disparate Shulammites by virtue of their shared potential as counter-cultural sources of the self, what specific effects do the Shulammite's forays from sacred to secular musical genres have upon the Song's allegorical 'sacred eroticism'? Scholars use the latter rubric to categorise a long and varied repertoire of artistic, literary and musical imagery that depicts divine-human relations in sexual terms. The cornerstone that authorises the articulation of sacred devotion in such profane ie, earthy, sexual metaphors is in fact scriptural; in the Hebrew testament, God describes Israel as his wife or bride, and hence the love poetry of the Song was deemed an elaborate template for describing union with God via romantic tropes. Some of the most famous examples that comprise sacred eroticism include both Gregory of Nyssa's and Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song, Origen's commentaries on the same, a plethora of medieval writings now classified as 'erotic Christ mysticism', Bernini's statue of an ecstatically transfixed St. Teresa of Avila, the holy sonnets of metaphysical poets John Donne and George Herbert, and musical settings of the Song by Heinrich Schütz, Lucrezia Vizzana, and Claudio Monteverdi, to name just a few. Particularly pertinent to this study, historian Deborah Shuger (1994) has noted that the sacred erotic is so prominent in Renaissance Christian discourses that 'transgressive and excessive desires' actually ground the heart of early modern *religious* subjectivity, 'the economy and organization of Renaissance selfhood' (176ff.). As a result, it may be more accurate to construe modern tropes of romantic passion as patterned after the discourse of spiritual longing (ibid.).

Transplanting portions of the Song into the subcultural genres of folk rock and post-punk alternative does not have to be reductively read as sacrilegious pillage.¹⁸ Here I take my interpretive cues from Richard Rambuss (1998). In *Closet Devotions*, he questions the strict dichotomy that scholars often enforce between 17th-century metaphysical poets' quasi-pornographic yet 'incontestably' *sacred* eroticism, and the 'clearly' blasphemous enlistments of biblical tropes, images, and icons by today's popular artists, more specifically, queer artists and activists.¹⁹ After traversing the scandalous imagery of Donne, Crashaw, Herbert et al, Rambuss frames a catalogue of queer exempla 'as recognising – even being ... *faithful to* – the visceral power of the religious' (100). Works by Andres Serrano, Tony Kushner, and Marsden Hartley revamp mystico-erotic 'metaphysical conceits' in order to jolt and invigorate audiences' affective and political responsiveness

to our world in ways that the ‘more ordinary operations of eroticism’ just would not effect (ibid). Similarly, some (though obviously not all) pop songwriters today engage sacred tropes and images because the latter still hold rhetorically incisive, culturally semiotic clout. What these queer artists and, in my view, Steeleye and the Pixies’ hybrid Shulammites do is commingle religious and sexual themes to articulate, perhaps even reconsecrate, human longing in a culture which commodifies and cheapens sexual love through its sheer objectified ubiquity. In doing so, all these voices revise the parameters and the mandate of the sacred erotic; they reconfigure and enlist it as a graphic ‘language of ecstasy, a horizon of significance within which transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries of self *can be seen as good things*’ (Warner qtd. in Rambuss 1998, 58). Consequently, the bands’ surface profanations actually turn out to be allegories that question an impoverished status quo, more specifically, its thin (heteronormative) fare for imagining and experiencing the sacred, the erotic, and human selfhood.

This broader, allegorical role for the Shulammite’s sacred eroticism is politically crucial according to Rambuss. Now more than ever, ‘Christianity’s own canonic perversities’ need to be ‘mobilized’ against ‘a censoriously normalizing social and cultural vision’ that ‘fundamentalisms’ and ‘the mainstreaming religio-social tactics of the New Christian Right’ vigorously disseminate (6). The foundationally transgressive acts that compose an incarnational religion, and that beg analogies with the ‘penetrating intimacies’ of sexual union, simply ‘offer too many transit points to the ecstatic, the excessive, the transgressive, the erotic ... to be cast as a force field [by religious conservatives] for the proscription of desire and its ever-wanton vagaries’ (ibid). By contrast, the weddings of quasi-porn with spiritual ideals that Rambuss catalogues within early modern prayer manuals, woodcuts, engravings, and the metaphysicals’ poetry all model a powerfully anti-conservative alternative. They were created within a context where in fact ‘discourses of the sacred ... serve[d] to authorise the ecstatic, the excessive, and the illicit’ (19). This effected an ‘expansion’, even ‘violation’ of ‘cultural orthodoxies’ vis à vis ‘the body, gender, eroticism, and homoeroticism’ (ibid). Similarly, Steeleye’s and the Pixies’ musical incorporations of sacred eroticism helped ‘authorise’ alternative subject positions for their audiences, respectively disrupting as they did folk and rock’s definitions of orthodox musics and ‘normal’ identities.

Ironically, this latest allegorical role for the sacred erotic requires the secular transfer of Shulamith’s career from her socialising function within wedding sermons and marriage counselling to a more iconoclastic one within alternative musics. Admittedly, such musical reconfigurations of biblical types are hardly meant to cultivate a ‘devotional subjectivity’ or to inspire/express theocentric desire as the sacred eroticism in Elizabethan poetry and prayer manuals had done. The sacred erotic’s migration into folk rock and proto-grunge may no longer serve specifically Christian (or Jewish) self-fashioning, but here again, perhaps the Shulammite’s ‘own’ originally chameleon persona – effaced so often by preachers and believers – make her the patron saint for initiating and sustaining the identity formation of messier, less dichotomised, more fermented selves. After all, Shulamith’s grotesque physique and inconclusive peregrinations have always disrupted the classical allegorical story lines she has been made to toe. As a result, the transposition of this unruly icon outside the church and into two different rock music languages – rock being *the* genre whose semiotics are culturally synonymous with sex and the profane – can chasten any one who is still tempted to persist in narrowly spiritualising the sacred erotic. Furthermore, music’s unwieldy, penetrating effects upon bodies (even those provoked by earlier, supposedly more pious settings of the Song) make her this new allegory’s perfect delivery girl. Piercingly sonic Shulammites

imbue such ‘canonically perverse’ exegeses with a literal, ie corporeal, eroticism that undermines even the most earnest attempts to focus on the text’s traditional allegorical messages. If radically transgressive, boundary violating eros fuels divine-human intercourse, Shulamith’s embrace by folk and grunge keeps that ‘visceral power of the religious’ alive far more intensely, perhaps more ‘devoutly,’ than the strains of Christian rock.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an overview of the history, objectives, scholars, and publications that comprise New Musicology, see two sections from the *Groves* article on ‘Musicology’: ‘I. The Nature of Musicology, 5. New Trends,’ by Vann and Duckles, and in ‘II. Disciplines of Musicology,’ 11. ‘Gender and Sexual Studies’ by McClary, *Grove Music Online* ed. L.Macy, <http://www.grovemusic.com.cyber.usask.ca> (Accessed 21 May 2008).
- ² See for example, Fontaine 2000, Kristeva 1987, Meyers 1986, Ostriker 2000, Tribble 1978, and (to some extent) Exum 2000. For earliest critiques of these readings, see Black 2000, Black and Exum 1998, and later, Moore and Burrus 2003.
- ³ See Moore and Burrus, 2003. See also Moore 2000. Roland Boer (1999 and 2000) identifies and develops pornographic possibilities in the Song.
- ⁴ On Shulamith’s anguish, the Song’s violence, and scholars’ interpretive neglect of the same, see Black and Exum, 1998. On the lovers’ grotesque features, see Black 2000.
- ⁵ Black (1999 and 2000) surveys the variety of readings that exegetes have constructed to make some sense of both lovers’ ‘voices and descriptions of their physical bodies (at least two of each, but perhaps more), which mingle and writhe against each other in confusion’ (2000, 302f.). Black goes on to document how, despite conventional/sentimental readings of the female lover as playing the beautiful woman in idyllic, erotic love poetry, actual imagery depicting her body makes her ‘ill-proportioned, odd-looking’ such that she appears ‘grotesque’ or ‘comical’ and thoroughly mired in the mundane (2000: 311ff.). It is precisely, however, her ‘hybridized’, beautiful yet grotesque, and thus enigmatic contours that in fact permit the canonically iconoclastic readings of the Song as porn or as inspiring s/m fantasy, or as gender-destabilising template: ‘For hybridization is transgressive, its efficacy in terms of the grotesque lies in its ability to ‘produce new possibilities and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it” (2000: 319, emphasis in original, quoting Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 58). According to Black, readers ‘are drawn by [the] fluidity [of the imagery]. ... But the imagery also troubles, pushes the reader away, for it confounds attempts to be pinned down. It also provokes laughter, or worse, disgust’ (321f.). It is due to all these perplexities and confusions, that I deem the Shulamite’s body, utterances, and actions enigmatic.

6 I have taken the liberty of using the term ‘Shulamith’ here to add some variety to vocabulary in the article. However, scholars have commented on in fact the *lack* of a proper name for this female protagonist in the Song. Leaving her unnamed can convey the general anonymity that characterises the history of actual women in biblical times as well as the perhaps androcentric lack of interest in fleshing out female biblical figures more fully and ‘equitably.’ On the other hand, giving her a name can be a recuperative strategy that seeks to rectify both scholarly and authorial disregard for Shulamith’s full personhood and the political consequences for women that such insouciance directly or indirectly generated.

7 Technically, for many folk and electric folk musicians, it is a misnomer to discuss folk music’s harmonies. Of course, many of the original songs were transmitted orally and without harmonic settings or accompaniments. When later arranged with instrumentation, it is still more accurate to speak of ‘contrapuntal texture’ than of chordal harmonies (Renbourn qtd. in Sweers 2005, 152). Folk and electric folk musicians ‘usually work and think melodically’ (Sweers 2005, 152); thus Pentangle band member John Renbourn: ‘The old modal tunes have a lot of character and can be ruined by a bad setting. ... Moving lines that share the melodic characteristics of the original can be complementary – they don’t actually ‘harmonize’ in the eighteenth-century sense (although they can). ... Even the Alan Lomax recordings ... show a mass of moving parts rather than a formalized chord structure.’ Similarly, Martin Carthy (Steeleye Span) opines: ‘I think you actually get a better idea of this music if you approach it from a non-harmonic way, in a non-orchestral way’ (qtd. in Sweers 2005, 152).

8 The terms folk rock and electric folk are treated as synonyms in popular media. Practitioners thereof, however, distinguish between the two. In a public lecture delivered in 1993 and now available online, Jennifer Cutting insists that ‘folk rock’ consists of music by, for example, ‘Bob Dylan, The Byrds ... Indigo Girls, and R.E.M.’; these songwriters use forms that resemble those of traditional ballads and songs, but write original lyrics – often politically charged in content – as well as new music that combines ever more experimental combinations of old and new instruments. This later folk rock genre has been erroneously subsumed under the broader rubric of *electric folk*, but in fact, the latter should be used more narrowly to designate ‘syncretic music formed by the combination of melodic and harmonic elements from songs and tunes of the tradition with the harmonic and rhythmic conventions of rock and other popular music forms, and played with a combination of acoustic and electric instruments’ (Cutting 1993). *Electric folk* such as that of Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention experienced a three-year window of mainstream success in Britain from 1972–75, but then receded to the margins of pop culture. With the rise of punk, electric folk seemed anachronistic to mainstream youth, and yet electric folk inspired the rise of folk rock which has retained a strong, subcultural following. (See also Chapter Two, ‘A Question of Definition’ in Sweers 2005: 44–68).

9 According to Sweers, ‘Lloyd never blamed the modern media for the decline of folk song, which, as he judged realistically, had been connected with the print media since the sixteenth century. ... Rather, he saw the problem in the change of living conditions’ (60f.).

Brocken emphasises authenticity-as-fabrication throughout his study of the British folk revival: ‘to be experienced as ‘authentic’, folk music had to be mediated. Folk music simulation – especially recordings – can only ever be an initiative that deliberately caters for those in quest of an affect and image of musical history. ... We had not so much inherited this music as created it ...’ (65).

10 See Song of Solomon 4.9 to 5.6. Boer (2000) uses Lacan to re-examine this passage and others as culturally taboo incest fantasies/perversities; see especially, 291–293. For him, intimations of incest are more widespread: 1:6; 3.11; 4.9, 10 and 12; 5:1-2; 6:9; 8:1 (291).

11 My thanks to guitarist and songwriter Andrew Joel Thompson here for clarifications regarding harmonic and stylistic elements in ‘I’ve Been Tired’.

12 Black (1999) and Black and Exum (1998) encourage more scholarly and readerly attention to these dystopic elements.

- 13 Sisario (2006) attributes a ‘goofy irony’ to the Pixies’ body of work, more specifically in his discussion
of what he calls the ‘aesthetic precursor’ to their *Doolittle* album – the Beatles’ *White Album* (48).
- 14 Comment made by Keith Cameron, *Mojo* journalist in the film ‘Gouge’ 2004.
- 15 ‘Completely new’ and without ‘reference points’ (PJ Harvey); ‘Impossible to cover’ (Thom Yorke);
‘They changed the format for delivering harder rock’ (David Bowie); ‘It’s basic pop music. ... There
wasn’t that much difference between the Pixies and Abba’ (Keith Cameron). Thompson admires
David Lynch films (‘highly entertaining ... a bit surreal, a bit humorous, a bit squirmy, kind of designed
to entertain and also make the audience feel just slightly uncomfortable’), and hopes his Pixies songs
offered similar entertainment value (Thompson qtd. in Sisario 2006, 34).
- 16 This investigation prompts a broader recognition as well that all ascriptions of cultural semiotics to
musical sounds are arguably allegorical projects. Philosophical debates over the nature of musical
meaning are highly complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but the basic inter-connective oper-
ation required to ascribe any extra-musical meaning to music entails often lengthy extended metaphor-
ical transfers that could be labelled allegorical; interpreters borrow terms from other fields of human
experience to describe the movement, character and texture (even these are metaphors) of musical
units within standard musical forms. Sonic gestures or idioms (again, more metaphors) thus generate
the figural meanings that theorists and musicologists perceive and articulate.
- 17 This is Deborah Shuger’s term (1994) from a very different context: Erotically charged Magdalene
narratives in 17th-century Protestant England retained their appeal as a resource for Christian identity
formation despite Reformation and Renaissance humanist shifts in early modern sources of the self;
the former still served as a ‘residual narrative’ in which ‘symbols of erotic spirituality[were] themselves
implicated in the early modern structuring of subjectivity’ (190).
- 18 Perhaps these observations can offer a more nuanced account of secular ‘shifts’ in the musical history
of the sacred erotic that would counter reductive assessments of pop music/culture’s latest engagements
thereof as voguish artifice or sacrilege. Musicologist Susan McClary’s (2000) perception of affinities
between the 17th-century musical languages of sacred eroticism (those of Monteverdi, Stradella, and
Schutz, for example), and their very different 20th-century counterpart – black Gospel music – are
instructive: ‘To many of us today, religion and sexuality reside at opposite ends of the spectrum. But
seventeenth-century artists often mapped these realms upon one another ... If human desire is at its
most fervent at moments of sexual transport, then the church wanted access to that experience, albeit
harnessed and redefined as love for God’ (19). See also, McClary 1991, Chapter Two, and Epstein
2004.
- 19 Rambuss analyses paintings by Marsden Hartley, Andres Serrano, Juan Davila, the play *Angels in
America* by Tony Kushner, as well as three films – *More of a Man* (gay pornography), *Priest, The
Last Temptation of Christ* – and even gay rights stickers.

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