Within the long and varied tradition of medieval Christian commentaries on the Song of Songs, the yearning for the beloved, articulated from both masculine and feminine perspectives, becomes key to a hermeneutic construction illuminating the relation of the divine to the cosmos, the community of believers, and the individual soul. There are specific adumbrations of this tradition in which the virgin Mary is read into the story as the desiring bride. The liturgies for the Marian feast days drew upon the Song (as well as on other passages from the biblical Wisdom literature), and these Marian liturgies in turn necessitated and influenced subsequent commentaries in which Mary is read as the beloved of Christ, often in place of, or alongside, readings which interpreted the feminine beloved as Ecclesia. In the medieval liturgical and commentary traditions, the divine eros is essentially polymorphous; heavenly love does not heed the earthly conventions governing erotic contact between genders and family members, and Christ and Mary may be found represented in various configurations of erotic relation to one another.

Beyond the intradivine erotic processes figured in liturgical and exegetical works, it is well known that the Song has deeply informed

---

1 A list of the major early commentaries (to 1200) is given at the end of Ann Matter's study, *The Voice of My Beloved*. Translations from many important late medieval commentaries (excluding Bernard) are given in the useful anthology at the end of Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory*. The most influential Marian commentaries on the Song include those of Honorius Augustodunensis and Rupert of Deutz. Honorius wrote two commentaries; one, known as the *Sigillum Beate Marie* [PL 172:495–518] (circa 1103), and a later more elaborate work, the *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum* [PL 172:347–496], some time after 1132. Rupert is responsible for the most extensive early Marian commentary, written ca. 1125: the *Commentaria in Canticum Canticorum (de incarnatione Domini)*. For discussion of these against the background of the Marian liturgies, see Matter, chapter 6. On Honorius, also helpful is Amelia Carr's introduction to her translation of his *Sigillum* or *Seal of the Blessed Mary*. 
the ways in which late medieval writers described personal experiences of the divine. Examples can be found in works by affective mystics of both genders, from Beguines like Hadewijch, Gertrude the Great and Mechtilde of Magdeburg to the Victorine writers and Richard Rolle. The Song also clearly influenced more theoretical and prescriptive works giving instruction on the leading of a holy life (including works for women, like the Ancrene Wisse, or Guide for Anchoresses).2

The fact that people dedicated to lives of asceticism and celibacy so often describe—or are instructed to imagine—their relation to the divine through the modality of an experience of erotic passion is a paradox which finds itself directly addressed at some point in most modern secondary works on the experiential and exegetical uses of the Song. In Denys Turner’s delicate analysis of the Song commentaries, Eros and Allegory, he reiterates the question: why eros? Why does eros underlie a conception of God’s relation to the humanum and vice versa, considering that it does so in commentaries on the Song written in a monastic culture where celibacy is upheld as an ascetic virtue? He directs us into the commentaries by the avenue of the pseudo-Dionysius: God “is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (agape) and by yearning (eros) and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide in all things.”3 Turner constructs his own theological elaboration of Dionysius’ words:

the divine eros is a love which creates that other which it loves, for it creates out of goodness, not because of any supererogatory goodness it can thereby secure. It is out of that “necessity” which is love that God creates; but creation is for that same reason an absolutely free act and we should be entirely lost for the words in which to construe this paradox if we had not the language of eros in which to utter it.4

---

2 Secondary works on these authors and their relation to the Song are numerous; the mystical tradition has generally been studied more (and its authors have been more frequently edited and translated) than the commentary tradition. English versions of the important mystical texts are available in the “Classics of Western Spirituality” series. Beguines and Victorines are discussed in Bernard McGinn, The Flowering of Mysticism, and more briefly in his pithy essay “The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism.” For Rolle’s use of the Song see especially Denis Renevey, Language, Self and Love. Discussion of the Song particularly as it influenced Middle English writings (including both Rolle and the Ancrene Wisse) may be found in Astell’s Song of Songs in the Middle Ages.

3 From Divine Names, 712 B, quoted in Turner, Eros and Allegory, 47–48; also 67.

4 Turner, Eros and Allegory, 67.