

REVIEWS

Camilla Caporicci (edited by),

*The Song of Songs in European Poetry (Twelfth to Seventeenth Centuries): Translations, Appropriations, Rewritings*. Turnhout: Brepols, The Medieval Translator 21, 2024.

“The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (Song 1:1): this opening formula, reminiscent of the ascriptions to David in the Psalms, constitutes the only conventional statement in a biblical text that otherwise defies precedent. The verse is immediately followed by an outburst of erotic longing, which sets the tenor for a work that foregrounds corporeal desire with an intensity unmatched in Scripture: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine” (Song 1:2). Does this fervent love relate to God? This has remained the central question for generations of readers and exegetes. For the two lovers never explicitly name God. Yet, perhaps precisely due to its unabashed sensuality, the Song of Songs has been one of the most enticing readings among the biblical books, playing an essential role in shaping medieval and Renaissance European spirituality. Over time, Jewish and Christian interpreters have preserved this exceptionally ambivalent book in their respective canons by allegorising it as a meditation on the relationship between divine and human love. From early rabbinic exegetes reading Israel (or the individual soul) as God’s covenantal Spouse to medieval Christian conceptualisations of the Church’s or the soul’s marriage with Christ, and further through Marian devotion to ecstatic mysticism, the Song has been reframed as “a triumph of allegory, the eroticism of the text not erased, but re-semanticized as a sign of something else” (p. 13). Emerging

early on, these diverse allegorical interpretations transformed the biblical book into a model for devotional expression. The Song of Songs thus stands as one of the most fascinating paradoxes in the history of biblical reception: a lyrical and passionate celebration of love that, across centuries, has served as a vehicle for articulating the profound mystery of spiritual union and sacred eros.

Scholarly fascination with the many allegorical interpretations and appropriations of the Song of Solomon in the medieval and early modern period long diverted attention away from the influence of the biblical book in the rise and development of European poetic culture. Recent scholarship by Ann W. Astell (1990), E. Ann Matter (1992), Rosanna Guglielmetti (2008), Monica Barsi and Alessandra Preda (2016), Noam Flinker (2000) has begun to redress this, bringing to light the dynamics through which the Song has permeated the literary and cultural fabric of Europe. While these studies have unveiled much about the medieval and early modern reception of the Song, they have only briefly addressed its poetic resonances or have privileged its exegetical and homiletic traditions. In this context, Camilla Caporicci's study emerges as both timely and pioneering. Her edited collection fills an important scholarly lacuna, offering the first comprehensive investigation of the biblical book as a vital intertext in vernacular and Latin poetry between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries.

This volume, developed from a 2020 conference at the University of Padua, forms part of Caporicci's broader research project for the reappraisal of the Song's role in the European tradition of love lyric – a project whose major findings have been recently published in her monograph with Oxford University Press (2025). Arranged into three main sections, the collection contains essays by fourteen contributors from a variety of academic fields and backgrounds. The reader is thus invited to reflect on the intricate process of the Song's appropriations and rewritings from the perspectives of biblical reception, comparative literature, literary criticism, musicology, translation studies, philology, and linguistics. Moreover, the collection spans a diverse geographical scope, favouring the appreciation of the phenomenon across confessional and linguistic disciplinary boundaries. Its commendable coherence is grounded in its thematic focus and the well-thought-through structure, which facilitates the reader's grasp of the material's historical evolution.

The methodological diversity is one of the book's greatest strengths as it also allows for addressing the longstanding but problematic distinction between sacred and secular poetry. While this dichotomy is increasingly seen as misleading, it cannot be utterly dismissed, especially in medieval contexts, where spiritual and secular discourses often intersect in complex ways. Few biblical texts have inspired such sustained poetic engagement in major devotional and religious medieval works. It is not surprising, then, that the four essays of the first section, 'A Many-faced Influence: Medieval Voices', examine the multifaceted contexts in which the lyric appropriations of the Song of Songs fostered this exceptional convergence of sacred and secular codes. Leor Jacobi outlines the Song's lore in Hebrew liturgical poetry, pointing out its peculiar interpretation in the fifth-century Ashkenazi poem, *Shir HaShirim Amareha Šefe*. The author of the *piyyut* transforms the profane love text into an interpretative space, where the feminised Song (despite the masculinity of the term) turns into a nourishing mother and the Sages are the breasts, mediating the "scholarly act of 'expressing milk' from the Song of Songs" (p. 42). The text's remarkable fluidity and tension between devotional and secular love are further developed in the following chapters. Greti Dinkova-Bruun examines three particular verse engagements with the *Cantica canticorum* – namely, Riga's own versification, Aegidius of Paris's revision of it, and an anonymous poem called *Cantica canticorum Beate Virginis* – to prove the uniqueness of Peter Riga's *Aurora* on two levels. On the one hand, the generative power of Riga's composition transforms the biblical text into a highly poetic reality "both profound theologically and intricate stylistically" (p. 51); on the other hand, the *Aurora*'s great capacity to inspire imitations and adaptations is seen precisely in the Song of Songs's intersection between erotic passion and spiritual love. Moving beyond traditional allegory, Brindusa Grigoriu's chapter analyses the Song's textual reminiscences in early Tristan and Ysolt romances, including Béroul's version of the legend, Thomas of Britain's poem, *The Folie of Berne*, Marie de France's *Chevrefoil*, and Eilhart of Oberg's adaptation. Grigoriu examines the episode of Tristan's amorous death, where the hero becomes a tree amid the arboreal landscape of the world-garden, assuming the role of the mystical Bridegroom from the Song of Songs. United with his feminine, flower-like counterpart, he comes to embody the triumph of a love-death "viriditas" (p. 60) through which the two lovers are eternally joined. This first section concludes

with Christiania Whitehead and Denis Renevey's chapter focusing on the fourteenth-century Middle English mystic Richard Rolle, whose writing was deeply influenced by the Song of Songs. As Reveney argues, the impact of the biblical poem "is not only literary, accounting for the intense lyricism and musicality of *Melos* [*amoris*], its imagery, and its metaphors; in addition it also contributes the building blocks of Rolle's contemplative system" (p. 90). In particular, Reveney maintains that Rolle's contemplative sensorium, consisting of the fusion of bodily and inner sense perceptions, evolved directly from his engagement with the Song of Songs. Christiania Whitehead, in turn, explores the reproduction of Rolle's lyrics in the fifteenth century and his mediation on angelic song. Whitehead's analysis of the anonymous religious lyrics is finely informed by their accompanying illustrations, which changed the resonances of these lyrics.

The transmission of the Song of Songs and its intertextual relationship with other works appears highly problematic since the book circulated in multiple genres and forms. This dynamic is particularly evident in the essays constituting the second section, where the dialogue between poetry and music in Italian medieval and early modern contexts comes to light ('Poetry and Music: the Italian Tradition'). Lino Pertile's finely argued essay shows how the Song's imagery of the wound of love and the marriage of the Cross is reinterpreted as an interdiscursive phenomenon in the popular piety tradition of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy. Pertile turns to Dante's *Purgatorio* to reveal how the concept of 'buon dolor' (good sorrow) – a thirst for suffering which perfects the penitents' souls and brings them closer to God – "would not be possible without the Song of Songs and the immense riches of its commentary" (p. 108). This textual entanglement persists into the Renaissance as it appears in the following chapters. Matteo Navone's contribution offers a reassessment of Petrarchism's complex relationship to biblical language, and especially how both minor and famous sixteenth-century Italian poets, such as Pollastrino, Girolamo Malipiero, Bernardo and Torquato Tasso – though not overtly invoking the Song – nevertheless revived their spiritual lyricism with a language close to that of the Song's love poetry. The conflation of corporeal and mystical languages also features in the last two chapters of the section, which focus on the significant influence of the biblical book on Italian early modern musical production.

Marina Toffetti's broad survey of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century musical settings of the Song reveals the extent to which composers drew upon its lyrical intensity not merely for textual content but as "a privileged catalyst for certain traits of the spiritual and aesthetic sensibility" (p. 161). Gabriele Taschetti's analysis centres on a collection of motets, *Symbolae diversorum musicorum*, compiled by Lorenzo Calvi (Venice, 1621). The collection deserves attention since a quarter of it is dedicated to the Song of Songs. Taschetti unpacks the different textual approaches and the editorial strategies behind this rich repertoire of Song-based motets. Both essays eloquently attest to the power of music as a parallel – and often privileged – hermeneutic mode for the Song.

The English translations and appropriations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the subject of the third and final section, 'Rewriting and Appropriating the Song of Songs in the British Isles'. Echoing earlier patterns, the Song of the Songs here again serves as a bridge between sacred and secular discourses. Its fusion of sensual and devotional imagery allowed it to influence a wide spectrum of poetry, making it common for texts to be both religious and amorous or, at least, to exhibit a polysemic richness rooted in its language. Of course, the Reformation added complexity by prompting vernacular translations of the Bible, including the Song, and further multiplying the variety of possible source texts – verse paraphrases, exegetical and liturgical texts, sermons, hymns, and prayer books. In this light, the first three chapters might be read through the lens of cultural acquisition and the different strategies of lexical and conceptual amplification, domestication and defamiliarisation behind poetic and prose borrowings. Fabio Ciambella's study of early English Bible translations, from Coverdale to the King James version, combines a corpus-based lexical analysis with theological sensitivity to reveal how each translator adopted different styles and priorities at a time "when multiple source texts were available and considered equally important" (p. 203). Rachel Stenner's compelling reading of William Baldwin's *Canticles* (1549) positions it as a liminal text between scriptural paraphrase and a precursor of Petrarchian lyric, inviting the reader to reconsider the development of Petrarchism in England. By voicing female desire, Baldwin unsettles the assumptions about gender and voice that defined the English tradition of love lyric. The result, concludes Stenner, "is a biblical paraphrase fashioned as English love poetry", manifesting "an experimental conjunction of

secular and devotional writing” (p. 222). Tibor Fabiny’s attentive close reading of Joseph Hall’s 1609 verse paraphrase of the Song of Songs presents it as a highly poetic commentary (compared to some of the greatest poems of the period) and a very complicated text, enlarging on the biblical source text to express the author’s artistic, political and theological intentions. Rediscovering Hall’s forgotten commentary “can help us broaden our knowledge of the poetic and religious imagination of the seventeenth century” (p. 235).

The concluding chapters of this section reveal the role of the Song of Solomon in the intricate religious and political situation of seventeenth-century England, to bear witness to either one’s faith or one’s religious dissent. Carmen Gallo’s chapter is devoted to George Herbert, one of the major representatives of metaphysical poetry. Gallo discusses Herbert’s reshaping of the Song of Songs, particularly the image of the banquet, in *The Temple* (1633) “as a way of representing a sacramental experience that mingles spiritual and sensual dimensions to respond to the theological controversies of his time on Christ’s Real Presence” (p. 238). As for the influence of the Song on religious dissent, Simone Turco addresses the ambivalent attitude toward the biblical source of some Ranter thinkers during the Puritan Revolution. While recognising the Song as a possible vehicle of sensuality, they fail to unify the erotic language and imagery of the source with their religious principles to affirm their libertarian views. In the context of significant repression, Adrian Streete closes this section with the poetic engagement of a number of English women prophets in the seventeenth century, drawing upon the Song of Songs as a powerful means of asserting their spiritual and social authority. Streete focuses on the writings of Anna Trapnel, Katherine Sutton, Anne Wentworth, and Dorothy White, offering an interpretive lens that situates their use of the Song within a triadic framework: theological, political, and domestic. Streete concludes with a few reflections on the broader use of the Song by other religious sects and considers the fate of its prophetic resonances in the later decades of the seventeenth century.

Caporicci’s volume not only reaffirms the enduring vibrancy of the Song of Songs *as* and *in* literature, but also makes a vital contribution to a long-overlooked area in the study of biblical reception across medieval and early modern Europe. Impressively ambitious in scope yet lucid in structure, this essay collection navigates the Song’s multifarious poetic afterlives with clarity, originality, and

scholarly finesse. Through an approach that combines precise close readings with exceptional methodological vivacity, Caporicci's book offers a much-needed reappraisal of the importance of the Song of Songs for European culture. What emerges is a conceptually layered portrait of this scriptural work as a text that continually renews itself through dialogue with theology, philosophy, aesthetics, and music across an array of literary forms and genres. At the same time, the volume's multidisciplinary acumen guides the reader to a major awareness that the reception history of the Song of Songs is an elusive and hidden phenomenon. The volume also gestures (albeit briefly) towards the material transmission of the Song, hinting at the fertile potential of further enquiry into its manuscript and print histories. Above all, the study succeeds in demonstrating how the biblical poem served as a complex and veiled paradigm within European literary imagination. It will undoubtedly remain a touchstone for scholars working at the intersection of biblical reception, poetics, and cultural history. More broadly, it promises to reshape future conversations about the history of the Song of Songs and its role in defining religious and literary culture.

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