INTRODUCTION

This work grew out of two, initially separate, preoccupations. One of us (van Dijk-Hemmes) was searching for traces of women’s culture in the Hebrew Bible; the other (Brenner) was looking for (presumably male) biblical literary paradigms of woman and their underlining social stereotypes. At first each of us argued for the merits of her respective approach. Then we came to realize that our individual programs overlapped to an extent and were certainly complementary. Thereby mutual criticism led to collaboration, and the present book evolved out of that collaboration.

Ultimately, each of us retains sole responsibility for her own personal contributions. However, because each has been intensely involved in the other’s project for years, and because every critical move made by either of us was exchanged and ultimately thrashed out together, we regard this book not only as an assemblage of individually written pieces but, largely, as the product of a joint effort.

As we commenced, separately and together, we found that preconceptions, suppositions, presumptions, and sentiments that had generated our work had to be modified, altered, or discarded. Gradually our perspectives and objectives shifted and, throughout the stages of investigation and then writing, we had to continually reshape and reformulate both aims and methods. This Introduction, then, proceeds from an attempt to chart that process of an ongoing, gradual unfolding. We then present some of the basic premises and notions which inform our agendas. Short descriptions of the book’s constituent parts follow.

On Gendering Biblical Texts: General Considerations

Feminist Bible scholarship is far from monolithic. The scholars who practise it follow diverse agendas. Some use their energy to unmask patriarchy (Fuchs). Some look for a women’s subculture. Some try to rehabilitate women’s images (Trible). Some are mainly interested in counter-reading and in the deconstructive properties attributable to biblical texts (Bal). The two of us started by pursuing twin strands: searching for women’s texts within the Hebrew canon, and the means for differentiating them from men’s texts.
We studied for our first degrees in different places, albeit roughly at the same time: one in Utrecht, the other in Haifa. We were both taught that the quest for biblical authorship was a legitimate pursuit, even though the question of gender authorship was seldom if ever broached. Later on, when awareness of gender matters and androcentrism and gender bias/oppression became heightened through feminist interest, it was—still is—commonly assumed that biblical texts were written exclusively or almost exclusively by males and for the consumption of males; and that whoever wanted to prove that a certain text is an exception to this generalization had to carry the burden of proof. An obvious response to this implicit challenge was to find, define and classify women’s texts in contradistinction to men’s texts.

A second and supplementary direction entailed having a closer look at gendering possible candidates for men’s texts by attempting to redefine them as such, and by asking ourselves how those differed from texts classified as women’s texts. We realize that we may come under fire here, mainly from feminists who object to the practice of covertly complying with androcentric standards by evaluating women’s culture in accordance with dominant male culture. We therefore hasten to explain this point. We wanted to draw analogies between gendered texts by juxtaposition; our approach is informed by the understanding that a framework within which a text is embedded—and biblical texts of presumably female origin are indeed embedded—is meaningful, sometimes even fatally so, for whatever it envelops.

When looking for women’s texts, one has to refer to two preliminary questions.

(a) Is it possible to gender a text or its author, that is, to define one or the other, or both, as a product of women’s culture or men’s culture? This, of course, is mainly a question of the adequacy of the methodology or methodologies employed.

(b) Is the gendering of texts important, and for whom? This is a question of validity and the contribution to literary and cultural knowledge that gendering texts might advance.

These questions will appear and reappear throughout the discussion. We shall try to relate to them by appealing to biblical scholarship, especially of feminist persuasions, as well as to literary criticism and related (feminist and other) disciplines.
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Orality, Literacy, and Literariness

We started our investigation, then, by assuming—as we had been taught—that women’s texts in the Bible, if there are any, are embedded in men’s texts and framed by men’s editing and redactional activities. Textual activities preserve but also change, distort, and recreate their subject matter (Ong 1982). Therefore, since women’s traditions in the Bible in so far as they exist are preserved as written texts, one has to uncover the traditions behind and underneath the texts as well as relate to their embedding within their frames. We soon realized that in order to find women’s traditions and trace their broken lines we had to consider orality, literacy and literariness, and the nature of the links between those concepts; and to apply these considerations to our search.

Ong (1982, 10) holds that the term “oral literature” is an unfortunate one. Since the word “literature” is etymologically derived from the Latin for “letter”, “literature” and its semantic derivatives imply literacy (the ability to write) and therefore, by definition, preclude orality. That writing and textualization undoubtedly transform oral consciousness, unconsciousness, and traditions radically is beyond dispute. Nevertheless, we maintain, lack of literacy does not automatically preclude oral literariness (the ability to compose and transmit poetry/narrative). Etymology aside, the ability to write and record (even in a secondarily oral society, while we imagine biblical societies to still be primarily oral), is not necessarily a prerequisite for creative verbal activity.

The concept of orality has, certainly since Gunkel, been applied to biblical literature at large; therefore, it should and can be applied to the search for women’s texts. This application emanates from a specific understanding: even if literacy was relatively scarce among women (like among men in the biblical world, but more about that later), this by itself does not preclude women’s activities in literary composition and its performance in private and/or in public. In other words, although literariness and literacy overlap to an extent, the concept of oral literariness (perhaps for want of a more elegant term) is generally acknowledged in biblical studies. This tacit acknowledgement is important, for it is of great assistance in the quest for women’s traditions that are transfixed in those texts.

S.D. Goitein (1988 [1957]) shows how the wealth of women’s traditions is perhaps preserved, developed and enhanced precisely because of the need for mnemotechnical procedures. The problem of
the eventual recording of those traditions is, of course, another matter entirely. Hence, we formulate the first premise which underlies and informs our investigation thus. Women’s literary traditions were probably and by and large oral and were preserved and transmitted, at least in part, as the produce of collective efforts. We note in this regard that the relevant texts often introduce discourse attributed to women as oral performance (a song or recitation). While this mode of textual presentation can hardly point to an actual oral origin of those fragmentary traditions, it nevertheless attests to the orality which often underlines texts of literate, or partly literate, societies (Ong 1982, 157-160). In short, the notion of orality affects the evaluation of literary genres where women’s verbal creativity is the most likely to have emerged (or been recorded). For instance, genres like victory poems for heroes and derisive poems about enemies must have evolved through orality before they were eventually reported in writing. Their *Sitz im Leben* (inside and outside the text) and presentation as oral must have facilitated their fictive preservation.

But who committed these presumably oral women’s traditions to writing? Once more, it is widely assumed that men did. The notion of male supremacy in literacy cannot perhaps be challenged. We feel, however, that it can be modified somewhat.

Some scholars (notably Cross 1975, Millard 1985 and Naveh 1968; but see also Haran 1988) convincingly argue that, to judge by epigraphic finds, literacy became widespread in ancient Israel from the 8th century BCE onwards. There is no reason to assume that this important cultural development affected men’s lives only. Furthermore, there is an abundance of extrabiblical Near Eastern evidence concerning women’s literacy even from much earlier times (Hallo 1976, Fontaine 1989). Women’s literacy and literariness was already to be found in Sumer: Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon, is but one example. Did those ancient women use professional scribes? Maybe, but so did their male counterparts. It seems safe to assume that ancient Israel did not differ substantially from its neighbours in regard to women’s literacy, except for one important facility for advancing it—the existence of women-ministered goddess temples. And this difference, important as it is, appears less decisive when we take into account the forces of international cultural osmosis. For instance, Jezebel could write, and her juridical skill was more than adequate: this is not suppressed inspite of the negative portrayal she
receives in the text (1 Kgs 21), hence we can probably regard it as reliable reporting. There is no need to assume that all or most women, of the upper classes but also of other classes, were excluded from the domain of written language, or from the domain of creative literary activity. It must be admitted, however, that there is no evidence for or against the existence of female professional scribes in ancient Israel; knowledge might exist without being exploited vocationally, especially where women are concerned. And, to return to this point, perhaps there were no female Israelite scribes because of the lack of female-run cultic centres. We have to accept, then, that in all probability women’s traditions became texts, were recorded and transmitted (at least mostly), through the active agencies of male scribes and male editors.

A shift from oral creation to written text is always problematic. The transformation of women’s orality into texts consigned to male scribes is, in addition, significantly more traumatic than indicated by the regular process. General problems which accompany the recording and transmitting stages are augmented by problems of inverted gender perspectives. The female character of original women’s compositions may thus be obliterated or masked over in the process.¹ And this factor leads us back to the problemsatics of defining biblical authorship.

Author, Authority, Text, Voice

In modern literary theory the demise of the author often underlies critical theory (Barthes 1970, 1977), even though this notion is sometimes qualified (see Culler 1983, “Readers and Reading”, 31-83). A modified “death of the author” notion (Foucault in Harari, 1979, 141-60) is useful when applied to contemporary texts but even more so when it is applied to ancient, largely anonymous, literatures. In fact, it is difficult not to subscribe to Gerald Bruns’ opinion. To quote, “It is now hard to see how a notion of authorship can be applied to these texts [the Hebrew Bible] in any significant way.” (Bruns 1984). This observation stems from, and is a reaction to, the preoccupation with The Author which has characterized biblical exegesis and scholarship for millennia.

¹ For the literacy and literariness of women in Greco-Roman times, and for the question of writing and dissemination of women’s texts, cf. Kraemer and others in Levine (1991).
Attempts to identify authors of a largely anonymous collective literature of times past, such as the Bible, tend to be circular and highly speculative. Ultimately, the search for such Authors fails or, at best, remains vulnerable. Hence, in addition to the recognition of oral roots, we prefer to talk about texts rather than about the conjectured persons who might have composed those texts. It is the text rather than the person on which we focus. We are aware, however, that nevertheless, by force of habit and education, we keep looking for an author as a subtext. By that we mean that in our work, and to a certain extent despite ourselves, text and author are almost interchangeable (Culler 1983, “Stories of Reading”, 64-83). For us the author is the creative imprint, the text as signature, the textual output as both literary prowess and reflection of human experience. And yet, in order to avoid acts of naming, we prefer to relate to a text and the voices within it rather than to a specificity of an identified (personal) authorship.

At this point, then, we reroute our initial quest—Where can we find women’s texts in the Bible? How can they be differentiated from men’s texts?—and redefine our objectives. What we wish to uncover are the gender positions entrenched in a text to the extent that its authority rather than its authorship can be gendered. In other words, we try to walk a tightrope of distinguishing between:

(a) Notions of women-authored texts, that is, texts that were actually composed and/or written by women.
(b) Textuality attributed to a woman or women in a text.
(c) The possibility of defining plausible, hence authoritative, women’s voices which operate within and behind a text.

We start from a conviction that women composed literature in biblical times, a facility not rendered impossible by illiteracy. We add our recognition that the extent of female illiteracy has been rendered questionable by recent research into the popularization and democratization of literacy. We then link women’s orality and (il)literacy with critical considerations concerning the author’s status. Consequently, we have begun (contra positions adopted earlier) to find it more interesting to abandon acts of gendering texts by referring to the gender of their (conjectured) authors. Instead, in order to define a text as a women’s text (or a men’s text), we try to discern female (and later male) voices in them. In most cases we have therefore refrained from speculating upon the gender of a text’s
actual writer—to distinguish from its oral composer, or transmitter(s).

The concept of "voice" which we have finally arrived at merits some articulation at this point. It indicates orality within writing, the sum of speech acts assigned to a fictive person or the narrator within a text. By implication, a voice's fictive owner has a privileged position of power in the literary discourse within which it features. If we want to use the language of visuality to describe the written reproduction of this basically audial manifestation, we can define a textual voice by turning to Bal’s narratological model (Bal 1988b, 34-38). A voice belongs to her/him who holds the primary subject position in a discourse (after that of the narrator but, quite often, as the embodiment of the narrator’s privileged albeit covert "voice"). The voice often belongs to and expresses the focalizer of the text. When all or most of the affirmative answers to the questions, Who speaks? Who focalizes the action? Whose viewpoint is dominant?—converge on one and the same textual figure, then that figure embodies the dominant voice of a passage, be it prose narrative or poetic.

It seems worth noting yet again that the discursive "voices" discussed are textualized as well as fictionalized. Consequently, their affinity with extra-literary discourses (the "real" world) is far from simple, although both worlds reflect and reinforce each other. To use Ong's phrases, writing is representational and referential and context-bound to the non-literal world; however, it should be borne in mind that the relationship between the two spheres is not a one-to-one relationship (Ong, 166-7). Textualized voices are echoes only, disembodied and removed from their extra-verbal situation. Nevertheless, and paradoxically so, they remain grounded in "the world".

Women's voices are further divorced from their presumed literary and non-literary origins by their having been contextualized into male discourse. Thus we have come to realize by degrees that, while interpreting women's textual discourse, it is hardly appropriate to regard a voice as a woman's (or, for that matter, a man's) property: the referential link between textual voice and the world outside is too tenuous. Here we finally had to change our terminology so that it would correspond to our changed perspective. Since the notion of "textual voice" is an abstracted construct, we settled for a terminological abstraction. We came to symbolize traces of textualized women's traditions as F (feminine/female) voices. By analogy,
men's texts were then perceived and symbolized as repositories of M (masculine/male) voices. The work of Van Dijk-Hemmes documents the gradual process whereby the emphasis of inquiry shifts, by stages, from notions of textual authorship toward the recognition of F voices, a recognition which emerges at the end of her quest for what, initially, had been styled "women's texts".

Reading and Women's Texts

A fundamental difficulty for gendering texts by the predominant voices which operate in them is, how to separate F texts from M texts (which are considered the literary "norm" unless proven otherwise). Elaine Showalter's (1986) "cultural model" is primarily concerned with the criticism of modern F literature. Van Dijk-Hemmes has adopted this model for the purpose of uncovering women's texts in the Hebrew Bible. This choice was motivated by two chief factors:

(a) The cultural model is inclusive; and it incorporates history without allotting exclusive weight either to F experience or to (M) chronological and spatial history.
(b) Its notions of women's "muted voice" and "double voice" are useful parameters for gendering F texts.

To use Exum's phrases (1989), van Dijk-Hemmes searches for the "submerged strains" of women's voices from underneath the male "dominant world-view that also controls literary production"; and "hopes to show how the female perspective, the female voice, cannot be silenced . . .".

Fiction is in the eye of the beholder. Showalter (1986), Schweikart (1986), and Culler (1983) show that connecting with a text always entails either a covert or else an outspoken gender-motivated stance. Now is the time to return to one of our initial questions, namely, Whose readerly interests might the gendering of biblical texts serve?

At this point we stop once more and draw together some of the concepts that have informed our investigation—orality, voice rather than author, group experience and group literary activity, the cultural model, diversity, the muting of F voices, the wish to distinguish between F and M voices, and the gendered nature of reading. We can now reformulate in yet another way. Gendering texts depends to a large extent on the reader's membership of a gender.
Consequently, we allow that many biblical texts are potentially dual-gendered. F readers will listen to F voices emanating from those texts; M readers will hear themselves echoed in them. This is to say that, in many cases, two parallel readings are possible. In such cases, we feel, a presentation of both parallel readings is preferable to privileging any one of the two more than the other. In the case of other texts, however, the situation is more definitive genderwise this way or the other (although, even then, a dual sense of hearing can become a readerly advantage).

Now that the journey we took has been delineated, it seems appropriate to describe briefly what our agenda consists of.

**Women’s Texts and F Voices**

In Part I van Dijk-Hemmes discusses women’s texts classified according to literary genres. By the end of the discussion she has amassed and listed a classified *corpus* of F constituency, a literary body of F soundings or voices, in biblical “women’s” texts. She thus continues Goitein’s work on *Women as Creators of Biblical Genres* (1957 in Hebrew, translated 1988), which she uses as prooftext but modifies and enhances.

Although Van Dijk-Hemmes shares with Goitein basic concepts (such as the orality of so-called women’s texts), her agenda and approach also differ from his. Some of these differences will be mentioned here by way of a prelude; others will become apparent upon reading her critique.

As indicated by the title of Goitein’s work (and the rest of his book), when he relates women’s voices within biblical texts to extra-literary “reality” he in fact discusses the notion of women’s *authorship*. While he does not always state the authorship of particular texts, he certainly implies more than just “genre creativity” or “genre” authorship. His position is far from clear on yet another count for—and despite his occasional declarations to the contrary—he relies too heavily on the Bible’s ascriptions of discourse to women. Although he does not claim that such ascriptions automatically guarantee women’s authorship, he remains largely imprisoned by that notion. In contrast to Goitein, van Dijk-Hemmes regards such biblical ascriptions primarily as eye-catchers. The fact that an author/editor attributes a textual voice to a woman is helpful: it signifies that the voice might be read as such. However, it does not
automatically mean that the voice in the text is an F voice unless and until it is more closely delineated by the parameters outlined above. Explicit biblical attributions of texts to women are used by her merely as an opening, as a possibility for counter-reading. The matter might be summarized as follows. Goitein looks for women creators and performers; he is not free from the authority traditionally invested in authorship and the naming of authors, and relates the findings of his literary investigations more or less directly to the world outside the biblical text. Van Dijk-Hemmes conducts a readerly search for F voices embedded in the text, and is more cautious in relating those to extraneous factors. As Ong states, ‘Writing...has been called ‘autonomous discourse’ by contrast with oral utterance, which is never autonomous but always embedded in non-verbal existence’” (p. 160). When tracing text-bound orality, one must remember that the nature of the orality-literacy shift is much more complex than Goitein has it—not least because the extra-verbal context he visualizes does not account seriously for the transmutation of gender perspectives which, in the case of biblical texts, accompanies the orality-literacy shift.

Women’s Discourse Embedded in Men’s Discourse? An extended example

One of the genres which Goitein attributes to biblical women is the “rebuke song”. According to him, and the analogies from Arabic poetry he cites, the genre conventionalizes a female rebuker (wife or mother) and the admonitions she metes out to her menfolk. In Part I van Dijk-Hemmes discusses Goitein’s description of this genre in order to modify and qualify it. One of the points she deals with is the figure of the admonishing woman in Proverbs. In her discussion she raises the possibility that the fictive figure-at-the-window in Proverbs 7, universally interpreted as a representation of a male teacher posing as a father, can be read as the figure of the admonishing mother (I, 4.B). In Part II Brenner takes up this point and extends it to the first collection of Proverbs, Chapters 1-9, and to the Book of Proverbs as an editorial whole.

There has always been general consent in regard to this text. It is interpreted as an M discourse which is simultaneously attracted and repelled by women and their discourse. While it is obvious that F discourse is embedded in it, this discourse has always been judged as reflected discourse—not a reproduction of genuine F voices but
a filtered image, mirrored through the literary convention of an M voice and delivered through the filters of M perspectives and perception of woman. Even feminist critics have agreed that F voices are here reproduced in a tendentious M manner (Newsom 1989) or, at the very least, within the textual envelope of M discourse (Camp 1985).

Brenner’s reading reverses the tables. She asks, Can we read Proverbs 1-9 as a text in which a mother’s voice, rather than a father’s, occupies the central and privileged position of the speaking subject? Such a possibility seems worth exploring since (as Camp acutely observes) Proverbs is doubly framed at both ends by literary F figures—personified Wisdom together with her antitheses, the “strange” woman, and personified Folly, in the first collection; Lemuel’s mother’s instructions and the Worthy Woman (פֶּטֶּת חַיֵּל poem at the end of the Book (chapter 31). Brenner shows that the recognition, through F reading, of an F voice in these passages is helpful for dealing with their problematics, one of which is the superabundance of F discourse within an assumed M discourse. A byproduct of this gendered reading is the nuancing of the “female rebuker” genre and its qualification as “mother’s instruction to son and to daughter”, whereas Goitein’s definition relates to menfolk only as the rebuke’s textual target audience.

Desire and M Discourse

In Part I van Dijk-Hemmes discusses women’s love poetry, as it is preserved in the Song of Songs, and the distinctive properties of the female voice which operate within those texts. In Part III Brenner illuminates the picture further by discussing biblical M love lyrics.

Brenner proceeds from an interpretation of Qoheleth 3.2-8 as a framed love poem. This passage has not been thematized by readers as such. Although the possibility that it indeed refers to love and sex (among other things) has been recognized from antiquity, the textual frame in which it is embedded (Qoh 3.1, 9) has influenced readers that its theme is human time. The poem does not overtly classify itself by genre, and the gender (M) attributed to its speaking voice is only implicitly inferred from the frame but not explicitly stated within it. Therefore, it is particularly interesting for our project. After the notion of the textual frame has been accepted, the poem itself can be dissociated from the textual assumptions implied by the frame,
and read afresh in order to find whose voice reverberates in it. It is first classified by genre (poem of love/desire) and, then, gendered by reference to its voice (M) and collated with other biblical instances of men's voicings of love and desire.

Considered side by side, the corresponding F and M voices within the same thematic field of love poetry (van Dijk-Hemmes on the Song of Songs, Brenner on Qoheleth 3 and its textual relatives) form a contrast which illuminates each text, and the gender positions textualized in them, by their mutual oppositions.

M Voices and Biblical Pornography

The definition of certain biblical texts, especially prophetic ones, as verbal or literary pornography is not entirely new. Setel (1985) discusses it at length. Carroll (1986) applies it to passages in the Book of Jeremiah. Van Dijk-Hemmes has written on pornography in Hosea (1989b).

Like violence, pornography and its literal and visual (re)presentations is a key issue for feminists. Pornography attracts, for its subject matter is human desire. It simultaneously fascinates and repels, for it contains strong and often corrupting sadomasochistic elements. It frightens, since its fantasy is the fantasy of power relations and, like rape, it both expresses and reinforces gender roles and role models in human society. In short: Like rape and violence, pornography relates to the deepest recesses of our psyches, hence it does not leave us indifferent.

Biblical pornography has been utilized as an extremely effective vehicle for the fossilization of gender roles because it carries a unique authority even when not acknowledged as such. We therefore decided to include two pieces on biblical pornography in this book: Van Dijk-Hemmes analyzes its form and function in Ezekiel 23 and Brenner discusses its presence in Jeremiah 2-5.

The pornographic passages discussed clearly characterize themselves as soundings of M voices. Not simply because they are assigned to male speakers, even specifically to the supreme authority of a male God; but, mainly, because they contain such fantasies about and against women that—as corroborated by psychological and psychiatric research—they must be classified as products of M discourse. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is there a corresponding pornographic vision assigned to an F voice.
We do not wish to claim that our work is exhaustive or comprehensive. More items can undoubtedly be added to the corpus of biblical women’s voices here collected; many more texts can be gendered as F- or else M-voiced; more can and should be said about the methodology and advantages of gendering F and M texts and voices. Our aim has been to make a contribution to the ongoing quest for readerly alternatives, feminist style. We have constructed another model of reading which, we hope, will be taken up and expanded by others, so that our gender-motivated readings of the texts gendered will be regarded as openings. We also hope that our gender-motivated readings of the texts gendered will stimulate others to use the model here offered and to improve it; and that debates concerning gender, voices, and authority in biblical literature and biblical scholarship will eventually gain ascendancy over the more traditional debates concerning authors.

In our view, gendering texts is an invaluable step toward a reconstruction of ancient Israel’s culture. Israelite culture, as it is reflected in the Hebrew Bible, is distorted by gender bias and M literary supremacy. It is so badly mutilated and falsified that, one fears, the cultural actualities of the quasi-historical construct fondly called “Biblical Israel” are, for us, beyond remembrance or recollection. One of the ways for dealing with this frustration is to dig for remnants in order to recall: the literary quest has obvious implications for history. By redefining biblical women’s (and men’s) voices we redefine not only individual texts, not only “women’s culture”. By so doing we redefine a human culture as a whole, for human societies are bi-gendered. The fact that our task is neither simple nor easily rewarding does not exempt us from dealing with it.

Athalya Brenner