

DO NOT PRESS ME TO LEAVE YOU: NARRATIVE DESIRE AND THE BOOK OF RUTH

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Abstract

The post-exilic book of Ruth is celebrated by queer and feminist scholars for its ostensibly affirmative depiction of woman-identified, erotic love. Yet, while the story foregrounds an interethnic, female partnership, the patriarchal and heteronormative institutions of marriage, motherhood and nation are all reinforced at the narrative's conclusion. Moreover, Ruth is one of the most ambiguous books in the Hebrew Bible, rendering the relationship between its female characters exceedingly complex. How then should woman-identified readers approach Ruth, *a book that appears to exploit the very woman-identified relationships they seek to lift up in order to reinscribe the very invisibility they seek to overcome?*

With these matters in mind, this dissertation offers a critical paradigm for reading Ruth through the lens of "narrative desire." Steeped principally in the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, narrative desire brings together insights from narratology, feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, philosophical studies and queer theory. As an interdisciplinary way of reading, narrative desire provides a versatile approach to indeterminate texts, highlighting the erotic interplay between a narrative's structure and content, and the reader's response. Through exegetical analyses with several contemporary intertexts, I investigate the workings of desires that shape the text's formation and its reception and trace ways of negotiating the book of Ruth that deny, limit or affirm the subjectivity of woman-identified readers.

Deryn Guest's principles of lesbian-identified hermeneutics form the methodological backdrop for my exegesis. Drawing on the principles of *resistance* and *rupture*, I read Ruth alongside Fanny Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and John Avnet's film adaptation, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, in order to interrogate the ambiguity that shapes Ruth and Naomi's relationship and to uncover what Leah Ceccarelli calls "strategic ambiguity," a

form of polysemy intended to appeal to divergent audiences. Next, I offer a *reclamation* of the text, drawing on Jeanette Winterson's treatment of the relationship between a lesbian daughter and her mother in the novel *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* to argue for an alternative interpretation of the character of Ruth as a woman-identified daughter in search of both autonomy and ongoing connection to "the mother's house." Finally, I turn to the critical question of *re-engagement*. Reading Ruth alongside Amos Gitai's film *Golem, The Spirit of Exile*, I examine the hidden presence of heterosexual and racial melancholia, terms coined by Judith Butler and Anne Anlin Cheng, David Eng and Shinhee Han respectively. Shedding light on the forestalled grief that attends the exilic experience and shapes the thwarted eroticism between Ruth and Naomi, one discovers a history of loss that continues to touch readers in the present. Drawing historical gleanings from each of these readings, I conclude that an expanded woman-identified perspective on Ruth is both viable and crucial to understanding the complex negotiations of identity and communal boundaries in the ancient context of Yehud.

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“Hymn to Her”

Let me inside you
Into your room
I've heard it's lined
With the things you don't show
Lay me beside you
Down on the floor
I've been your lover
From the womb to the tomb
I dress as your daughter
When the moon becomes round
You be my mother
When everything's gone

And she will always carry on
Something is lost
But something is found
They will keep on speaking her name
Some things change
Some stay the same

Keep beckoning to me
From behind that closed door
The maid and the mother
And the crone that's grown old

I hear your voice
Coming out of that hole
I listen to you
And I want some more
I listen to you
And I want some more

And she will always carry on
Something is lost
But something is found
They will keep on speaking her name
Some things change
Some stay the same

- Meg Keene

Introduction “A Story I Do Not Trust”

“What appears at first sight to be a little piece of harmless entertainment may turn out to contain insights which will change our consciousness.”

- Jack Priestly¹

“All right, but first I want to say it’s a story I do not trust.”

- “Becky”²

In fiction writer Norma Rosen’s short piece “Dialogue on Devotion,” she portrays an imaginary meeting of the “facetiously acronymed WGTDTB: Women Gathered to Deplore the Bible.”³ On this particular night, the women convene to discuss the merits and dangers of the selfless acts of devotion portrayed in the book of Ruth. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, the women struggle with the text, resisting it and at the same time holding it close in order to extract a blessing. Frustrated by what appears to be the manipulation of female characters toward patriarchal ends, the women nonetheless marvel at the story’s staying power. As the untrustworthy Becky admits, “The whole world takes this story to its heart.”⁴

For centuries the book of Ruth has been heralded as a tale of two courageous women, the Moabite Ruth and her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, who work together to make a better life for themselves in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. As widows with no monetary power or men to speak for them, they are forced to creatively subvert the economic and legal systems of their day in order to survive. Today readers continue to return to this story for inspiration and

¹ Jack Priestly, “Concepts with Blurred Edges: Story and the Religious Imagination,” *Religious Education* 78, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 383-384.

² Norma Rosen, “Dialogue on Devotion,” in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 349.

³ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 349.

sustenance. Women in particular recognize the bonds of love connecting daughters, mothers and lovers that exist between Ruth, Naomi and her kinsman Boaz. The exceptional loving-kindness (the Hebrew concept of *hesed*) each one ostensibly shows to the others remains a model for living and a source of strength for the oppressed.

And yet for some the story is also deeply dissatisfying. As Jewish scholar and rabbi Vanessa L. Ochs observes, there are many “glitches” that are overlooked in standard interpretations of Ruth, glitches that, as a young reader of Torah, she was taught to bypass in order to “smooth away the irritants and restore happy coherence to the original text.”⁵ Feminist interpreters in particular have encouraged readers to take a second look at the unsettling aspects of the text and interrogate previous scholarly presumptions. Does Naomi sincerely reciprocate Ruth’s devotion despite Naomi’s many silences? Is Ruth fully accepted into the community by the end of the story given the narrator’s preoccupation with her foreignness? If Boaz knows Ruth is in need, why does he wait until she risks everything on the threshing floor before agreeing to redeem her? What becomes of Ruth after she gives her son over to Naomi and no longer speaks? The question of how we might begin to adjudicate such matters will soon take up our attention. For now, let us observe that the book of Ruth presents these and many more unresolved tensions. While Ruth and Naomi overcome numerous obstacles to secure a resting place for themselves, they remain dependent on a system which subjugates the powerless. What begins as a narrative purportedly driven by the “brave and bold decision of women,”⁶ becomes for many a source of dissatisfaction and grief.

My own engagement with the book of Ruth began with a conflicting mixture of celebration and lament. Among the many *hesed*-motivated gleaners in the fields of *bet lehem*,

⁵ Vanessa L. Ochs, “Reading Ruth: Where Are the Women?,” in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 290.

⁶ Phyllis Trible, “A Human Comedy,” in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 195.

lesbian/woman-identified⁷ interpreters like me have turned to the book of Ruth for nourishment. Because there are so few examples of positive female relationships in the Hebrew Bible, feminist and lesbian-identified interpreters often tout Ruth as a *cause célèbre*. Lesbians recognize facets of their own stories in the encounter between Ruth and Naomi, who defy social expectations and legal barriers in order to remain together and create an alternative family. Depicting “the closest physical relationship between two women expressed anywhere in the Bible,”⁸ the book of Ruth suggests evidence of a homoerotic attachment between two females. Whether lesbian-identified readers view the book of Ruth as a sacred text or simply a premiere example of ancient literature, here it seems that, finally, members of “our tribe” come out of the shadows.

The more one attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff, however, the more difficult it is to separate the lesbian-affirmative facets of the text from a deeply patriarchal and heteronormative narrative. The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is exceptionally complex, and their devotion to one another is by no means assured. Naomi devotes considerable energy into finding “a home” (*mānôāh*, 3:1; cf. 1:9, “security”), that is, a husband, for Ruth, and the community measures Ruth’s ultimate worth in terms of her ability to give Naomi a son and build up the house of Israel (4:11-16).⁹ While Ruth subversively disrupts the boundaries demarcating the limits of her sexuality, gender and ethnicity, those same boundaries are realigned as the narrative draws to a close. After the birth of Obed, she ceases to speak in the very book that bears her name. How then should lesbian-identified readers approach Ruth, *a book that appears to exploit the very woman-identified relationships we seek to lift up in order to reinscribe the*

⁷ See Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227-254. These terms are defined in more detail below.

⁸ Mona West, “Ruth,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, eds. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 191.

⁹ All biblical citations referencing only chapter and number refer to the book of Ruth. Unless otherwise indicated, direct quotations taken from the Hebrew Bible are from the Jewish Public Society (JPS) translation and citations from the New Testament are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

very invisibility we seek to overcome? Are we, like jilted lovers, seduced by the narrative into embracing an unsustainable relationship? Is Ruth pressing us to leave her, as Naomi once pressed her (1:16)?

Finding Our Past

While Ruth and Naomi are fictional characters and the term “lesbian” is anachronistic to the context in which Ruth was written, the questions raised here nevertheless bear historical significance. In the absence of direct historical witnesses, scholars often turn to literature for evidence of same-sex relationships and non-normative expressions of sexuality and gender. The linguistic turn in biblical studies brought with it a renewed interest in the study of narrative as a historical resource, if not to the world of the characters in the story, then to the cultural concerns and practices of the text’s audience. This is the task of literary historiography, which looks to a society’s artistic productions to shed light on the peoples of the past, their beliefs, their longings, their allegiances and their traumas.

That being said, the distinction between “direct historical witnesses” and “literary” sources for history is somewhat false, for as a growing number of contemporary historians argue, all history is “a narrative that presents a past”(to use Marc Zvi Brettler’s definition with relation to the Bible).¹⁰ Historical accounts are typically structured in storytelling form, replete with the same interpretive features (e.g. exposition, climax, point of view) that characterize fiction. One

¹⁰ Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 12. In addition to In addition to Brettler, 8-19, for a sampling of helpful works on the subject of biblical historiography, see also, John Barton, “Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is There Any Common Ground?,” in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, eds. Stanley. E. Porter, Paul Joyce and David E. Orton (Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), 3-15; Hans M. Barstad, *History and the Hebrew Bible: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near East Historiography* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Louis C. Jonker, ed. *Historiography and Identity (Re)formulation in Second Temple Historiographical Literature* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010); and E. Theodore Mullen, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1993).

only needs to look to the writings of the first century Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus to see how narrative techniques are employed to cast historical “truth” in ideological terms that often bridge any hard distinction between fact and fiction. Still, ancient writers did not deem literal veracity essential in order to convey a sense of truth; therefore, the task of the biblical historiographer is to attempt to understand how a narrative reflects the social makeup, identity formation and ideological investments of its ancient audience.

In *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics*, Deryn Guest identifies many of the challenges associated with the uncovering of “lesbian” history in the ancient world. “Arguably, the single most pressing obstacle to any kind of lesbian-identified critical study is invisibility,” she writes.¹¹ Not only have “gay” and “lesbian” histories been ignored and suppressed as subjects of inquiry until very recently, when scholars do look for evidence of such histories they are confronted with difficult questions regarding terminology and methodology. How does one substantiate or categorize same-sex relationships between women when the term “homosexual” only appears in the late nineteenth century? What counts for indications of female homoeroticism? All-female communities? Resistance to marriage? Passionate friendships? Sexual relations? Should we correlate same-sex activity with a lifelong identity type? To what degree should figures from the past look like “us” in the present?¹²

Searching for evidence of same-sex relations and relationships in the Hebrew Bible has proved particularly difficult. While the debates regarding homosexuality and the Bible are familiar enough that I do not need to reproduce them here, suffice it to say the information the Bible does provide is largely polemical in nature. In Leviticus 18 and 20, for example, the biblical writer(s) attempt to set apart Israelites from Canaanites by expressly forbidding

¹¹ Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 111.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111-130.

“perverse” sexual practices supposedly observed by the latter (Lev 18:3, 20:13). As Ken Stone observes, this polemic extended into modern biblical scholarship. While there is no archeological evidence to support a Canaanite “sex cult,” Canaanite agricultural practices (which seem to be no different from Israelite practices) were frequently characterized in early twentieth century biblical commentary as involving abnormal sexual acts. It seems the strategy of the biblical writer(s) to couple sexual derogation with xenophobic rhetoric was so successful that it continues to negatively shape perceptions to this day.¹³

Nonetheless, such biblical prohibitions do provide acknowledgement that same-sex activity occurred. While the references pertain to male relations, Guest makes note of some potential allusions to female homoeroticism in the literature of surrounding cultures.¹⁴ Furthermore, recently biblical commentators have put forth a range of deconstructive readings that indicate an anxiety on the part of biblical writers regarding the heteronormative assumptions underlying the Israelite worldview. Stone observes, for example, that Genesis 3:16’s dual injunction that the woman’s desire will be for the man and that she will submit to him as a consequence of her rebellion intimates “that women might have good reasons for refusing to submit to the terms of the heterosexual contract.”¹⁵ The insecurity manifest in this double indemnity strongly suggests that the presumption of male-female complementarity is not as

¹³ Ken Stone, “Queering the Canaanite,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, eds. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 119-127; cf. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 199-202. While scholars are increasingly scrutinizing the biblical portrayal of the Canaanites as sexually deviant, the polemic is still reproduced in popular writing. See for example, Jeff Miner and John Tyler Connoley, *The Children Are Free: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence on Same-sex Relationships* (Indianapolis, Ind: Jesus Metropolitan Community Church, 2002), 10-11.

¹⁴ Guest, 125. Guest admits these references (a Ugarit source in which servant girls are said to behave lasciviously at a banquet and an omen within a Mesopotamian almanac of incantations that mentions women copulating) raise the possibility of homoerotic relations between women. Cf. M.H. Pope, “Homosexuality,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Supplementary Volume, eds. Keith Crim, et.al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 514-517; and Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1998), 35-36.

¹⁵ Ken Stone, “The Garden of Eden and the Heterosexual Contract,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, eds. Robert Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 64; cited in Guest, 150.

ubiquitous in the ancient world as we have assumed, thus “open[ing] up spaces for the production of alternative, queer subjects of religious and theological discourse.”¹⁶

Ruth and Naomi, alongside David and Jonathan,¹⁷ appear to be the most viable queer subjects in the Hebrew Bible. Turning the heterosexual contract of Genesis on its head, Ruth clings (*dābaq*) to Naomi (1:14) just as Adam is said to cling (*dābaq*) to Eve (Gen 2:24). Yet at least one scholar critical of queer interpretations of Ruth argues against the historical plausibility of such readings since there was nothing like a “lesbian romance novella” known in the ancient Near East.¹⁸ While this may be true, it does not mean that writings dealing with intimate relations between women (or actual woman-identified women) were unknown to post-exilic Jews. Some scholars date the Song of Songs to the post-exilic period, which would suggest the influence of Greek literature and art.¹⁹ Among those influences perhaps was the writer Sappho (b. 630-612 B.C.E., d. 570 B.C.E.), whose poetry sometimes centered on woman-identified love. While Sappho’s direct influence on the book of Ruth is doubtful, the fact of the poet’s near contemporaneousness to the author(s) of Ruth increases the possibility that the post-exilic author(s) and audience may have also been familiar with the existence of homoerotic verse.

Having raised the question of history, I nonetheless wish to suggest that the historiographic task which we are undertaking exceeds the question of whether we can salvage a “lesbian” Ruth from the past. The “historical gleanings” that we will attempt to gather throughout our study will ideally illuminate the ways in which sexuality is employed

¹⁶ Stone, “Garden of Eden,” 36; cited in Guest, 151.

¹⁷ For recent treatments of homoerotic love between David and Jonathan, see James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013); Anthony Heacock, *Jonathan Loved David: Manly Love in the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Sex* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011); and Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 1-76.

¹⁸ Scott N. Callaham, “But Ruth Clung to Her: Textual Constraints on Ambiguity in Ruth 1:14,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 63, no. 2 (Jan 1, 2012): 194.

¹⁹ Ariel A. Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), 24-26.

(consciously and unconsciously) as a narrative device. The negotiation of erotic language, intimate relationships and sexual roles together reveals broader issues of identity central to the writer(s) and the audience. As literary critic Ross Chambers observes, all discourse is constituted by a *sui-referential* system that, notably, *cleaves* (i.e. clings) the reader to the narrator by means of narrative seductions.²⁰ If Ruth inexplicably clings to Naomi despite dismissal, frustration and disappointment, readers and listeners likewise cling to the narrative to fulfill complex longings that may run deep. The power of the book of Ruth perhaps lies less in what it reveals to us about the past than in how it continues to shape us as historical subjects in the present.

Reading Desire

Such considerations point to the matter of *desire*. The subject of *narrative desire* – that is, how stories play upon our desires, as well as how our desires shape our reading of biblical narratives – offers some innovative insight into the intersubjective relationship between the Bible and its interpreters. Narrative desire illuminates the myriad forms of persuasion, inducement, yearning, pleasure, dissatisfaction, frustration and heartbreak we experience as readers. Where previous scholars of Ruth have explored its sexual content through the relations between characters, here I wish examine the dynamics of desire as they occur between reader and text. The book of Ruth is especially suited for an inquiry into narrative desire. As with many biblical narratives, its characters are endowed with yearnings both rudimentary and complex; plots are fueled by longings spoken and unspoken; and readers respond out of desires conscious and unaware. Moreover, within Ruth one finds a veritable surplus of narrative gaps and textual uncertainties that require the reader's active engagement. The desires of the narrative world and

²⁰ Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 4, 217-218.

the external desires of interpreters come together in an elaborate dance, leading to a wide range of interpretive outcomes.

But how does one *read* desire? As narrative critics have observed, writers, through strategies of exposition, transition, diversion and closure, *pattern* our desires and attempt to transform us into ideal kinds of desirers.²¹ We in turn conform to or resist such seductions as the demands of our own questions and investments shape our reading. In Chapter One, I will explore in more detail the various analytic and philosophical approaches to narrative desire among literary and biblical critics. As we have already observed, a fundamental aspect of narrative desire is the issue of *identity*. Throughout the centuries authors have employed the written word to mold the self-perceptions and communal character of their readers. This is certainly true with biblical literature, which is largely preoccupied with shaping the communal memory and self-understanding of the people of God. Readers then and today have looked to literature to confirm, and in some cases challenge, our sense of self. We read to both mirror and complicate our understanding of the world and our place within it.

My own identity has been integral to how this project has unfolded. In the spring of 2011, I participated in a biblical studies seminar on Ruth at Drew University where I began to explore the story's significance for lesbian-identified readers. Dissatisfied by what I felt to be limited engagement with the text of Ruth by previous lesbian and bisexual scholars, I set out to ascertain whether a woman-identified interpretation of Ruth and Naomi's relationship was indeed viable based upon my own interpretation of the narrative. The theme for the seminar, "Framing Ruth," centered on various ways in which the Ruth narrative is framed both within the Bible and through its reception. For me, the theme proved to be ironic; I found that I myself felt "framed"

²¹ Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.

by a slippery text and a community of interpreters (*my* community of interpreters) perhaps overeager to find images of themselves in the story. In a presentation to my colleagues, I shared the following:

This is where I find myself at the close of Ruth: Unsatisfied. Yearning. Unresolved. I am reduced to “if onlys.” *If only I read the story again with fresh eyes, I might trace my way out of its labyrinth. If only I was a Jew, midrash could save me. If only I was a pure deconstructionist, unstable texts could sustain me. If only I did not desire so much from this story. If only I did not desire so much. If only I was not a lesbian.*

My engagement with Ruth became a swan song in which I felt there was nothing left to do but forgo my investments and come to terms with my own imperceptibility in the words on the page. What pained me most was that I felt I may have to concede to the counterarguments of those scholars who regard homosexuality as sinful.²² Fortunately, my colleagues encouraged me to press on and see if anything might lie beyond the impasses I presumed existed.

My swan song also suggested there was a great deal more at stake in the questions I was raising than my identity as a lesbian. As I have situated myself as a biblical scholar at Drew, I have outwardly adopted the postmodern interpretive tools of my training, while inwardly I apparently resisted the instability and uncertainty that adheres in a deconstructive approach. Despite whatever intellectual distancing from the Bible as a sacred text I had feigned, as a Christian I needed Ruth to speak a divine word of good news to women and men like myself, who have been marginalized in our communities of faith. As a woman and a lesbian who typically finds more sustenance in feminist retellings of biblical stories than in the Bible itself, I

²² The most prominent example is Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). While Gagnon’s work has exegetical merits, it has been heavily critiqued on both intellectual and ethical grounds. In a footnote he makes reference to a homoerotic reading of Ruth as “desperate,” however he does not engage the scholarship on the subject (154). For critical evaluations, see William L. Countryman, "Review of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*," *Anglican Theological Review* 85, no. 1 (2003): 196-197; David J. Hester, "Review of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*," *Review of Biblical Literature* 7 (Jul 5 2003), http://bookreviews.org/pdf/1798_3289.pdf; William Stacy Johnson, "Review of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*," *Theology Today* 63.3 (Oct 1, 2006): 386-394; and Eric Thurman, "Review of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*," *Review of Biblical Literature* 3 (Mar 30, 2003), http://bookreviews.org/pdf/1798_765.pdf.

wanted, in this instance, to resist the midrashic impulse and find a way to redeem the canonical text.

While no text can satisfy all of our yearnings, my continued gleaning in the book of Ruth has proved meaningful. Not only has this project engaged the many facets of my identity, it has taught me to remain with difficult questions. I believe woman-identified appropriations of Ruth are not only possible but vital to its interpretation, though it requires that we embrace the ambiguities of the text rather than resist or deny that such complexities exist. An understanding of the veiled presentation of a woman-identified relationship in Ruth is critical to comprehending the sociopolitical and psychological function of the narrative in its post-exilic context. As we trace the ways in which the homoerotic relationship between Ruth and Naomi succeeds or flounders, we will expand our insight into the multifaceted longings of the ancient audience. The combination of courage, dis-ease, subversiveness and grief that lines the book of Ruth reveals to us nothing less than the volatile and ever-evolving nature of human desires, including our own.

In what follows, I undertake a study of Ruth utilizing three contemporary intertexts to illuminate the politics of sexuality at work in the biblical text. Throughout, I will interweave questions of desire to better understand the interplay between narrative content, authorial/narrative intention, textual ambiguities and readerly longing. Chapter One will present a more in-depth introduction to the book of Ruth and the interdisciplinary inquiry into narrative desire. Not only is this broad theoretical approach (engaging insights from narratology, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, philosophical studies and queer theory) well suited to the multi-disciplinary work of intertextual analysis, the theories employed intersect in a shared interest in the role of sexuality in the shaping of discourse. Chapter Two explores the textual ambiguity in Ruth, with specific attention to those indeterminate elements that lead to varied interpretations of

the Ruth-Naomi relationship. This examination will provide the foundation for our first intertextual analysis in Chapter Three. Reading Ruth alongside Fanny's Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and John Avnet's film adaptation *Fried Green Tomatoes*, I will argue that the novel, film and biblical story each engage in what Leah Ceccarelli calls "strategic ambiguity," a form of polysemy intended to appeal to divergent audiences.²³ With deliberate design, the text is at once encoded with suggestions and denials of homoeroticism in a manner that bolsters *and* compromises standard lesbian-affirmative readings of each work. In Chapter Four, I hope to complicate those readings of Ruth that focus on Ruth and Naomi's romantic relationship by offering an alternative lesbian-identified reading foregrounding their mother- and daughter-in law relationship. Utilizing another intertext, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, I propose the ambivalent relationship Ruth shares with Naomi is reflective of contemporary lesbian experience with the mother. This alternative reading frees lesbian-identified readers from an endless eddy of narrative manipulation by providing grounds upon which to embrace the ambiguities of the text in a new way. In Chapter Five, our analysis comes full circle as we consider (perhaps unexpectedly) the importance of grappling with the *unknowable* nature of Ruth. Reading Ruth alongside Amos Gitai's cinematic retelling *Golem, The Spirit of Exile*, we will explore the ways in which the exilic experience manifests itself in sexual and racial/ethnic loss. The underlying heterosexual and racial melancholia at work in the film and the book of Ruth sheds yet further light on Ruth's textual indeterminacy and raises important insights into the question of queer history with which we began.

²³ Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 395-415.

Intertextuality

The chosen intertexts introduced above were selected for both their thematic and narratological similarities and contrasts to Ruth, as will become evident when we begin our exploration of each. Previously, intertextual studies on Ruth have primarily examined the diachronic (i.e., historically influenced) intersections between Ruth and other biblical narratives looking for evidence of linguistic and thematic allusion.²⁴ Direct influence need not be a prerequisite for intertextual analysis, however. Here I assume a synchronic approach, as described by Julia Kristeva, in which every discourse is “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning).”²⁵ Intertexts do not merely add derivative meaning to an original, stable text. Rather, through comparison, they reveal the polyvalence of textual meaning. While authors and interpreters may attempt to impose limitations on the possibilities for interpretation, intertexts expose the specter of textual authority. As Peter D. Miscall writes:

From the perspective of intertextuality, textual authority and status are always in question since texts are interdependent and use each other. No text is an island. Displacement and decentering, rather than replacement and chaos, are two terms and concepts that attempt to express the questioning of authority and status and not the complete loss of either. The text is not undone and replaced. It is displaced and shifted from its former position of authority. It may have moved elsewhere but it is still somewhere. It does not disappear. To destroy a text’s center is to reduce it to chaos; to decenter it is to move the center elsewhere, an elsewhere that is no longer an absolutely controlling and dominating site. Textual authority and status are in question because the original text no longer has the necessary site and center to exercise its previous authority. But the authority and status are “in question” and are not totally removed or denied.²⁶

²⁴ For intertextual examinations of this kind, see for example, Harold Fisch, “Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History,” *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 425-37; and Ellen Van Wolde, “Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives,” *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 1 (Jan 1997): 1-28; also see Chapter One, note 18.

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardin and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237-270. Originally published in *Sēmeiōtikē. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), 143-173; cited in Danna Nolan Fewell, ed., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 22.

²⁶ Peter D. Miscall, “Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book,” in Fewell, *Reading Between Texts*, 45.

Regardless of the historical relationship between texts, intertextual analysis inspires us to ask questions and draw previously unconsidered insights from the text. This in turn enables us to “move the center elsewhere” and expand the boundaries of textual meaning.

Narrative desire figures prominently in intertextual relationships. Artists both reproduce and upend the textual features of other texts, trading in their own economies of desire. The novels and film explored here not only demonstrate a range of creative adaptations of Ruth but offer countercoherent readings that decenter and subvert dominant interpretations, especially in relation to issues of sexuality, identity, and inclusion. In addition to thematic intersections, these appropriations either mimic narrative strategies or manipulate Ruth’s narrative structure, revealing the investments and values inherent to the original story.

Woman-Identified Hermeneutics

The book of Ruth no doubt piques women’s desires, and in particular those of lesbian women. But how does one go about defining women’s “desires” or articulating what constitutes a particular group’s yearnings in any collective sense? Can we assume any common set of presumptions, values, or longings that shape how women approach a text, sacred or otherwise? Are there criteria upon which one might label a text “a woman’s story” or “lesbian”?

Admittedly, it is impossible to provide a method that will satisfy the requirements or proclivities of every interpreter, particularly in relation to subjects as personal, unstable and multifarious as desire, sexuality and identity. However, a guiding principle which can ground our work is *subjectivity*, specifically the ways and means by which readers experience themselves represented or empowered when reading a literary text. While it stands to reason that a reader will not find herself reflected in the characters or subject matter of every text, she will always

have the opportunity to experience herself as a *reading subject*; that is, she will see herself as having a crucial role to play in the creation of meaning.²⁷

Approximately midway through the twentieth century, narrative critics set out to define the notion of a reading subject. Does the reader confer meaning on a text through her active reading response or does she bring to life the intended meaning predetermined by the author? This conversation inaugurated the sub-discipline within literary criticism now known as reader-response theory. Today the debate continues with scholars finding themselves located somewhere on a continuum spanning from what Hugh C. White terms “right-wing” and “left-wing” reader-response. Right-wing reader-response critics argue interpreters play a role dictated by the *codes of the text*, whereas left-wing reader-response critics cease to speak of authorial intention, locating the site of meaning-making fully *within the reader*.²⁸

²⁷ Here I do not wish to espouse an essentialist view of the self that is static and unchanging, but rather a notion of the reading subject as one who is dynamic and capable of multiple identifications. As Guest observes, “The very terminology of ‘subjects’ is a decisive move away from the concept of ‘selves.’ The modernist concept of the essential self with a core identity as a natural given is abandoned in the postmodernist recognition that the self is a constructed idea; a provisional and shifting product shaped by discourse and behavior” (42, n26).

²⁸ Hugh C. White, “The Trace of the Author in the Text,” in *Textual Determinacy, Part Two. Semeia* 71, eds. Robert C. Culley and Robert B. Robinson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 48-49. For a helpful overview of the development of reader-response criticism, see Jane P. Tompkins, ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). Though the so-called “intention fallacy” was raised in 1946 by William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, early twentieth century literary scholars ascribed to the notion that an author’s intention could be uncovered. Debate largely centered on the relationship between the author and the text, with the response of the reader largely presumed to be a function of the narrative. See William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468-88. In 1950, formalist critic Walter Gibson was one of the first to suggest a difference between a real reader and the intended reader. The “mock reader” is a role to which an individual may choose to conform or resist, and a narrative’s ability to successfully invite the reader into that role is the mark of its quality. While most critics continued to maintain that meaning is inherent to the text, debates ensued about the reader’s relative agency or passivity. See Walter Gibson, “Authors Speakers, Readers and Mock Readers,” in Tompkins, 1-6, excerpt reprinted from *College English* 11 (Feb 1950): 265-269; Some twenty years after Gibson, Wolfgang Iser presented his now well-known concept of the implied reader, one who actualizes the meaning of the narrative. Giving the reader an equal value alongside the text, Iser’s contribution marked a significant shift in the theoretical conversation. The reader, according to Iser, is a co-creator of the text alongside the author; filling gaps and activating implied aspects of the work. See Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in Tompkins, 50-69; reprinted from Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns in Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 274-294. Around the same time, Roland Barthes more radically pronounced “the death of the author,” paving the way for Stanley Fish to declare there is no text outside of an interpretive community. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image—Music—Text*, ed.

Early biblical narratologists such as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg have largely ascribed to the right-wing view, focusing on the Bible's persuasive art. Among his contributions, Alter coined the phrase "the art of reticence" to describe the biblical narrator's clandestine role in influencing the reader. Through limited interruption and dispassionate commentary, the narrator focalizes our point of view through covert means of characterization.²⁹ Sternberg also highlighted the narrator's ability to shape a reader's judgments, particularly through the use of narrative gaps. According to Sternberg, there is an intended structural relationship between a narrative gap and a reader's response. The reader fills the gap in a causal chain, working to forge "maximal relevance" between elements of the narrative in order to arrive at a plausible hypothesis. For the hypothesis to have validity, he contends, it must be legitimated by the text.³⁰

While Alter and Sternberg dramatically enhanced the conversation on Hebrew biblical aesthetics, the problem with their approach lies with the question of how one substantiates the intention of the author, particular when readers arrive at different conclusions. More recently literary critic Mieke Bal has proposed the more balanced concept of *narrativity*, which I will apply here. Bal stresses that the artist has no control over future interpretation (whatever her intention), however, the *work's* "agency" is still of consequence. She advocates a shift in emphasis from the intentionality of the author to the intentionality of the work. Because it is the critical reader who literally "authorizes" an interpretation, narrativity places the interpreter at the

and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148; and Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980).

²⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 143-162.

³⁰ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 186-188. Sternberg's famous illustration of gap-filling, the "two-fold hypothesis" regarding whether or not Uriah the Hittite knows of David's sexual encounter with his wife Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), illustrates Sternberg's confidence that the reader will be led to the appropriate conclusions regardless of how he or she fills the gaps in the narrative. Whether or not the reader believes that Uriah does or does not know of David's and Bathsheba's infidelity when he is summoned home (and Sternberg convincingly argues for both hypotheses), the interplay of two equally valid possibilities succeeds in making David appear even more ruthless than if the narrator had told us something like "and Uriah did not know." This allows the narrator to more indirectly pass judgment on David (*ibid.*, 201-209).

center of the meaning-making process without abandoning the critical ways the artistic form impacts the reader.³¹ Bal's concept provides an intersubjective model of the text-viewer/reader relationship in which "the experience of viewing pictures [or reading narrative] is itself imbued with process. In this process, interiority and exteriority interact and get entangled without actually merging into a unified stability."³² Narrativity serves our purposes well. In some instances we will consider the original author's purpose in writing, and, in others, focus on meanings that may exceed the author's (or authors') original intent. In all cases, our working assumption will be that the desires motivating interpretations of Ruth proceed from the work as well as the reader, often interacting in a dynamic web of exchange.

With its origins in gay and lesbian studies, queer hermeneutics recognizes the critical role of the reading subject. In his introduction to *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, Ken Stone outlines a range of approaches associated with queer reading. "Queer" is often intended as a social location, be it the critic's own identity as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (lgbt) person, or as an ally of the lgbt community. In this vein queer commentary may consider how the Bible speaks to contemporary sexual and gender minorities and examine texts in which there is evidence of homoerotic expression or homophobia. Another kind of queer reading may, however, place into question the stability of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and assumptions about the natural gender complementarity of men and women, probing the text for alternative sexual and gender possibilities. Still, other queer readings might build on such an analysis by looking at the relationship of race/ethnicity, class and ability to sex and gender as

³¹ Mieke Bal, "Intention," in *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 236-265.

³² *Ibid.*, 258.

raised in the text, with attention to the fluid interplay of socially constructed categories of identity.³³

Though not merely a derivative discipline, lesbian hermeneutics certainly has much in common with queer hermeneutics. “Woman-identified” and “lesbian-identified” hermeneutics are grounded in the concept of a “lesbian continuum” proposed by Adrienne Rich. Rich expands the definition of lesbian from those women who identify as homosexual to a broader category of “women-identified women.”³⁴ She employs the notion of a continuum in order “to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support.”³⁵ The lesbian- or woman-identified woman functions as a figure of resistance against all forms of compulsory heterosexuality, the ideology that women and men are innately attracted to the opposite sex and the heteronormative and patriarchal institutions that reinforce such as belief.

A lesbian-identified hermeneutic gives rise to the range of interpretive possibilities described by Stone, with one important caveat. Guest cogently argues that lesbian *sexuality* must be foregrounded in order for lesbian hermeneutics to retain a critical edge. A “strong carnal element” is necessary to counter the erasure of actual lesbians in literature and society, and, moreover, to highlight the political nature of lesbian identity.³⁶ While Adrienne Rich envisions

³³ Ken Stone, “Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible: An Introduction,” in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Stone (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 21-22. Stone points out these latter issues of intersectionality have rarely been taken up in biblical hermeneutics, acknowledging that issues of intersectionality are not even dealt with comprehensively in his edited volume. However, Stone himself provide an excellent example of this kind of reading in his “Queering the Canaanite.”

³⁴ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 227-254.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

³⁶ Guest, 32-34. Guest goes on to say that while this does not mean that the lesbian signifier must always be equated with sexual activity (some lesbians are celibate), female homoeroticism is essential to the discussion if the political dimension of the lesbian signifier is to retain its force (35). In the early days of second-wave feminism, the stigmatization of lesbianism was successfully employed to divide heterosexual and homosexual women and to

the lesbian continuum as a place that would unite all woman-identified women in the struggle against patriarchy, she insists upon the term lesbian precisely because within lesbianism is the inherent recognition that women do not exist to satisfy male sexuality. Lesbian sexuality is taboo (usually only surfacing under the male gaze of pornography) because what men fear, according to Rich, is not the female sexual appetite per se, but women's indifference to men.³⁷ As Guest writes, "the lesbian signifier should not be diluted of its sexual features but enriched by its power to fright, to provoke anxiety, to disturb and unsettle. It is the sexual dimension of the word, *combined with* the radical commitment to women and the threat that *many* women will choose lesbianism, which gives it that power."³⁸

Despite its strengths, Guest points to some of the potential pitfalls of a lesbian-identified hermeneutic. First, there is the risk of promoting an essential or natural category of lesbian. Not only would this limit the very elasticity of the lesbian continuum meant to bring together all women in their efforts against sexism, it could paradoxically serve to "[reify] a sexual category that will continue to divide one kind of woman from another . . . sustaining the homo-hetero binary that has funded the history of oppression."³⁹ As Judith Butler argues, by "coming out" as lesbian, one perpetuates the belief that homosexuality is a derivative of heterosexuality. Even if one does not subscribe to notions of biological determinism, the claim to an intrinsic lesbian identity perpetuates the need to substantiate the self against others which fuels the cycle of naturalization and marginalization.⁴⁰ Secondly, the primarily white Western category of "lesbian" does not necessarily resonate with non-white and non-Western women. The term

undercut the resistance to compulsory heterosexuality that lesbians, by their very existence, brought to light. For a fuller discussion, see Guest, 19-38.

³⁷ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 236.

³⁸ Guest, 34. Emphasis in original.

³⁹ Guest, 158. Cf. 37-38, 117-123.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 16-17.

cannot be assumed to define universally the terms and conditions upon which woman-identified women will consider themselves as such.⁴¹

Notwithstanding these concerns, Guest persists in employing the lesbian signifier as a heuristic tool, promoting a notion of “strategic constructionism” or what others may term strategic essentialism,⁴² a hermeneutical approach that allows for an interpretive foothold while appreciating the limitations of perspective any one identity marker may afford.⁴³ The lesbian signifier is a positional category, not an ontological status, employed with the understanding that sexuality is a permanently unstable, socially constructed concept.⁴⁴ Literary critic Valerie Traub observes how a hermeneutic driven solely by a strict essentialist view of sexual identity can become “the critical equivalent of ‘Look there! Look, there’s another one,’” whereas the strategically constructionist/essentialist critic can strive “not to recover the *lesbian* as a being with a discreet original and stable meaning, but rather to examine the conditions of intelligibility whereby female-female intimacies gain, or fail to gain, cultural signification.”⁴⁵ This approach also moves the focus past mere representations of lesbianism to more complex analyses of sexuality as a fulcrum for a wide variety of power relations, including the often multi-constitutive relationship linking sex, gender, and race/ethnicity.⁴⁶ As Michel Foucault argues, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those

⁴¹The histories of slavery and colonialism have forged a pernicious link between “deviant” sexuality and ‘foreign’ women and women of color; moreover contemporary gay and lesbian politics are often construed as Western imports that threaten the stability of indigenous family structures. Non-white and non-Western woman may see in the term lesbian the imposition of a hegemonic term that does not take their lived realities into full account. See Guest, 31, 60-81. For further discussion on these issues, see also Joane Nagel, “Ethnicity and Sexuality,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 114-118.

⁴² Guest, 19-42, 159. The term “strategic essentialism” originated with literary theorist and philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. See Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, “An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” *Boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993): 24-50.

⁴³ Guest, 159.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁵ Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 27-28, cited in Guest, 121. Original emphasis in Traub.

⁴⁶ Guest, 38-53, 158-159; cf. Traub, 27.

endowed with the greatest instrumentality; useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.”⁴⁷

Guest proposes four principles to guide lesbian biblical hermeneutics:

1. Resistance: commitment to a hermeneutic of hetero-suspicion
2. Rupture: commitment to the disruption of sex-gender binaries
3. Reclamation: commitment to the strategies of appropriation
4. Re-engagement: commitment to making a difference⁴⁸

The principle of *resistance* begins with a commitment to counter the ostensible absence of female homoeroticism in the Bible and other ancient literature that we discussed above.⁴⁹ Guest identifies three primary strategies that are used to obscure the evidence of female homoeroticism: the valorization of motherhood, images of women as competitive rivals, and injunctions to sex-gender complementarity.⁵⁰ The valorization of motherhood has meant that Naomi’s maternal relationship to Ruth often overshadows other conceptualizations of their relationship, and it has bolstered the presumption that Ruth desires heterosexual marriage and motherhood, issues to which we will return in Chapter Two. Though Ruth and Naomi are rarely cast as direct rivals, the caricature of women vying for the attention of men that drives other biblical stories (Rachel and Leah, for example) undercuts the notion that women might seek out other women as primary companions. The attendant presumption that a woman’s sexual desire is for a man furthermore propels the plot of Ruth and its interpretations toward heteronormative ends.

From this stance of hetero-suspicion, Guest then advocates that interpreters interrogate the sex and gender binaries assumed within the text. The principle of *rupture* requires that we pay close attention to the ways in which sexual practices are referenced in the Bible and in

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 103.

⁴⁸ Guest, 110.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-130.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 130-156.

biblical interpretation, particularly when sexual practice is cited to denigrate “the Other.” The representation of Moabites as sexually lascivious found elsewhere in the Bible (e.g. Gen 19:30-38; Num 25:1) looms in the background, making Ruth’s actions on the threshing floor all the more scandalous. Possibly her associations with Moabite debauchery cast aspersion on Ruth’s “unnatural” attachment to Naomi in the mind of ancient readers. Strategies of sexual delegitimation are typically founded upon a worldview that presumes certain normative expressions of sexuality, including male-female sexual complementarity. While a “hetero” ideology may dominate in the Bible, deconstructive readings will often expose the instability of such binary arrangements and, in some cases, suggest an implicit discomfort with or even critique of those arrangements. As we will find in the book of Ruth, categories of sex and gender are continually upended, suggesting a “queer” sensibility at work in the narrative.

With the principle of reclamation, Guest explores ways of recovering biblical texts for lesbian-identified readers. Among the strategies she explores are (1) applying “critical imagination’ with respect to textual gaps in order to explore the possibilities of same-sex relationships even where texts may be silent or evasive; (2) shifting one’s identification with various characters in the process of reading in order to illuminate new perspectives on the text; (3) replacing the implied male, heterosexual reader with a female, lesbian-identified one in order to empathize (sometimes humorously)⁵¹ with marginalized readers; and (4) applying one’s midrashic imagination in order to expand the narrative possibilities of the biblical story.⁵²

While Guest lauds the creative and corrective efforts of biblical midrashists, she also stresses the power of reading the Bible queerly without going beyond the canonical boundaries of the narrative. Reading from a lesbian perspective entails asking different questions, bringing

⁵¹ As Guest notes, reading from the perspective of a lesbian, the Levitical injunctions against lying with a man as one would with a woman is liberating for lesbians (197)!

⁵² *Ibid.*, 195-230.

woman-identified life experiences and insights to the text.⁵³ In not bringing queer perspectives to bear on canonized scripture, heteronormative and homophobic interpretations are allowed to go unchecked.⁵⁴ As we apply the first three of Guest's strategies of reclamation throughout our study, we will find that heterocentric readings are no longer as self-evident as some may assume.

Finally, Guest's principle of re-engagement calls us to wrestle with the religious, social and political implications of woman-identified hermeneutics. For some queer readers of the Bible, the ability to reclaim scripture has enabled them to remain an active part of their religious traditions and has renewed their faith in the ability of the Bible to speak to God's people. For others, sustained engagement with the Bible's treatment of sexuality has led them to conclude that scripture is no longer central to their faith or spirituality. As Guest concludes, the tasks of critiquing and reclaiming biblical texts are both critical to the ongoing work of bringing minority perspectives to bear and challenging ideologies of oppression that the Bible has traditionally been employed to justify.⁵⁵

The analyses in each chapter will follow this trajectory from resistance to re-engagement. A close reading of Ruth's textual indeterminacy and the intertextual analysis with *Fried Green Tomatoes* will engage us in the work of resistance and rupture. Our examination of Ruth alongside *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* will invite us to the task of reclamation. And in our final reading of Ruth together with *Golem, The Spirit of Exile*, we will wrestle with the question of re-engagement. How has this "harmless piece of entertainment" changed our consciousness? Is Ruth still pressing us to leave her? Perhaps we may yet extract a blessing from the fields of *bet lehem*.

⁵³ Ibid., 195-210.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 204-205.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 231-268.

Throughout our study, Meg Keene's soulful ballad, "Hymn to Her," performed by the Pretenders, will form the backdrop for our explorations.⁵⁶ While there is no indication that the song was written with the book of Ruth in mind, each stanza captures in an exceptional way the quest to understand Ruth in all her many forms. As we trace Ruth's (r)evolutions, we will, I hope, become more conscious of the desires at the heart of the quest. While she is often elusive, those familiar with Ruth's story often experience her palpable presence amidst their own relationships with the women in their lives. In this way, "she will always carry on," and assuredly, "they will keep on speaking her name."

⁵⁶ Meg Keene, "Hymn to Her," Performed by The Pretenders. *Get Close*. Sire, WEA Records, 1986, compact disc.

Chapter One Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth

*Let me inside you
into your room
I've heard it's lined
with the things you don't show*

- Meg Keene

You know that I too am still alive, at least in fiction if not in reality. The devoted scribes who wrote down my story, later to be included in their holy writs, actually describe only one year in my life, and of that only several months in detail. They focus on the weeks I spent walking with my mother-in-law, Naomi, across the Jordan to her hometown, Bethlehem, from my country, Moab (Ruth 1). Then they tell of my activities during the coming harvesting season in Bethlehem (Ruth 2). Then they go into real, if polite, song-and-dance about the single illicit night I spent with Naomi's relative Boaz, later my husband, on the threshing floor (Ruth 3). Then they jump to the legal discussion concerning Boaz's planned marriage to me (Ruth 4). They never mention the wedding itself, but they do glorify its fruit, a son. The son is then assigned to Naomi (4:16-17), and I disappear from the story that carries my name. The genealogy of King David, beginning with my son Obed at the end of my story, is a male genealogy that never mentions any mothers, just fathers and their sons (vv.18-22).

- Athalya Brenner¹

As Athalya Brenner's attempt to capture the voice of Ruth poignantly illustrates, our protagonist's story is not entirely her own. In four chapters of highly stylized Hebrew prose,² Ruth the Moabite's story, or at least a portion of it, is recounted from an Israelite point of view. But it is not so much Ruth's story (or Naomi's or Boaz's for that matter)³ as it is a community's story, told to creatively dramatize and respond to the social pressures and collective crises facing

¹ Athalya Brenner, "The Three of Us: Ruth, Orpah and Naomi," in *I Am...Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 100.

² For an analysis of Ruth's chiasmic design see Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 165-168. Though the genealogy is stylistically variant, I concur with those scholars who believe it is part of the original narrative. For further discussion, see Chapter One, note 96.

³ For an excellent discussion of readers' presumptions about Boaz's heterosexuality and the possibility that he, too, knows of the temptation to turn to younger men (!) (3:10), see Hugh S. Pyper, "Boaz Reawakened," in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines*, eds. J. K. Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines, and Christl M. Maier (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 445-457.

its audience. While early studies on Ruth looked to the narrative to shed light on ancient Near Eastern social customs and agricultural practices,⁴ later interpreters stressed Ruth's historical verisimilitude over its factuality. As biblical scholars have increasingly begun reconciling the aims of the historical-critical method with literary analysis of the Bible,⁵ there is an increased recognition that the historical "truths" contained within Ruth exceed mere facts and include insights into the anthropology, sociology, psychology and politics of the ancient storytelling community.

Our discussion here begins with a brief overview of the book of Ruth and its history of interpretation, with specific focus on issues of narrative, gender and sexuality. Next we will turn to the subject of narrative desire and the various theoretical modalities that will guide our analyses.

Ruth and its Interpretation⁶

The dating and authorship of Ruth has been a source of debate among scholars.⁷ Some date the text as early as the tenth century B.C.E., believing it to be an apology for King David's

⁴ As a demonstration of the historical concerns examined by Ruth scholars, see as examples: Simon B. Parker, "Marriage Blessing in Israelite and Ugaritic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 1 (Mar 1, 1976): 23-30; Sidney Smith, "The Threshing Floor at the City Gate," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 78 (Jan 1, 1946): 5-14; E.A. Speiser, "Of Shoes and Shekels," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 77 (Feb 1940):15-20; Thomas Thompson and Dorothy Thompson, "Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 18, no.1 (Jan 1, 1968): 79-99; and Gene M. Tucker, "Witnesses and 'Dates' in Israelite Contracts," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Jan 1, 1966): 42-45.

⁵ See Introduction, note 10.

⁶ Portions of this section also appear in Stephanie Day Powell, Amy Beth Jones and Dong Sung Kim, "Reading Ruth, Reading Desire," in *The Oxford Handbook to Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁷ For arguments dating Ruth to the pre-exilic period see, for example, E.F. Campbell, Jr. *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 23-28; Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 35-46; André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, trans. K.C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 18-21; Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 28-29; and Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1979), 250-252. For arguments for post-exilic dating see, for example, Tamara Cohn Eskenezi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*

Moabite ancestry. However, the preponderance of evidence points to a date in the post-exilic period. The language in Ruth (the presence of late biblical Hebrew and Aramaic influences) provides the most compelling suggestion of a later date.⁸ Ruth and Naomi's journey to Bethlehem mirrors the journey of those returning from Babylon after the exile in order to constitute the new community of Yehud. Many scholars also point to the probability that Ruth was written to respond to the negative attitudes found within Ezra-Nehemiah regarding the presence of foreign women in Yehud (Ez 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-27; cf. Neh 13:1-3).⁹ Though there is no *stated* enmity against Moab in the text, the narrator reminds us no less than six times of Ruth's Moabite status (1:4, 22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10). If one reads intertextually (as most commentators do),¹⁰ the association of Moabites with incest (Gen 19:30-38), contemptuous neglect (Deut 23:3-5) and sexual and religious seduction (Num 25:1-3) lies just below the

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xvi-xix; Christian Frevel, *Das Buch Rut* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992), 34; Erich Zenger, *Das Buch Ruth* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986), 28; and Ziony Zevit, "Dating Ruth: Legal, Linguistic and Historical Observations," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117, no. 4 (2005): 574-600. Those who date Ruth somewhere between the late pre-exilic and early post-exilic eras include Frederic W. Bush in *Ruth/Esther* (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1996), 37-42; Tod Linafelt in Tod Linafelt and Timothy Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 1999), xv-xx; and Katharine Doob Sakenfeld in *Ruth* (Louisville, Ken.: John Knox Press, 1999), 1-5.

⁸ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, xvii. Some scholars argue that the use of some archaic forms of Hebrew suggests a pre-exilic date, however the words in question appear in the speeches of Boaz and Naomi and could be employed to portray them as advanced in age.

⁹ See, for example, Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, xviii-xix; Neil Glover, "Your People, My People: An Exploration of Ethnicity in the Book of Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 3 (2009): 293-313; and Yair Zakovitch, *Ruth: Introduction and Commentary*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990), 19.

¹⁰ Since the narrative contains no overt condemnatory statements, one occasionally finds the argument that there is no anti-Moabite polemic in Ruth. A more nuanced objection to reading this sentiment into the text comes from Jennifer Koosed. See Jennifer Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 38-47. She recognizes that ethnic tensions may be present in the narrative but argues that a narrative awareness of ethnic difference does not presuppose ethnic conflict. She resists those postcolonial readings of Ruth that place Israel in the oppressor role over Moab, since both Israel and Moab were under the thumb of larger powers. I appreciate her reluctance to draw blanket analogies between contemporary and ancient contexts, yet antipathy toward Moab is a prevalent theme in the Hebrew Bible. There is no reason to imagine ancient readers would not have brought this powerful mythic memory to bear on Ruth, whether or not they themselves shared the ethnic bias.

narrative's surface. The frequent mention of Ruth's Moabite background therefore strongly suggests the narrative's preoccupation with exogamy.¹¹

In addition to the issue of foreigners, the book of Ruth deals with numerous themes that would have had a direct bearing upon daily life in Yehud, such as issues of family, widowhood, marriage and inheritance. There are long-standing debates regarding the precise influence of the ostensible practices of redemption and levirate marriage attested to elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Deut. 25: 5-10; cf. Gen 38; Lev 25: 25-34). Boaz seems to marry Ruth according to the spirit, rather than the letter, of the law since he is neither the brother of Mahlon (who would take up the role of *levir* to his widow) nor is he required as a redeemer (Heb. *gō'ēl*) to redeem Ruth along with Naomi's land.¹² Theologically, the book of Ruth stresses the need for acts of *hesed* to sustain the community and protect its most vulnerable members.¹³ Ruth also raises questions about the practice of religious conversion¹⁴ and the role of God in the affairs of everyday people. While God is credited with ending the famine in Bethlehem (1:6) and he plays an active role in Ruth's conception (4:13), the divine character is largely absent from the activities of the

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of issues of ethnicity and assimilation see Glover. In a recent essay, Athalya Brenner challenges the assumption that Moabite is an ethnic distinction, arguing instead that it is a territorial designation. While she maintains that the term is used to emphasize Ruth's "foreign" status, she makes the interesting suggestion that thinking of Moabite as a territorial identity may be what makes Ruth's integration into Israelite society palatable to Boaz and Naomi. See Brenner, "Ruth: The Art of Memorizing Territory and Religion," in *A Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum*, eds. David J. A. Clines and Ellen Van Wolde (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 83-86.

¹² For comprehensive discussions of these issues, see Derek Robert George Beattie, "The Book of Ruth as Evidence for Israelite Legal Practice," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 251-267; Campbell, 88-90, 109-110, 123-124, 146-147, 156-161; Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, xxvii-xxxviii, liii-iv; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 11-12, 14, 80, 86, 88-92, 104-105, 111-112, 114-115, 118-120.127-132; Hubbard, 157-161; and Nielsen, 84-89. Today few scholars attempt to reconcile the incongruence between the laws as they are applied in Ruth. Mona West's view is typical: "It is important to realize that the artistry and message of Ruth are dependent on the interplay of law and narrative within the book. This artistry is lost if the book is approached as a legal treatise or test case for the laws it contains. Instead, the legal material should be viewed as a creative matrix for plot movement and character development. The laws are intentionally ambiguous in order to provide possibilities for the characters to act above and beyond what society requires of them" (190).

¹³ For a comprehensive study of the concept of *hesed*, see Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of the Hēsed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978).

¹⁴ See Chapter Two, note 58.

narrative. Though many commentators believe that God controls the events of the story from “behind the scenes,”¹⁵ Ruth insists that it is Boaz, not YHWH, who can provide her with refuge (3:9; cf. 2:12). Conceivably the book of Ruth was written to stress the need for the faithful to make God’s deliverance a reality.¹⁶

Finally, of course, the book of Ruth highlights the lives of women. In light of the androcentric nature of much biblical literature, Ruth’s unusual emphasis on the affairs and perspectives of women has led some scholars to consider that the author was female or that oral versions of the story originated in women’s circles.¹⁷ The mention of Rachel, Leah and Tamar in 4:11-12 points to Ruth’s honorary inclusion among the so-called “trickster women” in Genesis. (Gen 29, 31, 38; cf. Gen 19:30-36, 27). The many thematic and linguistic parallels to the stories

¹⁵ R.M. Hals argues that God’s absence in the narrative makes his implicit omnipresence all the more acute. See R.M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 12; cited in Linafelt, *Ruth*, xvi. For similar theological interpretations see as examples: Campbell, 28-29; Hubbard, 70; and Nielsen, 30-31.

¹⁶ In a reading using the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Danna Nolan Fewell argues that the narrative enacts Bakhtin’s principle of “‘the event-ness of Being,’ in which each ‘step taken’ (*postupok*) is an indeterminate, unpredictable, but ‘answerable deed’ set against a range of alternate behaviors.” The choices made by each character (including the character of God) should be interpreted against the backdrop of all of the alternate choices they could have made. Fewell concludes:

This is why the Davidic genealogy must conclude the story, and not serve as a preface as genealogies normally do. Nothing is predetermined, but time is left open to events of moral agency. Rather than being the teleological goal, David is a surprising outcome of specific choices made by a diverse cast of characters who occupy different kinds of social spaces. This is also why attempts to imbue the book with divine providence are lamentably wrong-headed. YHWH holds no strings but assumes his place alongside the other characters as a performer of ‘answerable deeds’ grounded in unprecedented moments of choice and accountability.

See Danna Nolan Fewell, "Space for Moral Agency in the Book of Ruth," Forthcoming in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. Used with permission of the author.

¹⁷ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky xvi-xvii. See as examples: Adrien J. Bledstein, “Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth Were Written by a Woman,” in *Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, Eng: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1993), 116-133. Mishael Caspi and Rachel S. Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi, and the Female Journey* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1996), 53-101, 196-216; Campbell, 22-23; S.D. Goitein, “Women as Creators of Biblical Genres,” *Prooftexts* 8, no. 1 (1988): 1-33; Hubbard, 14; LaCocque, 13; and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, “Ruth: A Product of Women’s Culture?,” in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Ruth*, 134-139.

of these notorious women, especially to that of Tamar, suggest a pointed awareness of the subversive nature of Ruth's actions.¹⁸

As early as the nineteenth century, ground-breaking women like Grace Aguilar and Elizabeth Cady Stanton recognized Ruth's countercultural depiction of independent, industrious females.¹⁹ Ruth's status in the canon as foremother to both David and Jesus stood as a *cause célèbre* for both Jewish and Christian women. However, only after the publication of Phyllis Trible's seminal 1978 article, "A Human Comedy" did widespread feminist biblical criticism on Ruth begin to develop.²⁰ Combining a feminist hermeneutic with a sustained rhetorical-critical reading, Trible argues that the book of Ruth provides definitive testimony to women subversively "transforming culture" in the Hebrew Bible."²¹

Yet not all scholars have thought of Ruth as a subversive tale. Among its designations, Ruth has been categorized as legend, romance, fairy tale, and folklore.²² Hermann Gunkel classically identified Ruth as an "idyl," owing to the book's combination of eloquent poetics and moral stateliness with its focus on the simple affairs of ordinary individuals.²³ It is difficult to overstate the influence of Gunkel's form-critical classification. Because the genre of idyll evokes images of the simple and the serene, interpreters have followed his instinct to read it as a

¹⁸ Kirsten Nielsen's commentary highlights issues of interbiblical allusions in Ruth. Cf. Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption* (23-25, 46-48, 72-73, 78) for a creative presentation of the ways in which the story of Tamar foreshadows themes in Ruth.

¹⁹ See Grace Aguilar, *The Women of Israel: Or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History. Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duties, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, As Based on the Word of God* (London: Routledge, 1830); and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al. *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895).

²⁰ Among its influences, Trible's work paved the way for Fewell and Gunn's work as well as two volumes on Ruth in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* series. These volumes represent some of the first collections of essays by women about a biblical book that centers on women. Contributing scholars focused broadly on issues spanning from the significance of the "mother's house" (*bêt 'ēm*), marriage, childbirth and childlessness, the politics of immigration and exogamy, and the possibility of female authorship. See Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Ruth* and Athayla Brenner, *Ruth and Esther: Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series) (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

²¹ Trible, 196.

²² Nielsen, 6.

²³ Hermann Gunkel, *What Remains of the Old Testament and Other Essays* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1928), 20.

narrative “intelligible at sight to our children,” replete with noble adventures and happy endings.²⁴ With its presupposition that God awards the moral and the pious, the genre of idyll also neatly underscores the theological assumption that a divine force guides the narrative’s outcome.²⁵ Subsequently, interpreters who read Ruth as an idyll have, to varying degrees, been prone to overlook the more ambiguous and troublesome aspects of the book, preferring instead to read it as a seamless work of art that neatly resolves all of the dilemmas it raises.²⁶

Early narrative-critical studies of Ruth focused on the story’s design as a key to unlocking its themes and motifs. Barbara Green argues Ruth’s author carefully constructs a tightly wrought series of cause-and-effect relations leading up to a climax that, after which it is realized, “the audience should be able to look back and see by what steps and with what hints the pathway was paved.”²⁷ Drawing on the work of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, Jack Sasson identifies Ruth as “folkloristic” in genre and isolates the specific “functions” of characters in Ruth as defined by Propp. Significant to our discussion is Sasson’s analysis of Ruth’s structural elements alongside Erich Auerbach’s well-known observation that Hebrew narrative is “fraught with background.”²⁸ Auerbach discerned that biblical writers forgo unnecessary details about each character’s histories, attitudes and motives and focus our attention instead on the

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁵ Jan Wojcik, “Improving Rules in the Book of Ruth,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 100, no. 2 (Mar 1985): 146.

²⁶ Ruth’s countryside setting and girl-meets-boy plot structure have continued to shape its reception as a quaint story of loving-kindness, a view summarized as recently as 2007 in a popular series, *Blogging the Bible*: “Ruth is the quietest of all Bible books, a short story that manages to combine extraordinary power and extraordinary serenity. Like an old country song, it leaves you feeling calm, joyful, inspired, and also a little bit melancholy – sad that the world can’t always be so sweet.” See David Plotz, “The Book of Ruth,” *Blogging the Bible*, *Slate.com*, Last modified April 18, 2007, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/blogging_the_bible/features/2007/the_book_of_ruth/why_its_the_most_popular_book_in_the_bible.html. Accessed March 5, 2015.

²⁷ Barbara Green, “The Plot of the Biblical Story of Ruth,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 55.

²⁸ Sasson, 219.

economical dialogue between them.²⁹ For Sasson, the marriage of Proppian syntax with the Spartan quality of Hebrew prose leaves “little opportunity for . . . [the] reader to relax attention,” resulting in a remarkably suspenseful narrative.³⁰ As such, Ruth is “completely satisfying”:

Once it is agreed that *Ruth* is modeled after a folktale pattern, it becomes possible to draw conclusions that are applicable to any literature of the same genre No complications are introduced which are left unresolved; no character is given a role that remains ambiguous. *Heroes* find their mates, *villains* meet their fates, *dispatchers* find their ultimate reward, and *donors* fulfill their obligations. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a tale that hews closer to folktale patterns than most Biblical narratives, *Ruth* has constantly found favor in the eyes of a variegated audience.³¹

In contrast to Sasson, other scholars point to Auerbach’s recognition of Hebrew narrative’s stylistic reticence to contemplate the *unsatisfying*, or at least deeply open-ended, nature of Ruth. Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn contend with former literary approaches, asserting that character and genre, and consequently, the meaning of a narrative are not fixed or mandated by the text.³² They argue for a reading that appreciates realistic characters, namely, people with “conflicting traits” who “are often different people to different people.”³³ Through a close reading of the play of perspectives between characters, they trouble the view that Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz act solely out of altruism and consider how their actions also reflect self-interests. In their reading, each character is fettered by his or her social reality; Naomi’s reserve regarding her Moabite daughter-in-law cloaks her cultural prejudices,³⁴ while Boaz cloaks his desire for Ruth the Moabite through his public show of honorable redemption.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid.; cf. Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 1-19.

³⁰ Sasson, 218.

³¹ Ibid., 216. Emphasis in original.

³² Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 15.

³³ Ibid., 16.

³⁴ Ibid., 75.

³⁵ Ibid., 91-92.

Between these two characters stands Ruth, who “dances” between them for her survival.³⁶ With mixed motives of loyalty, a desire for recognition, and the need to endure, Ruth paves her way into the Bethlehem community despite a precarious future.³⁷

With Fewell and Gunn’s decisive influence, narrative scholars have continued to highlight Ruth’s many narrative gaps and textual ambiguities. Some feminist scholars have felt the need to rewrite the story from the vantage points of its central characters, using the text’s indeterminacy as a vehicle to illuminate the issues of class, gender and ethnicity only alluded to by the text.³⁸ The degree of indeterminacy within Ruth led Tod A. Linafelt to devote his entire commentary to an examination of “that which is most unresolved and even perplexing about the narrative.”³⁹

Perhaps nowhere is the stylistic retinence more pronounced in the book of Ruth than in the depiction of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship. The ambiguous and often loaded exchanges between them have led interpreters to brand their tale as everything from a love story to a tragedy. Dan W. Clanton, Jr. argues the book of Ruth is a virtually loveless narrative. In his reading of the text, Ruth does not love Boaz, but she does care for Naomi.⁴⁰ Naomi, however, does not reciprocate that devotion; rather she “only uses [Ruth] to achieve her goal of reincorporation into Judean society.”⁴¹ Reviewing several contemporary adaptations, Clanton compellingly demonstrates how later storytellers must “infuse” the original story with loving and romantic

³⁶ Ibid., 94.

³⁷ Ibid., 98-105.

³⁸ See for example, Brenner, “The Three of Us,” and Ellen Van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1997).

³⁹ Linafelt, *Ruth*, xiii.

⁴⁰ Dan Clanton, “‘Gee, Baby, Ain’t I Good to You?’ Unreturned and Empty Love in the Book of Ruth,” in *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Bible’s Women in the Arts and Music* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2009), 79-80.

⁴¹ Ibid., 108.

elements through expanded backstories and added dialogue.⁴² These alterations are necessary if one is to find “‘the happily ever after’ in a story that is bereft of love.”⁴³

Clanton may be overstating the point in thinking Naomi heartless; however his observations underscore the fact that the book of Ruth is indeed “fraught with background,” a background that is ripe for interpretation. The narrator is decidedly coy with regard to the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, leaving it up to the reader to decide how each feels towards the other. Contra Clanton, many interpreters have seen in this ambiguity insinuation of a homoerotic attachment. Ruth’s moving declaration of loyalty to Naomi in 1:16-17 serves as the principle ground upon which to argue for a deep emotional, if not physical, bond between them. The passionate nature of her speech is demonstrated most powerfully by its frequent inclusion in contemporary wedding ceremonies. The use of the passage by heterosexuals is ironic given the same-gender context in which it is spoken in the Bible, as well as the gendered nature of the language itself. Taking into account the Hebrew text’s feminine verb forms, Wil Gafney proposes what she deems a more fitting translation:

Do not beg me to leave you anymore, woman,
or to turn back from following you, woman.
For where you go, woman, I will go;
where you rest, woman, I will rest;
your people, woman, will be my people;
and your God, woman, will be my God.
Where you die, woman, I will die
and there I will be buried.

⁴² Ibid., 105-109. Clanton surveys a wide range of novels, children’s stories and films, including most notably Charles H. De Lench, *The Love Story of Ruth and Boaz: A Dramatic Verse Version of the Biblical Story* (New York: Exposition Press, 1966). In De Lench’s retelling, Naomi delivers a speech with matrimonial undertones very similar to Ruth’s speech in 1:16-1:18. In another study, Helen Leneman observes a similar phenomenon in Georg Schumann’s operatic adaptation *Ruth*, in which, in contrast to the text, Naomi speaks after Ruth’s impassioned declaration from 1:16-17, declaring “O Ruth, thou beloved, thou hast steadfastly journeyed with me. The Lord will keep thy feet upon thy way.” See Helen Leneman, “More Than the Love of Men: Ruth and Naomi’s Story in Music,” *Interpretation* 64, no. 2 (Apr 2010):155; cf. Georg Schumann, *Ruth* (oratorio) Opus 20, in German with English translation [F.E.C. Leuckart, Leipzig, Ger.: 1909 (orchestral score)]; [New York, G. Schirmer: 1910 (piano score)].

⁴³ Clanton, 109.

May YHWH do this to me and more
if anything but death separates me from you,
woman.⁴⁴

While it may at first be unclear as to whether Naomi reciprocates Ruth's devotion, there is another textual indication that a "biblically sanctioned" union between them is just on the horizon.⁴⁵ As we noted in the introduction, Ruth's act of clinging to Naomi (*dābaq*) calls to mind the use of the same verb in Genesis 2:24 where a man is said to leave his parents and cling to his wife "so that they become one flesh." "Such nuances," argue Fewell and Gunn, "suggest the image of Ruth as 'husband' to Naomi and indeed, for much of the story, Ruth replaces husband and son as Naomi's caretaker."⁴⁶ Boaz himself picks up on this association when he praises Ruth for leaving the land of her father and mother in order to accompany Naomi (2:11).

Among biblical scholars there is strong debate as to whether the use of *dābaq* implies a homoerotic attraction. Outside of Ruth, the word describes the clinging of a man to a woman (Gen 2:24) or an Israelite to a non-Israelite (Josh 23:12), the loyal "following" of subjects after their king (2 Sam 20:2), and the "holding fast" to YHWH over other gods (Deut 10:20). In Ruth, aside from 1:14, the word is employed in 2:8, 21, and 23 which all relate to Ruth "staying close" to the young women or men in the field. Both Kirsten Nielsen and Kristen Moen Saxegaard dismiss sexual connotations for 1:14 out of hand; Saxegaard reasons the non-sexual connotation of the latter verses makes the former less suggestive.⁴⁷ Hubbard acknowledges erotic undertones, drawing attention to the additional parallel use of the root *'āzab* ("to forsake"). While the man

⁴⁴ Wil Gafney, "Ruth," in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, eds. Hough R. Page, Jr., et. al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 252-253.

⁴⁵ Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg argues that Boaz's "illegal" marriage to a Moabite woman can function as a biblical model for the religious left in its advocacy for gay and lesbian marriages today. See Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, "Modern Day Moabites: The Bible and the Debate About Same-Sex Marriage," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 16, no. 5 (2008): 442-475.

⁴⁶ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 97.

⁴⁷ Nielsen, 30; Kristen Moen Saxegaard, "'More than Seven Sons': Ruth as Example of the Good Son," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 15, no. 2 (Jan 1, 2001): 262.

forsakes his mother and father in Gen. 2:24, Ruth entreats Naomi *not* to forsake her in 1:16.⁴⁸ It seems to me that the use of the term draws our attention to *both* the familial and potentially erotic aspects of their relationship. Linafelt embraces the artistic ambiguity: “The theme of solidarity and commitment between two women, begun here and developed as the story proceeds, offers a poignant counterpoint to Naomi’s inability to measure her self-worth except in relation to men.”⁴⁹ Whether or not one acknowledges the sexual connotations, the use of *dābaq* links two women in a man’s world and poignantly disrupts the patriarchal norms of the ancient context.

Unsurprisingly readers on the whole have been slow to embrace a lesbian-identified reading of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship. Yet well before biblical scholars acknowledged the possibility of homoeroticism, artists were insinuating it in their representations. William Blake’s *Naomi Entreating Ruth to Return to Moab* (1795) portrays Ruth clutching Naomi, Ruth’s arms prominently wrapped around her torso while her head rests on her breast.⁵⁰ Émile Lévy’s *Ruth and Naomi* (1859) intriguingly depicts Ruth seated next to Naomi as she dandles Obed on her knee whilst Boaz stands in the background, suggesting he has been displaced by Ruth as “father” to the child and “husband” to Naomi.⁵¹ Finally, Philip Hermogenes Calderon’s *Ruth and Naomi* (c. 1890) shows a curiously androgynous Naomi and an ultra-feminine Ruth locked in a passionate embrace while Orpah looks on. Naomi’s masculine build towers above Ruth as Ruth arches her neck as if in preparation for a kiss.⁵² Even though Calderon’s scene appropriately corresponds to Ruth’s clinging to Naomi and Orpah’s departure on the road to Bethlehem in

⁴⁸ Hubbard, 115.

⁴⁹ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 15.

⁵⁰ William Blake, *Naomi Entreating Ruth to Return to Moab*, 1795, watercolor, London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

⁵¹ Émile Lévy, *Ruth and Naomi*, 1859, oil.

⁵² Philip Hermogenes Calderon, *Ruth and Naomi*, c. 1890, oil, Liverpool, Eng., Walker Art Gallery.

chapter one, his depiction of Ruth and Naomi is so erotic that many viewers mistakenly assume that it is actually Boaz and Ruth.⁵³

The first overt discussion of a homoerotic relationship between Ruth and Naomi appeared in Jeannette Howard Foster's 1956 study, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*. Foster views the book of Ruth as the earliest example of lesbian-themed writing.⁵⁴ However, it was not until some forty to fifty years later that interpretations focused on Ruth and Naomi's woman-identified relationship began to appear in popular and scholarly literature.⁵⁵ Celena Duncan contends that Ruth "was in two deeply committed relationships, both vital and precious," though one (with Boaz) was nonsexual while the other was not.⁵⁶ Mona West similarly argues that Ruth, Naomi and Boaz collectively overcome social and legal barriers in order to create a new kind of family similar to some non-traditional arrangements today.⁵⁷ For West, Ruth is a model for the contemporary queer community:

Ruth is our Queer ancestress. She has gone before us and so offers us an example. In her own way, she knew that "silence equals death." After all, Orpah says nothing. According to the story she kisses Naomi goodbye and promptly disappears. Ruth, however, goes on courageously to name and affirm our relationships in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. She provides us with an example of self-determination, refusing to

⁵³ For a wonderful discussion of this painting, the diverse responses it provokes and the issues of sex and gender it raises in relationship to the text, see Cheryl J. Exum, "Is This Naomi?," in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 129-174.

⁵⁴ Koosed, 53; cf. Jeannette Howard Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature; A Historical and Quantitative Survey* (New York: Vantage Press, 1956), 22.

⁵⁵ Outside of some feminist commentaries, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.'s commentary is the only one that acknowledges the possibility of an erotic dimension to their relationship. See Hubbard, 115. More overt treatments have also appeared in popular works in Bible and theology. See as examples Miner and Connoley, 29-33; Jody Hirsch, "In Search of Role Models," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian, Gay, and Jewish*, eds. Christie Balka, and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 84-85; Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 126-137; and Nancy L. Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 94-124.

⁵⁶ Celena Duncan, "The Book of Ruth: On Boundaries, Love, and Truth," in Goss and West, *Take Back the Word*, 98.

⁵⁷ West, 192-194. West cites as examples: "a bisexual man and two lesbians live together with their biological child; a gay man is sperm donor for a lesbian couple and is part of the parenting of their child; three gay men live together as lovers and family for twenty years; a lesbian mother and her lover live two doors down from their lesbian daughter and her lover" (193). Contemporary queer families also often forge relationships that cross biological lines, often adopting and being adopted by non-biological parents, godparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and children.

accept a marginalized status based on heterosexist patriarchal definitions of marriage, family and procreation.

Ruth's words to Naomi in 1.16 are words for our community. They are pronouncement, blessing, creed, hymn, poem and declaration, offering paradigms for the ways in which we relate to one another in our comings and goings.⁵⁸

Along with many feminist interpreters, West characterizes Ruth's decision in to return with Naomi as courageous, lauding her capacity to see beyond their culture differences.⁵⁹

Rabbinic scholar Rebecca T. Alpert similarly makes a case for Naomi and Ruth as models for contemporary Jewish lesbians, whose sexuality often leads to intimate relationships across religious and cultural lines.⁶⁰ Yet she contends that only through the "midrashic suggestion" of a sexual relationship between Ruth and Naomi does their relationship bear full significance:

While public vows of commitment, familial connections, female friendship, and cross-cultural and intergenerational relationships are important aspects of lesbian culture, sexuality is central to lesbian identity. Many heterosexuals mistakenly assume that all that is different about lesbian women is that they have sex with other women. Jewish lesbians have sought to establish that lesbian culture includes other elements Yet without romantic love and sexuality, the story of Ruth and Naomi loses much of its power as a model for Jewish lesbian relationships.⁶¹

Alpert concedes that sexual love between Ruth and Naomi must be inferred. While Duncan and West are more positive in their assertions, she highlights the fact that readers can dismiss Ruth and Naomi's relationship as that of "just good friends." In Chapter Two, we will look in more depth at the question of whether or we can plausibly characterize their relationship as erotic.

What is more immediately clear is the significant degree to which issues of sexuality and gender are raised by the text. In their respective analyses of Ruth, Cheryl Exum and Jon Berquist

⁵⁸ Ibid., 191.

⁵⁹ See as a classic example Tribble, 172-173. For a notable exception, see Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, ed. Kwok Pui-Lan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010). Donaldson reevaluates the depiction of Ruth as the brave outsider and suggests that Orpah, who returns to her home and her people, is a more fitting model for indigenous women.

⁶⁰ Rebecca T. Alpert, "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth," in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 93-94.

⁶¹ Ibid., 94-95.

draw our attention to the narrative's destabilization of sex and gender roles. Berquist asserts that the successive crises of famine and death in Ruth lead to additional roles for the women in the narrative.⁶² Drawing on insights from the field of sociology, he argues that in times of crisis women and men take on non-normative roles in order to creatively respond to the challenges before them. This process of "dedifferentiation" allows communities under pressure "to release additional energy and to remobilize themselves for greater efficiency under new situations."⁶³ Berquist argues that when Ruth takes on the typically male role of husband and provider to Naomi and seducer to Boaz, Naomi and Boaz follow suit, with Naomi taking on the atypical responsibility of matchmaker (a role normally filled by fathers in the Hebrew Bible) and Boaz assuming a more passive role to allow for Ruth's advances.⁶⁴ He concludes:

Through a depiction of crisis-initiated dedifferentiation, the narrative deconstructs the gender boundaries of the narrative world in lasting ways. Even after marriage and birth re-establish the story's original state, the women continue to add men's roles, as the women of the community name the new child. The surprising end demonstrates the power of the story, in which people permanently destroy gender role boundaries in mutually profitable ways. Though this process began as a response to crisis, its continuation marks a permanent change within the narrative world. In that context, the story is subversive, focusing not on a redeemer's salvation of the needy through established social rules, but on a disadvantaged foreigner's deconstruction of gender boundaries *in order to save herself and her woman*.⁶⁵

Berquist astutely demonstrates the ways in which gender role dedifferentiation results in an elevation of the status of women. And while he does not argue from an expressly queer perspective, he intimates how the disruption of gender roles makes room for a lesbian-identified reading. Yet it is harder to accept his conclusion that gender roles are "permanently" transformed

⁶² Jon L. Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 57 (Mar 1, 1993): 23-37.

⁶³ Ibid., 23-25. Berquist is specifically drawing on Edward Tiryakian, "On the Significance of De-Differentiation," in *Macro-Sociological Theory: Perspectives on Sociological Theory*, I, eds. S.N. Eisenstadt and Horst Jürgen Helle (London: SAGE, 1985), 118-134.

⁶⁴ Berquist, 25-35.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 36. Emphasis added.

in the narrative world of Ruth. As he concedes, Ruth assumes the traditional role of wife and mother as the narrative draws to a close.

In a more tempered reading, Cheryl Exum argues that the narrative both significantly disrupts *and* reinforces sex and gender categories. Contemplating viewers' mistaken identification of the androgynous figure of Naomi as Boaz in Calderon's *Ruth and Naomi*, Exum argues that the confusion is not merely the result of contemporary biases.⁶⁶ Rather, it reflects sex and gender destabilization *in* the book of Ruth where sexually determined roles are continually upended. Naomi, in particular, variably assumes the role of husband, wife, mother and father at pivotal moments in the story.⁶⁷ Yet, whereas Berquist sees the narrative advocating for social change, Exum contends that, due to the gender role confusion, the narrative must work all the more to elevate the opposite-sex relationship between Ruth and Boaz above the same-sex one between Ruth and Naomi.⁶⁸ In Exum's careful reading of the "eternally unstable triangle"⁶⁹ between the three characters, Boaz must "vie with Naomi for Ruth's loyalty, if not her affection."⁷⁰ The narrator's oblique eroticization of Ruth's and Boaz's exchanges on the threshing floor invites the reader to engage in romantic speculation about their relationship which in turn naturalizes the heterosexual love between them. Once a marriage to Boaz is secured, Exum argues, the patriarchal, heterocentric plot prevails:

The book of Ruth is not a story about how two women make a life together in a man's world (though it is that in part), but a story about the continuity of a family, and this requires the presence of a man. Naomi and Ruth need a redeemer (*go'el*); this is the narrative lack that sets the story in motion. The Gattung of the book is romance, where the perilous journey, struggle and exultation of the hero are set in an idyllic and idealized world of the past, the period of the judges (Ruth 1.1), devoid of the violence and socio-political upheaval we read about in the book of Judges. Ruth is a variation on the fabula

⁶⁶ Exum, 129-137.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 150-161.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

in which a poor maiden finds her rich prince. Girl meets boy, girl gets boy, with two climactic moments: (1) girl resorts to a risky ploy and boy agrees to marry (or redeem) girl, and (2) the question, Will the nearer next-of-kin relinquish his right to redeem?, is resolved with a resounding 'yes'. Presumably Ruth and Boaz live happily ever after; at any rate, a line of kings descends from them. The family, and the nation, perpetuates itself.⁷¹

The differences between the perspectives of Exum and Berquist draw our attention to several crucial questions. For whom was Ruth written? Why employ a woman-identified relationship to initiate the plot? Does the narrative seek to sustain the status quo or to subvert the present state of affairs? Does the book reflect different voices contending to be heard, as some scholars have argued?⁷² To what degree does the narrative guide our interpretation? How do our predilections and investments shape our responses?

Narrative Desire⁷³

Because the relationship between narrative and desire encompasses the broad affective, cultural, ideological, and psychological investments of both writers and readers, the topic resists tidy categorization. As stated earlier, the subject encompasses methodologies and insights from the disciplines of narratology, psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, philosophical studies and queer theory. We can generally divide theories of desire into three subcategories that correspond

⁷¹ Exum, 144-145.

⁷² For example, Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, arguing the book has its origins in a women's culture, believes the narrative is "double-voiced" and reflects a dominant and a muted story. See van Dijk-Hemmes, 134-139. While van Dijk-Hemmes does not explicitly mention the influence of Bakhtin, his concept of the double-voiced is also applicable here. In Bakhtin's view, every day speech, even a single word, bears the marks of multiple social codes vying for representation in an ongoing struggle between static canonization (here simply the authorized status of the majority) and heteroglossia. A seemingly unified language is always the outcome of a struggle between dominant and marginalized, or centripetal and centrifugal, forces. Language in Bakhtin's view is a "rented" and negotiated system of meaning that contains the multiple voices of one's cultural system. Notably, Bakhtin distinguishes "double-voiced" discourse from ambiguity and simple contradiction. Double-voicedness is complex infusion of a second layer of speech into the first. Instances of the dialogic appear at different points in the narrative, depending on the narrator's objectives in the overall shaping of the plot. See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422. Also see Michael Holquist, "The Politics of Representation," *The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition* (Jan 1983): 2-9.

⁷³ An abbreviated discussion of narrative desire also appears in Powell, Jones and Kim.

to Freudian, feminist/queer, and Lacanian modalities. As we review each of these modalities here, I will offer brief remarks on their applicability to Ruth, which will serve as a foundation for subsequent investigations.

Sigmund Freud first conceives of desire in terms of sexuality as an instinct or drive that directs human behavior. One cannot overestimate the pivotal role of sexuality for Freud in the drama of the human life. As psychoanalytic theorist André Green explains, “sexuality is the basis on which the psyche is built,” and “[i]t can only emerge from a situation of conflict.”⁷⁴ Freud argues desire is mediated primarily through the interplay between the pleasure principle (the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain) and the reality principle (the reasoned deferral of gratification in order to achieve pleasure in a socially acceptable manner).⁷⁵ In addition to the conflict between these principles, Freud posits a dialectic between the life drive (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos). The life drive corresponds to our instincts of self-preservation while the death drive reflects our desire to “re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life.”⁷⁶

Building on this dialectic between Eros and Thanatos, Freud imposes a narrative model on both human sexual development and sexual relations.⁷⁷ As literary theorist Judith Roof explains, Freud believed that in both the act of sex and in the process of sexual maturity, the individual, like the protagonist in a satisfying story, must encounter obstacles if she or he is to

⁷⁴ André Green, *The Chains of Eros: The Sexual in Psychoanalysis* (London: Rebus Press, 2000), 8-9.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique, and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 218-226.

⁷⁶ Freud, “The Ego and the Id” (1923), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 39.

⁷⁷ Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xviii-xxii.

achieve proper ends.⁷⁸ These complications or “aberrations” include what Freud deems “abnormal” inclinations and behaviors, such as fetishes and attraction towards members of the same sex.⁷⁹ Aberrations largely take the form of “infantile” proclivities (e.g. a girl’s childhood crush on a female teacher) and are deemed neurotic only when they threaten sexuality’s proper aims: heterosexual coupling and, ideally, reproduction.⁸⁰ The very act of foreplay is dangerous to the degree that its intensity may threaten orgasm and the discharge of semen into the vagina; that is, foreplay threatens to cut the story short.⁸¹

Eros, then, is not merely in conflict with Thanatos; instead, the (“normal”) individual mobilizes sexual energies towards the end, which marks the fulfillment of desire. “This connection between death and fulfilled desire,” writes Roof:

also links desire, the force of Freud’s Eros, to the end, marshalling what appear to be opposing forces – desire and death – to the same end, arranging them in relation to this end and subordinating the potential perversity of repetition to the conservation of the proper (i.e., most resounding, total, and pleasurable) end.⁸²

Freud imagines “healthy” sexuality as a current of water flowing to its proper end; impediments to the realization of sexual climax and proper heterosexuality are siphoned off into streams of the unconscious where they are repressed.⁸³ Yet, as we have already observed, elements of perversion are necessary to the sexual story. As Roof observes, what is truly at stake, perhaps more than the realization of an ending, is *mastery*, which, in narrative terms, is linked to

⁷⁸ Ibid., xix-xx. cf. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (London: Imago Publishing Company, 1949), 109.

⁷⁹ Freud, *Three Essays*, 9-50.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 44-46, 90, 98 108-112, 114-115.

⁸¹ Ibid., 88-90; cf. Roof, xxi. Freud’s elevation of heterosexual sex (and ignorance of female sexuality) is clear. He argues that women’s sexual maturity entails the transference of her “erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation . . . from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice” (Freud, *Three Essays*, 99).

⁸² Roof, 17.

⁸³ Roof, xix; cf. Freud, *Three Essays*, 109, 114.

knowledge and truth.⁸⁴ Thus, it the ability to *overcome* aberrations that proves heterosexuality to be the superior story.

Given the narrative impulse behind Freud's model of sexuality, it not surprising that his work has been adapted to literary theories. Drawing on Freud, Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* encompasses a representative view of some of the earliest work on narrative desire. Brooks argues most stories are shaped by a libidinal economy in which the outcome is "the realization of a blocked and resisted desire."⁸⁵ Concerned specifically with *plotting*, he identifies desire as the principal motor fueling a story's design.⁸⁶ The temporal movement of the plot from the exposition to the climax is "a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances and desires."⁸⁷ The entangled desires of the writer and the reader are propelled forward in dynamic movement much like a steam engine churns water into steam as it moves towards its destination.

Building upon the concept of the death drive, Brooks contends most narratives are fueled by "male plots of ambition."⁸⁸ The logic of narrative is to move the (implicitly male) reader from the beginning through the deviant, yet pleasurable complications of the middle, to a satisfying, coherent ending. The complications typically center on women and other marginalized characters who, according to Brooks, constitute the "perverse middle."⁸⁹ Irrespective of the particular desires that inspire a story or inform its reception, what motivates all storytellers and binds all readers together is the desire for a fulfilling and total conclusion. The temporal demands of any

⁸⁴ Roof 11-13. As Roof points out, in Freud's reading of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* upon which he established his theory of the Oedipus complex, he forgoes the literal ending of the play (in which Oedipus is rendered blind) for the more triumphant climax in which the truth of his life is revealed.

⁸⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 37-61.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 37-61, 90-112.

story are such that “the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle.”⁹⁰ Readers long for “a fully predicated, and readable, sentence” in which the story’s original crisis is worked out and all threatening anomalies or deviations are suppressed or resolved.⁹¹ As we have observed, Ruth’s tranquil setting and ostensibly good-natured characters often predispose a reader to an unspoiled reading in which ideological tensions are minimized and happy endings realized. It also appears that these idyllic features work in tandem with a male plot of ambition to produce a model reader – one who will conform to the values and outcomes envisaged by the ancient storyteller.

Freud (and later Lacan) conceived of the workings of the unconscious in sexed and gendered terms, leading Brooks to liken narrative desire to male heterosexual satisfaction. Implicit to his model are assumptions about the need for linear, goal-oriented and (re)productive narrative trajectories. Roland Barthes similarly compared the conventional “pleasure of the text” to the fulfillment of Oedipal desire, the desire “to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end.”⁹² Within this framework, there is a persistent tension between a narrative and its ending that must be assuaged.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁹¹ Ibid., 96.

⁹² Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 10.

⁹³ To the best of my knowledge there have been no formal studies on the impact of narrative closure on female characters in the Hebrew Bible. For a comprehensive study of narrative closure in Genesis, see Susan Zeelander, *Closure in Biblical Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). For a study of “narrative mortality” in the books of Job, Jonah and the Gospel of John, see Walter B. Crouch, *Death and Closure in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000). For general works on narrative closure, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending; Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); D.A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Brian Richardson, ed. *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002); June Schlueter, *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995); and Alexander Welsh, et al., eds. *Narrative Endings: A Special Issue of Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33, no. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). For critical works on narrative, gender and plot, see Teresa de Lauretis, “Desire in Narrative,” in *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 103-157; Marilyn R. Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Earl G. Ingersoll, *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel* (Madison N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Ruth E. Page, *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Russell Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); and Susan Winnett, “Coming

In the book of Ruth, it is within the dialectic between narrative and closure where the politics of sexuality are negotiated. Tapping into the performative nature of identity, Ruth deploys her status as a woman and a foreigner to expose the relationship between the margins and the center of her society. In doing so, she calls into question constructed categories of insider and outsider. But if the heteronormative ideals normally governing her world are denaturalized, then they are reidealized in the wake of the narrative's closure, as illuminated by Exum above. Ruth's unconventional relationship with Naomi cannot withstand the narrative's pressure to reabsorb her into conventional society and the traditional role of wife and mother. Avivah Zornberg observes:

In the book of Ruth, the narratable dimension is generated by Ruth herself, by the problem, the instability that she constitutes for the normative world that she enters. The resulting turbulence in some sense survives even the fulfillment, legislated in advance, of the ending. Simply by being Ruth, she raises questions and disrupts norms. She represents the "quest after that which will end questing," the "*distortion of what will be made straight*."⁹⁴

When Boaz comes to the aid of Ruth and Naomi; he ensures ongoing female dependence on men, thus handily straightening out the "perversities" of the middle embodied by Ruth – so well, it seems, that Ruth disappears. Zornberg concludes:

So powerfully is she associated with the turbulence and contingency of narrative that no place can be found for her in the world of full and final meaning If there is to be a sense of total coherence at the close of the book, she must be effaced.⁹⁵

It is particularly ironic that Ruth conforms to male plotment given that it is heralded as a woman's story. While the plot is purportedly driven by women's concerns, patriarchal desires shape the narrative outcome. The calamity with which the story begins relates not only to Naomi and Ruth's survival, but to the continuation of Elimelech's name. Moreover, Elimelech and his

Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 103, no. 3 (May 1990): 505-18.

⁹⁴ Avivah Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 355. Emphasis added. Zornberg is quoting Miller, 3.

⁹⁵ Zornberg, 374.

sons are said to be Ephrathites (1:2) and therefore ancestors of Jesse, David's father (1 Sam 17:12). In this light, Mahlon and Chilion have a key kinship role to play, and their deaths portend nothing less than the tragedy of a kingdom unrealized.⁹⁶ Ruth's value lies with ability to give Naomi an heir (4:13-15) and perpetuate the name of the deceased (4:5), after which, arguably, she no longer has a narrative purpose.

Feminist and queer critics have rightly critiqued Brooks's model for its androcentrism and heteroideology.⁹⁷ While some feminists also critique the essentialist linking of sexuality and narrative, most take the view that the deployment of sexuality in theory is a significant and interrogable marker of power relations (the view I adopt here).⁹⁸ Brooks himself does not call into question his heterosexual premise or the ethical concerns his arguments raise. Nonetheless, he does seem correct that when male-oriented plots are enacted, women and other minorities are often susceptible to neglect, exclusion and violence. Women, especially those who are strong-willed and/or lesbian, are typically cast as obstacles or villains to be eradicated. Literary theorist Teresa de Lauretis notes that in many versions of the Oedipus tale, the Sphinx takes on the image of a female and Oedipus must overpower her sexuality in order to exact knowledge from her.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ As Nielsen argues, the closing genealogy leading up to the birth of David is the narrative's "basic premise and starting point." (27). Reading intertextually, she contends that the inclusion of Perez in the genealogy links Ruth and Tamar as women who each went to extraordinary lengths to maintain the patriarchal lineage (98). While I disagree with Nielsen's dating of Ruth to the pre-exilic period (28-29), I nonetheless concur that the text is concerned with the reputation of David and the survival of his house, themes that can also be found in the post-exilic books of Chronicles and Zechariah (12:7-8, 10, 12, 13:1). Even if the genealogy was not original to the book of Ruth, its insertion would have had its own political resonance in the post-exilic period. As Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky observe, "the connection to David may have served to legitimize a counterpoint to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, which exclude Moabite women" (93). For a fuller discussion of the issues surrounding the genealogy, see Nielsen, 95-99. For arguments for viewing the genealogy as a later addition, see as examples: Campbell, 172-173; and Gillis Gerleman, *Rut: Das Hohelied* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 38.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Winnett. In direct response to Brooks, Winnett postulates that there are significant differences between male and female desire that he does not account for. She suggests that women's erotic reader pleasure does not of necessity require climax, and thus multiple models of narrative desire are possible.

⁹⁸ The presumption of a structural relationship begins with Freud's understanding of the Oedipus complex as the foundational cultural myth and is further systematized by Lacan through the pairing of psychoanalytic theory with structural linguistics. For further discussion, see Farwell, xiii-xxxiii.

⁹⁹ de Lauretis, 114-115.

Though not writing from a feminist perspective per se, Lacan similarly observes the way in which Ophelia is made a scapegoat in the wake of Hamlet's emasculation. After the death of his father at the hands of Claudius, Hamlet cannot complete his Oedipal journey. Ophelia – *O phallos* – comes to represent the lost phallus: "She becomes in [Hamlet's] eyes the childbearer to every sin, a future 'breeder of sinners,' destined to succumb to every calumny."¹⁰⁰

Some critics argue that the problem of male bias inheres in linearity, resulting in tragedy for women. Film theorist Laura Mulvey writes, "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end."¹⁰¹ Tracing the roots of linear emplotment back to Freud's heteroideology, Roof writes:

Characterizing libido as a current of water whose physical demand is simply to flow freely to its destined end, Freud envisions both story and sexuality as a single strong stream gushing gleefully into the wide sea of human generation. This oceanic finale exalts both healthy heterosexuality and *the* satisfying story. Any impediments to an unobstructed flow force the current away from its appointed end into tiny, doomed side streams, their deviance spawning a degenerate or perverted story in place of the felicitous convergence of river and sea.¹⁰²

Linear narrative, argues Roof, is a productive phenomenon constituted by causes and effects, which generate endings. Narrative's productive capacity is mirrored in metaphors of both capitalist and heterosexual reproduction, leading to the naturalization of such concepts as 'the state' and 'the (heteronormative) family.'¹⁰³

Nonetheless, Freud insisted that in order for healthy heterosexuality to be realized, there must be impediments along the way. "Without the possibility that something might go wrong,"

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet," ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. James Hulbert, *Yale French Studies* 56 (1977): 22-23.

¹⁰¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 14. Cited in de Lauretis, 103.

¹⁰² Roof, xix. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

Roof writes, “the saving force of heterosexual attraction means nothing.”¹⁰⁴ Perversions to the narrative’s linear trajectory constitute a certain kind of foreplay that threatens narrative closure. As we have already intimated Ruth’s impassioned commitment to Naomi complicates heteronormative expectations, necessitating a “straightening out” *vis á vis* Boaz, and then Obed, in order for equilibrium to be restored. One can read Ruth and Naomi’s relationship as narrative foreplay meant to play on “perverse” desires whilst preparing for heteronormativity’s triumph.

The critique of linearity has led many contemporary women writers to turn to more experimental forms of writing.¹⁰⁵ Principle among them are feminist writers in the tradition of *écriture féminine*, including its foundational theorists Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Kristeva. The producers of so called “lyrical novels,” writers of *écriture féminine* emphasize female economies of desire that resist teleological plots and narrative closures. But is linearity the root of the problem? Evaluating this assumption, literary theorist Brian Richardson demonstrates how both linear and non-linear forms of narrative can produce harmful effects for women.¹⁰⁶ “The ‘enemy,’” he writes, “is not linearity or causality, but instead the confining teleology of conventional, repressive social narratives present in the larger culture.”¹⁰⁷ Plots reflect a given

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xix.

¹⁰⁵ For further discussion and critique see Page, 20-25 and Farwell, 47-53.

¹⁰⁶ Brian Richardson, “Linearity and Its Discontents: Rethinking Narrative Form and Ideological Valence,” *College English* 62, no. 6 (Jul 2000): 685-695.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 687.

social order that is historically produced.¹⁰⁸ Narrative form is only one among several criteria (representation, voice, irony, moral, etc.) with which to evaluate a work's political effects.¹⁰⁹

If narratives are historically contingent, then male heterocentric plots are not impregnable. But how does one defend against them? Feminist and queer critics have proposed a range of responses to the male plot of ambition, principal among them the strategy of *resistance*. Readers, de Lauretis and literary critic Judith Fetterley each argue, must be sensitive to the strategies by which the reader is constructed *as male* in order to withstand that role.¹¹⁰ Reflecting on the American literary corpus, Fetterley writes:

Though one of the most persistent of literary stereotypes is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the *immasculation* of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny.¹¹¹

Writing on the cinematic experience, de Lauretis also advocates that women consciously alternate their identifications between male to female characters to unmask the ideological forces that compromise female agency. "The real task," she elaborates:

is to *enact the contradiction of female desire*, and of women as social subjects, in the terms of narrative; to perform its figures of movement and closure, image and gaze, with the constant awareness that spectators are historically engendered in social practices, in the real world, and in cinema too.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 692. de Lauretis recounts that while many critics believe the Oedipal paradigm to be universally applicable to narratives, Russian formalist Vladimir Propp actually believed the Oedipus myth arose historically in the contentious transition from one form of royal succession to another, the first in which power transferred from the king to his son-in-law, requiring a more active role for the daughter, and the second in which power is transferred from father to son, requiring no female actant. In Sophocles's version of the story, the role of the princess is absorbed into that of the Sphinx and in many versions the Sphinx takes on the image of a female whom Oedipus must subdue (see de Lauretis, 114-115; cf. Vladimir Propp, "Oedipus in the Light of Folklore," in *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan, (London: Routledge, 2000), 58-63. Originally published as "Edip v svete fol'klora," *Serija Filogiceskich Nauk* 9 (1944): 138-175.

¹⁰⁹ Richardson, 692-693.

¹¹⁰ de Lauretis, 134-157; Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), vii-xxvi.

¹¹¹ Fetterley, xx. Emphasis in original.

¹¹² de Lauretis, 156. Emphasis added.

The characterization of Boaz serves as a primary means by which the narrator of Ruth seduces women into identifying against themselves. As the heteronormative and ethno-normative ideal, he is both the exceptional “man of substance” (Heb. *’iš gibbôr ḥayil*, 2:1) and the “good Israelite” who will save Ruth and Naomi from a life of destitution. Boaz (whose name refers to one of the pillars of the Temple and carries with it connotations of strength and religiosity)¹¹³ is cast in opposition to the less savory kinsman-redeemer (“So and So;” Heb. *plōnî almōnî*, 4:1), suggesting to the reader that there are “real men” in Israel ready to come to the aid of women. However, Rich calls for heterosexual women “to refuse to settle for the personal privilege and solution of the individual ‘good relationship’ within the institution of heterosexuality.”¹¹⁴ Lasting social change will not arise out of random acts of kindness, or in Ruth’s case, “as luck would have it” (2:3). Though he may be a good man, Boaz, too, is confined by the privileges of patriarchy and so must put a positive spin on his interethnic marriage as an act of *ḥesed* on behalf of the deceased (4:10).¹¹⁵ In doing so, the attendant “pillars” of property, procreation and patrilineage carry on.

But are there ways not only to resist, but also to subvert the male plot of ambition? How might we not only “enact the contradiction of female desire” but also unlock the oppositional desires *within* the book of Ruth? Here we turn to Lacan’s conceptualization of desire. Freud understands desire as a creative force governing our every enterprise and pleasure as the productive result of the forward movement of tension’s intensification and release.¹¹⁶ By contrast, Lacan imagines the realization of our desire to be an elusive endeavor, involving a more

¹¹³ Jakin and Boaz are the names of two pillars erected in front of the temple (1 Kg 7:21; 2 Ch 3:17). Possibly their names were meant to be spoken together as a sentence or phrase meaning, “he establishes in strength, or “in strength!” See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 127.

¹¹⁴ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 248.

¹¹⁵ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 91-93.

¹¹⁶ Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 7.

circular process of continual displacement. Though I will not employ his work uncritically, Lacan's paradigm opens the way toward alternative means of accessing textual desires that lie beyond the male plot of ambition. If desire is continually subject to deferral, then one cannot speak of narrative desire as a drive that propels the reader toward a climax.¹¹⁷ Rather, desire (like the erotic itself) surfaces and retreats in a more playful and circuitous manner.

Within psychological theory, the mirror has long been used as a metaphor for the relationship between a subject and a subject's desire as it is expressed by and through language. According to Lacan's *stade du miroir*, in the course of human development we find our identity in language.¹¹⁸ However, a loss occurs when we enter into the linguistic realm because language (imaged as male) is only a *reflection* of the real. Our desires, originating in the unconscious, presignificatory sphere (imaged as female) are inaccessible. The result is a psychic gap, what Lacan terms the "lost real," which cannot be filled.¹¹⁹ We attempt to access our original desire through speech and writing, but because our entry into language is predicated on an original loss, we are in a perpetual state of misrecognition in which the realization of desire is always deferred or displaced.¹²⁰ As human beings, we only experience traces of our true desires through indirect expressions such as dreams and slips of the tongue.¹²¹ By analogy, narratives texts express

¹¹⁷ Jay Clayton, "Narrative And Theories Of Desire," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1989): 39-40. Clayton offers a helpful discussion of Brooks's misuse of Lacan.

¹¹⁸ Dylan Evans explains that while Lacan at first sets the mirror stage during a child's development between six and eighteen months of age, he later regards it as a "permanent structure of subjectivity" present into adulthood. See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 115; cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire., Livre IV: La Relation D'objet, 1956-57*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 17.

¹¹⁹ Lacan distinguishes desire from need, which he understands as a biological instinct, though the two are related. A child who expresses a demand for food (a craving which can be met) also experiences a desire for unconditional love, a demand which can never be fully satiated. To paraphrase Evans, desire thus emerges in the articulation of a need as the surplus between need and demand (Evans, 37); cf. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 286-287; and Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 57-60.

¹²⁰ Gemma López, *Seductions in Narrative: Subjectivity and Desire in the Works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson* (Youngstown, N.Y: Cambria Press, 2007), 9-11; Cf. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977).

¹²¹ Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

hidden (and often contradictory) desires through repetitions, gaps, polysemous language and other textual anomalies.

To develop his theory, Lacan pairs his reading of the Freudian unconscious with structuralist linguistics.¹²² He likens the relationship between the symbolic realm and the pre-linguistic sphere to the relationship between sign and signifier (simplistically put, the relationship between a word and its referent). Desire, by analogy, can only be expressed metonymically, never directly, thus the true nature of desire is deferred.¹²³ As Butler explains, “Linguistic reference fails in the same way that desire is structured by failure: if language were to reach the object it desires, it would undo itself as language.”¹²⁴

Yet while Lacan presumes desire is inaccessible, that which cannot be expressed directly is always pressing to be given form.¹²⁵ Lacan’s multifaceted notion of *jouissance* reflects this paradox. Distinct from its general connotations (e.g. “enjoyment,” “pleasure,” “orgasm”), he employs the term to describe the suffering one encounters when one exceeds the experience of pleasure to the point of pain. *Jouissance* reflects the limits of desire and the trauma that results from being separated from the lost real. “Its function,” writes psychoanalyst Dylan Evans, “is therefore to sustain the neurotic illusion that enjoyment would be attainable if it were not forbidden.”¹²⁶ Whereas Lacan initially associates *jouissance* within the Oedipus complex and the

¹²² Primarily the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson.

¹²³ Lacan does not use the term metonymy as it is commonly understood (i.e. “a term used to denote an object which it does not literally refer to, but with which it is closely linked,” such as “suit” to denote a business person (Evans, 113). Rather he understands metonymy, in his words, as “desire for something else” based on his understanding that the root of one’s desire cannot be accessed in the symbolic realm. Even if a person believes she has found the object of her desire, once found, it ceases to be that object and the person moves on to another object in a constant chain of deferral. Lacan, *Écrits*, 167; cf. Evans, 114.

¹²⁴ Butler, “Desire,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 383.

¹²⁵ Catherine Belsey, “Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire,” *New Literary History* 25, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 686. As Belsey reminds us this is precisely the task of psychoanalytic therapy.

¹²⁶ Evans, 92.

male-identified realm of language (“essentially phallic”), he later describes a feminine form of *jouissance* that lies “beyond the phallus.”¹²⁷ Literary critic Anne Marie Rekdal explains:

Entering into the symbolic order means accepting the patriarchal Law as the law of society and replacing *jouissance* – the absolute pleasure associated with the lost Object – with a desire in language. Transgressing the Law means entering into the territory of *le réel, the real* – of the Thing and *jouissance*.¹²⁸

Herein lies the paradox. Is *jouissance* pain or pleasure? Is the experience of *jouissance* traumatic or transgressive? Is it possible to transcend the boundary between the symbolic and the real?

Whereas Lacan described feminine *jouissance* as “ineffable,” Kristeva calls its inaccessibility into question. Through her concept of the semiotic, she suggests a way to transgress the symbolic “in the direction of the unspeakable.”¹²⁹ “This conception of *le sémiotique*,” literary critic Shuli Barzilai explains, “may be postulated as a mediation between the real, which is beyond or other of language and the symbolic, between what is ineffable and what is articulated through language.”¹³⁰ Kristeva deconstructs Lacan’s opposition between rational language and what is presumed to lie beyond discourse, arguing for a hermeneutic for the margins.¹³¹ Poetic language (poetry, literature and the visual arts) in particular reveals the permeable borderline between the symbolic and the real, out of which *jouissance* emerges. To

¹²⁷ Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XX: Encore, 1972-73*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 14; cf. Evans, 92.

¹²⁸ Anne Marie Rekdal, “The Female Jouissance: An Analysis of Ibsen’s *Et dukkehjem*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 74, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 152. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 29. Originally published as *Histoires d’amour* (Paris: Seuil, 1984). Cited in Shuli Barzilai, “Borders of Language: Kristeva’s Critique of Lacan,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 106.2 (Mar 1991): 294.

¹³⁰ Barzilai, 297. Kristeva’s major writings on the semiotic include the following: “The Ethics of Linguistics,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardin and Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 23-35. Originally published in *Critique* 322 (Mar 1974); *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Originally published as *Pouvoirs De L’horreur: Essai Sur L’abjection* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980); “The System and the Speaking Subject,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 24-33. Originally published in *Times Literary Supplement* (October 12, 1973): 1249-1252; *Tales of Love*; and “Within the Microcosm of ‘The Talking Cure,’” in *Interpreting Lacan*, Psychiatry and the Humanities 6, eds. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, trans. Thomas Gora and Margaret Waller, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 33-48.

¹³¹ Barzilai, 296. Cf. Kristeva, “Ethics,” 25 and *Powers of Horror*, 207.

dwell on this border is simultaneously painful and sublime, an experience that she refers to as abjection.¹³²

We will expound upon Kristeva's understanding of the abject in Chapter Four. For now let us observe that in the experience of reading, it is precisely the kind of indeterminate language we encounter in Ruth that brings about abjection and *jouissance*. "Abjection is above all ambiguity," writes Kristeva.¹³³ As with Lacan, her notion of *jouissance* is both threatening and transgressive. When we encounter semantic ambiguity, we confront the instability of language yet, simultaneously, we open ourselves to the multiplicity of desire.

We can now turn Lacan's disparaging notion of female *jouissance* on its head. If we are to ascribe to his gendered view of the psyche, then to go "beyond the phallus" is to seek to access those desires which lie beyond male logic and control. This turning of the phrase is also more in harmony with Barthes's notion of *jouissance*. While Barthes aligns textual pleasure with oedipal satisfaction, he also promotes "a process of profaning the oedipal sanctity of structure and control."¹³⁴ To discover the *texte de jouissance* ("text of bliss"), readers must also in a sense become writers in order to uncover ideological investments, contradictory impulses and interstices of "bliss" where unspoken narrative desires remain dormant.¹³⁵ Resisting teleological inducements, we return to beginnings and middles. Meaning and desire are no longer implicitly correlated with satisfactory ends.

Though desire remains elusive, the other side of the Lacanian mirror is not, therefore, impenetrable. Whilst seducing the subject through the allure of reflexivity, the mirror wields the

¹³²Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9-10, 17,

¹³³ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 9; cited in Barzilai, 295.

¹³⁴ Roof, xxiv.

¹³⁵ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 6-7, 9-15, 64, *passim*; cf. Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting: Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Poststructuralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 32-35.

power to expose repressed and conflicting desires and reveals the fractured nature of the self.¹³⁶

The process of reading mimics the relationship between the mirror and the subject, as literary critic Gemma López explains:

The mirror provides versions of the self becoming other “in another space (both familiar and unfamiliar),” thus suggesting “the instability of the ‘real’ on this side of the looking glass.” This description of the mirror as an alternative space, both familiar and unfamiliar, where equally alternative versions of the self are produced thus suggesting the instability of reality, may be regarded as a metaphor for narrative fiction.

The mirror, like narrative, provides the results of representation. In the mirror, the self becomes doubled, as doubled as Narcissus, Frankenstein’s creature, or the reader of fiction, all catching fleeting glimpses of their multiplicity, while becoming seduced by an image of themselves – a (per)version – in an endless repetition of the Lacanian *stade du miroir*. In turn, their glimpses of multiplicity allow them to problematise the nature of reality or whether what is happening “on this side of the looking-glass” is more real than their (fictional) projection.¹³⁷

The attentive reader thus experiences herself as multiple (even perverse!) when she embraces the text in its familiarity and strangeness. This may be a challenge for readers of the Bible who are intimately familiar with its stories and predisposed to long-established interpretations. On the other hand, Gunn and Fewell observe that, without the longing to know the outcome, such readers are drawn back to peculiar elements of the story, which raise new avenues of inquiry. “Perhaps the fascination of reading lies in the journey, not the destination,” they write, “even if it is a journey we have made before.”¹³⁸

The Lacanian mirror can also serve as a metaphor for the complicated relationship between the writer and the text. Just as texts refract the desires of readers, they also reflect the divided psyche of their authors. Writing on the book of Job, Clines likens the biblical author to a dreamer and the text to a dream in which “all the characters in a dream represent the dreamer or aspects of the dreamer”:

¹³⁶ Butler, “Desire,” 379.

¹³⁷ López, 25. López is quoting Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 87-88.

¹³⁸ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 107.

This is to say more than that there is something of the author in all of these characters, more even than that the author recognizes himself in his characters – consciously or unconsciously. The implication of the multitude of characters through whom the author dreams himself is that *the author experiences a conflict over the issues he raises in the book*. He has created a fiction of a dialogue about innocent suffering in which different speakers adopt different points of view because he himself, whatever his conscious mind thinks, feels uncertainty about the answer. The book is structurally, then, an expression of the author’s psychic conflict. . .¹³⁹

Our analysis of Ruth will reveal a similar dynamic. While I will argue that the author(s) utilize textual indeterminacies to appeal to the diverse desires of his audience, at another level the ambiguities of the text reveal contradictory desires on the part of the writer(s) that escape conscious control. These contradictory desires in part undoubtedly reflect an awareness (however unacknowledged at a surface level) of the internal conflicts, moral deliberations and existential crises facing the community.

A final aspect of Lacan’s theory of desire merits attention. For Lacan, the longing to recover the lost real is a desire for return, and, specifically, an attempt to make whole again the fractured self. We can read the need for myths of origins such as the book of Ruth as expressions of a longing for return writ large. Butler writes, “As much as desire seeks to recollect or recover one’s origins in an effort to achieve a metaphysical oneness, it is thwarted from that recovery by a primary separation or loss. In the place of that return, desire acquires an imaginary trajectory.”¹⁴⁰ It is no surprise then that the narrative of Ruth is preoccupied with return. Eight times in chapter one we find references to return (Heb. *šuv*). When Naomi and her daughters-in-law hear that the famine in Bethlehem has subsided, they prepare “to return from the country of Moab” (1:6; cf. 1:7). On the road to Bethlehem, Naomi twice resists Orpah and Ruth’s desire to follow her, telling them to “Turn back, each of you to her mother’s house (1:8; cf. 1:11, 1:12).

¹³⁹ David J. A. Clines, “Why Is There a Book of Job and What Does it Do to You if You Read It?,” in *Interested Parties The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 12-13. Emphasis added.

¹⁴⁰ Butler, “Desire,” 379.

Despite her resistance, they contend, “No, we will return with you to your people” (1:10)
Eventually, Ruth does return, ironically, to a place she has never been (1:22; cf. 1:15).¹⁴¹

In the remaining chapters, we, along with other readers, writers and dramatists, return to Ruth again and again and again. The question remains as to what desires will be assuaged and what yearnings will go unmet. Yet with each return to our “mother’s house” perhaps we will experience ourselves closer to the root of our desires and find a provisional resting place on the journey. With each new departure, we will ask Ruth – lover, daughter, mother – to let us inside to show us the things she does not readily reveal.

In the next two chapters, we turn to an examination of the ambiguity and artistry in the book of Ruth, followed by our reading of Ruth alongside *Fried Green Tomatoes*. While our exegetical study of Ruth forms the foundation for the entire project, Chapters Two and Three in particular should be read in relation to one another. As we explore the “queer traces” that line the book of Ruth, we will discover significant points of resistance to the male plot of ambition. Yet, we will also find the writer(s) of Ruth to be tactical artist(s) capable of employing ambiguity toward political ends. In order to disrupt the male plot of ambition and “enact the contradiction of female [or oppositional] desires,” we will have to interrogate these narrative strategies and the effects they produce. At the same time, we will examine the conditions that called for the need for strategic ambiguity and consider the diverse desires within the community of Yehud that the narrative implicitly reflects. As we begin to map the deeper desires that exceed the conscious control of the author(s) of Ruth, we will come closer to Lacan’s recognition of desire’s metonymic and elusive character. This will set the stage for our endeavors to reclaim and re-engage the book of Ruth in Chapters Four and Five.

¹⁴¹ Already, we see the play of compound desires, as Orpah’s “return” is back to Moab, whereas Ruth’s is to Bethlehem.

Chapter Two Resistance: Ambiguity and Artistry in the Book of Ruth

*I hear your voice
Coming out of that hole
I listen to you
And I want some more
I listen to you
And I want some more*

- Meg Keene

“Perhaps the idyll could be abandoned for a while and a leaner, tougher story read.”

- Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn¹

For a biblical tale that is only sixty-five verses, Ruth is one of the most ambiguous – and ambitious – books in the Hebrew Bible. Underneath what is often deemed a straightforward, charming story of love and loyalty lays a deceptively dense narrative. As we noted in Chapter One, Ruth has been dated to nearly every major period of Israel’s history, and scholars continue to be divided on this point. The fact that there are compelling reasons to date the book as late as the Persian period, and yet it addresses concerns of earlier centuries, may be more of an indication of the heavy cultural work that the narrative is attempting to do.² In many ways, Ruth constitutes one of those “grand narratives” of Israelite history, an idea that may appeal to biblical theologians and will be immediately suspicious to those with postmodern sensibilities. As a book that ostensibly attempts to reflect upon many stages of Israelite history – from the Halcyon days that preceded the origins of the Davidic dynasty to the displacement and reconstitution of a

¹ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 13.

² Danna Nolan Fewell’s reflections on “constitutive storytelling” have been particularly helpful to my thinking here. See Danna Nolan Fewell, “Facing the Ending of History: The Akedah under the Shadow of Empire,” forthcoming in *The Bible and Critical Theory*. Used with permission of the author.

divided community before and after exile – it carries a significant burden. It is little wonder then that the narrative often falters under the weight of this burden as polyphonic meanings, conflicting ideas and ambivalent attitudes emerge from just below the narrative surface.

At the core of this ambiguous and ambitious text lie the relationships between its main characters. While the theme of relationship is central, the nature of the connection between the primary characters is by no means universally agreed upon. As we have seen, the book of Ruth's unusual focus on the lives of women in the ancient world coupled with some contemporary women's desires to uphold a woman-identified relationship has led certain readers to embrace an overly sanguine view of Ruth and Naomi's attachment. Upon closer inspection, it is the very indeterminacy of that relationship and others that contributes to the narrative's artistry and confronts readers with some of the book's major social, cultural and ethical questions.

In this chapter, we take a closer look at the text of Ruth to examine the book's linguistic features, narrative poetics, rhetorical devices and other modes of textual indeterminacy that reveal the multifaceted, yet principally ambiguous relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Though our principal aim is resistance, resistance here entails embracing certain interpretive problems. That is to say that while we will resist those staunchly heteronormative readings that deny an erotic relationship between Ruth and Naomi in favor of those that shed light on its clear possibility, we will at the same time honor the ambiguous treatment of their relationship in the narrative as one of its constitutive elements. Ultimately, one might say we are resisting the temptations of a bifurcated reading (i.e. either Naomi and Ruth are lovers, or they are not) in favor of more nuanced interpretations that will shed a great deal more light on the ways in which gender and sexuality are deployed in the text. In doing so, we will not only counter the

invisibility of “queer” characters in Ruth, but also seek to understand their significant and even crucial, if complex place within the narrative.

In light of these aims, I have chosen a range of “conversation partners” who, while perhaps not all-inclusive, nonetheless reflect a wide array of scholarly opinions on Ruth. While I cannot escape my own interpretive biases as I engage the judgments of these interpreters, I am ultimately less interested in whether or not we are in agreement than in to what extent they acknowledge and engage the undecidable elements of the text. The degree to which I give weight to some interpreters over others is due to their willingness to entertain questions other scholars have ignored or resisted.³

As we consider the extent of the text’s ambiguity, we face some central questions: What is its purpose? To what ends does this ambiguity lead? Is the entirety of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship merely, as Peter Brooks might suggest, “the perverse middle” of the narrative trajectory, designed to seduce us into accepting an androcentric and heterocentric narrative outcome? Or do the veiled insinuations of an erotic relationship between Ruth and Naomi make the homoerotic themes of the text more apparent? In Chapter Three, we take up these questions

³ As one reviews the major commentaries and monographs on the book of Ruth, one can locate scholars’ works on a continuum of relative embrace of, or resistance to, the story’s literary, social, and theological complexity. An early example that demarcates the poles of this continuum is the 1988/89 debate in *The Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* between Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn and Peter Coxon. In their original article and the monograph that followed, Fewell and Gunn reject the typically sanguine interpretation of the narrative for a more textured reading. Through a close reading of the play of perspectives between characters and the silences, particularly Naomi’s, which permeate the narrative, they trouble the view that Naomi and Ruth act solely out of altruism and consider how their actions also reflect self-interests. Though Coxon’s rebuttal is largely a mischaracterization of Fewell and Gunn’s method and argument, his response is telling in that he similarly makes use of the textual ambiguities to reiterate an amicable reading of Naomi’s character. Coxon argues that “the naturalistic accumulation of materials” will reveal “deeper levels of reality and truth” (25), yet what is actually revealed is Coxon’s own discomfort with a reading that fails to reconcile each character’s words, actions and motivations in a harmonizing and positive manner. As should become obvious, scholars continue to map themselves onto this continuum based upon their methodological approach to plot, characterization, dialogue, narrative reticence, readers’ responses and their own theological aims. See Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “’A Son Is Born To Naomi’: Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40 (1988): 99-108; Peter Coxon, “Was Naomi A Scold? A Response to Fewell and Gunn,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45 (1989): 25-37; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Is Coxon a Scold? On Responding to the Book of Ruth,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45 (1989): 39- 43; and Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*.

by reading the biblical narrative alongside Fanny Flagg’s novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and its film adaptation, *Fried Green Tomatoes*. As intertexts which appropriate the book of Ruth in both their cultural content *and* laconic style, they provide us with a unique insight into the narrative conditions by which woman-identified relationships, recalling Traub’s goal, “gain, or fail to gain, cultural signification.” As we will discover, the strategies of revelation and concealment common to both Ruth and the novel and film simultaneously bolster and compromise a lesbian-identified reading/viewing. After analyzing this phenomenon of “strategic ambiguity,” we will conclude with some consideration of the sociopolitical motivation behind the book’s narrative strategies in anticipation of further historical gleanings in Chapters Four and Five.

The Queer Traces of Ruth

“[Ruth] is a story that sits on a knife’s edge,” write Fewell and Gunn. Reflecting on the “compromised” nature of redemption in the Ruth narrative, Fewell and Gunn underscore the many paradoxes that underlie the book: economic security for women that is conditioned on female economic dependence; the recovery of dead men’s lineages through the sacrifices of the living; and acts of *hesed* between women that serve the aims of the patriarchy.⁴ Still they argue that if we pay closer attention to the peculiar elements of the text – the “misses” that previous readers have failed to take into account – we might retrieve a more complex and even countercultural narrative.⁵

Perhaps nowhere does the story of Ruth sit on a knife’s edge more than in the characterization of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship. Suffused with tension, ambivalence and

⁴ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

contradiction, one is never sure if their connection is one of attraction or repulsion, fervent love or distrustful misgiving. As we undertake a careful examination of Ruth's textual ambiguities, what emerges are traces – queer traces - that suggest but never fully bear out a homoerotic attachment. “Slippery and elusive,” writes Emily McAvan, “this is a story that is not exactly queer, though it is not exactly not.”⁶

Like the preponderance of stories in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is characterized by a laconic, reticent style that requires active engagement on the part of the reader. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter contends that it was an innovation of biblical narrative to conceive of meaning as a *process* whereby a reader had to suspend judgment, navigate textual gaps and weigh multiple possibilities.⁷ In order to assess the motivation of characters in the book of Ruth, the careful reader must navigate the play of perspectives,⁸ minimalist verbal exchanges, reserved bits of narration and a myriad of textual silences. Linafelt likewise works from the premise that ambiguity underscores the role of the reader. By refusing to give the readers enough information to discern a character's motives, he argues, “the narrative forces the reader to formulate his or her own suppositions while never knowing for sure if they are correct.”⁹

In fact, the ambiguity in Ruth is not merely the product of opaque language and narrative omissions, but part of the very armature of the text. Drawing on the work of E.F. Campbell, Jr., Jennifer Koosed highlights a key feature of Ruth known as “doubling.” Doubling occurs on multiple levels, from the paired presentation of characters (e.g. Naomi and Elimelech, Mahlon

⁶ Emily McAvan, “Queer Mourning and Melancholia in the Book of Ruth,” *Luvah: Journal of the Creative Imagination* 4 (Spring 2013): 6.

⁷ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁸ Through their own midrashic retelling of the story through the eyes of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, Fewell and Gunn encourage readers to take the perspective of characters inside the story as events unfold and they each acquire knowledge. This approach allows one to evaluate the interplay of diverse perspectives and better read characters as multi-faceted individuals with complex personalities and motivations (*Compromising Redemption*, 14-16). Similarly, Tod Linafelt argues that by assuming the perspective of the individual characters, we resist the temptation to reduce them to caricatures by endowing them with an “inner life” (*Ruth*, xiv).

⁹ Linafelt, xv-xvi.

and Chilion, Ruth and Orpah) and the couplet-structure of dialogues (e.g. the six couplets in Ruth's vow to Naomi in 1:16-17) to the strategic placement of twice-repeated words (e.g. *lûn*, "to lodge"/"to stay", in 1:16 and 3:13; *rêqām*, "empty" in 1:21 and 3:17; and *kānāf*, "wings"/"robe" in 2:12 and 3:9) and thematic oppositions (e.g. fullness/emptiness, women/men, poor/rich, private space/public space). Often these doublings form thematic *inclusio*, or bracketing devices, which commence in chapters one and two and are repeated in chapters three or four.¹⁰

Additionally, seven times (1:7 twice, 1:9, 1:11, 1:13, 1:19b and 4:11) there is a curious subject-verb anomaly in the Hebrew in which a masculine verb ending appears where the referent is two females (Ruth and Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, or Rachel and Leah). In 1:22 Ruth and Naomi are described using a masculine pronoun, and in 3:15, it is unclear whether it is Boaz or Ruth who returns to the city (the Masoretic Text, or MT, reads, "and he went," while the Syriac and the Vulgate read, "and she went").¹¹ While Campbell explains these irregularities as archaic dual feminine forms or other such irregularities,¹² Koosed keeps open the possibility of intentional doubling: "As the narrative plays with masculine and feminine roles, the letters on the page play with the same binary oppositions. Identities and relationships can be read in multiple ways." At the very least, these incongruities suggest awareness, barely suppressed below the narrative's surface, of the constructed and mutable nature of gender and gender roles.¹³

Koosed argues that doubling inscribes the centrality of relationships into the text.¹⁴ However, the effect of doubling is to not necessarily to make parallel certain situations or

¹⁰ Koosed, 2-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹² Campbell, 65, 78, 128.

¹³ Koosed, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

affiliations.¹⁵ Rather doubling raises questions about the *nature* of the relationship between characters, and when attended to carefully, may even challenge our conventional understanding of how characters interrelate. In one notable *inclusio*, the same verb, *lûn* (“to lodge”) is used by Ruth in her impassioned vow to Naomi in 1:16 and later employed by Boaz in 3:13 as he entreats Ruth to stay for the night on the threshing floor. The choice of the verb is significant; in contrast to the more conventional *yāšab* or *šākan*, (“to dwell;” “to live”), the narrator employs a more poetic expression that is typically rendered “to lodge” or “to spend the night” (e.g. Gen 19:2, 24:23; Josh 3:1; Judg 18:2, 19:4).¹⁶ Sasson argues that Ruth’s vow highlights her desire to share a permanent, if transient, future with Naomi:

It seems to me...that the *area* in which Naomi will rest on her way homeward is not of interest here; but rather the emphasis is on the *type of dwelling* which will ultimately become her home. Ruth’s statement concerns events, situations, and relationships which will permanently bind the two women. Whether Naomi’s future home is in a palace or in a hut, Ruth is determined to share her mother-in-law’s dwelling. Furthermore, by using the verb *lûn*, “to lodge,” the narrator not only selected a more poetic verb, but may also have implied that Ruth was willing to share with Naomi any unsettled future, so long as nothing parted them.¹⁷

¹⁵ Based upon his reading of Freud, Brook argues that repetitions “bind” textual energies, complicating although ultimately adding to, the momentum of the narrative climax. Repetitions take us back to an earlier moment in the text, while paradoxically moving us forward through an intensification of meaning (102). Brooks writes,

As the word binding suggests, these formalizations and the recognitions they provoke may in some sense be painful: they create a delay, a postponement in the discharge of energy, a turning back from immediate pleasure, to ensure that the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complex. The most effective or, at the least, the most challenging texts may be those that are most delayed, most highly bound, most painful (101-102).

See Brooks, 90-112; cf. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 7-23. While I agree that the use of doubles in Ruth slows down the forward movement of the plot, I do not believe that they *necessarily* bind the textual energies of the text in the way Brooks imagines. As I hope my argument illustrates, the use of polysemous terms complicates our interpretations and may even, through their multivalence, disrupt conventional readings of the end.

¹⁶ Hubbard, 117. Hubbard argues that the use of the term in Josh 3:1 and Judg 19:4 implies a more permanent stay, however the context of each clearly suggests the more transitory “spend the night.”

¹⁷ Sasson, 30. Emphasis in original.

Effectively, Ruth is saying, “Night after night, I will rest my head wherever you rest your head, no matter where we may go.”

Typically commentators argue that the use of the verb in 1:16 foreshadows its reappearance in 3:13 for the purpose of linking Boaz’s commitment to Ruth to Ruth’s commitment to Naomi. Hubbard argues that the repetition “hint[s] that the prospective marriage [to Boaz] was the reward of [Ruth’s] earlier resolve.”¹⁸ However, if we consider the shifting meaning of the term as it is being used during the interactions between the characters, it is equally possible that Boaz’s invitation rings a dissonant and even threatening chord for Ruth.¹⁹ After all, Boaz’s insistence that she *lûn* for *that night* (*lînî hallaylāh*) accentuates the highly conditional (not to mention, potentially scandalous)²⁰ nature of this arrangement. His provisional allegiance rests on the next day’s economic negotiations with a rival redeemer. Ruth has no guarantee that she will be able to continue to *lûn* with Naomi; in fact the introduction of a rival redeemer for the land (who may or may not wish to marry Ruth) raises the possibility that they will be permanently separated! On the one night that Ruth does not *lûn* with Naomi, their future is called into question.

On the other hand, Hubbard is right to point out the suggestiveness of the repetition, and the doubled use of the term may link Ruth, Naomi and Boaz in a more direct, but less heteronormative way than most commentators presuppose. As we will explore further below, there are textual indications that Naomi is vicariously present with Ruth during the intimate rendezvous on the threshing floor. In this light, the reverberating sound of *lûn* signals one of

¹⁸ Hubbard, 218.

¹⁹ Moreover, the context is different as the JPS and NRSV both attest. Where each uses the term “lodge” in 1:16, they translate *lûn* in 3:13 as “stay” and “remain” respectively.

²⁰ According to Koosed, the scholarly assessment of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz is “just as bifurcated” as that of Ruth and Naomi. She writes, “Either the story is a great romance or a realistic depiction of what women must do to survive in a patriarchal world. Both interpretations are equally viable because of a narrative lack – neither Ruth’s motivations nor emotions are indicated” (89).

many queer narrative traces. The “perversities of the middle” come alive as Naomi inserts herself in an almost corporeal way between Ruth and Boaz, intimating – perhaps – that Naomi returns Ruth’s commitment to *lûn* with her permanently.

Doubles (along with other polysemous terms) present us, therefore, with a variety of interpretative possibilities. As the characters are developed and the web of interconnections unfolds, words and phrases such as “stay the night” disrupt our expectations even as they link the characters. Multiple meanings engender dissonance and uncertainty in the reader while subverting “self-evident” interpretations. The moment a reader arrives at a compelling interpretation, the text multiplies itself with the suggestion of an alternative possibility. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon makes the point well: “texts ‘complicate’ readings of themselves.”²¹

Queer Beginnings

In the case of Ruth and Naomi, meaning is complicated at every textual turn. From the narrative’s inception, we are faced with divergent possibilities about the substance of their relationship. Jewish tradition has assumed Naomi embraced Ruth and Orpah into her home and instructed them, anachronistically we would now surmise, in the ways of Jewish life. Yet the only thing known to us about their relationship prior to the dialogue between them on the road from Moab to Bethlehem is that they are identified as Naomi’s “daughters-in-law” by the narrator (*kallôtêhā*, 1:6, cf. 1:7, 8) and “my daughters” (*běnōtāy*, 1:11, cf. 1:12, 13) by Naomi. Scholars have often noted that term *kallāt* also means “bride,” though most dismiss this

²¹ See Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Texts and Contexts: Interpreting the Disciples,” in *Textual Determinacy. Semeia* 62, eds. Robert C. Cully, and Robert B. Robinson. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993): 99. This is not to suggest, however, that interpretive possibilities are endless. As Malbon asserts, to argue against a single determinant meaning is not the same thing as arguing for the text’s indeterminacy: “We are not free to assume that the text can mean anything just because it can mean many things. The argument is, rather, that texts ‘complicate’ readings of themselves. Thus interpreters of the text take up their task from the text itself: to complicate interpretation.”

additional meaning as unrelated to the present context. Ruth's forebear Tamar is referred to repeatedly as Judah's *kallāt* (Gen 38:11, 16, 24), though it is clear that no love is lost between her and her father-in-law. Nonetheless, the double meaning of *kallāt* in Ruth is suggestive enough to pique the imagination. When the term is employed again in Ruth 4:15 (explored below), it carries with it connotations of a marital relationship between Ruth and Naomi.

Initially, Ruth may have been thought of as a "bride" to Naomi's family. In her creative retelling of the story, Gloria Goldreich imagines Naomi tenderly calling them "my brides" each time that she recalls their wedding days.²² On the other hand, the manner in which Ruth comes to be a part of Naomi's family is a source of debate. Instead of the typical formulation for marriage in which a man "takes" (*lāqah*) a woman, the verb employed in Ruth 1:4 to describe Mahlon's and Chilion's marriages to Ruth and Orpah, *vayyīš' ū*, is derived from the root *nāšā'* meaning to "to lift" or "to carry." Elsewhere the term may refer to marriage where there is no dowry, the coerced marriage of a socially inferior woman to a powerful man, marriage to a foreign woman, or the taking of a woman as booty during warfare.²³ While it is unclear as to which of these interpretations fits Ruth (the latter being the most doubtful),²⁴ what the use of the term perhaps

²² Gloria Goldreich, "Ruth Naomi and Orpah: A Parable of Friendship," in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 36. In Isaiah and Jeremiah, the term *kallāt* is also used to convey YHWH's intimate affection for his people. See Isa 49:18, 61:10, 62:5, and Jer 2:32. For other renderings of the term as "bride," see Jer 7:34, 16:9, 25:10, 33:11; Joel 2:16; Song 4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 5:1; and Hos 4:13, 14.

²³ For further discussion, see Allen Guenther, "A Typology of Israelite Marriage: Kinship, Socio-Economic, and Religious Factors," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (2005) 387-407; Tamara Cohn Eskenezi, "The Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 509-29; and Katherine E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 165-68.

²⁴ For an argument suggesting Ruth and Orpah are war brides, see Gafney, 250-251; Based on her intertextual reading, she contends that Ruth and Orpah are abducted into marriage, however there are no other textual indications that they were forcibly taken. The other texts to which Gafney refers all describe contexts of warfare, conflict or presumed force (e.g. Judges 21:23, Ezra 10:44 and 2 Chr 13:21), which is not the case here. The setting in "the days when the chieftains ruled" (1:1) has a "once upon a time" ring and suggests a period of peaceful, pastoral existence, albeit one plagued by famine. On the other hand, the time in which it is set reminds us of the intertribal conflicts that pervade the book of Judges. At the very least, the use of *nāšā'* in Ruth 1:4 may be intended to underscore the fact that Mahlon and Chilion choose women from among those "foreign" groups competing for land and resources.

suggests is that Ruth “carries a murky backstory.”²⁵ If she was “lifted” from impoverished circumstances, perhaps Naomi found her a burden, conceivably making her status as a Moabite all the more aggravating.

What Ruth and Naomi’s history means for their present relationship is unclear. Only by turning to their words and actions might we imagine the quality of their relationship more directly. Robert Alter argues that a character’s first words are most suggestive of their perspective and attitude.²⁶ Traditionally scholars have understood the dialogue between Naomi and Ruth in chapter one to form the foundation of their bond of *hesed*. Yet a closer examination of their exchange suggests a relationship that is filled with as much pathos as it is promise.

Naomi’s first utterance is “Turn back, each of you to your mother’s house.” (1:8) Straight away she communicates a desire to be separated from her daughters-in-law. Whether she speaks indecisively or harshly and whether her concern is more for her daughters-in-law or for herself all remains to be determined. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld rightly observes that her rebuff is filled with paradox: “In proposing to sever the relationship with her daughters-in-law, Naomi chooses an expression that draws attention to the women’s interconnections.”²⁷ Meant to dissuade, her reference to “her mother’s house” (*lěbēt immāh*) conveys maternal affection and concern for Ruth and Orpah’s welfare. Phyllis Tribble writes, “If their lives are to be fulfilled, then they must remarry, because their male-structured society offers no other possibility . . . Naomi herself is powerless to help. Throughout the exchange, her counsel is customary [and] her motive altruistic.”²⁸

²⁵ Fewell, “Space for Moral Agency.”

²⁶ Alter, 74.

²⁷ Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 23; cf. Tribble, 169.

²⁸ Tribble, 170.

We are not told, however, how Naomi's words ring in the ears of Ruth and Orpah (or even if they interpret them in the same way). We only know that they lift their voices to weep (1:9). We also do not know if a return to Moab is socially viable²⁹ or desired, or if they even have mother's houses to which they might return. Ellen Van Wolde argues that when read syntactically Naomi's words convey an acutely impersonal and dismissive attitude: "Go, Return, a woman to the house of her mother!"³⁰ In this light, not only are Naomi's words possibly unrealistic, they seem laced with cruelty.

We are faced with divergent possibilities: Naomi either pushes away her daughters-in-law out of an intense, self-denying love, or she attempts to cast them off, weary of the burden they may cause going forward.³¹ The ensuing scene complicates the question further. Notably, it is unclear whether Naomi lifts her voice to join Ruth and Orpah in their weeping (*vattīšenāh qôlān*, 1:14). Grammatically, both possibilities exist.³² If she does join in their crying, the scene is strongly suggestive of emotional attachment and familial devotion. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the use of the verb *nāšā'* with *qôl* (to "lift [one's] voice") almost always refers to highly emotional moments between family members.³³ If we understand Naomi's words to be genuine, then her tears are a confirmation of the mutuality of their concern. Yet, in view of the text's tendency toward doubling, it is likely that *vattīšenāh qôlān* refers only to Ruth and Orpah, which

²⁹ As Fewell and Gunn suggest, drawing on an image from Maureen Duffy's poem "Mother and Girl," widowed women in the ancient world were likely deemed "secondhand pots" (Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 24, 30, 112). Cf. Maureen Duffy, "Mother and the Girl," in *Collected Poems* (London: H. Hamilton, 1985), 282.

³⁰ Van Wolde, *Ruth*, 11.

³¹ There is a sense in which Naomi seems at least to cast off Moab. Ruth 1:6 begins, "She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab." By verse 7, she "left *that place* (*hamāqôm*) where she had been living."

³² Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 25-26.

³³ Hagar lifts her voice in anguish (Gen 21:16) as she contemplates having to watch Ishmael die in the wilderness. Esau lifts his voice in grief before his father Isaac (Gen 27:38) as they confront the ensuing rift between Jacob and Esau over the paternal blessing. Upon meeting his beloved for the first time, Jacob lifts his voice before Rachel in tears (Gen 29:11). In two notable exceptions, the Israelites "lift their voices" in fear and contrition in the wilderness (see Num 14:1) and while taking possession of the land (Judg 2:4), although there is something of the familial in these scenes as well, where the people fear being separated from their families (Num 14:13) and arguably their deity (Judg 2:5).

renders the verb more congruent with their corresponding protest in 1:10, “No, we will return with you to your people.”³⁴ In this light, Ruth’s and Orpah’s tears could be viewed as cries of desperation in the face of an immovable Naomi.

Nonetheless, Naomi prays for *hesed* and security (*mēnūhāh*) for her daughters-in-law in the name of YHWH (1:8-9), kisses them farewell (1:9), and mourns aloud over her inability to bear sons who might serve as their future husbands (1:11-13). It is reasonable to read her outpouring of blessings and lamentations, as most commentators do, as the words of a grieving parent letting go of her children. Twice referring to Ruth and Orpah as “daughters” (1:11, 12),³⁵ Naomi’s love for them appears palpable.

Yet Fewell and Gunn argue that upon closer inspection her speech has a feeling of “polite rhetoric” cloaked in religious piety. They note the inherent irony of Naomi blessing her daughters-in-law in the name of YHWH only to instruct Ruth to return with her sister-in-law to *her* people and *her* gods. Embedded in this irony, they suggest, is a hint of personal and ethnic suspicion, similar to that of Judah toward Tamar in Gen 38:

In the Judah-Tamar story Judah regards Tamar the Canaanite with suspicion, considering her to be the cause of the trouble (namely, the death of his two sons). He does not accuse her of this openly, however; rather, he urges her to return to her father’s house.

Naomi’s attitude towards her daughters-in-law is cloaked by an ambiguous text; but she does urge them insistently to return to their mother’s house. The allusion to the Genesis tale prods us. Might she perhaps be like Judah? Might she be veiling her suspicion of the young women, but insisting nevertheless that they belong not with her but with their own families in Moab? Ruth and Orpah, then, would be to Naomi like Tamar is to Judah – an albatross around her neck.

Read thus, her blessing is two-edged. “May YHWH deal *hesed* with you May YHWH grant that you find a home” (1:9). The words may well convey her recognition that the women have treated her kindly. At the same time they are a way of distancing herself, as they wrap in piety her message to them to part from her.³⁶

³⁴ Hubbard, 66. He also notes that the Manuscript *a* from Qumran Cave 4 uses the (possible) archaic dual feminine form *qōlām* instead of MT *qōlān*, indicating only the two daughters-in-law are weeping.

³⁵ Hubbard views this repetition as evidence of their “tender emotional ties.” *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁶ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 73-74.

Linafelt also contends that the formal tone and archaic syntax of Naomi's (and later Boaz's) speech gives it a loquacious and removed quality.³⁷ "Whether this is meant to communicate to the reader their wisdom," he writes, "or rather the idea that they are out of touch with what is going on around them is up to individual readers to decide."³⁸

The reader does indeed become the arbiter of Naomi's intentions. That we are placed in the position of judge over such an ambiguous speech is perhaps the reason why so many interpreters want to read her words with compassion. The depth of Naomi's despair has led to her frequent comparison to Job. The loss of her children places her on the threshold of hopelessness, and like Job, she accuses God of having made her lot very bitter (1:20; cf. Job 27:2). Perhaps she is simply too grief stricken to offer anything but platitudes to her daughters-in-law. This is yet another way to understand her seemingly empty blessing in 1:9a. Jeremy Schipper observes how, when her words are read syntactically, she appears to trail off mid-sentence: "May Yhwh give you . . . Find rest, each woman in the house of her husband."³⁹ While most translations reconcile the two clauses by connecting them,⁴⁰ the verse as it stands suggests the speech of a traumatized woman, either unable to complete her thought or lacking in the faith that her blessing presupposes.⁴¹

³⁷ By contrast, Naomi's speech to the townswomen in 1:20-21, spoken in poetic form, may offer more direct insight into her emotional state. Linafelt argues that the shift from prose to poetry in Hebrew narrative is often an indicator that the narrator wishes to provide access to the interior life of the character. Naomi's expression of bitterness and despair appears to be a transparent response to her belief that God has judged and afflicted her. See Tod Linafelt, "Poetry and Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook to Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Used with permission of the author.

³⁸ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 9. For a discussion of archaizing language in Ruth, see Jacob Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 17, 20.

³⁹ Jeremy Schipper, "The Syntax and Rhetoric of Ruth 1:9a," *Vetus Testamentum* 62, no. 4 (January 1, 2012): 642.

⁴⁰ The JPS, for example, reads, "May the Lord grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!"

⁴¹ Schipper's note offers a helpful overview of the various scholarly proposals for the translation of 1:9a. Schipper takes up a proposal offered by Robert D. Holmstedt that the verse is an anacoluthon, defined by Holmstedt as "a clause that is started one way, paused, and finished a different way." Holmstedt adds, "This is a phenomenon common in everyday speech, though it may also be used for some effect in literature." Where I have interpreted the verse's literary effect as an indication of trauma, Schipper argues that, disillusioned with YHWH, Naomi abandons her pious inclinations for more practical advice. The rhetorical effect, he contends, is thus: "May Yhwh . . . [O,

Naomi's grief does not render invalid her effect on her daughters-in-law, however. Van Wolde writes, "Nowhere in this chapter or in later chapters... does Naomi recognize things must also be hard for Orpah and Ruth."⁴² She contends Naomi's repeated use of the words "I," "me" and "my" is "almost offensive."⁴³ Van Wolde emerges with "a twofold attitude towards Naomi, of sympathy and antipathy at the same time."⁴⁴ A final indication of Naomi's myopia appears with her declaration in 1:13, "My lot is far more bitter than yours." An alternate translation could even be "my lot is far more bitter *because of you*" depending on one's translation of the final clause (*mikkem*).⁴⁵ Possibly Naomi intends a double meaning:⁴⁶ "Return to Moab where at least you have a future, and besides, your presence only makes life more unbearable for me."

The ultimate ambiguity lies in Naomi's silence in the wake of Ruth's profession of loyalty (1:16-17). Not surprisingly, commentators are divided as to its meaning. Tribble believes Naomi is bereft of words because she is in awe of Ruth's commitment to accompany an old woman to a strange land.⁴⁷ Fewell and Gunn attribute Naomi's failure to respond to her dis-ease about returning with a Moabite hanger-on in tow. While acknowledging the friction between the two women, Kristin Moen Saxegaard counsels against reducing their relationship to one conflict, preferring to understand Naomi's silence as "an expression of her condition, as resignation and great sorrow."⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Kirsten Nielsen reminds us, "There is not a single word in the chapter to show that Ruth's love is returned, or even that Naomi just accepts her company. Her

forget it!] Each of you, go find security with another husband!" Schipper, 644-645. See also Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 75.

⁴² Van Wolde, *Ruth*, 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁵ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Tribble, 173.

⁴⁸ Kristin Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 86.

silence creates a tension in the story that leads the reader to ask how this unusual relationship can possibly develop.”⁴⁹

As with Naomi, Ruth’s first words are suggestive of a great deal, although again multiple interpretations of her motivations and intentions emerge. Technically, Ruth shares her first words with Orpah in 1:10, though we will assume that her monologue in 1:16-17 constitutes her primary speech. Even so, Ruth and Orpah’s joint reply to Naomi’s rebuff is indicative of Ruth’s disposition going forward: “No, we will return with you to your people” (1:10). Dutifully, they link their destiny to that of Naomi.⁵⁰ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky translate the verse literally as “it is with *you* that we *return* to *your* people.”⁵¹ Syntactically their outcry “emphatically situates Naomi at the center of their concern.”⁵²

We have observed previously the indelible cultural imprint Ruth’s words to Naomi in 1:16-17 have made, including their ironic inclusion in contemporary heterosexual wedding ceremonies. Yet what is often overlooked when the passage is recited is Ruth’s opening cry, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you” (1:16a). As Sakenfeld asserts, Ruth’s first words betray the profound tension of the scene and would be unfit for a wedding service.”⁵³ The careful reader will observe the peculiarity of Ruth’s verb choice. Whereas the term *pāga* ‘ is typically translated in 1:16 as “to urge,” “to entreat” or “to press,” its semantic range can extend to include “to ill-treat,” “to meet with hostility,” “to fall upon,” “to bother,” and even “to assault.”⁵⁴ Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the term appears in contexts suffused with underlying

⁴⁹ Nielsen, 50.

⁵⁰ Although Orpah ultimately decides to return to Moab, Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky remind us that the narrative makes no negative evaluative statements about her choice; she can also be understood as a dutiful daughter-in-law who simply takes a difference path. In later Jewish tradition (e.g. *Ruth Rabbah*), however, Orpah is condemned (Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, 17). Also see Chapter One, note 59.

⁵¹ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, 12. Emphasis in original.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 31.

⁵⁴ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 76. The verb appears again in 2:9 and 2:22. For a fuller

friction or outright conflict. “When [*pāga*] is used to indicate a hostile meeting,” David Shepherd adds, “. . . the object of aggression is indicated by the preposition *bē*.”⁵⁵ In 1:16a the object of the preposition is Ruth herself, leading Mona DeKoven Fishbane to translate ‘*al tîpgē ’î bî* thus: “do not *hurt* me to leave you.”⁵⁶ “In effect,” Fishbane writes, “[Ruth] asks Naomi to transcend her pain over Ruth’s pain, so as not to cause Ruth further pain!”⁵⁷ We might imagine Ruth adding, “Yes, I have treated you with kindness all these years. Now do the same for me!”

Ruth’s opening statement to Naomi takes on all of the meanings of the English word *plaint*. She responds to Naomi’s rejection with words of grief bordering on an indictment. Similar to many of the psalms of lament in the Hebrew Bible, hers is at once a cry of anguish and a call to accountability. But if Ruth’s initial outcry suggests a plea on her own behalf, this is counterbalanced by the unequivocal focus on Naomi throughout the remainder of her vow:

For wherever you go, I will go;
 wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.
 Where you die, I will die,
 and there I will be buried. (16b-17b)

discussion of this verb and the translation issues surrounding these verses, see David Shepherd, “Violence in the Fields? Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2001): 444-463.

⁵⁵ Shepherd, 452. Brown, Driver and Briggs (803) only attribute the meaning “to encounter with hostility” to select verses (Josh 2:16; Judg 8:21, 15:12, 18:25; 1 Sam 22:17, 18, 18; 2 Sam 1:15. 1 Kgs 2:25, 29, 31, 32, 34, 36; and Exod 5:3. However, in other instances (all where the verb is followed by the preposition *be*), where they translate the verb as “to encounter with request” (Jer 7:16, 27:18; Job 21:15), the verb appear in contexts more ominous than their rendering suggest. This strengthens my argument that its use in Ruth 1:16 implies certain conflict.

⁵⁶ Mona DeKoven Fishbane, “Ruth: Dilemmas of Loyalty and Connection,” in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 299. Emphasis added. Specifically, Fishbane believes the verb is used here to indicate a double entendre of “urge/hurt.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

In Jewish tradition, Ruth's words are viewed as those of a paradigmatic Jewish convert.⁵⁸ But the relational dimension of her vow makes her promises to Naomi even more profound.⁵⁹ Marge Piercy stresses the particularity of her choice in her poem, "The Book of Ruth and Naomi":

I will be a Jew for you,
for what is yours I will love⁶⁰

Ruth pledges not to return to Bethlehem or to the people of YHWH, but to go wherever *Naomi* goes, to lodge wherever *Naomi* lodges, to make whomever *Naomi* chooses to make her people, and to worship whichever God *Naomi* chooses to worship. Nonetheless, the pledge "to return with *you* to *your* people" (1:10) gives emphasis to the specificity of her commitment to return to the land and way of life that Naomi understands as home. As Vanessa L. Ochs writes, "To say that [Ruth] is returning to a place she has never been is to say that she has not only annexed herself to Naomi in friendship, but has made Naomi's history and memory her own."⁶¹

Ruth's promise to be buried with Naomi intensifies the permanence of her devotion. In the Hebrew Bible, it seems that tremendous value was placed on burial in one's homeland. Jacob's sons transport his bones from Egypt to Canaan so that their father's remains could be buried in the cave his ancestor Abraham purchased centuries earlier (Gen 50:13-14; cf. Josh

⁵⁸ For a discussion on "conversion" in the biblical world and rabbinic views of conversion in response to Ruth, see Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, xlii-xlvi. According to Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 121-122, formal religious conversion did not emerge as a practice in Judaism until the second century B.C.E. Ruth's vow of allegiance to YHWH should be understood as a more complex decision related to ethnicity, assimilation and her personal loyalty to Naomi (see Glover). Moreover, it is not clear that an ancient audience, even in post-exilic Yehud, would have understood Ruth to be making a monotheistic commitment, as some scholars have suggested (see, for example, Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 32-33). At the beginning of the Persian period, Israel's religion could be understood as a "tolerant monolatry" in which an individual might ascribe to one god, but recognize that divinity exists in other gods as well. More intolerant attitudes towards the worship of other gods, as reflected in Ezra-Nehemiah, only develop very late in the Persian period and into the Hellenistic period. See further, Lisbeth S. Fried, "From Xeno-Philia to -Phobia: Jewish Encounters with the Other," in *A Time of Change: Judah and its Neighbors in the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods*, (London: T & T Clark International, 2007): 179-204; and Glover, 293-313.

⁵⁹ Fishbane, 299.

⁶⁰ Marge Piercy, *Mars and Her Children* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 121.

⁶¹ Ochs, 295.

24:32).⁶² Ruth's concluding oath is an appeal to what Ruth likely understood to be one of Naomi's deepest desires – to be laid to rest on her native soil. To this final pledge, she adds, “Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you” (1:17b). Here we read striking words of imprecation; Ruth calls upon YHWH to curse her should she break her vow.⁶³ With this, her oath is complete and religiously sanctioned in the name of Naomi's god.

At this juncture we are again at a crossroads of how to interpret our character's intentions. Is Ruth truly as self-sacrificing as her oath suggests, or is there more to her effusive speech? Why would she want to return with this woman who has, perhaps, all but outright rejected her? For most scholars, Ruth's vow is so strongly linked to the understood theme of *hesed* that it is read *prima facie*, with little to no consideration of irony, point of view, or ulterior motive(s). Sakenfeld contends that Ruth's words should be taken as authentic unless otherwise indicated by the narrator. She concedes that a reader's understanding of the tone, motivation, and intent of a character do influence our perceptions, but states, “a more traditional reading [of Ruth] that takes seriously the basic theme of caring and responsibility for others makes more sense of the story as a whole and fits better with the general style of Hebrew narrative, where dialogue not meant to be taken at face value is typically so marked by the narrator or by other characters.”⁶⁴

⁶² Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 33.

⁶³ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky argue that with the use of the indeterminate *ki* (meaning “if,” “for,” and/or “indeed.”), Ruth's utterance here may be all the more profound. Ruth could be implying “*only* death will separate them; or conversely, denying that *even* death can do so” (22, emphasis in original). Syntactically, it is a difficult case to make since there is no negative indicator (i.e. NCV: “even death will not separate us”), but the sense would be “for if indeed even death separates us, may YHWH curse me.” Such a translation need not presuppose an afterlife; Ruth may be simply reiterating that if her bones are to be buried with Naomi's as she intends, not even their remains will be separated at death.

⁶⁴ Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 12-13. Katrina A. Larkin writes with similar misgiving, “an approach that seeks solely to ‘deconstruct’ a text by revealing all its hidden shortcomings can fall into the trap of ignoring what is good in it.” See Katrina A. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 56.

Is it possible to speak of a “general style of Hebrew narrative”? With what criteria should we evaluate a character’s motivation and purpose? Alter and Sternberg each posit scales of reliability in which the narrator, as Sakenfeld implies, is the most reliable source. An implicit contract exists between the author and the reader in which the narrator is understood always to be truthful (though the narrator may withhold some information). The reliability of a character’s speech (including the character of God) is judged by the degree to which it upholds or contradicts the narrator’s statements.⁶⁵ Despite its influence, there are several problems with this general theory, however. The idea of a “truthful” narrator often fails to take into account the possibility of ambiguous language or irony. The author may wish to endow his narrator with omniscience, but the narrator cannot always control all that his or her characters communicate to the audience. Also, in the absence of explicit narratorial comment, a character’s words may or *may not* be understood as truthful and harmonious with his or her actions. For example, when Ruth prostrates herself before Boaz and asks, “Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?” (2:10), we may assume with Boaz that she is genuinely self-deprecating. On the other hand, depending on how we construct Ruth’s character, we may see her gently mocking Boaz’s bravado with her display.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Alter, 146-147; Sternberg, 51. For further critique, see Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising*, 53-56, 68-75. See a fuller discussion of reliability in Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 53-56.

⁶⁶As Koosed observes, Ruth chooses the term *šiphāh* (2:13) over the narrator’s more generic term for servants, *na’arim*, and places herself on the lowest rung of the social ladder, an unwarranted choice that calls for suspicion. Koosed concludes:

Even though Boaz takes Ruth seriously, even though commentators follow his lead and take her seriously as well, I cannot. Boaz is acting the rich patriarch, opening his hand to those who are in need. But Ruth does not need his munificence to glean – it is her right under the law. It is no virtue to allow the homeless to eat out of your trash; it is no virtue to let the poor pick up after your harvesters. The joke may be lost on Boaz, but she is mocking his show of “generosity” (76).

Later on the threshing floor, Ruth will employ the elevated term, *’āmāh* (“handmaid,” 1:9), placing herself on a par with Boaz (Sasson, 80).

In contrast to Alter and Sternberg, Nielsen argues that dialogue-driven narrative is a characteristic of biblical writing intended to encourage readers to draw their own conclusions.⁶⁷

Likewise, Linafelt works from the premise that ambiguity underscores the role of the reader.

“The story [of Ruth] in a style typical Hebrew narrative,” he argues:

simply does not give the reader enough information to answer these questions with any hard-and-fast certainty, which is not to say the questions are unimportant or that the author has no interest in them. On the contrary, these questions are central to the plot; but by not providing the answers, the narrative forces the reader to formulate his or her own suppositions while never knowing for sure if they are correct.⁶⁸

If there is a general style of Hebrew narrative, it is one that is both economical and exacting as it draws the reader into the evaluative process.

Due to her eloquence and the sheer forcefulness of her resolve, scholars often approach Ruth’s words as unambiguous in meaning and intent. There is more than one way to understand what lies behind her speech, however. Koosed writes, “Ruth’s first words announce her as a verbally adroit trickster, as a jester of words.”⁶⁹ She matches Naomi’s protestations one by one⁷⁰ in a manner that is at once exaggerated in its tone and disarming in its directness. Compared to Naomi’s reserved, ornamental speech, Ruth makes promises with abandon, speaking “in a stripped-down, staccato-like syntax that conveys the irrefutability striven for but never reached in Naomi’s more loquacious exhortations.”⁷¹ Fewell and Gunn assert, “We are now, of course, in a world of hyperbole, on the edge of the absurd”:

Ruth mimics the older woman’s rhetoric, indulges her grief and self-pity, but at the same time nudges her to confront real life. Ruth declares devotion to Naomi herself, not to her dead or hypothetical sons. Naomi does have someone to go with, she says, she does have a place to go to, she does have her own people, she does have a god, and someday she

⁶⁷ Nielsen, 47.

⁶⁸ Linafelt, *Ruth*, xv-xvi.

⁶⁹ Koosed, 51.

⁷⁰ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 96.

⁷¹ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 16.

will die – but not today! Ruth uses hyperbole to attempt to crack Naomi’s hypothetical world

Understand the speech thus and we may hear her saying to Naomi: If you are worried that to continue to associate with a foreign woman with foreign gods is to invite further disaster, then don’t worry, for I can fix that; I’ll change people – your people will be my people! – and I’ll change gods as well – your god will be my god!⁷²

Ruth, perhaps intuitively, responds to Naomi’s objections – those implicit and those explicit – in a manner that leaves Naomi silent (1:18). Why does Ruth go to such lengths? Likely she intends to dislodge Naomi from her embittered worldview and confront her with the incontrovertible truth that she is not alone. For many a reader, her speech also bears out the depth of her affections. Indeed, Ruth’s words are so persuasive that we are caught up in the absurdity, the veritable queerness, of her devotion. West writes:

In her words of devotion Ruth names her relationship to Naomi using words that depict a relationship that crossed the boundaries of age, nationality and religion. Ruth chooses against the odds to stay with Naomi – one worthless woman joining herself to another, and, in her choosing, she refuses to accept the status quo of a society that limits and defines their existence as worthless, empty and marginal based on marital status or reproductive ability.⁷³

But how can we be sure that Ruth’s goals are so noble or enlightened? As Nielsen reminds us, whereas Naomi’s hopelessness is apparent, Ruth’s state of mind is much more difficult to discern. Is Ruth’s act of clinging “the defiance of desperation,”⁷⁴ a last ditch effort at survival? Does Ruth actually wish to transfer her cultural and religious allegiances and live out her remaining days in a foreign place, or is she merely attempting to assuage a grieving mother-in-law? Could she have her own reasons, unstated here, for wanting to leave Moab? The narrative does not tell us.

In a passage so full of passion, we paradoxically know little to nothing of Ruth’s own desires. What may be discerned is the gravity of her determination. Ruth’s sense of purpose is

⁷² Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 96.

⁷³ West, 191.

⁷⁴ Nielsen, 49.

accentuated in 1:18: “When [Naomi] saw how determined (*mit’ammešet*) she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her.” Here, the verb *āmēš* (“to be strong, determined”) is conjugated as a reflexive hitpael participle with a durative sense. “Hence,” writes Hubbard, “against Naomi’s assaults, Ruth . . . [steels] herself by mustering all her physical and mental resources.”⁷⁵ And as earlier discussed, Naomi has no response. Perhaps she is moved to quiet compassion by Ruth’s resolve, or perhaps she is simply unwilling to go on protesting. Perhaps she is angry and frustrated that the situation has spiraled out of control and her only recourse is to give Ruth “the silent treatment.” Again, the narrative does not tell us.

If Ruth must garner courage to confront Naomi on the road to return, a greater challenge awaits her when they arrive in Bethlehem. Amidst the clamor of the townswomen’s inquiries, Naomi pronounces YHWH has brought her back grief-stricken and alone:

The women said, “Can this be Naomi?” “Do not call me Naomi,” she replied, “Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune on me!” (1:20-21)

Campbell marks this as a moment of “delicious irony” since, of course, Naomi has not returned *completely* empty.⁷⁶ Commentators vary in their assessment of Naomi’s failure to acknowledge Ruth. André LaCocque justifies her silence positively, arguing she acts discretely merely to save Ruth from embarrassment. Wanting to shield her foreign daughter-in-law from public scrutiny, he argues, she downplays her presence.⁷⁷ Judy Fentress-Williams contends that Naomi’s perspective mirrors the larger communal experience of exile and return:

The confusion around Naomi’s identity upon her return speaks to Israel’s crisis upon her return to the land after exile. She has returned to the land that is central to her identity but she is no longer the same; she has lost so much *and what she has is foreign*. When Naomi instructs the women to call her “Mara” she gives voice to Israel after exile. Her primary

⁷⁵ Hubbard, 121.

⁷⁶ Campbell, 84.

⁷⁷ LaCocque, 55.

identity is that of loss and emptiness at the hand of “Shaddai.” Before she can rebuild, Naomi and the nation she represents must mourn what has been lost.⁷⁸

Naomi’s words may indeed have resonated strongly with a post-exilic Yehudite audience.

Devastated by loss and estranged from her origins, Naomi cannot help but attest to her feelings of desolation.

However, reading inside the play of perspectives that constitutes the story world, *we* cannot help but contemplate the impact of Naomi’s speech on Ruth. Fewell and Gunn imagine her internal response:

The day they arrived in Bethlehem wasn’t one Ruth cared to dwell on too much. There was talking at last – Naomi certainly broke her silence – but it didn’t involve her. At least not directly. It was as though she was there but not there. There was tension between Naomi and the clustering women, and she knew she was part of the tension. Everyone was looking at her, though no one said a word. Yet Naomi talked as though she were invisible. She felt acutely self-conscious, aware of her difference. In that moment, she’d never been so alone. Oh god, she thought, what have I done?⁷⁹

From Ruth’s point of view, the discomfort is palpable. If Naomi is perceived as a stranger in their midst, how much more so is Ruth. Naomi may want to shield her from public scrutiny, but as LaCocque concedes, Naomi “leaves it for time and public rumor (cf. 2:11, etc.) to do their work.”⁸⁰ If we as readers do not know how things will fare for Ruth going forward, how much less certain might it seem to this young girl in a strange land?

Every reconstruction of a story is the product of manifold choices which take readers down different paths. We have only just left chapter one of Ruth and already we have entertained many ideas about the relationship between its central characters. Is this a tale of two lovers or two antagonists, of *hesed* or pragmatic survival? Going forward, we can envision many paths Ruth and Naomi’s relationship might take, but what is clear is that they must work together for

⁷⁸Judy Fentress-Williams, *Ruth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 63. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 33.

⁸⁰LaCocque, 55. What LaCocque seems to be saying is that Naomi expects this and chooses not to add fuel to the fire by saying more about Ruth than is necessary.

the plot to move forward. Should we view them growing closer in their pursuits? To what extent will they act for the other or seek their own rewards? As queer traces continue to emerge, how should we as readers understand the development of their relationship and its purpose to the story as a whole?

The Perversities of the Middle

If women and those who are sexually “deviant” constitute the perverse middle according to the Brooksian scheme, then Ruth and Naomi each play their constitutive parts in the pleasurable complications that precede the realization of narrative climax. In chapters two and three, the two women participate in a kind of elusive dance around one another in which the reader is never quite certain about their aims or affections. As we will see, Ruth herself constitutes a “perverse” element as she subverts conventions of ethnicity, sex and gender on the grain field and the threshing floor. Naomi, moreover, surreptitiously inserts herself into the sexually charged space between Ruth and Boaz, further complicating the male plot of ambition. All the while, the textual ambiguities surrounding Ruth and Naomi’s relationship continue to proliferate.

As chapter two opens, we are informed by the narrator of Boaz’s existence. To the astute reader, this piece of information is immediately conspicuous. Did Naomi have knowledge of Boaz prior to her return? Could Ruth and Orpah in fact have had options for marriage in Bethlehem? Or does Naomi only remember Boaz when Ruth comes home from his field (2:19-20)? Sasson argues Naomi did know of Boaz and even interprets the verse to read, “Now Naomi knew an *acquaintance* of her husband . . .” (cf. JPS: “Now Naomi had a kinsman . . .”).⁸¹ The difficulty in translation stems from an instance of *ketiv* (that which is written) /*qere* (that which

⁸¹ Sasson, 38. Emphasis added.

is read) in the MT; where the ketiv (*myd* ') is rendered “friend,” the *qere* (*môda* ') is read as “kinsman.” Though other commentators disagree with his translation,⁸² Sasson’s rendering raises the implicit question of how Naomi could *not* have known of Boaz, who, the narrator reminds us, was “a man of substance, of the family of Elimelech” (2:1).

Possibly, the narrator is playfully ambiguous about Naomi’s knowledge of Boaz in order to highlight Ruth’s predicament. In their first days in Bethlehem, Naomi seems oblivious to Ruth’s welfare, and perhaps to her own as well. Ruth sets out to the fields to glean, to which Naomi responds with minimal words, “Yes, daughter, go” (2:2). “As luck would have it,” the narrator tells us, Ruth finds herself in Boaz’s field (2:3). While some scholars point to this as evidence of YHWH’s guiding hand, within the context of the passage, it points to the fact of Ruth’s ignorance. It is she who must submit herself to the vagaries of chance in order to find food.

Scholars differ as to whether Ruth asks permission of her mother-in-law to glean or simply states her intention to do so. The participle *nā* ' in 2:2 can be translated as an indicator of entreaty (“may I go”) or self-deliberation (“I will go”). Eskenezi’s and Frymer-Kensky’s translation of *ēlkāh nā* ' as “I would please go” is probably most fitting, preserving both Ruth’s initiative and her deference to Naomi.⁸³

The morning’s exchange with Naomi sets the tone for her later encounter with Boaz. At once reverential and daring, Ruth is again a master of language. She preempts the patriarch’s shower of praise and blessing (2:11-12) with appropriate humility (2:10). But for all her self-deprecation, she skillfully maneuvers the conversation toward her own ends. When Boaz calls on YHWH to reward her deeds and to extend her refuge under his divine wings (*kānāf*), Ruth

⁸² See Saxegaard, *Character Complexity*, 147-149 for a further discussion of how various translators solves this text-critical issue.

⁸³ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, 28.

responds, “*You* are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to *your* maidservant – though I am not so much as one of *your* maidservants” (2:13). It is Boaz’s benevolence and protections she seeks. Later on the threshing floor, playing on the double meaning of *kānāf*, she even more intrepidly calls upon him to “spread your robe (*kānāf*) over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman” (3:9b).

Ruth’s verbal dexterity affords her a place at Boaz’s table (2:14) and the right to glean alongside his female workers (2:8). Boaz even instructs his workers to pull whole stalks out for her to collect (2:16). Twice the text emphasizes that Ruth is able to eat until she is satisfied (2:14b, 18b), with enough of her midday meal leftover to take home to Naomi. “A curious detail to be repeated,” write Fewell and Gunn, “That, no doubt, means a significant one. She shares with Naomi, clearly, but only after she has met her own needs first. Sacrificial love? Perhaps – but not self-emptying.”⁸⁴

Ruth carries home an ephah of barley, the equivalent of anywhere from twenty-nine to fifty pounds,⁸⁵ perhaps an exaggeration meant to accentuate its abundance in the face of their hunger. At the sight of this excess, Naomi excitedly inquires about Ruth’s activities: “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you!”(2:19a). Naomi’s change of disposition raises the question, why did she herself not go out to the fields to glean? Was she too feeble, too embarrassed or perhaps still too grief-stricken? Or did she “[fidget] all day as she wondered how Ruth was faring,” as Hubbard imagines,⁸⁶ hoping that, alone, Ruth might be better able to charm some landowner, maybe even one who had heard of their troubles?

⁸⁴ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 98.

⁸⁵ Sasson, 57.

⁸⁶ Hubbard, 181.

Perhaps the most plaguing aspect of this chapter is Naomi's failure to warn Ruth of the dangers of gleaning. Boaz orders his men not "to molest" (*nāga'*) Ruth, a term that, similar to *pāga'* in 2:22, is laden with sexually violent associations.⁸⁷ While translators and commentators have downplayed its ominous connotations,⁸⁸ Hubbard renders its use elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as "beat violently" (Gen 32:26, 33; Job 1:19, Josh 8:15, Niphal) "inflict injury" (Gen 26:11, 29) and "have sexual relations" (Gen 20:6, Prov 6:29).⁸⁹ In addition to the risk of physical peril, one wonders how Naomi could, without warning her, expose a foreigner like Ruth to public derogation in the grain field (and later the threshing floor), places where she was at particular risk of being perceived as a selfish and sexually promiscuous Moabite.⁹⁰

Is Naomi so uncaring with regard to Ruth's plight or just engrossed in her woes? Naomi's lack of concern does not seem to escape Ruth. Fewell and Gunn propose that in order to tease or possibly chastise Naomi for failing to warn her of the risks involved in gleaning, Ruth intentionally misrepresents Boaz's words to catch her attention. While Boaz had instructed Ruth to stay with "my young women" (*na'ārōtāy*) as she works (2:8), Ruth mischievously tells Naomi he said to stay with "the young men" (*hann'ārīm*, 2:21).⁹¹ The JPS avoids the discrepancy by translating the term in 2:21 inclusively as "workers," but it seems unlikely that the Ruth would choose a gender-neutral term here when Boaz was so intent on protecting her from male harassment. In using the term *dābaq*, Linafelt conjectures, she may be "hinting at the possibility

⁸⁷ For more on the history of the interpretation of the verb *nāga'*, see Shepherd, 445-450; and Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 122-123.

⁸⁸ For example, Sasson argues that since the statement comes before Boaz's encouragement to Ruth to avail herself of water that the men have drawn (2:10), the intent is merely to assure her she will not be refused if she does so (50).

⁸⁹ Hubbard, 159.

⁹⁰ Deuteronomy 23:5 notably condemns the Moabites for failing to meet the Israelites with food and water in the desert. The threshing floor may have also been associated with plundering (1 Sam 23:1) and prostitution (Hos 9:10).

⁹¹ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 39.

of separation from Naomi if she ends up marrying one of these young men (recall that the verb “stick to” [*dbq*] is used in this way in Gen 2:24).”⁹²

Ruth’s remarks trigger a response from Naomi, who this time acknowledges the danger: “It is best, daughter, that you go out with his girls, and not be annoyed in some other field” (2:22). Fewell and Gunn wonder if Naomi in fact fears Ruth might attract the attention of someone who is not her redeemer.⁹³ Perhaps Naomi believes that Ruth is as naïve as she feigns to be. In any case, Ruth is successful at “prodding Naomi to express a concern for her well being.”⁹⁴ Through verbal legerdemain, she again garners an acknowledgement of her own need while shrewdly coaxing Naomi back to life.⁹⁵

Does Naomi’s attitude change? At the very least, the close of chapter two offers a more discernible indication that she might – or could – return Ruth’s devotion. Brenner, one of the few scholars to expound upon Naomi’s sexual feelings toward Ruth, imagines Ruth’s return from Boaz’s field as a critical turning point for Naomi. In Brenner’s creative retelling, Naomi recalls:

I never was a demonstrative woman. In fact, even when parting from my beloved Orpah, she kissed me and I didn’t kiss her (chapter 1). But this time, I jumped out of bed, where I’d been lying listlessly, grabbed Ruth, and hugged and kissed her rather emotionally. And then it happened. All of a sudden, as I was touching Ruth, a wave of . . . what? came over me It was an electric shock, you’d say today, that totally engulfed me. It was, I said to myself as I was reeling with confusion but in the midst of its clearest comprehension, *desire* that I felt.⁹⁶

If Naomi is passive in chapter two, she is a whirl of activity in chapter three. Having declared Boaz “one of *our* redeeming kinsmen” (2:20), she and Ruth finally begin to work in seeming concert. As Naomi instructs Ruth what to do on the threshing floor, there are textual and intertextual suggestions that she participates vicariously in Ruth’s seduction. Her instructions,

⁹² Linafelt, *Ruth*, 44.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁴ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 43-44.

⁹⁵ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 39.

⁹⁶ Brenner, “The Three of Us,” 115-116. Emphasis in original.

“bathe, anoint yourself [and] dress up” (3:3), call to mind the very same actions taken by David when he comes out of mourning for his dead child (2 Sam. 12:20).⁹⁷ The allusion insinuates it is the speaker, Naomi, also awakening from the malaise of grief, who will be stirred to life when Ruth and Boaz meet.

Here, too, traces of the queer become more pronounced. There is a peculiar discrepancy found in the MT between the *qere* and the *ktiv* in 3:3-4, cited respectively below:

... wash and anoint yourself, put on your finest dress, and go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, mark the place where he lies down and go and uncover the place of his feet and lie down – and he will tell you what to do.

... wash and anoint yourself, put on your finest dress, and *I* will go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, mark the place where he lies down and go and uncover the place of his feet and *I* will lie down – and he will tell you what to do.⁹⁸

Brian P. Irwin theorizes the change is a *tiqqune sopherim* (scribal emendation) made during the Persian period in order to play down the sexual content of the threshing floor rendezvous by replacing Ruth with Naomi. Irwin attributes the change to concern over intimate relations between Israelites and Moabites.⁹⁹ While this is conceivable, the confusion only serves to draw more attention to the scene’s eroticism. Naomi’s vicarious participation sets the stage for a curious *ménage a trois* in which Ruth’s pledge to *lûn* with Naomi will converge with her seduction of Boaz in a not only figurative, but an almost corporeal way.¹⁰⁰

If we read the *qere/ktiv* as another kind of doubling, the text also deconstructs itself, once again destabilizing gender binaries and subverting our expectations. The perversities of the middle are enacted quite literally as Naomi places herself between Boaz and Ruth. But how does

⁹⁷ David, like Naomi, also refuses solace (2 Sam 12:17).

⁹⁸ Exum, 170. Exum’s translation. Emphasis added.

⁹⁹ Brian P. Irwin, “Removing Ruth: *Tiqqune Sopherim* in Ruth 3.3-4?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 3 (Mar 2008): 331–338.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Powell, Jones and Kim.

this textual anomaly affect our understanding of Ruth and Naomi's relationship? Do the grammatical inconsistencies merely blur the lines as to who actually seduces Boaz, reminding the reader that it is Naomi's plan? Does the *ketiv* hint that Naomi is reawakened to life at the prospect of a marital consummation? Or, does it connect Naomi and Ruth sexually? Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. remarks the *ketiv* re-evokes the allusion to Genesis 2:24: "It is as if in some fundamental way Ruth and Naomi are already 'one flesh.'" ¹⁰¹ Out of this "union," they will in fact produce a child. The symbolic transfer of seed from Boaz to Naomi through Ruth (3:15, 17) illustrates how Ruth "plays 'wife' to Boaz, 'husband' to Naomi."¹⁰²

However, the careful reader observes how Ruth *does not* follow Naomi's instruction to allow Boaz to take the initiative (3:4). Instead, she propositions Boaz (3:9). Later, after the nighttime encounter, she again misrepresents events to Naomi when she tells her that the seed Boaz gave her was meant for her mother-in-law (3:17). Are Ruth and Naomi in fact acting as "one flesh" from Ruth's perspective? Will the transfer of seed bear equal fruit for both women? Jennings asserts the love between Ruth and Naomi mirrors the love of YHWH for his people in its provision of "seed, sons, and security."¹⁰³ Certainly the praise bestowed on Ruth by Boaz (2:11) and the community (4:11-12) gives Ruth some pride of place in the security of Israel's future.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, the status of her relationship with Naomi appears less than assured.

A Queer Future?

¹⁰¹ Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 229.

¹⁰² Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 103.

¹⁰³ Jennings, 234.

¹⁰⁴ Not only is Ruth compared to the matriarchs Rachel, Leah and Tamar, Boaz's observation that "you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before" (2:11) is an allusion to Abraham himself. See Tribble, 177.

Interpreters who envisage a lasting relationship between Ruth and Naomi picture the women raising Obed jointly. In Brenner's retelling Naomi allows herself to imagine the possibility, if only for a moment:

In my wild imagination, I saw the two of us establishing a two-woman homestead, perhaps acquiring a child by some means, natural or otherwise or by adoption. In my fond imagination, I saw us establishing a relationship of love. Why did Ruth follow me to a strange land? Why does she feed and comfort me, if not because of love and love alone? She was a generation younger, so what? Men are allowed to have younger lovers; why should women not be allowed that? *And nobody should know, nobody would suspect, they'd view us as two bereaved women making the best of difficult circumstances.*¹⁰⁵

There are some compelling textual reasons to believe that Naomi's fantasy may have become reality. First, there is the displacement of Boaz by YHWH at the point of marital consummation: "So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her. The Lord let her conceive and she bore a son" (literally, "[Boaz] came into her and the Lord gave her conception") (4:13). While YHWH often plays a role in permitting pregnancy in other birth narratives in the Hebrew Bible, this is the only instance in which he is said to be involved directly in impregnation.¹⁰⁶ YHWH's participation certainly bears theological significance, drawing our attention to Ruth's divinely sanctioned role in the future of Israel. However, what is of more immediate note is the fact that Boaz is supplanted. He provides the sperm, but his procreative role is abruptly upended. His position as Obed's father is reduced to the biological.

The question of Obed's parentage is further complicated by what follows. Ruth bears the child, and the townswomen immediately bestow their congratulations on Naomi for having been granted a redeemer in her old age (4:14-15). At first glance that redeemer seems to be Boaz until

¹⁰⁵ Brenner, "The Three of Us," 116. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ Timothy D. Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 212. In other instances, YHWH opens the woman's womb (e.g. Gen. 29:31, 30:22), takes note of her (e.g. Gen 21:1), remembers her (e.g. 1 Sam 1:19b), or delivers the news through an angelic messenger (e.g. Judg 13:3) or a prophet (e.g. 2 Kgs 4:16). For further analysis of birth reports in annunciation type-scenes, see Finlay, 85-161.

they add, “for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons” (4:15). Obed, the fruit of Ruth’s womb, is Naomi’s redeemer. Recall that here Ruth is again referred to as *kallāt*, with its possible meaning of bride. Boaz may have provided the seed, YHWH may have given conception, but Naomi and her bride have together acquired a child in the eyes of the community. As Koosed playfully notes, essentially “Obed has two mommies.”¹⁰⁷ Here also the term love (*āhēb*) is notably used for the first time in the narrative as the townswomen openly acknowledge Ruth’s steadfast devotion to Naomi.

Contra a reading that sees Ruth and Naomi as co-parents, Saxegaard argues that the reference to sons places their relationship in an altogether different light. In her view Ruth transcends her role as Naomi’s daughter-in-law by becoming the ideal Israelite son.¹⁰⁸ Unlike Mahlon and Chilion, whose names denote sterility and death,¹⁰⁹ Ruth provides offspring for Naomi and cares for her in her declining years. Ruth’s attribution as “better . . . than seven sons” further carries with it a veiled intraethnic critique. One Moabite daughter-in-law surpasses seven Israelite sons.¹¹⁰ If Obed will renew Naomi’s life and sustain her in old age, then it is due to the excellence of his mother’s example.

Saxegaard’s thesis is persuasive, although it seems unnecessary to set her argument in opposition to those who argue for a romantic or sexual component to Ruth and Naomi’s relationship. In a text that, as we have seen, plays on categories of gender and sexuality in multiple ways, these readings are not mutually exclusive. Ruth’s actions defy the expectations of her gender on many fronts. If her provisions of food and a home exceed the devotion of the typical Israelite son, how much more so do her unorthodox means of producing a child for

¹⁰⁷ Koosed, 116.

¹⁰⁸ Saxegaard, “More than Seven Sons,” 257-275.

¹⁰⁹ Mahlon is thought mean “to be sterile, weak” and Chilion “to be at end, finished.” See Sasson 18-19, cited in Saxegaard, “More Than Seven Sons,” 259.

¹¹⁰ Saxegaard, “More Than Seven Sons,” 271.

Naomi exceed the commitment of a typical Israelite father? If we compare her actions to those of Judah in Genesis 38, Ruth emerges as a superior patriarch, ensuring the protection and future of her family.

A more compelling challenge to the notion that Ruth and Naomi (or Ruth and Boaz for that matter) are to be understood as Obed's parents comes from Koosed herself. Koosed reminds us that when Boaz acquires Ruth, he intends "to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate, that the name of the deceased may not disappear from among his kinsmen and from the gate of his home town" (4:10, cf. 4:5). In actuality, Obed is the symbolic (and legal) offspring of Mahlon. This fact, alongside the designation of Naomi as the child's mother, suggests that Mahlon and Naomi are his proper parents.¹¹¹ But why Naomi and not Ruth if Ruth is Mahlon's widow and her marriage to Boaz is at least a quasi-levirate arrangement? Zornberg, reading Ruth alongside later rabbinic texts, suggests that Ruth's greatest gift to Naomi is the metaphysical return of Mahlon through the newborn child. "The child who is born in the end," she writes, "is a movement backward through her of the soul of Mahlon *Vehaya lemeshiv nefesh*, and it will be a returner of the soul (4:15). In other words, the child has come back to Naomi."¹¹²

In these readings, Ruth and Boaz are superseded by Naomi and Mahlon as Obed's parents. However, for Koosed such an interpretation is no more or less queer than the possibility of Ruth and Naomi's sexual partnership:

The reconfiguration and extension of kinship relations, which today rely on twenty-first-century reproductive technologies, are not really new. They have been present in society for millennia – the people who give the genetic plan to the child are not necessarily the

¹¹¹ Koosed, 104.

¹¹²Avivah Zornberg, "The Concealed Alternative," in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 75. Zornberg argues that Ruth clings to Naomi because of "a fire in her bones" for Mahlon that surpasses his death and can only be satisfied through the birth of "his" child. While her midrashic reading is dependent on other intertexts, there is nothing, in my view, within the book of Ruth that renders it implausible, thus adding yet another dimension to our understanding of Ruth's *hesed* and the significance of Obed's birth.

child's parents in the legal and/or social spheres. Legal, social, and biological parenthoods are not always coterminous

Even if Naomi and Ruth never had a sexual relationship, the way in which this book redefines kinship at the beginning as the family you choose and at the end removes the link between sexuality and parenthood, opens it up to queer readings, ones that go deeper and further than the question of whether the two women had sex.¹¹³

Kinship ties, she reminds us, are a system of symbols in which sex, biology and blood relations are secondary to communal practices, values and beliefs.¹¹⁴ In ancient Israel, the extended or joint family took precedence over the individual (biological) unit, and marriages provided but one conduit into a larger network of legal and social relations.¹¹⁵ As Koosed astutely concludes, Naomi and Ruth “glean their family ties,” making the most of the food and family relations at their disposal in order to bring a child into the world.¹¹⁶

Given the matrix of legal, social, and biological factors shaping Obed's birth, the question of who constitutes his parentage remains ambiguous. One might even argue that Obed is blessed with multiple parents. Nonetheless, this irenic vision is overshadowed by Ruth's seeming displacement in even the intimate acts of motherhood. Though Naomi may be Obed's rightful mother in the legal realm, why does she take him “to her bosom” and become his *ōmenet* or “wet nurse” (cf. JPS, “foster mother”) (4:16)? How are we to understand the fact that the townswomen and not Ruth name the child (4:17b)? Do these events signal a parting of the ways for Ruth and Naomi? Or do they merely provide further evidence of fluid familial and communal practices?

Regarding the proclaiming of Obed, scholars generally focus on the special role the townswomen play and the way in which their ritual participation underscores the role of women

¹¹³ Koosed, 104, 107.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 104-105. In her analysis, Koosed draws in part on David Murray Schneider's anthropological theory of kinship. See David Murray Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

¹¹⁵ Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 36. Cited in Koosed, 105.

¹¹⁶ Koosed, 107.

generally in the unfolding of the plot.¹¹⁷ While concern over the preservation of a dead man's lineage predominates chapter four, "the women redeem this male theme," writes Tribble, "They identify the child as the son of Naomi rather than Elimelech. They perceive this infant as restoring life to the living rather than restoring a name to the dead."¹¹⁸ Here we also find the only instance in the Hebrew Bible of someone naming a child other than the newborn's parents.¹¹⁹ The women receive pride of place alongside the male elders of the town (4:11-12) in the blessing of this exemplary birth.

Strikingly, Boaz is absent from these celebratory remarks; it is Naomi and her "bride" (*kallāt*, 4:15) who have produced a child. West asserts that Obed's birth marks the pinnacle of the procreative union between Ruth and Naomi.¹²⁰ LaCocque also makes the interesting assertion that the women's birth announcement is not just a statement of public witness but an announcement "to Naomi as if she were the 'father' of the child."¹²¹ Remarking on the odd configuration of 4:17 ("and the woman neighbors called him a name . . . They named him Obed"), he argues, following Hubbard, that the declaration signifies a formulaic announcement of birth in which the announcer(s) offer interpretive commentary on its significance (cf. Jer 20:14-15, Job 3:3, Isa 9:5), in this instance, "A son is born to Naomi!"¹²² "Since [Naomi] is not

¹¹⁷ LaCocque (144) argues that the townswomen's naming of the child constitutes an *inclusio* that ties together their initial naming of Naomi ("Is this Naomi?") in 1:19 with the identification of her redeemer. Where Naomi in 1:20 had eschewed the pronouncement of her own name ("Call me Mara," 1:20), here the women call it out with that of the infant-*gôel* in order to celebrate the role of Obed (meaning "servant") in restoring her to her namesake ("pleasant"). Cf. Hubbard, 276-277; Lois Durbin, "Fullness and Emptiness, Fertility and Loss: Meditations on Naomi's Tale in the Book of Ruth," in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 143; and Peter H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth A Social Identity Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 134-135.

¹¹⁸Tribble, 194.

¹¹⁹ Hubbard, 278; cf. Sasson, 173-174. One exception is the naming of Solomon by the prophet Nathan as "Jedidiah" meaning "beloved of YHWH," however this occurs only after Bathsheba names him Solomon as "his replacement" for her dead child (2 Sam 12:24-25).

¹²⁰ West, 194.

¹²¹ LaCocque, 145. Emphasis added.

¹²² Ibid., 144-145. LaCocque's translation. Cf. Hubbard, 13-14, 275-276.

the one who gave birth,” adds LaCocque, “the birth must be announced to her.”¹²³ Again, the fluidity of gender roles becomes apparent:

Thus, Obed has two mothers (a fact that the text puts in parallel with the two mothers of the Israel house, Rachel and Leah), as Perez had two fathers (Judah and the deceased husband of Tamar, in Genesis 38). And if Ruth is then like Tamar, and beyond her, like Rachel and Leah, Naomi is like Sarah and she becomes the “mother” of the child of promise.¹²⁴

Fewell and Gunn read these references to Rachel, Leah and Tamar with greater suspicion. In the sisters’ own day, Rachel and Leah were not co-mothers, but rather competitors. The tradition to which they belong, moreover, bears to mind an intertextual history of jealousy, resentment, female surrogacy and exploitation. Like Tamar and Hagar before her, Ruth must earn her recognition through the sacrifices of her own body.¹²⁵ Her “gift” of a child highlights her utility as much, if not more so, than her devotion.

Fewell and Gunn also question the mood of the scene. Amidst the cries of public celebration, Naomi herself has no words of acknowledgement for Ruth, harkening back to her previous failure to acknowledge her when they arrived in Bethlehem. There Naomi came back empty, here she is made full, but still she has no words of praise or thanksgiving for her daughter-in-law. Perhaps, Fewell and Gunn suggest, the townswomen proclaim Ruth is “better to you than seven sons” (4:15) in order to reproach her and prompt her to speak.¹²⁶ In any case, by pronouncing “a son is born to Naomi” (4:17) they give expression to her self-involved point of view.¹²⁷

Scholars have long debated what it means that Naomi becomes Obed’s “foster mother.” Does she breastfeed him or merely hold him lovingly to her chest (4:16)? Naomi’s designation as

¹²³ LaCocque, 145.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 144.

¹²⁵ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 81.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 80-81.

¹²⁷ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 81.

his *ōmenet*, may be translated as “guardian,” “nanny,” “wet nurse” or “one who gives suck.” Those interpreters who argue that Naomi is a wet nurse in name only, rather than one who breastfeeds, contend that Naomi is past the age of lactation. However, given that Naomi could be as young as forty years of age, this is not necessarily the case. As Koosed observes, interpreters and translators are more influenced by their own perceptions about age, culture and the biology of lactation than by any real evidence in the text.¹²⁸ Not only is it possible for women to breastfeed much later into life than is normally assumed (the oldest documented case is sixty years old), it is also possible to induce lactation in adoptive mothers. The practice of employing wet nurses was one common in the ancient world, one often exercised by women of the privileged class.¹²⁹ While this is not precisely the case with Naomi and Ruth, there is certainly biblical evidence here and elsewhere that women gave over their children for others to breastfeed (cf. Gen 24:59, 35:8; Exod 2:7-10; 2 Kgs 11:2-3).¹³⁰

Nonetheless, the text is ambiguous as to Naomi’s precise role,¹³¹ and as Koosed avers, “in the world of fiction anything can happen.”¹³² In her examination of the anthropological significance of breast milk in the ancient world, Cynthia R. Chapman argues that the case of Naomi is one of three biblical narratives of “preposterous breastfeeding.”¹³³ Unlike in modern

¹²⁸ Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of how a translator’s assumptions about the self-sacrificing nature of motherhood shapes interpretation comes from Eugene H. Petersen’s idiomatic translation, *The Message*: “Naomi took the baby and held him in her arms, cuddling him, cooing over him, waiting on him hand and foot.”

¹²⁹ Mayer I. Guber, “Breast-feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia,” *Journal Of The Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989): 73-82. Cited in Cynthia R. Chapman, “‘Oh That You Were Like a Brother to Me, One Who Had Nursed at My Mother’s Breasts’ Breast Milk As a Kinship-Forging Substance.” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 12, no. 7 (2012): 28, http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_169.pdf.

¹³⁰ Koosed, 114-115. For more on the biology of lactation, see La Leche League International, *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* (New York: Plume, 2004).

¹³¹ This is in part due to the polysemous nature of *ōmenet*, even when used in reference to a man. In Num 11:12, Moses is speaking metaphorically, though that is no reason to discount the implication of breastfeeding, as Sasson suggests. Moses very clearly imagines himself as one who gives milk to a suckling children, just he imagines himself carrying a child to term. By Sasson’s logic, we could translate *ōmenet* as “adoptive mother” here, but that would clearly dilute the power of the image. See Sasson, 172; cf. Koosed, 114.

¹³² Koosed, 115.

¹³³ Chapman, 26-41.

Western cultures where blood ties are thought to establish kinship, in the ancient world breast milk seems to have been understood as a substance which conferred insider ethnicity and social/ritual status on a child.¹³⁴ In Assyrian and Egyptian literature, one finds examples of divine and human kings nursing at the breasts of goddesses to establish royal and divine status.¹³⁵ In ancient Israel, Chapman contends, breast milk also seems to be to the representational conduit through which Israelites maintained ethnic identity in the face of imperial threats and foreign influence.¹³⁶ She theorizes that Judean pillar figurines with articulated breasts that were mass produced in the eighth centuries and seventh centuries functioned as symbols of resistance and repopulation in response to Assyrian military attacks.¹³⁷ In numerous exilic and post-exilic texts, Jerusalem is also likened to a mother nursing her young. In Isaiah 66:12-13, returning Babylonian exiles are said to regain their glory through the milk of Zion.¹³⁸

Chapman reads the account of Naomi's breastfeeding alongside that of Sarah and Isaac and Moses and his mother. In each story, the breastfed child is a foundational figure whose mother (or *ōmenet* in the case of Naomi) possesses ritual, priestly or royal status.¹³⁹ The woman is "preposterously" able to overcome certain obstacles (age in the cases of Sarah and Naomi, separation in the case of Moses¹⁴⁰) in order to be able to pass along her social status and ethnic

¹³⁴ Ibid., 1-3, 26. For more on issues of purity and breastfeeding in rabbinic literature, see Gwynn Kessler, "Let's Cross that Body When We Get to It: Gender and Ethnicity in Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 329-359. Significant to Kessler's discussion is the transgression of gender boundaries with regard to men nursing. In the case of Mordecai, she argues the rabbis seem to assert that his male milk is purer than female milk due to its capacity to confer Jewishness on Esther (334-337, 344-353).

¹³⁵ Chapman, 8-11.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11-17.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 14-17.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 11-13.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 26-41. The woman's status is established primarily through introductory tribal identification and/or genealogical statements.

¹⁴⁰ Despite being nursed by his own mother, Moses's upbringing in an Egyptian household may shed light on the personal implications of his complaint to YHWH in Numbers 11:12: "Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers." Possibly, Moses, in a moment of frustration, is resisting his ethnic ties, which would render him a proper *ōmenet* for the people.

identity through breastfeeding. In each story, the suckling infant is also born into a household in which a foreign woman is available to nurse the newborn. In every case, the plot turns on the child being able to nurse at the breast of his proper Hebrew or Israelite “mother.”¹⁴¹

It has long been recognized in Ruth scholarship that Naomi’s adoption of Obed has certain loose parallels with extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern accounts of female deities suckling newborns in order to ensure a noble fate.¹⁴² It has also been often argued that Naomi’s adoption ensures that he has the proper parentage to place him in the line of David.¹⁴³ However, if Chapman’s hypothesis is correct, there is a more direct link between Naomi’s act of breastfeeding and Obed’s legitimization as an *Israelite* ancestor to David. Tainted by Ruth’s foreignness, Obed must be nursed at the breast of Naomi in order to dissolve the stigma.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Chapman argues, the erasure of her ethnicity is coupled with her erasure as mother:

At the moment of her marriage to Boaz, she very briefly becomes simply “Ruth.” Once the son is born, however, Ruth’s name is never mentioned again. She is celebrated with a label rather than a name; she is a “daughter-in-law” to Naomi who is more valuable to Naomi “than seven sons.” While this is a positive description, it strips her of both her name and the title “mother.” While the name “Ruth” disappears, Naomi’s name is repeated three times in the five verses that describe the birth of Obed.¹⁴⁵

We return once again to our central question: what does this mean for Ruth and Naomi’s relationship? Does Naomi disavow Ruth or simply follow the customs of her people in taking up Obed? Does Ruth surrender the child bitterly or join in the celebration of Naomi’s rebirth? No matter what ethnic tensions may swirl around them, are they not still recognized, implicitly if not explicitly, as co-mothers?

Because the narrative is silent as to Ruth’s perspective, it is left open to the reader to imagine her point of view on the events of chapter four. LaCocque suggests it is one of willing

¹⁴¹ Chapman, 26-41.

¹⁴² See Sasson’s comprehensive discussion of this “vestigial motif,” 233-240.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Gerleman, 37-38.

¹⁴⁴ Chapman, 34-39.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

self-sacrifice, and even contemplates her foreshadowing the words of Jesus in John 3:30: “It is necessary for her to increase and that I decrease.”¹⁴⁶ Koosed counters this suggestion: “No matter how much a woman may love her mother-in-law, no mother hands her child over to her.”¹⁴⁷

Koosed instead proposes Ruth may have had her own reasons to relinquish her role:

Readers romanticize both Ruth and motherhood in assuming that the conception and birth of Obed fulfills a desire on the part of Ruth, even though the narrative never indicates that she has such a desire [T]he moment when Ruth hands Obed over to Naomi to breast-feed may be Ruth’s resisting of a final assimilation into the Israelite community. She refuses to embrace fully the role of good Israelite wife and mother when she declines to raise the son whom she has borne.¹⁴⁸

LaCocque’s and Koosed’s arguments seem to lie on opposite ends of the spectrum, depicting Ruth as either altruistically passive or subversively defiant. Koosed’s point is well taken that we should refrain from bringing stereotypical attitudes towards mothers and mothering to bear on the text. But can we imagine that Ruth would break her oath to Naomi and permanently separate herself from her child? In the final analysis, we are reminded that the desires of characters, like the desires of readers, are, more often than not, multiple, fluid, and even self-contradictory. Perhaps for Ruth to live out her vow to Naomi, she has to learn to live her life as a dance between self-sacrifice and self-preservation, balancing self-love with the needs of others.

As the story of Ruth draws to a close, her status in the community and in the narrative stands as the book’s final ambiguous element. Ruth no longer speaks after chapter three and she is no longer mentioned by the narrator after Naomi adopts Obed in chapter four. Linafelt comments, “It is curious that with as much focus as the blessings place on the person of Ruth [in

¹⁴⁶ LaCocque, 144.

¹⁴⁷ Koosed, 118.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. Simeon Solomon’s painting *Ruth, Naomi and Obed* (1860, oil) is the only work of visual art I have come across that suggests Ruth’s resistance to motherhood. Naomi, who is holding Obed, stands over Ruth looking affectionately at the child, while Ruth appears despondent and only superficially engaged.

the final chapter] they never actually mention her name.”¹⁴⁹ Boaz’s name, on the other hand, does reappear in the closing genealogy, bringing the narrative full circle, back to the world of men, progeny and inheritance where it began. Other scholars, however, argue that Ruth does not disappear at all. The fact that Ruth is no longer referred to as “the Moabite” when she marries Boaz (4:13) suggests that she has successfully integrated into the community. She is lauded by the townspeople, male and female alike, and she is placed among the ranks of other great women in Israel’s history. Even if Ruth is no longer named or speaks, her story continues to be told in later Jewish writings such as *Ruth Rabbah*, the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5) and early Christian hymnody, such as Ephrem the Syrian’s *De Nativitate 9*. Arguably, the decision to title the narrative Ruth was made in part to ensure that her unique role in Israel’s history would not be forgotten.

Yet Ruth’s silence, if not erasure, means that we as readers are not privy to her perspective on events. Did she experience herself as integrated into the community or was the experience more one of exploitation followed by absorption? How might she, or women like her, rewrite the narrative if given the opportunity? In one way, the titling of the book Ruth may stand as the book’s most subversive – indeed queerest – symbol, reminding us that so-called grand narratives will always waver under the weight of the kinds of gaps and fissures we have traced here. There are always more stories to be told.

Ambiguity and Desire

The task of we have undertaken – to read expressly for textual ambiguity – is certainly an arduous and perhaps even wearisome one, particularly with a text so infused with undecidable elements as that of Ruth. Such an approach is at odds with the basic task of the writer of biblical

¹⁴⁹ Linafelt, *Ruth*, 75.

commentary, argues David Clines. “The fact, unhappy fact if you prefer to call it so,” he writes, “is that [when writing a commentary] I strive reducing everything toward order, towards eliminating every meaning for a text except one, the one that I will adopt, the one that I will choose.”¹⁵⁰ While this may not be every such writer’s approach,¹⁵¹ Clines’s statement highlights readers’ desires for singular, stable readings. The yearning for determinacy tempts us to make definitive interpretive choices in order to reconstruct the narrative into a comprehensible and satisfying story. Nonetheless, just because one is able to tease out preferred or plausible meanings, this does not eliminate the ambiguities; they are still there. As literary critic Ellen Spolsky reminds us, “criticism does not make the puzzle go away.”¹⁵²

Insolubility does not keep us from attempting to unravel the enigma, however. This is the “trouble with connotation,” according to literary theorist D.A. Miller:

Now, defined in contrast to the immediate self-evidence (however on reflection deconstructible) of denotation, connotation will always manifest a certain semiotic insufficiency. The former will appear to be telling us, as Barthes says, “something simple, literal, primitive: something *true*,” while the latter can’t help appearing doubtful, debatable, possibly a mere effluvium of rumination (stereotypically, the English professor’s) fond of discovering in what must be read what need not be read into it. The dubiety, being constitutive, can never be resolved. On one hand, connotation enjoys, or suffers from, an abiding deniability. To refuse the evidence for a merely connoted meaning is as simple – and as frequent – as uttering the words “But isn’t it just . . . ?” before retorting the denotation. On the other, this maneuver is so far betrayed by the spirit of irritation, willfulness, and triumphalism in which it is infallibly performed, that it ends up attesting not just to the excesses of connotation but also to the impossibility of ever really eliminating them from signifying practice

Needing corroboration, finding it only in what exhibits the same need, with no better affordance for meeting it, connotation thus tends to light everywhere, to put all signifiers to a test of their hospitality. Pushing its way through the Text, it will exploit the remotest contacts, enter into the most shameless liaisons, betray all canons of integrity – like an arriviste who hasn’t arrived, it simply can’t stop networking. (For if unprovable,

¹⁵⁰ Clines, “Varieties of Indeterminacy,” in *Textual Determinacy, Part Two. Semeia* 71, eds. Robert C. Culley and Robert B. Robinson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 22.

¹⁵¹ By contrast, Linafelt writes, “The task of the commentator is to enable the reader to apprehend and negotiate the uncertainties of the text and, when possible, to demonstrate how these uncertainties are not pesky problems to be solved but rather are integral to the narrative art of the book” (*Ruth*, xiii).

¹⁵² Ellen Spolsky, *The Uses of Adversity: Failure and Accommodation in Reader Response* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990): 21.

connotation can at least be probable, by virtue of an accumulation, a redundancy of notations).¹⁵³

When fully embraced, connotation's effect on the reader is to keep her or him in a perpetual state of wanting; it is one of narrative desire's most useful tools. And, as Gemma López writes, "it is in the very nature of desire to elude answers and definition."¹⁵⁴ Recalling our discussion of Lacan's theory of the relationship between language and desire from Chapter One, one might argue that elusiveness is in fact a condition of all texts, because the text, as the embodiment of the Other, is incapable of meeting fully our desires. Even when connotative meanings are resisted, Miller seems to argue that their effects are still felt in the very acts of denial that attempt to sublimate them. We can never fully banish connotation from "signifying practice;" it inevitably becomes a case of "thou doth protest too much." If we hope to find in Ruth a merely benign story of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the text will resist that desire, just as it refuses to fully bear out more subversive or countercultural meanings.

Queer traces in Ruth are everywhere evident but nowhere explicitly acknowledged. If the queer in Ruth is perpetually elusive, always already forestalled by the denotated boundaries of the text, then why does the text appear to propagate the secret as it were? The answer lies perhaps somewhere between connotation and its denial; that is to say, the debate over the "truth" of the text is less important than the effects of its ambiguous tendencies. Hence, rather than endlessly weighing our interpretive options, a more productive approach to the book of Ruth (or any biblical narrative) may be to embrace textual ambiguity and investigate its *function*. If undecidability is at least in some measure a constitutive element of the narrative's intentional design, then for what is its purpose? How do Ruth's textual ambiguities impact various

¹⁵³ D.A. Miller, "Anal Rope" *Representations* 32 (Autumn 1990): 119-120. Miller is citing Barthes, *S/Z*, trans by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974): 9. Original emphasis in Barthes.

¹⁵⁴ López, 9.

audiences – ancient and modern – in relationship to the investments they bring? To further investigate these matters, we turn now to an intertextual analysis of the story Ruth alongside *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and its film adaptation, *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Chapter Three **Rupture: Ruth and Fried Green Tomatoes**

As we saw in the introduction, Guest's principle of rupture entails calling into question those biblical texts and interpretations that efface or denigrate the sexual (and often, by association, the racial/ethnic) "Other." Early queer interpretations of the Bible sought to disrupt popular (and sometime scholarly) readings of the so-called "clobber passages" (e.g. Lev 18:22, 20:13; Rom 1:26-27) employed to cast aspersions on sexual minorities. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to deconstructive readings, which interrogate how the texts themselves often rupture conventional understandings of gender and sexuality. As the scholarship has grown, we recognize that many biblical texts possess significantly queer elements.

In this chapter, we seek to "rupture," or uncover the ways in which the queer elements of Ruth are employed towards social and political ends. Reading Ruth alongside *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and its film adaptation, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, allows us to explore many facets of the text that are overlooked in traditional readings. Above all, what Flagg's novel and the cinematic adaptation appropriate from Ruth are many of the undecidable elements found in the biblical text. Uncovering this phenomenon of "strategic ambiguity" in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and Ruth brings to light the ways in which sexual and racial politics are at once invoked and evaded to produce a palatable product for diverse audiences.

Fried Green Appropriations

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café tells the story of Ruth Jamison and Idgie Threadgoode, two women who run a café during the Depression era in rural Alabama. The

reference to the biblical narrative takes place when Ruth, who is being beaten by her husband, Frank Bennett, sends Idgie a page from the King James Version of the book of Ruth, highlighting 1:16-20 as a cry for help. Beyond this overt recitation, the novel also shares many notable parallels with the biblical story. Just as Ruth and Naomi come together following the untimely death of Mahlon, Idgie and Ruth's friendship originates in the wake of the tragic death of Buddy, Idgie's brother and Ruth's suitor. In both stories, the relationship grows from initial distrust and misgiving, to companionship and collaboration.¹ Where Ruth brings Naomi back to life, Idgie brings out the life in Ruth as she encourages her to let go of some of her stricter religious mores. Ruth in turn helps Idgie to stay connected with her family in Whistle Stop after a family tragedy, similar to the way Ruth helps Naomi to reestablish herself in Bethlehem.

Idgie and Ruth also come together to form an unconventional family. After Idgie rescues Ruth from Frank Bennett, Ruth bears a son, Buddy Jr., whom Ruth and Idgie raise jointly. "Thus," writes Adele Reinhartz, "Ruth Jamison restores family to Idgie, just as the biblical Ruth did for Naomi."² Remarkably, Idgie is referred to several times as Buddy Jr.'s mother, and even once surreptitiously as his "father"³ (though at other times she is referred to as his aunt). Like the women of Bethlehem, the Threadgoodes and the wider community affirm their family arrangement. Idgie's father even takes out a loan so they can open the café. In turn, Ruth and Idgie use their positions at the center of the community to speak out against injustices and make life materially better for those less fortunate.

In addition to content, there are also thematic and structural parallels between Ruth and the novel and film that lend well to intertextual analysis. Both the biblical story and the novel

¹ Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 61.

² Ibid.

³ When Buddy, Jr. is born, Idgie's mother, Momma Threadgoode, even exclaims, "Oh look, Idgie, he's got your hair." Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), 193.

appear to champion those who are poor, the victims of racial/ethnic discrimination and, of course, women. To illumine these social values, each narrative uses the past as a way to reflect upon or make sense of the present. Just as post-exilic concerns are framed through the lens of Ruth's folk-like setting "in the days when the chieftains ruled," (1:1) the romanticized Old South of *Whistle Stop* is set against the backdrop of the New South in which the story is narrated. Despite the vested interest in issues of gender, race/ethnicity and class, however, both the novel and the biblical story avoid didacticism. The social vision espoused in each is refracted primarily through the unfolding of plot and character dialogue. As a consequence it falls to the reader to assess critically the ways in which each narrative negotiates its purported social claims.

Women's stories are central to both narratives. In the novel and film, the elderly Ninny Threadgoode tells the story of Idgie and Ruth in order to empower another woman (Evelyn Couch). Similarly, as we observed in the introduction, numerous scholars have theorized Ruth is authored by a woman or is the product of women's culture due to its distinct sensitivity to women's concerns.⁴ The world of men largely recedes in both narratives in order to foreground the ingenuity and interdependence of women. In the face of constrained notions of womanhood and the threat of male violence, the principal female characters draw on their inner strength to mature into subjects in their own right. One cannot help but think of the biblical Ruth when reading psychoanalytic critic Jane Van Buren's apt description of Flagg's protagonist: "In the tale of Idgie, a young female manages to settle the balance between danger, bounty, and sexual difference through her own efforts."⁵

Yet the contemporary novel and its cinematic counterpart, like the biblical tale, structurally enact the male plot of ambition even as the characters in each subvert conventions of

⁴ See Chapter One, note 17.

⁵ Jane Van Buren, "Food for Thought in the Film *Fried Green Tomatoes*." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1998): 298.

race and gender. In terms of race, systemic inequalities remain largely unchallenged despite the invocation of racial politics; racial disparities persist in ways similar to how interethnic discrimination goes unchallenged in *Ruth*. While Flagg's novel is to some degree more sensitive to inequities between African-American and white characters, in the film African-Americans are reduced to stock actors, who move the stories of the white protagonists forward. The spirited and courageous roles that black characters play are largely minimalized and the effects of events on their lives obscured. Also, in strategies similar to those in *Ruth*, the politics of race are deployed in conjunction with those of gender and sexuality in ways that effectively inoculate the reader/viewer from the direct impact of any one concern. Under the guise of racial sensitivity, this narrative "economy of secrets," to use literary critic Jeff Berglund's apt phrase,⁶ creates space for the materialization of the hegemonic desires motivating the plot.

The heterosexual plotline also finds its way into the novel and film, further bolstering the male plot of ambition. At the end of the novel, Idgie mourns Ruth's death alongside Smokey Lonesome, whose love for Ruth is paralleled with that of Idgie, even though he never touches her or makes his feelings known.⁷ Mirroring the book of *Ruth*, the film adaptation also insinuates that Idgie "grows up" and finds a husband,⁸ displacing her woman-identified relationship with a

⁶ Jeff Berglund, *Cannibal Fictions: American Explorations of Colonialism, Race, Gender and Sexuality* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 116.

⁷ Flagg, 348-350. Ironically, it is Idgie who seems to comfort Smokey and not the other way around. In both the novel and the film, we are also momentarily led to believe that Smokey may be the hero of the story as the one who killed Frank Bennett to protect Ruth's baby. Even though, as a transient, he is ostensibly an inappropriate suitor for Ruth, his gentle demeanor and infatuated devotion make him a foil for Bennett and serves a reminder that the femme Ruth is a beautiful and (heterosexually) marriageable woman.

⁸ Writing in 1977, film theorist Richard Dyer identified a heterosexual plot formula operating in mainstream lesbian films of the time. The female protagonist of these films is pursued by both men and women, and in the end the male suitor triumphs. The underlying message is that "the true definition of a woman is heterosexual and that she gets that definition from a man." See Richard Dyer, "Stereotyping," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 34. While more recently there have been lesbian films that depart from this formula (e.g. *Imagine Me and You*, 2005; *The Kids are All Right*, 2010), it still persists (e.g. *Kissing Jessica Stein*, 2001; *April's Shower*, 2003; *My Summer of Love*, 2004), with either the male character still getting the girl or with lesbianism portrayed as an immature and/or temporary stage of a woman's sexual development. Film critic Kristin M. Jones's commentary on *My Summer of Love* is indicative of how the equation of heterosexuality with "growing up" adheres

conventional heterosexual one. But the most consistent way in which the male plot of ambition is sanctioned, if not realized, in the film (and to a lesser extent in the novel) is through the trope of female friendship, which serves to undercut the lesbian relationship between Ruth and Idgie. As with Ruth and Naomi, the nature of the relationship between the stories' protagonists functions as a principal site of ambiguity, both concealing and revealing the sociopolitical stakes at hand.

Ambiguating Strategies

Here we turn to an analysis of the strategies of ambiguity in *Fried Green Tomatoes* in order to shed light on many of the selfsame strategies in the book of Ruth. We will look first at those general techniques that give rise to undecidable and polysemous meanings, and then we will turn to a specific form of polysemy known as "strategic ambiguity" as defined by rhetorical critic Leah Ceccarelli. In this analysis, we will focus primarily on the film, with occasional observations on the novel. Not only does *Fried Green Tomatoes* make use of ambiguity to a greater extent than the book, the transformation from novel to film further reveals the tactical efforts on the part of screenwriters Flagg and Carol Sobieski to "de-lesbianize" and deracialize the narrative.

A certain degree of the ambiguity that arises in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and the book of Ruth is the natural product of a principally extradiegetic narrative style. Just as we must rely on minimal narration and the play of perspectives between characters to evaluate point of view in Ruth, we have only the narrative voice of Ninny and the direct speech of characters to

in such films: "[Film director] Pawlikowski's treatment of the love scenes is also refreshingly natural, free of any tinge of discomfort with female adolescent sexuality – in many ways theirs could be an adult relationship, or a heterosexual one." Kristin M. Jones, "My Summer of Love," *Film Comment* (May/June 2005), <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/my-summer-of-love-review>.

understand the motivations and intentions of characters in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.⁹ We as readers/viewers are scarcely privy to the internal thoughts and feelings of the main actors, although film viewers certainly have the visual advantage of observing expressions of emotion.

Ambiguous meanings are also sustained in both the biblical narrative and the film through a reliance on connotative meanings. Because Idgie and Ruth never make explicit their erotic attraction, viewers must infer sexual meanings from veiled speech, longing looks and demonstrative gestures, much in the same way that readers must infer an amorous relationship between Ruth and Naomi based on the allusion to Genesis 2:24, words like *kallāt* and *dābaq*, and emotionally-laden speeches and gestures. Similarly, the absence of any explicitly negative sentiments towards Moabites in the book of Ruth enables readers to entertain the possibility of ethnic bias in the narrative or to ignore it altogether. The sanguine depiction of relationships between blacks and whites in *Whistle Stop* set against the backdrop of Jim Crow Alabama likewise obscures the racial politics of the film, making it easier for viewers to stop short of critically engaging them. Finally, as in *Ruth*, the story worlds of Flagg's novel and the film adaptation are built around numerous binarisms that function in the service of ambiguity. The oppositions between butch/femme, young/old, black/white, rich/poor and Old South/New South normalize social hierarchies, even as each work purportedly interrogates inequalities.

As a work that flirts with depictions of same-sex desire, *Fried Green Tomatoes* fits into the category of what film critic Karen Hollinger identifies as “the ambiguous lesbian film”:

...a type of film that has attained considerable mainstream popularity with both lesbian and straight female audiences by refusing to identify itself unequivocally as a portrayal of

⁹ I say “principally” extradiegetic because Ninny functions primarily as a removed, third-person narrator, although it may be appropriate to refer to her as at least partially intradiegetic since she identifies herself as Idgie's sister-in-law who would purportedly have first-hand knowledge of some events. However, in the 1930's scenes of the film, no such sister-in-law ever appears. We later discover that one of the film's “secrets” is that Ninny may in fact be Idgie. However, if this is the case, she never lets on to this fact to Evelyn as she narrates, and she never speaks directly about her (Ninny's) feelings toward Ruth Jamison.

female friendship or of lesbian romance. The sexual orientation of its female characters is never made explicit, and viewers are left to read the text largely as they wish.¹⁰

Film critic Chris Holmlund similarly refers to the “hide and seek” approach of certain films in which lesbian themes are encoded but never overtly acknowledged.¹¹ Cinematographically, ambiguity is achieved through “clichéd counter-conventions of continuity editing,” which include “shot/reverse shots where two women look longingly at one another, point-of-view shots where one woman spies on the other, and two shots where two women hug, romp, or dance together.”¹² *Fried Green Tomatoes* contains all of these elements. Not only are certain scenes sexually suggestive (e.g. a scantily-clad swimming scene, a romantic picnic in which Idgie braves a swarm of bees to obtain honey for Ruth, and an eroticized food fight where the two roll around on the floor of the café), there are more subtle moments throughout the film (e.g. clandestine watching, prolonged gazes, and even the reference to Ruth and Naomi) that mark a lesbian subtext.¹³

Attempting to frame further the ambiguous lesbian film in rhetorical terms, media critic Naomi Rockler contends that *Fried Green Tomatoes* engages in Ceccarelli’s concept of strategic ambiguity, a “form of polysemy [that] is likely to be planned by the author and result in two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text.”¹⁴ While many texts are polysemous (i.e. “open to multiple ideologically situated interpretations”),¹⁵ Ceccarelli argues that not all texts are polysemous in the same way. She makes a distinction between strategic ambiguity and “resistive reading,” “a type of polysemy that is audience inspired, that

¹⁰ Karen Hollinger, “Theorizing Mainstream Female Spectatorship: The Case of the Popular Lesbian Film,” *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 6.

¹¹ Chris Holmlund, “Cruisin for a Bruisin’: Hollywood’s Deadly Lesbian Dolls,” *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ Naomi Rockler, “A Wall on the Lesbian Continuum: Polysemy and *Fried Green Tomatoes*,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 92.

¹⁴ Ceccarelli, 404. Cited in Rockler, 93.

¹⁵ Rockler, 92.

instigates a conflict over the text, and that undergirds rebellion against the author's intended meaning."¹⁶ Resistive readers read "against the grain" and subvert the agenda of the text's creator. Strategic ambiguity, on the other hand, is a technique employed by the rhetor, who purposely inserts multiple meanings into the text. To employ this tactic successfully, the writer "must appeal to ideological mainstream norms to secure a mass audience, while at the same . . . [offering] ambiguity so that other individuals may interpret the text oppositionally."¹⁷ Often economically motivated, the ambiguity has to be carefully controlled in order to produce "limited choices for interpretation."¹⁸

The cinematic adaptation of Flagg's novel appears designed to meet the desires of both a general viewership and a queer-sensitive minority. Viewers predisposed to recognize lesbian "codes" will identify lesbian themes, while others will not.¹⁹ Since the film never employs the term *lesbian*, a great deal of press attention was, upon its release, paid to the degree to which the directors, writers and cast members were willing to discuss its sexual politics. Flagg and the film's director, Jon Avnet, were each adamant that the characters' sexual preferences were unimportant, choosing instead to highlight the theme of strong female friendships. Flagg insisted, "It's not a political film at all. It's about the possibilities of people being sweet and loving to each other."²⁰ On the other hand, Mary Louise Parker, the actor who portrayed Ruth, responded

¹⁶ Ceccarelli, 404.

¹⁷ Rockler, 92. See also John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 28.

¹⁸ Rockler, 92. See also Dana L. Cloud, "The Limits of Interpretation: Ambivalence and Stereotype in *Spenser: For Hire*," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, no. 4 (Dec 1992): 311-324.

¹⁹ Rockler, 93. For an interesting discussion of various responses to suggestions of lesbianism in the film among college students, also see Rockler, 101-104.

²⁰ James Robert Parrish, *Gays and Lesbians in Mainstream Cinema: Plots, Critiques, Casts and Credits for 272 Theatrical and Made-for-Television Hollywood Releases* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 1993), 149. Cited in Berglund, 127. For interesting assessments of Flagg's own internalized homophobia see Jan Whitt, "What Happened to Celie and Idgie?: 'Apparitional Lesbians' in American Film," *Studies in Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Apr 2005): 43-57.

that the lesbian themes are so “completely obvious” that they do not need to be spelled out.²¹ Members of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation agreed with Parker, giving *Fried Green Tomatoes* the award for “outstanding depictions of lesbians in film.”²² Such divergent opinions reflect and further enact the film’s strategic ambiguity, demonstrating its effectiveness by insinuating the film’s lesbianism exists merely “in the eye of the beholder.”

However, the real proof of the author’s intentions lies in the transformation of the novel into the screenplay. Even though the word lesbian is not used in the novel, the sexual attraction between Idgie and Ruth *is* by all accounts obvious, even if it is trivialized at times. When Idgie first finds herself enamored with Ruth, Momma Threadgoode chides Idgie’s siblings not to tease her about her “crush.” Sipsey, the family maid, remarks, “That ol’ love bug done bit Idgie.”²³ However, it is not long before this “crush” develops into a reciprocal love affair that eventually leads to a shared life with a child. By contrast, the romantic love between them is masked considerably in the film. Berglund recounts a change from the novel in one of the early drafts of the screenplay: When Idgie attempts to dissuade Ruth from marrying Frank Bennett, she says, “Oh no you don’t [love him]. You love me . . . You know you do. You know you do!”²⁴ In the screenplay, the line is changed to “You know you don’t. You want to stay here with *us*. I know you do. *We* love you.”²⁵ In the actual film, the scene is deleted entirely. While swimming, Ruth tells Idgie she is getting married. Idgie responds awkwardly, after which Ruth kisses Idgie on the cheek and plunges into the lake. Even with this mild eroticism, viewers are able to reduce their affection to adolescent infatuation.

²¹Stephen Schaefer, “Critics Fry Tomatoes for Dodging Gay Issue,” *Boston Herald*, January 15, 1992.

²²Yardena Arar, “Tomatoes Stirs Up a Story Within a Story,” *Los Angeles California Daily News*, February 9, 1992.

²³Flagg, 80-81.

²⁴Cited in Berglund 145. See Flagg, 90.

²⁵Cited in Berglund 145 (his emphasis) from 1990 Screenplay 41.

The Power of "Friends"

Fried Green Tomatoes also successfully conceals the possibility of lesbianism through several framing devices that foreground the theme of female friendship. Each of these devices remarkably parallels textual designs in *Ruth*. Just as Ruth and Naomi's relationship is shaped by the death of Mahlon, the relationship between Ruth and Idgie is framed around the loss of Buddy. Idgie adores Buddy as the only person who appears to appreciate fully her unruly disposition; her desire to climb trees and dress like a tomboy can be viewed as efforts to emulate him.²⁶ In the novel, Ruth does not come to Whistle Stop until after Buddy's death, whereas in the movie he is portrayed as Ruth's suitor. In one of the opening scenes, he is killed as Ruth and Idgie watch on in horror. In this way, writes literary critic Lu Vickers, "the movie wants us to believe that the women's relationship revolves around their mutual love of Buddy, and that given his loss, they may as well settle for each other."²⁷ Their love for one another is cast as secondary to their love of the deceased, much like Ruth's devotion to Naomi is cast in terms of her ability to carry on the name of Mahlon through Obed.

The film and the biblical story are also each at great pains to offset woman-identified relationships by establishing the male-identified desires of its protagonists. The mysteries of the threshing floor in *Ruth* no doubt have captured the imagination of countless readers, redirecting attentions away from Ruth's primary devotion to Naomi. Similarly, the heterosexual desires of Ruth and Idgie are intimated sufficiently enough to cast doubt on their affections for one another. Yet while the femme Ruth of *Fried Green Tomatoes* easily "blend[s] into heterosexuality," Idgie's potential heterosexuality requires some additional effort to establish.²⁸ Though she

²⁶ Holmlund, 38.

²⁷ Lu Vickers, "Fried Green Tomatoes: Excuse Me, Did We See the Same Movie?," *Jump Cut* 39 (June 1994): 28.

²⁸ Jennifer Ross Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," in *Vision/ReVision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film*, ed. Barbara Tapa Lupack (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling

dresses as a tomboy and hangs out at the Wagon Wheel Club drinking, smoking and playing cards, she is pursued as a love interest by her male friend, Grady Kilgore. While Idgie rebuffs him, this is easily attributed to her reluctance to settle down as his wife. Whereas in the book Idgie has another female lover, Eva Bates, this character is never developed in the film, allowing viewers to believe her attraction to Ruth is exceptional. When Ruth dies in the film, Idgie is free to pursue a more conventional life with a man.

Perhaps the most effective narrative device for neutralizing the presence of lesbian themes in the film is the cross-generational relationship between the elderly Ninny and the younger Evelyn. Literary critic Jennifer Ross Church argues that their platonic relationship “stabilizes and normalizes the ambiguous but more potentially subversive stories of Ruth and Idgie.”²⁹ Like Ruth and Idgie, Ninny and Evelyn tell each other stories, share fried green tomatoes, and eventually come to live with one another.³⁰ Even more strategic is the insinuation (absent from the book) that Ninny is actually Idgie. Just after Ninny’s return to Whistle Stop, Evelyn finds a fresh jar of honey on Ruth’s grave with a note signed by “the Bee Charmer.” Ninny smiles at Evelyn with a twinkle in her eye, and they wonder aloud if they might catch sight of Idgie. In the film, Ruth dies when she and Idgie are in their thirties; Ninny is an octogenarian when she meets Evelyn. Since Ninny is now a widow with a child of her own, this allows viewers to imagine Idgie “grows up and gets herself a man” after Ruth’s death.³¹ Again, lesbianism is reduced to youthful experimentation. Ninny’s closing reflection on the mystery of Frank Bennett’s death clears up any doubts about the appeal to platonic affection: She pronounces to Evelyn, if ironically, “Truth’s a funny thing . . . I feel better because all these

Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 200. Church also offers a thoughtful discussion of Idgie’s visual progression into a more traditionally feminine woman.

²⁹ Church, 200.

³⁰ Church, 200-201.

³¹ Rockler, 98.

people will live as long as you remember ‘em. You’ve reminded me of the most important thing in life – *friends, best friends!*”

Naomi and Ruth’s cross-generational relationship also figures as a tool of strategic ambiguity. While the biblical story never specifies Naomi’s age, there are several indirect suggestions that she would be much too old for a sexual relationship with Ruth. Rhetorically, Naomi likens herself to the dead (1:8) and eschews the possibility of having more children of her own (1:11). At least one explanation for her decision to send Ruth to glean alone is that she is too old for the physical labor required. She is, moreover, portrayed as Boaz’s counterpart, who compares himself to younger men (3:10). Ruth, by contrast, inversely mirrors Naomi’s agedness as a young and sexually available maiden. She must be protected from the advances of male workers and willingly makes herself accessible to Boaz on the threshing floor. Ruth may be devoted to Naomi, but we expect her to mature into a proper heteronormative wife.

The appeal to strong female friendships in *Fried Green Tomatoes* is evaluated differently by scholarly critics. Media critic Jan Whitt argues that substituting romantic love with sisterly affection makes “the subversive themes more obvious,” particularly to anyone who has read the novel.³² Literary critic Michael Dunne argues the lack of any real resistance to Idgie and Ruth’s relationship by their family and community eases conventional assumptions on the part of audience members who might otherwise object.³³ For queer viewers, the film undoubtedly affirms that “we are out there,” and were so even in the 1930’s rural South.

Yet, while *Fried Green Tomatoes* might provide sexual minorities with some measure of representation, the film’s strategic ambiguity concurrently shrouds lesbian experience in

³² Whitt, 43.

³³ Michael Dunne, “Bakhtin Eats Some Fried Green Tomatoes: Dialogic Elements in Fannie Flagg’s Famous Novel,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 1 (Oct. 2005): 34-35. Dunne is commenting on the novel, though the same strategy of non-judgment is employed in the film.

silence.³⁴ “Ambiguous lesbian films tell their audience that what appears to be lesbianism is really only female friendship, thus seeming to deny the very existence of lesbian identity,” writes Hollinger.³⁵ Even if heterosexual audience members recognize the lesbian codes, they are encouraged to rely on stereotypes such as “mannish” dress and mannerisms. The result is a film that parodies aberrant sex and gender expression, thereby reinforcing notions of what is “normal.” Furthermore, the lack of erotic content and the failure to acknowledge the woman-identified self-understanding of the characters minimizes the sexual dimension of lesbianism while simultaneously failing to acknowledge that lesbianism is more than just sex.

Rockler contends that *Fried Green Tomatoes* in fact misses a prime opportunity to illustrate the lesbian continuum envisioned by Adrienne Rich:

The continuum, after all, creates a parallel between lesbians and heterosexual women. What better narrative for illustrating the lesbian continuum than a narrative that parallels two female relationships? Evelyn and Ninny share a bond that is similar to Idgie and Ruth. Evelyn and Ruth resist their patriarchal husbands with the help of Ninny and Idgie, and it is the story of Idgie and Ruth that inspires Evelyn to stop trying to please her husband and develop her own identity. Had Idgie and Ruth been portrayed explicitly as lesbians, the film could have portrayed unambiguously the blur between friendships and lesbian relationships by directly comparing a heterosexual friendship with a lesbian relationship.³⁶

The juxtaposition of Ninny and Evelyn with Ruth and Idgie might have highlighted the shared struggles against compulsory heterosexuality faced by straight women and lesbians without dismissing the sexual desires of lesbian women. The cloaking of lesbian desire suggests that same-sex desire is a bit too dangerous, even for a feminist film. Heterosexual women are given the message that they can love other women so long as it does not compromise their long term relationships with men. According to Rich, as long as heterosexuality remains naturalized, the institution will remain largely unchallenged:

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

³⁵ Hollinger, 7.

³⁶ Rockler, 104.

The assumption that "most women are innately heterosexual" stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism. It remains a tenable assumption partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a "preference" at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and "innately" heterosexual. Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness. To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a "preference" or "choice" for women – and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows – will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists, but I think the rewards will be great: a freeing-up of thinking, the exploring of new paths, the shattering of another great silence, new clarity in personal relationships.³⁷

It is telling that, while Evelyn learns to stand up to her husband in some matters as a result of Idgie and Ruth's influence, she also "gains control" over her life by losing weight and becoming a Mary Kay representative. She continues to define her self-worth according to conventionally male standards of female beauty.³⁸ Idgie and Ruth's resistance to male oppression is reduced to a more benign effort on the part of Evelyn to become a happier housewife.

The examination into representations of sexuality and gender in *Fried Green Tomatoes* affords us a number of insights into the book of Ruth. On the positive side, critical analyses of *Fried Green Tomatoes* demonstrate that a text may in fact be understood as lesbian "even when the author . . . refuses to acknowledge that there are lesbian characters or themes."³⁹ In the same way, readers of Ruth do not have to know the author's (or authors') intentions in order to recognize and appreciate its woman-identified ethos. The window into the intimate lives of women and the gender-bending playfulness of the text create a space for readers to imagine a

³⁷ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 238-239.

³⁸ Gretchen Bisplinghoff, "The Appearance of Change in *Fried Green Tomatoes*," in *Visual Literacy in the Digital Age: Selected Readings from the 25th Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association*, eds. Darrel G. Beauchamp, Roberts A. Braden and Judy Clark Baca (Blacksburg, Va: The International Visual Literacy Association, 1994), 448-450.

³⁹ Whitt, 49.

range of possibilities for Ruth and Naomi's relationship. *And nobody should know, nobody would suspect, they'd view us as two bereaved women making the best of difficult circumstances.* Lesbian-identified readers recognize our own reflection in Ruth and Naomi as women finding creative and subversive ways to survive and love one another in a world ignorant of or hostile to our relationships.

On the other hand, the ambiguous strategies employed in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and the book of Ruth reveal that polysemy, even when it engenders "hidden" meanings, is not necessarily a force for liberation. Ceccarelli argues that while some polysemous texts threaten hegemonic power, other polysemous texts may function as "a tool of the dominant regime, a way of appealing to the powerful while placating the marginal just enough to keep them from openly rebelling against the discourse and the system it supports."⁴⁰ Such narratives systematically reinforce prevailing social divisions and the binary arrangements that undergird them, tempering the incendiary effects of socially dissident messages.

When we read the book of Ruth alongside *Fried Green Tomatoes*, we can more clearly discern the ways in which Ruth's woman-identified themes are neutralized even as they are celebrated. The eroticism between Ruth and Naomi is carefully tempered (though not effaced) by the contentious aspects of their relationship, questions of age, and the looming presence of male competitors. While it is true that intergenerational relationships have always existed, lovers have always quarreled, and women sometimes marry men for reasons other than love, the author of Ruth uses such strategies of diversion to place doubt in the minds of readers about the viability of Ruth and Naomi's love.

Ruth's heroic resistance to a life dependent on sons and marriage with which the story begins is quickly transformed into a quest for betrothal and progeny. Like Flagg, the author of

⁴⁰ Ceccarelli, 405.

Ruth fails to highlight the social conditions which render women economically reliant on men for survival; instead sociopolitical problems are rendered private struggles that necessitate surreptitious solutions. Meanwhile, Boaz's emergence on the scene reminds the audience that there will always be the exceptional "good man" and the "good Israelite" available to save deserving women from a life of destitution. Ruth and Naomi may indeed emerge as heroines (perhaps even ones whose attachment surpasses the love of men), but, like Evelyn and Ninny, they will need to find protection in the household of a male in order to survive.

Intersecting Ambiguities

In order to understand fully the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity as it functions in both the contemporary film and the ancient story, we need to analyze the deployment of racial/ethnic ideologies alongside representations of sex and gender. The invocation of racial *and* sexual politics in a "feel-good" film such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* requires a delicate balancing of the issues in order not to alienate diverse audiences. Film critic Shameen Kabir argues that the "exposure of racism and the bonding of women in alternative family structures" most likely seemed "sufficiently radical" to the filmmakers without adding overt lesbianism to the mix.⁴¹ For Kabir, the fact that Idgie and Ruth extend their alternative family to include African-American characters is a mark of the film's progressive attitudes. Idgie's willingness to go on trial to protect Sipsey from hanging for the murder of Frank Bennett demonstrates the lengths to which she will go to protect those she values most.

Church, on the other hand, likens the film's embrace of racial themes to its superficial treatment of woman-identified issues. "Like lesbianism," she writes, "race is invoked for its

⁴¹ Shameem Kabir, *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (London: Cassell Publishing, 1998), 114.

emotional power yet is emptied of content.”⁴² Through numerous textual devices, sexism, racism and homophobia are cast as something “out there,” placing audience members on the “right side” of the film’s morality while protecting them from feeling responsible. Just as the wife-abusing Frank Bennett lives in the next town over, racists are depicted as those essentially external to Whistle Stop (seemingly “real” racial trouble arises only when the Ku Klux Klan from the neighboring state of Tennessee arrives outside the café). What is more, the lack of opposition to Idgie and Ruth’s relationship is deliberately coupled with perfunctory appeals to racial sensitivity. Lesbianism is in some sense “made safe” by depicting the female protagonists as “good” white characters with whom viewers can identify. Cultural critic Ann Pellegrini argues that the film employs a “strategy of ‘compensatory stereotyping.’” She explains:

[In *Fried Green Tomatoes*] blackness demarcates differences within *whiteness* The whiteness and, so, propriety of a loving relationship between two women is secured by playing it off against stereotypes of put-upon black folk. Lesbianism is raced white and disappears behind the screen of normative and even heroic whiteness.⁴³

In the final analysis, *Fried Green Tomatoes* audience members are free to embrace the social messages of the film if they so choose, but the political tensions that the film might have provoked are never substantially realized. We observe a similar attenuation of the subversive in Ruth. As previously observed, the avoidance of any direct mention of anti-Moabite biases enables readers to circumvent its full impact on Ruth. Traditionally, scholars have been so focused on the positive relationship between Ruth and Naomi that they have virtually ignored the possibility of Naomi’s bigotry. In this way, the noble, woman-identified nature of their relationship, ambiguous as it is, ironically overshadows the ethnic tensions that could alienate

⁴² Church, 202.

⁴³ Ann Pellegrini, “Women on Top, Boys on the Side, but Some of Us Are Brave: Blackness, Lesbianism, and the Visible,” *College Literature* 24 no. 1 (Feb 1997): 90-91. Emphasis in original.

some segments of Ruth's audience. At the same time, Ruth's ethnicity is not so obscured that it does not potentially impede her relationship with Boaz in the mind of most interpreters. The triumph over ethnic bias is critically linked to Ruth's male-identified future. In tactics similar to that of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, anti-Moabite prejudices are invoked for their emotional power yet allayed through the actions of the heteronormative and ethno-normative male hero. Whatever conflicts audience members may experience regarding same-sex or cross-cultural relationships, they are assuaged, if not forgotten, when the right man gets his girl.

Moreover, if woman-identified themes in Ruth and *Fried Green Tomatoes* are simultaneously coded with suggestion and denial, the issues of race and ethnicity are revealed and concealed in an even more painstaking manner. Sexual and racial/ethnic politics come together in both to form what Berglund refers to as an "economy of secrets."⁴⁴ Secrets, he reminds us are really "marked absences" that must be revealed on one level in order to be concealed on another level.⁴⁵ Berglund observes how *Fried Green Tomatoes*'s strategic ambiguity is realized through the film's slogan "the secret's in the sauce," a reference to the film's principal secret: the cannibalization of Frank Bennett's barbequed body.⁴⁶ The cannibalized body, he argues, has functioned as a site of negotiation in the American imaginary, a place where social boundaries are drawn and erased, where "the familiar is made strange" and where the domestic sphere is transformed into "a frightening frontier."⁴⁷

In the film, personal relationships delineate the difference between the racist and non-racist whites; the trope of friendship reappears, and black characters are presented as "loyal,

⁴⁴ Berglund, 116.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 110-111.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 108-114, *passim*.

⁴⁷ Berglund, 106.

devoted and harmless” to their white employers.”⁴⁸ While the film resists disparaging its black characters by attributing the idea of Frank Bennett’s dismemberment to Idgie,⁴⁹ Sipse’s killing of Frank Bennett and the barbecuing of his body by Big George “indelibly [links cannibalism] with blackness.”⁵⁰ However, the refusal to name cannibalism, Berglund observes, “bear[s] uncanny parallels to the refusal to ‘name’ lesbian desire, to ‘name’ racism, to ‘name’ putative heterosexuality or normative whiteness – all practices that are pervasive but unacknowledged.”⁵¹

The unveiling of the secret surrounding Frank Bennett’s death is consistently juxtaposed to scenes where the lesbian and gender-bending content of the film surface. Most significantly, his death scene is placed adjacent to a vaudeville act in which Idgie and Grady cross-dress as husband and wife. Berglund writes, “This comedic example of binary confusion prepares the way for the scene of cannibalism, another symbolic yet bodily literal ritual of confounding oppositions.” The power of normative identities is destabilized at the very moment Frank Bennett’s power is undone. Yet even though the moment of cannibalism places pressure on binary categories of race and gender, its incendiary effects are minimalized through a comic diversion. Both the scandal of lesbianism and cannibalism are contained, offsetting one another in the economy of secrets.⁵²

A parallel economy of “marked absences” must be negotiated in Ruth. Again this negotiation centers on the bodily boundary between life and death, this time through the birth of a child. As Koosed observes, conventional models of kinship typically must balance the two competing taboos of incest and miscegenation. Kinship patterns require that a marriage take place outside of the clan, but not outside one’s understood racial/ethnic community. Since Obed,

⁴⁸ Vickers, 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 112, 115-116.

as Lot's descendent through Ruth, is the product of *both* incest and miscegenation, it no wonder the narrative secrets its ethnic bias.⁵³

The narrator employs at least two strategies to neutralize the taint of Moabite ethnicity. When Boaz acquires Ruth, he intends "to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate" (4:5); Obed is therefore the symbolic (and legal) offspring of Mahlon. As previously observed, this fact, alongside the designation of Naomi as the child's mother, suggests that Mahlon and Naomi are his proper parents. This culturally and socially sanctioned "union" between Mahlon and his mother inversely mirrors the incestuous union between Lot and his daughters, perhaps, Koosed suggests, undoing the original sin.⁵⁴ A second step is required, however, to ensure Obed's full legitimacy: Naomi's nursing of Obed. Whether Naomi's lactation is biologically plausible or the "preposterous" work of fiction, she nonetheless confers Israelite identity onto her "son" and dissolves the stigma of Moabite ethnicity in a literally, bodily way. Differences – and anxieties about differences – get absorbed, much like Frank Bennett's body dissolves into the barbeque sauce.

Once it is established that Obed has two daddies, Mahlon and Boaz, it is not such a problem that he also has two mommies as well. While there is certainly still room for a queer reading of this unconventional family, all of this kinship maneuvering has nonetheless neutralized the subversive undercurrent of Naomi and Ruth's woman-identified, interethnic relationship. In the arc of the plot, their unusual relationship has served its narrative purpose, and now heteronormative kinship relations can be properly realigned. A further reconfiguration of gender roles marks this transition, as Ruth is (in another possible reading of the use of the doubled *kallāt*) transmuted in the span of one verse from the bride who loves Naomi to a

⁵³ Koosed, 106.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

daughter-in-law who is better than seven sons (4:15). Traces of the queer remain, though they are eclipsed by more conventional images. The line of male primogeniture is re-secured, as is the economic dependence of women on men.

The Heroine Disappears

A final element of strategic ambiguity that links together *Fried Green Tomatoes* with the book of Ruth is the uncertain status of the heroines at the close of each story. While the film is purportedly a testament to the deep bond of love between Idgie and Ruth, their story fades into memory and is supplanted by the more conventional friendship between Evelyn and Ninny. Ruth notably dies in the prime of her life, just after Idgie is acquitted for the murder of Frank Bennett and she and Ruth can begin to pursue a more permanent and secure life together. If Idgie does indeed live on, she is transformed into the significantly more mild-mannered and sexually naïve widow Ninny.⁵⁵ In essence, “Idgie” dies with Ruth, her rebellious spirit and her lesbian identity dying with her.

The biblical story likewise ends with Ruth’s paradoxical celebration and erasure. Lauded by the community, she nonetheless recedes from view, never to speak again. As noted earlier, Zornberg attributes Ruth’s disappearance to her correlation with narrative itself. “In the world of narrative,” she writes, “ultimate meanings are veiled; desires and fears, multiple possibilities, suspense, insufficiency keep the story going. But when the end comes, nothing further can develop; all is arrested in the condition to which its turbulent history has brought it”⁵⁶ When

⁵⁵ At no point does Ninny narrate the erotic dimensions of Ruth and Idgie’s relationship as they are depicted on the screen while she tells the story to Evelyn. When Evelyn laments to Ninny that she cannot look at her own vagina, Ninny replies, “Well I can’t help you with that.”

⁵⁶ Avivah Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, 357. Here, Zornberg is summarizing D.A. Miller’s argument from *Narrative and Its Discontents* (in which she grounds much of her analysis) about narrative closure.

Naomi announces that she must seek a “resting place”⁵⁷ (*manoāh*) for Ruth (3:1; cf. 1:9), this portends the end of her narrative life.

But given all the ways in which these heroines and their transgressions are already cloaked in ambiguity, what precisely is so threatening about their continued existence? If their lives were to go on, what new and uncontainable narrative possibilities might develop? Cultural critic Laura Cottingham argues that the trope of the “disappearing lesbian” in contemporary film and television is employed “to keep the lesbian exclusively fictionalized; that is to disallow any steady appearance of actual lesbians, of lesbianism as self-contained, stable, steadily lived and culturally incorporate.”⁵⁸ Lesbianism is rendered as either invisible or impossible in order to perpetuate the myth of normative heterosexuality and to ensure continued male control over female sexuality.⁵⁹

Typically, lesbian characters are allowed one or more of three fates, explains Cottingham, “(1) get heterosexualized; (2) get incarcerated; and[/or] (3) die.”⁶⁰ For what narrative purpose is Ruth struck with a “painful and debilitating” illness, Holmlund muses, if not to punish her for being with Idgie or to transform her into an angel (or perhaps both), thereby relegating their future to the realm of fantasy⁶¹ and tempering male anxieties. Idgie quite literally embodies the threat to male sexuality as suspicions are cast (even by Ruth) that she murdered the wife-beating Frank Bennett. It is no doubt part of the narrative design that she is eventually exonerated and

⁵⁷ Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, 367. “Resting place” is Zornberg’s translation; the JPS reads “a home.”

⁵⁸ Laura Cottingham, *Lesbians Are so Chic...that We Are Not Really Lesbians at All* (London: Cassell Publishing, 1996), 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-6. Cf. Janice L. Ristock, “Kiss and Kill: Some Impacts of Cultural Representations of Women’s Sexualities,” in *Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1997), 143-144.

⁶⁰ Cottingham, 32-33.

⁶¹ Holmlund, 38. Holmlund adds that if the femme Ruth is made into an angel, then the “tomboy” Idgie lives on continually in our minds, their relationship remaining a perpetually adolescent crush.

later “de-lesbianized.” Otherwise her woman-identified rebelliousness might exceed its limits and permanently alienate some viewers.

Neither is biblical Ruth effaced due to the mere whims of the storyteller. She is both “heterosexualized” and “killed” via erasure. Like Ruth and Idgie, she is also arguably imprisoned (figuratively, if not literally) in a story not of her own choosing. Yet, she is also transformed into an angel of sorts, one larger than life, who saves the Davidic kingship. It is perhaps not so ironic that she is lauded alongside that other suspected husband-killer – Tamar. As two women who threaten Israelite male hegemony even as they safeguard the male line, Ruth and Tamar each receive an ambiguous end, tucked safely away in the annals of Israelite history.

Historical Gleanings: A Diverse Community

The parallels between Ruth and *Fried Green Tomatoes* suggest that the narrative dynamics employed by ancient writers to negotiate issues of sexuality were perhaps not all that dissimilar to those of their contemporary counterparts. Holmlund sums up the formula of the ambiguous lesbian film and aptly demonstrates its applicability to the book of Ruth: lesbians are “mirrors (to each other), mothers (of each other), and/or men (for each other),” but never fully lovers to each other.⁶² This formula *does* suggest aspects of the lesbian continuum, at least to the extent that it demonstrates that woman-identified relationships can take multiple forms. As we turn to the mother/daughter aspect of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship in Chapter Four, we will examine further ways of conceptualizing that relationship that preserve a lesbian-identified reading without undercutting the erotic dimension of lesbian identity.

Yet, undoubtedly the book of Ruth affords readers the means to ignore or deny the same-sex love between Ruth and Naomi in ways uncannily similar to that of *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

⁶² Ibid., 36-37.

Both Ruth and *Fried Green Tomatoes* are set in “a time of innocence” in which the sociocultural challenges of the present day (i.e. when the stories are narrated) were ostensibly unknown. When asked if Ruth and Idgie had a sexual relationship, Flagg responded, “Well, I’m not really sure. Those were innocent times in that part of the world . . . I’m not sure people knew the word ‘lesbian.’ Maybe they didn’t have a name for the girls, and maybe it doesn’t matter.”⁶³ If the writer(s) of Ruth were aware of homoerotic relationships between women in the community, one can imagine a similar reliance on “plausible deniability” by Ruth’s author(s), who, if pressed, might have argued that same-sex desire was historically foreign to Israelite culture.

The book of Ruth’s irenic backdrop in the time of the judges is itself a strategically ambiguous tactic. As Fewell observes, on the one hand, the temporal setting suggests that “the past is not a ‘permanent landmark’ . . . if the past can be reimagined, then so can the present and future.”⁶⁴ On the other, the setting affords audiences the means to escape present circumstances and rest easy in the notion that it was a simpler time, one in which heroic men took care of widows in need and foreigners easily embraced the ways of their neighbors. As Clines observes, the history of a book’s reception (in Ruth’s case, principally as an idyll) often demonstrates how successful the text is at persuading readers to “suppress [their] critical instincts” and “adopt the book’s implicit ideologies.”⁶⁵

While the book of Ruth may have meant different things to different people within post-exilic Yehud, its political function was likely one of normalizing atypical social relationships

⁶³ Flagg’s response is ironic given that she reportedly based the novel on the life of her aunt whom she believed to be a lesbian. One cannot help but wonder if Flagg is in fact dependent upon the present-day homophobia of the 1990’s to validate her point of view. See Donald LaBadie, “Friend’s Life in a Shoebox Inspired Flagg,” *Commercial Appeal* (January 10, 1992).; cf. Rita Mae Brown, *Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 325.

⁶⁴ Danna Nolan Fewell, “The Ones Returning: Ruth, Naomi, and Social Negotiation,” in *Women and Exile: Conceptualizations of Gender in the Exilic Period*, eds. Martien Halvorsen-Taylor and Katherine Southwood (T & T Clark International, forthcoming). Used with permission of the author.

⁶⁵ Clines, “Why Is There a Book of Job?,” 17.

while reinforcing traditional family and communal structures. Unlike his or her dogmatic counterpart in Ezra-Nehemiah, the author(s) of Ruth seems to be aware of the need to appeal to diverse constituencies. In the words of Benjamin Mangrum, the returning exiles would have “encountered an onslaught of social, economic, political and religious dilemmas,”⁶⁶ among them the place of so-called foreign women. The realities of intermarriage between returnees and the people of the land meant that the internal boundaries of the community were in flux.⁶⁷ As a person of the land “agnatically related yet distinct”⁶⁸ from her Israelite neighbors, a Moabite woman would have been a particularly useful narrative tool through which to navigate those boundaries.

Eskenezi also argues that the family re-emerged as a significant socio-economic unit during the post-exilic period and that this shift likely translated into greater egalitarianism between women and men. Among the rights afforded to women seems to be the right to inherit property.⁶⁹ Eskenezi contends, “The fear of mixed marriages with their concomitant loss of property to the community makes most sense when women can, in fact, inherit.”⁷⁰ Tensions over land inheritance between Israelite returnees and those who had remained in the land were no doubt exacerbated by the presence of foreigners like Ruth who married into returning families. When it is revealed in 4:3 that Naomi in fact owns a piece of land, the full implications of her relationship to Ruth come to light:

If Ruth is indeed a present or future property owner in Bethlehem, then we have a sharper sense of the communal anxiety over those returning. This is not simply about insiders and outsiders, but about a *foreign woman* who does not simply poach space and finagle place, attempting through hard work and modesty to

⁶⁶Benjamin Mangrum, "Bringing 'Fullness' to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in the Book of Ruth" *Horizons In Biblical Theology* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 2011), 68.

⁶⁷ Tamara Cohn Eskenezi, "Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era," *Journal for the Study Of The Old Testament* 54 (June 1, 1992), 33-35

⁶⁸ Brenner, "Ruth: The Art of Memorizing Territory and Religion," 83.

⁶⁹ Eskenezi, "Out from the Shadows," 33-35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

endear herself to those around her, but a *foreign woman* who could one day legally lay claim to space in the house of bread.⁷¹

It is in the context of Yehud's social and economic upheaval that we can imagine unconventional families emerging – exogamous second marriages, bereaved mothers and daughters-in-law living together, and yes, even cohabitation between women with amorous ties. In the same or similar ways that contemporary lesbian relationships pose a threat to a compulsory heterosexuality, such economic interdependence between women would have been perceived as dangerous if not reined in. It is not inconceivable that women in the Persian period saw opportunities to work together to forge a life beyond the reach of patriarchal control. The author(s) of Ruth invoke these atypical relationships to temper them and properly reconfigure them into the Yehudite imaginary.

Fewell identifies at least three interrelated reasons that communities tell stories: 1) to domesticate the disruptive elements of life; 2) to address issues of communal boundaries and their attendant questions of identity; and 3) to respond to the community's need for adaptability and flexibility.⁷² Whatever other historical gleanings we may discern from the book of Ruth, we find within it evidence of the social negotiation that must have been going on in the *Golah* community about the place of foreigners, the roles of women and the material consequences of the erotic. While it has been argued that Ruth functioned as a democratic counter-voice to that of Ezra-Nehemiah, it may be more apt that the author(s) of Ruth employed a strategically ambiguous text to acknowledge these ongoing communal deliberations while attempting to safeguard what was understood to be a traditional way of life.

At the same time, authors are driven by psychological needs and drives that go beyond their conscious intentions. We recall from the introduction Clines's assertion that texts, much

⁷¹ Fewell, "The Ones Returning." Emphasis in original.

⁷² Ibid.

like dreams, can be interpreted as expressions of internal conflict within the author(s). Applying this insight to Ruth, we can imagine how the writer(s) may be psychically negotiating questions of identity and communal boundaries through the interaction between characters. If the book of Ruth, as dream, manifests the internal struggles of the author(s), then the text's ambiguous queerness is not only the product of strategic ambiguity, although it may be skillfully fashioned as such. The textual uncertainty that is achieved through the art of connotation is *also* suggestive of the author's (or authors') own psychic fragmentation. If evocations of the queer persist in the book of Ruth, it is because the binary constructions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity that tenuously hold the text together contain the means of their own deconstruction. Like Ruth herself, we discover there is always some excess, something more yet to be reaped for those who continue to glean.

We now turn to a second intertextual analysis of Ruth alongside *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Taking Clines's notion of the text as dream further, we explore the way in which the mother-(in-law)-daughter(in-law) relationship between Ruth and Naomi psychically reflects the struggle to balance autonomy with interdependence among those living in Yehud. As we draw upon Winterson's narrative and the contemporary experiences of lesbian daughters, we will discover that there is yet more sustenance to be found in the fields of *bet lehem*.

Chapter Four
Reclamation: Ruth and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

*Lay me beside you
down on the floor
I've been your lover
From the womb to the tomb
I dress as your daughter
When the moon becomes round
You be my mother
When everything's gone*

- Meg Keene

Perhaps we return to it again and again because its discontents, its drifts of desire, are not totally assuaged?

- Avivah Zornberg¹

“Turn it, turn it, for everything is in it.” As the rabbis say of the Torah,² so too perhaps it is with Ruth. As we have seen, the book of Ruth provides strong indications of woman-identified love. At the same time, the author(s) artfully reveal and conceal the erotic elements shaping Ruth and Naomi’s attachment. While indications of homoeroticism exist, the strategic use of ambiguity reinforces a discourse of secrecy and invisibility. On the other hand, the clear presence of queer traces within the text makes the homoeroticism impossible to deny.

The reclamation of sacred texts is a critical task for feminist and lesbian-identified biblical interpreters. Strategies of resistance and rupture expose the heteronormative assumptions shaping previous interpretations and illuminate the cracks and fissures within the text that make alternative readings possible. Yet a reclamation of the text, when feasible, demonstrates the full extent to which a lesbian-identified perspective can widen our understanding of it.

¹ Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, 374-375.

² *Pirke Avot* 2:21. The original saying is attributed to Ben Bag Bag.

We owe a great deal to those interpreters who have reclaimed Ruth as a sacred narrative for woman-identified women. Bringing their gifts of intellect and personal insight, they illuminate textual elements previously unexplored or ignored. At the same time, many such interpreters selectively disregard elements of Ruth and Naomi's relationship that might compromise a woman-identified reading. West, for example, lauds the text's celebration of alternative family relations but ignores the extent to which the text embraces and strengthens patriarchal values by the close of the narrative. In large part and unsurprisingly, lesbian-identified interpreters have not attended to the textual ambiguities and silences that may call into question the loving nature of Ruth and Naomi's relationship.

In what follows I offer a reading of Ruth that both attends to the textual ambiguities and affirms a lesbian-identified perspective on the text. As I suggested at the close of Chapter Three, there are elements of the text that exceed the author's (or authors') conscious control. With Clines's notion of the "text as dream" in mind, we find the textual ambiguities surrounding the relationship between Ruth and Naomi manifesting certain hidden desires. If we follow these "drifts of desire," we can in fact discover some surprising possibilities for re-appropriating Ruth, possibilities that are both affirming of lesbian experience and revelatory of the deeper yearnings underlying the narrative.

In this chapter we foreground Naomi and Ruth's relationship as mother(-in-law and daughter (-in-law). Drawing upon a second intertext, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (hereafter *Oranges*), I propose the complex relationship Ruth shares with Naomi is reflective of real lesbian experience with the mother. This reading is not meant to substitute for or diminish previous lesbian-identified interpretations, but rather to complicate and expand upon the identification of Ruth as a proto-lesbian figure. The strength of this approach is that it allows

us to appreciate Ruth's textual ambiguities in a fresh way. Rather than insist upon or deny the possibility of a homoerotic connection between Ruth and Naomi, we will be able instead to embrace the fluidity of their relationship as kinswomen, helpmates, friends and lovers.

While numerous articles and books have highlighted Naomi and Ruth's mother(-in-law)-daughter(-in-law) relationship, few have examined it critically. In her monograph, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible*, for example, Leila Leah Bronner conjectures that the author(s) of Ruth foreground the relationship between Naomi and Ruth because the mother-daughter relationship is *the* paragon of love and loyalty. The message, she postulates, is "at their best, humans will care for one another *as if* they were mother and daughter."³ Ruth and Naomi's *hesed* for one another is what enables their survival and allows them to transform the society around them.⁴ Gail Twersky Reimer, while she reads Ruth and Naomi's relationship with more nuance, somewhat similarly argues that Ruth's devotion *to Naomi* is what enables her to mature into a self-reliant woman, rather than one who finds her identity in husbands or children.⁵ While both perspectives bear merit, what I find missing from each is any real interrogation of the relationship *between* Ruth and Naomi. Why continue to envisage their relationship in a one-dimensional fashion when the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is obviously complex? The answer in part lies in the need to reclaim the significance of female characters in the Bible and to demonstrate that mothers and daughters can serve as

³ Leila Leah Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible* (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 68. Emphasis in original. To be fair, Bronner poses these possibilities as questions, though she seems to answer them in the affirmative. The section of the chapter is titled, "Ruth and the Song of Songs: A Paradigm of Mother and Daughter Love." (67).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵ Gail Twersky Reimer, "Her Mother's House," in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 97-105; cf. Tess Cosslett, "Intertextuality in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: The Bible, *Malory* and *Jane Eyre*," in *I'm Telling You Stories': Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, eds. by Helena Grice and Tim Woods (Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 1998), 133. To be fair, the point of Reimer's essay is to examine Ruth's own resistance to motherhood, rather than the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. However, I find it ironic that Naomi serves as a kind of static backdrop to Ruth's transformation, rather than an agent within it, even as she is purportedly the reason Ruth seeks an alternative life.

subjects in their own right. In order to validate female characters and relationships, scholars have idealized them, perhaps to a fault.⁶ How do we tell stories of daughters and mothers in ways that caricature neither? How much more enriched might our scholarship be if we take all of the facets of women's interrelationships seriously?⁷

You Say Tomato, I Say Orange: Reconstructing Ruth

As we found in Chapter Three, intertextual analysis can afford us new and dynamic insights into a biblical text. While *Fried Green Tomatoes* makes only general reference to Ruth, *Oranges* offers a more sustained reflection on key facets of her story. Winterson takes as the title to each chapter the five books of the Torah, then "Joshua" and "Judges," followed by "Ruth." While the other chapters draw on the Bible's themes broadly, literary critic Laurel Bollinger argues, "the Ruth material defines the nature of the novel as a whole by indicating the larger issues of mother/daughter relations and female loyalty that face [the main character] Jeanette."⁸ While Bollinger, along with numerous other literary critics, analyzes the significance of Ruth's appropriation for Winterson's project, here I wish to bring the analysis full circle by considering how Winterson's allusion to Ruth unlocks distinct and previously unconsidered insights into the biblical text.

⁶Bronner is a good example of the point I am making. In the chapter "Mothers and Daughters" in her monograph *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, Bronner offers no discussion of the tensions that exist between Ruth and Naomi, instead depicting their relationship solely in terms of their love and *hesed* for one another.

⁷An exception to this general trend appears in the some of the racially/ethnically contextual feminist writings on Ruth, where the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is thought to echo the often contentious relationship between daughter-in-laws and mothers in certain cultures. See for example, Julie Li-Chuan Chu, "Returning Home: The Inspiration of the Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth for Taiwanese Women," in *Reading the Bible as Women: Perspectives from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Semeia* 78, eds. Sakenfeld, Phyllis A. Bird and Sharon H. Ringe (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 47-54; and Madipoane J. Masenya, "Ngwetsi (Bride): The Naomi-Ruth Story from an African-South African Woman's Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998): 81-90.

⁸ Laurel Bollinger, "Models for Female Loyalty: The Biblical Ruth in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 367.

Oranges tells the story of the adopted child of a domineering fundamentalist Christian mother growing up in a small industrial town in England. Slated to become a missionary, Jeanette's lesbian awakening brings her into conflict with her church community, leading to her expulsion. As a coming of age story, *Oranges* appropriates the classic genre of the *Bildungsroman* (lit. "novel of formation"), while also subverting the tradition. In conventional *Bildungsromans* an adolescent character undergoes a rite of passage in which she or he must leave home and endure many difficulties. At the end of this journey, the protagonist accepts the values of the given society, returns home and is deemed mature. In Winterson's story, Jeanette's experiences conversely lead her to reject the values of her community and experience a transformation within. Her identity emerges in contradistinction to her community of origin.⁹

Like Ruth, *Oranges* foregrounds female relationships. Akin to Ruth's relationship to Elimelech and the sickly Mahlon and Chilion, male figures are only nominally important to Jeanette's life.¹⁰ Her difficult relationship with her mother is set alongside those with other church matriarchs, at least one of whom is a closeted lesbian. Just as Ruth and Naomi's relationship begins with a "conversion," Jeanette's first sexual relationships are with proselytes. Unlike Flagg, Winterson deals openly with her protagonist's sexuality.¹¹ As we will discover, the straightforward presentation of Jeanette's lesbianism more directly reflects Ruth's parallel journey of self-recognition and differentiation.

⁹ Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo, "Subversive Storytelling: The Construction of Lesbian Girlhood through Fantasy and Fairy Tale in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not The Only Fruit*, in *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*, ed. Ruth O. Saxon (London: Macmillan, 1998), 119; cf. López, 21,168-172.

¹⁰ Bollinger, 365.

¹¹ While it is true that neither *Oranges* nor its later BBC television adaptation (written by Winterson) employs the word lesbian, Jeanette's lesbianism is self-evident. Throughout the novel and the film, Jeanette's sexual relationships are presented in a forthright manner, the protagonist remains the heroine and she is not transformed into a villain or a victim. See Hillary Hinds, "*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: Reaching Audiences Other Lesbian Texts Cannot Reach," in *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*, ed. Sally Munt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 169.

While *Oranges* is a work of fiction, Winterson draws heavily on her own life story growing up in an evangelical family, including the formative influence of the Bible in her daily life. Winterson parodies the biblical text, often playing upon its language and themes to tell Jeanette's tale. In order to draw attention to the Bible as a work of literature, she also interweaves fantastical stories (which themselves parody other founding texts of Western culture) with corresponding subjects. "As in other works of biblical revision," writes literary critic Amy Benson Brown, "the fables' parallels with biblical themes and imagery effectively deny the biblical narrative a position of supreme or sole authority and foreground the malleable textuality of the Bible."¹² Nonetheless, Bollinger contends that Winterson parodies the Bible in the fullest sense of the word, observing the Greek prefix *para* denotes the stance of being both "counter" or "against" and "near" or "beside." While Jeanette repudiates the biblical tradition she has inherited, she simultaneously makes use of it to transform her own identity.¹³ "Winterson's articulation of a lesbian subject," writes Brown, "is actually inseparable from her revisionary engagement of the Bible."¹⁴ She employs the Bible in a "broader process of resignification"¹⁵ in which the forging of identity and the prophetic power of story-telling come together.¹⁶

From Origins to Exile

To better understand Winterson's engagement with the book of Ruth, it will be helpful to first examine how she appropriates other biblical stories in the preceding chapters. Winterson

¹² Amy Benson Brown, 235.

¹³ Bollinger, 367.

¹⁴ Benson Brown, 233.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 243-249. At the conclusion of her self-narrated story, the character Jeanette states ironically:

I could have been a priest instead of a prophet. The priest has a book with words set out. Old words, known words, words of power. The words work. They do what they're supposed to do; comfort and discipline. The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning. The prophets cry out because they are troubled by demons [Winterson (1985), 161].

employs biblical narratives to shape Jeanette's development from origins to exile to return, a heritage which informs Ruth's journey as well. In "Genesis," Jeanette relates her own myth of origins:

My mother, out walking that night, dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord:
a missionary child,
a servant of God,
a blessing.

And so it was that on a particular day, some time later, she followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child. A child with too much hair.

She said, 'This child is mine from the Lord.'

She took the child away and for seven days and seven nights the child cried out, for fear and not knowing. The mother sang to the child, and stabbed the demons. She understood how jealous the Spirit is of flesh.

Such warm tender flesh.

Her flesh now, sprung from her head.

Her vision.

Not the jolt beneath the hip bone, but water and the word.

She had a way out now, for years and years to come.¹⁷

Like Ruth, Jeanette leaves her mother's house to join an adopted mother (hereafter "Mother").

But for Jeanette, her destiny is preordained by Mother, who sets out to raise her for the mission field. Mother projects all of her ambitions onto the child, thus having "a way out, for years and years to come."

Drawing on themes and imagery from 1 Samuel 1-2 and Matthew 1-2, Mother "births" Jeanette through a different kind of immaculate conception, one through "water and the word." "She had a mysterious attitude towards the begetting of children," explains Jeanette, "it wasn't that she couldn't do it, more that she didn't want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first."¹⁸ Jeanette is "her flesh now, sprung from her head. Her vision." "Stabbing her demons," Mother fashions herself as a kind of creator-god reigning over her

¹⁷ Winterson (1985), 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3

adopted daughter, bringing order out of chaos¹⁹ for her little “foundling.”²⁰ Placing herself in the traditionally male position of the divine maker, Mother becomes the architect of Jeanette’s universe and the arbiter of the phallocratic order.

Nonetheless, Mother’s influence on Jeanette is not solely negative. Her frequent alterations of scripture and other literature exemplify a rebellious spirit. To suit her own predilections she rewrites the ending of *Jane Eyre* so that Jane marries St. John Rivers and they become missionaries. When Jeanette discovers the true ending, she is disenchanted, though she clearly channels Mother’s gifts for revision. Jeanette is also heir to Mother’s leadership talents in the church, which proves particularly ironic when Jeanette’s preaching and teaching are condemned. As literary critic Anne DeLong observes, Jeanette’s image of Mother is far from one-dimensional. In her biblical appropriations and fairy tales, Mother is regularly reworked as “wise woman, Virgin Mary, Zeus, Satan, orange tree, King Arthur, and sorcerer, manifestations that cross lines of good/evil, male/female dichotomies.”²¹ Mother models for Jeanette qualities of creativity, self-assurance, and perseverance that will enable her to forge her own path.

As a child, however, Jeanette struggles to understand the literalist worldview of her family and her church community. In a humorous episode, she attempts to rewrite the story of Daniel in the lion’s den using Fuzzy Felt (so that Daniel is swallowed by the lions), only to be chastised by Pastor Spratt. Rather than admit to her creative intentions, she tells him she “got mixed up.”²² As with the opening chapter of *Genesis*, Jeanette’s outer world is defined by

¹⁹ Anita Gnagnatti, “Discarding God’s Handbook: Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and the Tension of Intertextuality,” in *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000*, eds. Mark Knight and Thomas M. Woodman (Aldershot, Hants, Eng.: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 125.

²⁰ Winterson (1985), 3.

²¹ Anne DeLong, “The Cat’s Cradle: Multiple Discursive Threads in Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*,” *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 17, no. 3–4 (2006): 264.

²² Winterson (1985), 12-13.

oppositions, “light/dark, good/evil, believer/heathen, order/disorder, lost/found, saved/fallen.”²³ Only when Jeanette goes to school (the “Breeding Ground” as Mother refers to it)²⁴ does she begin to see life differently.

In “Exodus” Jeanette makes her “escape” to elementary school²⁵ though she finds it to be a wilderness. She reflects, “When the children of Israel left Egypt, they were guided by the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. For them, this did not seem to be a problem. For me, it was an enormous problem. The pillar of cloud was a fog, perplexing and impossible. I didn't understand the ground rules.”²⁶ Having been taught to read from the book of Deuteronomy²⁷ and “to interpret the signs and wonders that the unbeliever might never understand,”²⁸ Jeanette painfully discovers that a different kind of logic governs the world of public education.²⁹ When asked to do a sewing project, she proudly embroiders a sampler with words from Jeremiah 8:20, “THE SUMMER IS ENDED AND WE ARE NOT YET SAVED.”³⁰ She disturbs the teacher and is chastised by the other children, leading her to realize that the importance of context:

What constitutes a problem is not the thing, or the environment where we find the thing, but the conjunction of the two; something unexpected in a usual place (our favourite aunt in our favourite poker parlour) or something usual in an unexpected place (our favourite poker in our favourite aunt). I knew that my sampler was absolutely right in Elsie Norris's front room, but absolutely wrong in Mrs Virtue's sewing class. Mrs Virtue should either have had the imagination to commend me for my effort in context, or the far-sightedness to realise that there is a debate going on as to whether something has an absolute as well as a relative value; given that, she should have given me the benefit of the doubt.³¹

²³ Laura Doan, “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern” in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 142.

²⁴ Winterson (1985), 16.

²⁵ Cosslett, 16.

²⁶Winterson (1985), 48.

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁹ Gnagnatti, 126.

³⁰ Winterson (1985), 39.

³¹ Ibid., 45.

Still, Jeanette remains under the sway of Mother, who dismisses the rebukes of the other children. Mother even takes her to the cinema as a reward for setting herself apart. “My mother didn't have many friends either,” Jeanette reflects, “People didn't understand the way she thought; neither did I, but I loved her because she always knew exactly why things happened.”³²

Despite Mother's absolutism, Jeanette discovers those in her church community who view the world with more discrimination. “There's this world . . . and there's this world,” Elsie Norris tells her, banging on the wall then thumping on her chest, “If you want to make sense of either, you have to take notice of both.”³³ In “Leviticus” Jeanette begins to take notice, developing her earliest theological disagreement. Her pastor delivers a sermon on the need to aspire for perfection, prompting Jeanette's first full length fairy tale about a prince who seeks out a flawless princess. The prince searches in vain until he discovers a maiden who is “a perfect balance of qualities and strengths.” Imperfect, but “symmetrical in every respect”³⁴ the maiden tells him what he seeks does not exist. This leads to her sacrificial beheading. While the prince believes he has “stamped out a very great evil,”³⁵ he is consigned to endless searching with only a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to remind him of his hubris.³⁶

In “Numbers” Jeanette reflects on the safety of her clan. She encounters Melanie, her first lover and a convert to her church. On the first day of her attendance, Pastor Spratt delivers a sermon on “Unnatural Passions,” though neither Jeanette nor Melanie feel their love should be understood as such. After their first sexual encounter, Jeanette expresses the feeling of new birth,

³² Ibid., 43.

³³ Ibid., 32.

³⁴ Ibid., 64.

³⁵ Ibid., 67.

³⁶ Mara Reisman, “Integrating Fantasy and Reality in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*,” *Rocky Mountain Review* 65, no. 1 (2011): 17.

paraphrasing Genesis 1:8, “And it was evening and it was morning; another day,”³⁷ In the meantime, Jeanette is conversely perplexed about the seemingly unnatural expectation that she should marry a man. Echoing Ruth’s resolve to stay with Naomi against all odds, Jeanette is content to remain with Melanie and to disregard the forces that could divide them.

With its philosophical style, “Deuteronomy” demarcates a major transition in the novel. The chapter takes the form of sermon-like reflection, but unlike Moses’s priestly reflection on Israel’s past, Jeanette prophetically deliberates on the relationship between history, story and truth. She comes to understand that there are no objective truths, only overlapping narratives:

Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don't believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots. It's all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end. The best you can do is admire the cat's cradle, and maybe knot it up a bit more.³⁸

From here, Jeanette undergoes her own conversion story,³⁹ learning to act on the courage of her convictions. In “Joshua” and “Judges” her affair is discovered and the church leadership attempts an exorcism. At first, Jeanette feigns acceptance of their reproof and punishment. Eventually, however, she is excommunicated when another affair is discovered and she no longer agrees to repent.

After the denunciation of Jeanette’s relationship with Melanie, Mother burns the evidence, leading to this reflection in “Joshua”:

She burnt a lot more than the letters that night in the backyard. I don't think she knew. In her head she was still queen, but not my queen any more, not the White Queen any more. Walls protect and walls limit. It is the nature of walls that they should fall. That walls should fall is the consequence of blowing your own trumpet.⁴⁰

³⁷ Winterson (1985), 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁹ Amy Benson Brown, 242.

⁴⁰ Winterson (1985), 112.

While Mother is no longer the White Queen, Jeanette must decide whether or not she is going to embrace her emerging sexual identity, knowing the consequences of “blowing her own trumpet.” When the church decides in “Judges” that her attraction to women is the result of her “aping men” by assuming the authority to preach and teach, she decides to strike out on her own. Like Ruth, she breaks with her past, declaring, “It was not judgment day, but another morning.”⁴¹

From Exile to Return

On the banks of the Euphrates find a secret garden cunningly walled. There is an entrance, but the entrance is guarded. There is no way in for you. Inside you will find every plant that grows growing circular-wise like a target. Close to the heart is a sundial and at the heart an orange tree. This fruit had tripped up athletes while others have healed their wounds. All true quests end in this garden, where the split fruit pours forth blood and the halved fruit is a full bowl for travelers and pilgrims. To eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings. So at dusk you say goodbye to the place you love, not knowing if you can ever return, knowing you can never return by the same way as this. It may be, some other day, that you will open a gate by chance, and find yourself again on the other side of the wall.⁴²

In this powerful image of edenic loss, Jeanette expresses a desire for independence, wholeness, and, paradoxically perhaps, homecoming. Having eaten of the fruit of her own sexual awakening, she leaves her community recognizing that she “can never return by the same way as this.” Though Mother has insisted oranges are “the only fruit,”⁴³ Jeanette, like Ruth before her, places her faith in unknown gardens.

The final chapter, “Ruth,” focuses primarily on the emotional impact of Jeanette’s decision to leave home and then later to go back. After Elsie Norris dies, she moves to the city (presumably Oxford), though we learn very little about her life there. The chapter instead takes the form of a meditation on courage, separation and loss. While snippets of folk tale materials are

⁴¹ Ibid., 137.

⁴² Ibid., 123.

⁴³ Ibid., 29.

scattered throughout previous chapters, here two longer tales, the story of Winnet Stonejar and the story of Sir Perceval (begun in an earlier chapter), are interwoven with the conclusion to Jeanette's own story. Together these stories illuminate Winterson's multifaceted allusions to the Ruth narrative.

The tale of Winnet Stonejar tells the story of a young girl who is tricked by a sorcerer into becoming his apprentice. From the sorcerer she learns the magical arts, including the special knowledge of how to draw a protective chalk circle. However, she is not allowed to leave his castle, and eventually she forgets how she came to be there. She settles into her new home and vocation until she meets a prince, who woos her against the wishes of the sorcerer. Claiming she has disgraced him, the sorcerer tells her she must leave, but not before tying an invisible thread on one of her buttons. Like Jeanette, Winnet moves on to the city where she learns to use her powers differently, believing that she can never go back.

The Sir Perceval narrative offers yet another reflection on leaving home. Perceval, "the darling, the favourite"⁴⁴ of King Arthur (intimated to be his lover), departs from the court in search of the Holy Grail. As "a warrior who longed to grow herbs,"⁴⁵ his quest entails the search for balance between his seemingly opposing desires – "heroism and peace."⁴⁶ During a stop on his journey, the image of the thread reappears:

His host had asked him why he had left, not really wanting to hear, presuming reasons of his own, that the king was mad, or the Round Table ruined. Perceval had stayed silent. He had gone for his own sake, nothing more. He had thought that day of returning. He felt himself being pulled like a bobbin of cotton, so that he was dizzy and wanted to give in to the pull and wake up round familiar things. When he slept that night he dreamed he was a spider hanging a long way down a huge oak. Then a raven came and flew through his thread, so that he dropped to the ground and scuttled away.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Winterson (1985), 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁶ Reisman, 29.

⁴⁷ Winterson (1985), 173-174.

Inverting and rearranging categories of gender and sexuality, Jeanette's fairy tales creatively dramatize her multifaceted relationship with Mother, calling to mind the gender de-differentiation that also shapes Ruth and Naomi's relationship. The web of threads connecting Jeanette to her past is intricate and many-sided. When asked if she ever thinks of going back home, Jeanette reflects, "There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back."⁴⁸ Like Winnet, she is aware that she will never fully be free, but like Perceval, the thought of the thread linking her to home being severed leaves her lonely and wanting.⁴⁹ Akin to her notion of history, Jeanette realizes that her own life comprises a cat's cradle, a web of relationships without beginning or end.

Contemplating the image of the cat's cradle, DeLong illuminates how *Oranges* contributes significantly to an understanding of female identity, and in particular lesbian identity. The formation of lesbian subjectivity as it is expressed through language, she argues, entails the need for "multiple discursive threads," that is for "multiple threads of theory and storytelling from which multiple meanings can be extracted."⁵⁰ Winterson models such a discourse through her mixture of genres,⁵¹ her non-linear narrative style, her effusive use of intertexts and, finally, her resistance to closure at the end of the novel. In *Jeanette*, Winterson presents us with a subject who is fluid and evolving in her search for wholeness. While Jeanette's identity is formed through a process of continuation and disruption in relation to Mother, it is the elasticity of that bond, rather than its severance, which matters most. Through the images of the garden wall and the chalk circle, Winterson suggests alternating possibilities of separation and ongoing

⁴⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁴⁹ DeLong, 273.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 263-264.

⁵¹ Ibid., 264.

connection, “a wall for the body, a circle for the soul,”⁵² With these complementary images, Jeanette is able to go back to visit Mother without sacrificing her own integrity.

Not the Only Fruit: Reimagining Ruth

Like our intertextual analysis of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Oranges* enlarges our understanding of the book of Ruth, while also offering deeper insight into the relationship between readers (both ancient and modern) and the sacred text. From here, we expand upon our initial intertextual analysis to examine the ways in which the content and structure of *Oranges* enable us to re-read Ruth as a woman-identified text. This analysis is two-fold: first, we will look at the significance of Ruth’s identity as a daughter through the lens of lesbian psychological development; second, we will reflect on Naomi’s significance as a mother figure by reading Ruth in light of the writings of Kristeva. Following these investigations, we will again reflect on the historical gleanings harvested from our discussion.

As we began to explore above, *Oranges* is fundamentally a story of lesbian coming of age and one that significantly parallels Ruth’s journey. To better comprehend Winterson’s articulation of lesbian desire and its implications for Ruth, it will be helpful to consider psychoanalytic models of female development. In her analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in *Oranges*, DeLong looks at the theories of Lacan and Luce Irigaray as they might be applied to the character of Jeanette. As we have already seen in his thoughts on the mechanics of desire, Lacan contends that when human beings enter the symbolic order, they move from the pre-linguistic sphere (imaged as female) into the domain of language (imaged as male). The realization of female subjectivity, therefore, requires a separation from the same sex role model

⁵² Winterson (1985), 113.

(i.e. the mother) and an entry into the male realm of logic and discourse.⁵³ Irigaray, one of Lacan's chief feminist interlocutors, disputes this model, arguing for an ongoing connection to the mother and the "prediscursive reality"⁵⁴ she embodies. In the tradition of *écriture féminine*, Irigaray resists the values of linearity, unity and singularity that characterize male discourse⁵⁵ (exemplified in Brooks's male plot of ambition), arguing instead for a multiplicity of discourse "that comes from everywhere at once."⁵⁶ *Oranges* effectively demonstrates such a language through its intermingling of genres and its experimental structure, which together allows Jeanette to subvert patriarchal values and to come to terms with her identity.⁵⁷

DeLong, however, critiques both models of female development (and the narrative models espoused within each), arguing that the formation of *lesbian* identity in particular requires *both* a differentiation from and an attachment to the pre-discursive mother. In psychoanalytic terms, the mother, for a lesbian-identified woman, is equally the object of her desire and the figure against which she must distinguish herself. Jeanette employs the written word both to forge a connection to Mother (adopting the religious language and traditions of her childhood) and to differentiate herself (reappropriating the symbolic order to her own ends).⁵⁸ Language, like history, functions as the cat's cradle that is worked and reworked by Jeanette to establish her identity *vis á vis* her maternal origins.

DeLong's proposal finds corroboration in psychological research on the developmental experiences of lesbians. For example, psychotherapist Wendy B. Rosen examines the often strained relationship between lesbians and their heterosexual mothers in the coming out

⁵³ DeLong, 263.

⁵⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with the assistance of Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 89. Originally published as *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977. Cited in DeLong, 263.

⁵⁵ DeLong, 263.

⁵⁶ Irigaray, 209. Cited in DeLong, 263.

⁵⁷ DeLong, 264.

⁵⁸ Gamallo, 120.

process.⁵⁹ Where a daughter's connection with her mother can often be a source of empathy, strength and empowerment, the relationship is often derailed in the case of lesbian daughters due to the sociocultural barriers that bring her and her mother into conflict. As a heterosexual woman, the mother's measure of success lies in her ability to successfully fulfill the roles of heterosexual wife and parent and to raise her daughter to do the same. When the daughter embraces a path other than heterosexuality, the mother may feel threatened, which may in turn lead her to distance herself emotionally or reject her daughter outright.⁶⁰ Rosen writes:

That her daughter could become a lesbian is simply not a culturally permissible image to which a mother can be openly receptive without threatening both the larger system and her own personal sense of order. The meaning of this is powerful – [the] mother will unavoidably miss the cues regarding her daughter's sexuality in general, and her lesbianism, in particular, throughout [her] development. She will be, of necessity, selectively inattentive, and thus remain minimally attuned to the emotional manifestations of [her daughter's] evolving sexuality. She will be unable to serve as an empathic resource for her daughter in this aspect of her growth.⁶¹

The daughter, in turn, experiences this distancing as a rejection which can lead to feelings of confusion, shame, isolation and anger.⁶² She, too, may be unable to empathize with her mother's needs and desires.⁶³ Often both mother and daughter participate in an "inevitable empathic failure" as the expectations of compulsory heterosexuality impede a more mutually understanding relationship.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Wendy B. Rosen, "On the Integration of Sexuality: Lesbians and Their Mothers," in *Women's Growth in Diversity: More Writings from the Stone Center*, ed. Judith V. Jordan (New York: Guilford Press, 1997) 239-259. For more on lesbian adolescent development, see the following sampling: Lee A. Beaty, "Identity Development of Homosexual Youth and Parental and Familial Influences on the Coming Out Process," *Adolescence* 34, no. 135 (1999), 597-601; Anthony R. D'Augelli and Charlotte Patterson. *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities and Youth: Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Lou F. Gramling, Rebecca L. Carr and Nancy L. McCain, "Family Responses to Disclosure of Self-As-Lesbian," *Issues In Mental Health Nursing* 21, no. 7 (September 30, 2000): 653-669; Margaret Schneider, "Sappho Was a Right-on Adolescent: Growing Up Lesbian," *Journal of Homosexuality* 17 (1989): 111-130.

⁶⁰ W. Rosen, 246-249.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 249-254.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

Nonetheless, Rosen argues that lesbian daughters often seek to continue the relationship with their mothers in lieu of total separation. The desire for ongoing connection arises out of the need for clarity, differentiation, authenticity, and ultimately, healing. While the coming out process can entail significant grief and loss, it can also empower the lesbian daughter to narrate her own experience and to live a less fragmented life. Though her honesty about her sexuality is likely to strain her relationship with her mother, she is able to move forward in the world with greater integrity without totally sacrificing her connection to her origins.⁶⁵

It is no surprise then that Jeanette experiences a complicated web of resonances and conflicts with Mother, who is her mentor *and* the quintessential representative of the patriarchal religious discourse Jeanette renounces. Jeanette's description of her "birth" illustrates the simultaneous senses of connection and displacement she feels with Mother. She is her creation and protégé; in fact Mother has "a way out" now that she has found someone to carry on the traditional values she has embraced. However, while Mother may feel Jeanette is "her flesh now," Jeanette experiences herself as being "sprung from her head," the product of Mother's romanticized, but unrealistic vision. Like the goddess Athena, who was sprung from the head of Zeus, Jeanette rejects the gendered order of Mother's Olympian-like universe, while repudiating sexual and emotional contact with men.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, she retains a deeply-rooted connection to Mother, who baptizes her into this life through "water and the word."

The Mother's House

⁶⁵ Ibid., 252-254.

⁶⁶ For more on the gender implications of the allusions to Athena and Zeus, see Monica Calvo Pascual, "A Feminine Subject in Postmodernist Chaos: Janette [sic] Winterson's Political Manifesto in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*" in *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 13 (Nov. 2000): 26-27.

Jeanette's experience with Mother mirrors the complex relationship Ruth has to the "mother's house" (*bêt 'ēm*).⁶⁷ While Jeanette is adopted and Ruth is Naomi's daughter-in-law, each enters the mother's house at a formative age (Ruth perhaps in prepubescence).⁶⁸ Like Mother, Naomi embodies that space, which nurtures feminine identity and prepares women for marriage and motherhood. At the same time, Naomi, as with Mother, is mother and not-mother, a fact that symbolically underscores Ruth's displacement from the "mother's house." Twice removed, Ruth can neither (or perhaps refuses) to return to her biological mother's house, nor can she "return" to her original relationship with Naomi after the death of Mahlon. Though she seeks to make a home with Naomi in Bethlehem, Naomi's resistance to her devotion augurs an uneasy attachment to the maternal figure.

As with Mother, Naomi is both the object of Ruth's desire and the figure against which she must differentiate herself. As Ruth's avid declaration of loyalty makes clear, Naomi is, at least initially, her whole world. Like Jeanette, Ruth's transition from girlhood to womanhood will require significant acts of self-definition and self-assertion. While much has been made of Ruth's clinging to Naomi as evidence of her homoerotic attachment to her, it is perhaps her acts of *unclinging* (that is detaching and distinguishing herself) from Naomi that more comprehensively reflects lesbian experience. Unlike Jeanette, who is at least exposed to self-sufficient women, Ruth, a lone woman in a foreign land, must pursue a future for herself despite Naomi's insistence that they are bereft without husbands and sons to care for them.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 264-265.

⁶⁸ Here I disagree with Bollinger, who writes, "Although Ruth probably entered Naomi's household in early adolescence, the fact that Naomi is not really Ruth's mother makes it unnecessary for Ruth to undergo the painful division/connection struggle with her" (373). Bollinger wishes to argue that since Naomi and Mother are one step removed from the biological mother, this makes it less difficult for Ruth and Jeanette to experience resentment and thus to forgive their surrogate mothers' foibles. In the case of Jeanette, the non-biological mother's status does not seem to make any substantive difference in terms of the daughter's struggle to individuate. I would imagine the same to be true for Ruth if we assume (as Bollinger does) that she entered Naomi's household at a seminal age.

While Ruth's resolve at the outset may be motivated by her affections for Naomi, over time she steps outward and displays her fortitude apart from, and perhaps even despite, Naomi. Ignoring Naomi's passivity, Ruth embarks upon the grain field to claim a future for them both. Fewell, drawing on the work of spatial theorist Michel de Certeau, argues Ruth daringly "poaches" public space. "Rather than requesting to join his labor force as any able-bodied young woman might do at harvest time," writes Fewell, "she asks, though unentitled, to glean immediately behind the reapers where the sheaves are being bound."⁶⁹ Later she will poach the private space of Boaz's bed, "transforming a hierarchical situation into one of horizontal (!) intimacy."⁷⁰ With her words and actions, Ruth goes far beyond what Naomi had intended for her to do; she may even, by invoking the words "redeeming kinsman," give Boaz the leverage he needs to marry outside his ethnic clan. Fewell writes, "If Boaz simply marries Ruth without involving the custom of redemption, he could be perceived as a land-grabber who exploits and exacerbates economic inequality."⁷¹ Redeeming Ruth, he is able to "balance desire, ethical obligation, and concern for his reputation." Again and again, Ruth takes matters into her own hands and moves the plot forward.

Just as Jeanette becomes disillusioned with Mother, one wonders if Ruth becomes more and more emotionally separated from Naomi. While Naomi's obliviousness to Ruth's feelings never reaches the derisiveness of Mother toward Jeanette, Naomi's failure to acknowledge Ruth's sacrifice or even at times, her very presence, is perhaps more insidious, shrouded as it is in silence and disinterest. That Ruth continues to go forward despite her mother-in-law's indifference suggests not only Ruth's outward devotion, but her fidelity to self.

⁶⁹ Fewell, "Space for Moral Agency." See Chapter Four, note 117.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Naomi is arguably, in Rosen's words, "selectively inattentive" to Ruth's development as a woman, including her sexual maturity. Whereas Ruth seeks to provide for Naomi and herself, regardless of her marital circumstances, Naomi only displays interest in their future when she learns of Ruth's meeting with Boaz. Even if Naomi experiences sexual feelings toward Ruth, she redirects that energy into securing a marriage partner and a home for her daughter-in-law.

The irony of Naomi's reawakening is not lost on Ruth, who finds ways to poke fun at Naomi's reliance on the patriarchy, even as she (Ruth) concedes to its requirements. As we previously examined, not once, but twice, Ruth playfully misrepresents Boaz's words when she recounts her meetings with him to Naomi, first to chide her for sending her into the gleaning fields alone (2:21), and then to cajole her into believing their nighttime tryst was all for the purpose of bestowing Naomi seed (3:17). Ruth's subtle wit prefigures a subversive style of humor characterizing late twentieth century lesbian fiction. Reflecting on Winterson's use of parody, literary critic Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo writes:

The subversive significance of laughter has been appropriated by lesbian writers before as a means to invert and problematize the perspective of the dominant culture, which aligns Winterson's text with the emerging lesbian comic fiction that has been developing since the 1970s on [T]he use of humor is a covert way of dealing with personal and potentially painful issues, especially her conflictive and unresolved relationship with her mother

Laughter becomes, in this way, a useful maneuver of detachment to handle autobiographic material, but it also remains a politically subversive weapon that challenges conventional standards of perceiving and writing the world.⁷²

Ruth, like Jeanette, conceivably employs humor to alleviate some of the pain of her disconnection from Naomi while undermining some of the pretenses of the patriarchal system. If Ruth's little white lies to Naomi are intended for anyone, they are for herself, and narratively, for the reader. By mischievously distorting the truth, Ruth leaves space for the reader to hear her authentic (and less naïve) perspective on events.

⁷² Gamallo, 127.

Nonetheless, in the case of both Jeanette and Ruth, humor is tempered with compassion.⁷³ While Mother's callousness is often depicted in stark terms, Jeanette still describes her as "a brilliant and beautiful princess, so sensitive that the death of a moth could distress her for weeks on end."⁷⁴ Ruth may be even more sympathetic to Naomi's cultural limitations, choosing to tease her surreptitiously rather than openly confront her. Though neither daughter disavows her own needs or desires, each finds ways to remain in relationship.

But why? In the case of Jeanette, readers have puzzled over her decision to resume the relationship, especially given that after her departure Mother commits herself to helping "other distressed parents with demon-possessed children."⁷⁵ Interpreters have typically credited Ruth's decision to remain with Naomi to her unqualified loyalty. Bollinger argues that Jeanette best emulates Ruth when she decides not to desert Mother, but to remain steadfast and retain the bonds of female connection.⁷⁶ But is "loyalty" the quality that truly links Jeanette to Ruth? Given the often trying relationship each shares with the mother figure, loyalty alone may not adequately account for their choices.

As Rosen argues, lesbian daughters often opt for a certain measure of vulnerability with their mothers over permanent disconnection in order to foster relationships of authenticity and greater intimacy. While coming out can lead to painful emotional and physical separation, disclosure is "very much in the service of connection."⁷⁷ Ruth's *hesed* toward Naomi, shown even after she attains a secure future with Boaz, may reflect a desire to retain the bonds of

⁷³ Ibid., 126.

⁷⁴ Winterson (1985), 9.

⁷⁵ Winterson (1985), 174.

⁷⁶ Bollinger, 363-375. Bollinger frames her argument in terms of female development, arguing "subjectivity can be constructed out of female connection rather than exclusively through separation." While I agree with much of the psychological basis of her argument, I find her emphasis on loyalty too narrow, as "loyalty" between mother and daughter (or any relationship) can serve as a pretext for self-effacement if one's devotion supersedes one's self-individuation.

⁷⁷ W. Rosen, 252.

womanhood.⁷⁸ Bollinger is correct when she states that the Ruth text is relevant for Winterson “because it offers a response to the mother that does not demand rejection but also does not preclude independent action.”⁷⁹ Ruth – by taking initiative when Naomi is passive, by playfully teasing her mother-in-law, and by following her instructions on the threshing floor not quite to the letter – illustrates a middle ground between symbiosis and absolute independence.⁸⁰ Female individuation need not be set in opposition to female allegiance.⁸¹

While the book of Ruth is typically read as *Ruth and Naomi*’s return to Bethlehem, our intertextual analysis alongside *Oranges* illuminates the significance of *Ruth*’s return to the “mother’s house.” In psychoanalytic terms, we can conceive of Ruth’s original separation from her biological mother as the beginning of a life-long homecoming. According to literary critic Tess Cosslett, by “putting the two stories [of Ruth and Jeanette] side by side, both the separation from the mother and the subsequent return to the (adoptive) mother are emphasised. These ‘mothers’ are two different people in the biblical story – in *Oranges*, they are two readings of the same person.”⁸² Like, Jeanette, Ruth’s return to the mother’s house via her relationship with Naomi signals a process of maturation. Her decision to remain with Naomi, which some might interpret as self-effacing, is, rather, a reconciliatory journey and a coming to terms with the threads that bind us to our origins.

The image of the thread itself binds Ruth and Jeanette. The full significance of the metaphor comes to light for Jeanette as she contemplates her own homecoming. Just prior to her

⁷⁸ In a conversation with Wendy B. Rosen, Carter Heyward suggests it is often the painful divisions from one another that women experience in an androcentric society that leads them to maintain relationships, even difficult ones. On the experience of lesbian daughters with their mothers, she reflects, “It seems to me to that somewhere right in the middle of it all is largely unmet yearning that is bred into all of us in the heterosexist patriarchy for the intimacy and authenticity with women, with our mothers, with our friends, with our lovers, with ourselves” (W. Rosen, 257).

⁷⁹ Bollinger, 374.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁸¹ Reisman, 32.

⁸² Cosslett, 17.

return to see Mother after some length of time apart, someone asks if she ever thinks of going back. The reference bears repeating:

Silly question. *There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back.* Mind turns to the pull, it's hard to pull away. I'm always thinking of going back. When Lot's wife looked over her shoulder, she turned into a pillar of salt. Pillars hold things up, and salt keeps things clean, but it's a poor exchange for losing your self. People do go back, but they don't survive, because two realities are claiming them at the same time. Such things are too much. You can salt your heart, or kill your heart, or you can choose between the two realities.⁸³

The fact that Jeanette *does* return to visit Mother indicates that she is able to find a way to bridge the two realities that claim her – her desire to live with integrity and her connection to home. She is able to extend compassion – *ruth* – despite the fact that Mother has in no way abandoned her fundamentalist beliefs.⁸⁴ As DeLong concludes, there is a significant difference between “going back,” which Jeanette can never do, and going home. “Going back would mean retracing one’s thread or rewriting one’s own chosen path,” she writes, “Going home may be the culmination of the circular journey, as it is for Jeanette.”⁸⁵

In the book of Ruth, the image of the thread is expressed through the idea of *tikvah*. Initially, *tikvah*, which in Hebrew is variously translated as “cord,” “hope” or “future,” appears in Ruth 1:12-13a where Naomi laments, “Even if I thought there was hope for me (*yeš lîy tîqvāh*), even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up?” Naomi’s *tikvah* is linked to her ability to bear male offspring, but the term bears a fuller significance. Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky explain:

Naomi is referring here to the biblical ideal of a fulfilling future: a life with children. Frymer-Kensky points out that the word *tikvah*, normally translated as “hope” is related to a Hebrew word meaning “thread,” as in *tikvat hut hashani*, the cord of scarlet thread that the prostitute Rahab hangs outside her window as a signal to Joshua to spare her family (Josh. 2:18). The imagery in this idiom suggests that our life is spun out like a

⁸³ Winterson (1985), 160. Emphasis added.

⁸⁴ Amy Benson Brown, 246.

⁸⁵ DeLong, 274.

cord, and hope arises from the strength of that cord, representing the prospect of a viable future. Indeed, *tikvah*, used in this sense, appears four times elsewhere in the Bible in parallel with Hebrew *ʾaharit* “future” (Jer. 29:11; 31:17; Prov. 23:18; 24:14). In the two passages cited in Proverbs, the phrases “to have a future” and “not to have your hope/cord cut” (Heb. *karet*) are rhetorically equivalent. So, too, a tree is said to be especially full of *tikvah*, for even if it is cut down, new shoots grow from the stump (Job 14:7). Similarly, God says to Mother Rachel: “There is *tikvah* in your future, for your sons will return to their domain” (Jer. 31:17); and God shows Ezekiel a vision in which the Israelites say, “Our bones are dry, our *tikvah* is lost, we are cut off” (Ezek. 37:11).⁸⁶

What Naomi fails to see is that it is the *tikvah* connecting her to Ruth that will secure a future for them both. Together they will “pick up the [unraveled] threads of . . . life and weave them back into a restored life in community.”⁸⁷ Where Naomi imagines herself as cut off, Ruth embodies the promise of ongoing connection. For Ruth, this cord, this hope, links the future with the past, for *tikvah* simultaneously signifies being “spun out like a cord” and remaining rooted, as with the trunk of a tree. Like Jeanette, Ruth’s present existence is inexorably linked with what came before. Her commitment to remain with Naomi bears out the wisdom of *tikvah* and the hope of an integrated life.

Of Mothers, Demons and Daughterhood

Thus far, we have looked primarily at the portrayal of daughterhood in Ruth in an attempt to expand our understanding of Ruth’s complex identity *vis á vis* the experience of lesbian daughters. In order to deepen our analysis further, we now turn more directly to the significance of the mother. A more textured reading of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship grows out of the evolving feminist discourse on motherhood and its bearing on the symbolic and the social. Once again we turn to the psychoanalytic theory of Kristeva.

⁸⁶ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, 14-15.

⁸⁷ Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 103.

As Adrienne Rich explored in her classic text, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, motherhood has long been depicted as a condition innately desired and practiced by women, a myth propagated by the patriarchal values and economic needs of industrialized societies.⁸⁸ Yet for an institution so widely heralded in modern life, motherhood has commonly been understood in one-dimensional terms, a romanticized haven for the child in a cold world. Within Lacanian theory, the mother reflects the pre-symbolic realm in which every subject originates. Because the pre-symbolic is the site of our desire (“the real”), it is the place to which each of us nostalgically longs to return, a site of warmth and nurture. Maturity, however, demands that one resist this urge for return and depart into the symbolic order. The mother, Lacan believed, threatened to re-engulf the child into the undifferentiated space of the pre-symbolic, thus undermining his or her psychosocial growth.⁸⁹

For Lacan, then, the maternal stage is essentially an unchanging one, significant to one’s origins, but not, ultimately, to one’s development in the symbolic world. While Kristeva builds on Lacan’s theory, she revises it by imbuing the female body with renewed significance, linking it to her pivotal concept of the *abject*. While Kristeva’s use of the maternal has led to charges of essentialism, in fact her use of maternal imagery allows us to rethink the meaning of motherhood. Through the notion of the abject, Kristeva delinks the maternal from mere beginnings, enlarging its significance for the past, present, and future.⁹⁰ Later we will see how Kristeva’s own “return” to the maternal body echoes and parallels Ruth’s journey of return in interesting ways.

⁸⁸ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

⁸⁹ Evans, 120; cf. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre IV*, 195; and Lacan *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII: L’envers de la Psychanalyse, 1969–70*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 118.

⁹⁰ For an excellent response to Kristeva’s critics, see Fanny Söderbäck, “Motherhood According to Kristeva: On Time and Matter in Plato and Kristeva” *philoSOPHIA* 1, no. 1 (2011): 65-87.

For Kristeva, it is within the female body that the pre-symbolic and the symbolic overlap. Following Lacan, she posits a stage associated with the maternal that precedes the mirror stage, a stage referred to as the *semiotic chora*. During the chora, which occurs between zero and eight months of age, we experience “a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings and needs” with no awareness of the boundaries separating ourselves from the mother.⁹¹ Yet sometime between the end of the chora and the beginning of the mirror stages, we begin to develop an awareness of those boundaries, and we are confronted in somewhat traumatic fashion with the presence of an Other. Experienced as a threat, this awareness of the (m)other propels us into abjection where we vacillate between the fear of being forced out, or abjected, and the dread of being swallowed up.⁹² At stake is both the possibility of physical death (Kristeva associates the abject with bodily processes that signify the breakdown of the body, such as bleeding or decomposition),⁹³ as well as a collapse of meaning.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, abjection is necessary if the subject is to develop a healthy narcissism, or self-love.⁹⁵ As horrifying as abjection may be, through it we experience the sublime pleasure of *jouissance* discussed in Chapter One, where we momentarily transgress the boundary between the symbolic and the elusive realm of desire. With this *jouissance*, we are purified as new existential meanings are realized.⁹⁶ Art and literature serves as means by which

⁹¹ Dino Felluga, "Modules on Kristeva: On Psychosexual Development," *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, last modified January 31, 2011. Purdue University.

<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>.

⁹² Keryn Carter, "The Consuming Fruit: Oranges, Demons, and Daughters," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 40, no. 1 (1998): 16-17; cf. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2-4.

⁹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2-4; cf. Carter, 18.

⁹⁴ Dino Felluga, "Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject," *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, last modified January 31, 2011. Purdue University. September 14, 2014.

<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>; cf. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

⁹⁵ Felluga, cf. Kristeva *Powers of Horror*, 13.

⁹⁶ Felluga, cf. Kristeva, *Power of Horror*, 9-10.

we return to the sources of our abjection and better understand their significance to our present lives.⁹⁷

To understand the abject in more concrete terms we can turn finally now to the central motif in *Oranges*. In literary critic Keryn Carter's Kristevan reading of Winterson's novel, she notes the significance of the orange as a "dynamic" and "shifting" symbol.⁹⁸ Like the Kristevan mother, Winterson's orange possesses "the potential to consume that which threatens to consume it."⁹⁹ Winterson anthropomorphizes the orange into a demon figure whom Jeanette encounters while locked in Mother's parlor during the attempted exorcism. Prior to this event, the orange functions as a metaphor for life bandied about between Jeanette and Mother. Where Mother claims it is "the only fruit," Jeanette recognizes there is "Fruit salad, fruit pie, fruit for fools, fruited punch. Demon fruit, passion fruit, rotten fruit, fruit on Sunday."¹⁰⁰ When Mother leaves Jeanette in the hospital for an operation with only oranges to comfort her, Jeanette constructs play scenes with the orange peels and discovers (in the words of Elsie Norris) "What looks like one thing . . . may well be another."¹⁰¹ The orange demon, subsequently, functions as a cipher for Mother on the one hand, and a trope for Jeanette's transformation on the other. Carter writes, "The orange demon is linked to Jeanette's distinctive creativity, her humor, her lesbianism, to all those qualities that the people around her would have her hold in check."¹⁰²

Remarkably, Kristeva envisions the abject in terms very similar to Winterson's figure of the orange demon. The abject for Kristeva is the "demoniacal potential of the feminine."¹⁰³ "The 'orange demon' of daughterhood," Carter argues, is the capacity to confront the monstrous

⁹⁷ Felluga, cf. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

⁹⁸ Carter, 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Winterson (1985), 29.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰² Carter, 16.

¹⁰³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 65, cited in Carter 16.

power of the mother through this experience of the abject.¹⁰⁴ In every child's development, the child must individuate from the mother. Yet for Kristeva, the differentiation from the mother is not merely a process of simple detachment. Rather, as Carter explains:

As the boundaries between the child's body and the mother's gradually become more and more distinct, the child suffers an enormous sense of loss for the wholeness he or she had once experienced with the mother. Throughout this "whole," or pre-Oedipal stage, the child had not perceived itself as separate from the mother; the sense of loss that accompanies the child's realization of its separateness is, for Kristeva, complicated by fear – even horror. To develop a self the infant must retain its sense of *difference from* the mother; thus, the mother comes to represent the border between the self and the unknown. That border must be maintained at a distance because it retains the capacity to destroy – even devour – the child's emerging self. Paradoxically, the border is necessary to the child's development: It defines the child's sense of self by its very difference, its separateness.

There is the source of the process that Kristeva calls "abjection": the process that expels the boundaries that threaten the self even as they define it; the expulsion of the abject, of "the place where meaning collapses." Such a process, Kristeva argues, is essential for the individual's successful access to the social world; throughout our adult lives we work to maintain those boundaries at a safe distance. Many aspects of human existence can be read as representing abjection, but the body of the mother remains the primary object of abjection: the original not-self in every individual's history.¹⁰⁵

Jeanette "strives to define and enact her *difference from* her mother and her mother's desires."¹⁰⁶

Though offered as maternal nurturance, oranges signify differentiation. Carter continues: "Warm in color and distinctly breast-like, the orange also has the capacity to feed and nurture the growing Jeanette in ways that Mother clearly cannot."¹⁰⁷ By way of her orange creations, Jeanette ironically declares that oranges are indeed not the only fruit.

However, abjection reaches its full measure only when Jeanette is threatened with expulsion from Mother's world. When finally she is excommunicated from the church for purportedly defying the scripture's teachings on women in leadership, she experiences a profound loss of meaning. Despite their difficulties, Mother has been a role model in this regard.

¹⁰⁴ Carter, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Carter, 16-17. Emphasis in original. Carter is citing Kristeva, *Powers*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Carter, 16. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

Jeanette's authority in the church had also given her faith in the power of her own femaleness, and the support of other women had been a means of keeping the precarious boundary between Mother and herself in check. Rejected now by a community of mothers, she loses her place in the symbolic order. This is, according to Kristeva, the exact moment where the experience of the abject is most acutely felt. The community's attempt to silence her poses with it the threat of invisibility and reabsorption into Mother's engulfing authority.¹⁰⁸

Paradoxically, however, this moment of utter loss and potential engulfment is, in Kristeva's schema, the very moment in which meaning is *generated*.¹⁰⁹ This is the message conveyed by the orange demon. The encounter is worth citing in full here:

My mother nodded, nodded, nodded and locked me in. She did give me a blanket, but she took away the light bulb. Over the thirty-six hours that followed, I thought about the demon and some other things besides.

I knew that demons entered wherever there was a weak point. If I had a demon my weak point was Melanie, but she was beautiful and good and had loved me.

Can love really belong to the demon?

What sort of demon? The brown demon that rattles the ear? The red demon that dances the hornpipe? The watery demon that causes sickness? The orange demon that beguiles? Everyone has a demon like cats have fleas.

'They're looking in the wrong place,' I thought. 'If they want to get at my demon they'll have to get at me.'

I thought about William Blake.

'If I let them take away my demons, I'll have to give up what I've found.'

'You can't do that,' said a voice at my elbow.

Leaning on the coffee table was the orange demon.

'I've gone mad,' I thought.

'That may well be so,' agreed the demon evenly. 'So make the most of it.'

I flopped heavily against the settee. 'What do you want?'

'I want to help you decide what you want.' And the creature hopped up on to the mantelpiece and sat on Pastor Spratt's brass crocodile.

'Everyone has a demon as you so rightly observed,' the thing began, 'but not everyone knows this, and not everyone knows how to make use of it.'

'Demons are evil, aren't they?' I asked, worried.

'Not quite, they're just different, and difficult. You know what auras are?'

I nodded.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 20.

'Well, the demon you get depends on the colour of your aura, yours is orange which is why you've got me. Your mother's is brown, which is why she's so odd, and Mrs White's is hardly a demon at all. We're here to keep you in one piece, if you ignore us, you're quite likely to end up in two pieces, or lots of pieces, it's all part of the paradox.'

'But in the Bible you keep getting driven out.'

'Don't believe all you read.'

I started to feel ill again, so I took off my socks and pushed my toes into my mouth for comfort. They tasted of digestive biscuits. After that I went to the window and burst a few of the geranium buds to hear the pop. When I sat down the demon was glowing very bright and polishing the crocodile with its handkerchief.

'What sex are you?'

'Doesn't matter does it? After all that's your problem.'

'If I keep you, what will happen?'

'You'll have a difficult, different time.'

'Is it worth it?'

'That's up to you.'

'Will I keep Melanie?'

But the demon had vanished.¹¹⁰

This scene occurs prior to her excommunication, while the community still offers her the choice of repentance. As Kristeva observes, as a precondition of narcissism, the abject propels the individual "toward the place where meaning collapses."¹¹¹ Though Jeanette is not yet at that place, she begins to recognize the paradoxes of her journey toward wholeness. She will have "a different, difficult time," and she will likely lose the ones she loves most. By the time she is forced out, she embraces this lesson and the goodness of her sexuality. Leaving for the city, she transcends what is lost and enters a new stage of life.

Kristeva and Winterson, therefore, move us away from a definition of motherhood focused solely on nurturance and protection. In the case of *Oranges* it is not simply that Mother is a "monstrous" figure, rather, the relationship between Jeanette and Mother *dramatizes* the creative and destructive revolutions that characterize the mother-daughter relationship in the process of abjection, a process that prefigures our engagement with the world at large.¹¹² Since

¹¹⁰ Winterson (1985), 108-109.

¹¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

¹¹² Carter, 17.

the chora is not a static space, but rather one that is alive, animated and subject to change, it is the place where difference commences and identity finds its origins.¹¹³ As Francis Landy explains, “The abject is the ‘object’ of primary repression, which Kristeva calls the human capacity to ‘divide, reject, repeat’. It is upheld by taboos, but it is related also to fascination and ecstasy.”¹¹⁴ The negotiation of boundaries with the mother is a life-giving process; for Jeanette, the orange/demon/mother embodies “the border between the self and the unknown,” who paradoxically “defines the child’s sense of self by [her] very difference, [her] separateness.”¹¹⁵

Turning back to the book of Ruth we find that Ruth and Naomi are likewise figures of the abject. As observed, Ruth’s “departure” from the “mother’s house” is only partial. While she may leave the homeland of her biological mother, she remains firmly rooted in the maternal realm through her relationship with Naomi. Like Mother, Naomi comes to stand for the maternal body in relation to Ruth’s development.

As Kristeva argues, every subject vacillates between the chora and the mirror stage of development. In fact, it seems for Kristeva that the intermediary space/time of the abject is a critical “moment” in one’s development to which one returns again and again regardless of age. In a certain sense, this intermediary stage encapsulates the period from Ruth’s journey from Moab to her establishment in Bethlehem. Ruth’s initial relationship with Naomi can be characterized as choric. She binds her very existence to Naomi’s return journey, seemingly

¹¹³ Söderbäck (69-70) explains that in the original Platonic concept of chora, time and space coexist; therefore, chora is no mere receptacle, but rather a site where change is inherent. She writes, “The origin is abundance with regard to itself – it is that which cannot contain itself. Because the very possibility of fecundity relies on the availability of an opening, a self-contained entity cannot, by definition, be an origin.” Therefore, there are no “self-contained” or pure origins, only acts of generation defined by connection and separation. Identity finds its origins in this “morphous and morphizing Space.”

¹¹⁴ Francis Landy, “Ruth and the Romance of Realism,” in *Beauty and the Enigma and Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 229. Landy is citing Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12. In addition to Landy’s discussion of Kristeva, for other interpretations of Ruth using Kristevan theory, see Hugh S. Pypers, “Other Mothers: Maternity and Masculinity in the Book of Ruth,” in *A Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum*, eds. David J. A. Clines and Ellen Van Wolde (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 309-332; and Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, 362-366.

¹¹⁵ Carter, 16-17.

failing to distinguish her own needs from that of her mother-in-law. On the other hand (recalling that the chora is never a static state), there are glimpses even on the road to Bethlehem that Ruth recognizes a certain separation between Naomi and herself. She defies Naomi's insistence that she detach herself, and this defiance is paradoxically the first assertion of her will.

Ruth's journey henceforth becomes one of negotiating boundaries, first between herself and Naomi, and later between herself and the larger social environment of Bethlehem. Almost immediately, Ruth is confronted by the threat of absorption when Naomi fails to acknowledge her presence upon their arrival. Naomi's claim that she has returned to Bethlehem empty renders Ruth a non-entity, a status Ruth must actively resist if she is to survive. Kristeva writes, "The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting [sic] outside of her It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling."¹¹⁶ In alluding to violence, Kristeva underscores the considerable risks that accompany attempts to individuate. With no visible support from Naomi, Ruth is immediately confronted with the complexities of social, economic, ethnic and sexual boundaries, and she must confront them all simultaneously as a matter of survival. In contrast to Naomi's passivity, she resists the pull back into undifferentiated space and sets out to glean. Even then, she could glean inconspicuously, but instead she gains an audience with Boaz and finds herself at his table.¹¹⁷ She calls attention to her poverty, her foreignness (2:10) and her inferior social status (2:13), but in doing so, she gains

¹¹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁷ Possibly there existed two levels of gleaners, those who gathered the sheaves behind the reapers, as Ruth requests permission to do, and those who secondarily glean behind them. Sasson argues that Ruth makes this request of the overseer precisely because it is a request which he does not have the authority to grant. Ruth is, therefore, "on her feet all day," not because she has been gleaning, but rather because she has been waiting for the landowner to come to take note of her and grant the request. See Sasson, 47-48. Fewell suggests that Ruth requests to glean directly behind the reapers but adds, "Another consideration: no other gleaners are actually mentioned. The pressures of harvest season would in actuality provide paid work for any able-bodied gleaner. Clearly Boaz has other young women in his employ, so why does Ruth not simply ask for a job? She seems to be asking for something more lucrative." See Fewell, "Space for Moral Agency."

public recognition. Though her boldness ostensibly earns her a place among his male reapers (or at least protection from their harassments), Naomi urges her to stay among the womenfolk, again drawing her back into undifferentiated maternal space. As Kristeva articulates, within the abject there is a delicate line between that which is “securing” and “stifling,” which Ruth must negotiate.

This is not to simply say that Ruth must enter the equivalent paternal space of the house of Boaz in order to mature.¹¹⁸ This would be a misreading of Kristeva’s understanding of the function and significance of the maternal realm. If the space of abjection is where meaning is both lost *and* found, then Ruth, like Jeanette, must claim an identity for herself *in the context of* her relationship to Naomi. This provides us with some additional insight into the threshing floor scene and Naomi’s virtual appearance there.¹¹⁹

Like the orange demon, Naomi functions as a kind of spectral presence on the threshing floor. (In Jewish tradition, in fact, Boaz is thought to have believed himself beset by a female demon).¹²⁰ Ruth’s struggle to individuate from Naomi is played out once again, even as Naomi literally inserts herself into the acts of seduction. Transgressing Naomi’s instruction and taking the initiative with Boaz, Ruth at last experiences a moment of *jouissance*. Stephanie Day Powell, Amy Beth Jones and Dong Sung Kim write:

¹¹⁸ In a different psychoanalytic reading, Susan Reimer Torn (“Revisiting Ruth,” in Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 336-346) argues that biblical women who are contributors to the messianic line (Lot’s daughters, Tamar and Ruth) all have in common “the willful return to the father” (339). While Ruth’s strategies for seducing Boaz are relatively more subdued than those of her forebears, all of these women “broke taboos without hesitation, acting as if in response to some inner voice guided by an unnamed source” (341-342). From a Jungian perspective, a girl’s desire for the father is “an attempt to grow toward psychic wholeness by contacting the positive aspects of her own animus, or the masculine side of herself” (344). While I might critique her privileging of the return to the father and the implicit association between masculinity and psychic growth, there may be potential (though beyond the scope here) for integrating my own reading with that of Torn. I find especially provocative her suggestion of an “atavistic, matriarchal tradition” (341), which may inform Ruth’s actions and her desire for self-determination.

¹¹⁹ I am indebted to Amy Beth Jones and Dong Sung Kim for this reading of the threshing floor scene, which we develop in our article.

¹²⁰ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky, 57-58.

In her only words of dialogue on the threshing floor, Ruth asserts, “I am your handmaid (*’āmātekā*) Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid for you are a redeeming kinsman” (3:9b). On the surface, Ruth seems to be complying with the Naomi’s desires by offering herself as a wife to Boaz (cf. Ezek. 16:8). However, if we read her words plainly, we find that Ruth speaks only to the present moment – “I [*am*] your handmaid” and “you [*are*] a redeemer.” (The omission of the verb “to be” in the Hebrew here accentuates the immediacy of her assertions). There are no references to past losses or future gains. In naming herself *’āmāh* Ruth declares herself on a par with Boaz, an authority she subsequently demonstrates in assuming the power to name him a *gō’ēl*.¹²¹

Boaz acknowledges this transformation. Whereas she was once identified to him by her ethnic status and as one who belonged to another (2:5-6), he now recognizes her as an a “woman of worth” (Heb. *’ešet hayil*) (3:11), a designation, L. Juliana M. Claasens reminds us, “reserved for the Israelite model of personified Wisdom in Proverbs 31.” Claasens avers that it through this face-to-face encounter with Ruth in her vulnerability, dignity, and I would add, her authenticity, that Boaz is moved to act for the good of the Other.¹²²

The daughter who once clung to her mother-in-law becomes a woman who acts in her own right. The liminal time and space of harvesting heightens the reader’s awareness that transformation – and transgression – has occurred.¹²³ “Who are you, daughter?” (3:16),¹²⁴ Naomi asks her when she comes home, indicating that Ruth has returned in some way changed, perhaps even unrecognizable. Just as Mother finally concedes to Jeanette that “oranges are not the only

¹²¹ Powell, Jones and Kim. As Sasson notes, the use of the term *’āmāh* stands in contrast to Ruth earlier self-designation as *šiphāh* (2:13), “a female belonging to the lowest rung of the *mišpaḥāh*’s social ladder” (80).

⁶ L. Juliana M. Claasens, “Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (Oct 2012): 669, 671. See also Chapter Five, note 157.

¹²³ Eskenezi and Frymer-Kensky explain that as a site of celebratory and ritual gatherings, the threshing floor was a transitional space away from the ordinary events of daily life and perhaps even quasi-holy space (the original site of the Jerusalem Temple was a threshing floor). Yet it could also be associated with transgression (see Hos 9:1) as Boaz intimates in 3:14 (50-52). The temporal setting of threshing floor encounter also suggests a peculiar liminality. Powell, Jones and Kim write, “Naomi tells Ruth to go down to the threshing floor where Boaz will be winnowing barley (3:2-3). However, this setting in time is illogical since we are told in the previous chapter that Ruth gleaned in Boaz’s field until the conclusion of the barley and wheat harvest (2:23). Why would Boaz be winnowing barley at the end of the wheat harvest? While scholars have attempted to offer agricultural or linguistic explanations for this textual oddity [see, e.g. Campbell, 117-119; Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 52], arguably the anomaly signals to the reader time’s arrest.”

¹²⁴ Here I depart from the JPS’s translation in which Naomi states, “How is it with you daughter?” The repetition of *mî-’at* is another instance of doubling and clearly links Naomi’s startled response to Ruth with that of Boaz.

fruit,” Naomi at last seems acknowledges, if with surprise, Ruth’s separateness and individuality.¹²⁵

Historical Gleanings: Finding Our Autonomy

In Chapter Two, we explored the ways in which the author(s) of Ruth utilized strategic ambiguity with regard to Ruth and Naomi’s erotic relationship in order to normalize atypical families while at the same time buttressing traditional communal values and structures. Historically, this suggests that the boundaries of the Yehudite community were in such flux that there was not only a need to appeal to a diverse audience, but also to suppress any lasting acknowledgment of differences. But “history is a cat’s cradle,” and the “only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots.” In this chapter, we “knot it up a bit more,” by considering yet another way that Ruth’s woman-identified identity bears significance for the community of Yehud.

In the shadow of exile, returnees to Jerusalem had to negotiate the balance between autonomy and dependence in relationship to the peoples and institutions of a new society. As Berquist argues, the yearning for the reestablishment of Zion was tempered by a fear of the political and military independence that had formerly led to their expulsion from the motherland. Returnees took to heart the admonishments of the eighth-century prophets, who chastised the leaders of Israel and Judah for colluding with human leaders rather than relying on YHWH. The resettlement policies and the concomitant benevolent authoritarianism of the Persian Empire was

¹²⁵ Winterson (1985), 172. Mother says this, not in relation to Jeanette, but regarding a missionary shipment of food. But the comment occurs on the occasion of Jeanette’s return and may intimate, Carter suggests, her mother’s recognition of their separateness. See Carter, 17.

inviting to the extent that returnees could experience a measure of self-governance without engaging in open conflict.¹²⁶

Peter H.W. Lau elucidates how members of the *Golah* found themselves “in a liminal state, a state of transition and adjustment,” in virtually all aspects of their existence.¹²⁷ Returnees who may have hoped for better conditions than those in the uncertain economy of Babylon were faced with new challenges.¹²⁸ Encountering famine and a relentless taxation system linking religious and political establishments, the newly forged community quickly became mired in an economic system of land taxes, exorbitant interest and debt-slavery (Neh 5:1-19).¹²⁹ Economic and political pressures fueled the debate over who constituted the people of Israel, no doubt intensifying the sense of liminality. Several groups claimed legitimacy as the people of God, including the returned exiles, the so-called “people of the land” who remained in Judah after the Babylonian deportations, people of northern Israel who settled in Judah after the Assyrian invasion, and foreigners relocated by the Assyrians.¹³⁰ Drawing on the work of Morton Smith, Willa M. Johnson argues that the divisions between the *Golah* and “the people of the land” could in part be traced back to the split between YHWH-alone and syncretistic groups in the pre-exilic era. Purportedly the two groups co-existed without strife prior to the exile,¹³¹ however enmities grew as deportees interpreted the exile as God’s punishment for idolatry. If in fact “exilic conditions accentuated the divergent interests of the two rival groups, such that they became

¹²⁶ Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 4.

¹²⁷ Lau, 161.

¹²⁸ Willa M. Johnson, *The Holy Seed Has Been Defiled: The Interethnic Marriage Dilemma in Ezra 9-10* (Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 31.

¹²⁹ Lau, 171-173.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

¹³¹ W.M. Johnson, 35-37; cf. Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1987), 81. This point is debatable and in part depends on whether one reads the controversy between Rehoboam and Jeroboam (I Kgs 12) as historically accurate or a retrojection of post-exilic divisions back into Israel’s founding narratives.

more polarized,¹³² then the tensions between returnees and the more pluralistic people of the land would have been all the more palpable. As a consequence, religious life itself was in a state of liminality, spurring debates over whether foreigners like Ruth could legitimately profess a commitment to YHWH.

The *bêt āb* (“father’s house”) constituted another site of liminality. As noted in Chapter Three, the family re-emerged as an important institution in the post-exilic period. However, as Lau observes, the family unit of Yehud differed considerably from the *bêt ābôt* of the pre-exilic era. Larger in number (akin to the clan or *mishpāhāh* of pre-exilic days), the multi-generational *bêt āb* consisted of biological kin as well as those who could trace their lineage back to monarchic Israel. As such, Lau argues, it contained “fictional elements.” The fluidity of the family structure suggested a measure of permeability, a reality that the writer(s) of Ruth surely exploit.¹³³ On the other hand, Ezra’s attempt to define kinship structure on genealogical grounds constituted an effort to enforce more stringent boundaries.¹³⁴

Nonetheless, the debate over mixed marriages in Ezra-Nehemiah suggests more evidence of the liminal state of Israelite identity. As Lau illuminates, opposition to such unions was based upon both genealogical and religious grounds. In Ezra-Nehemiah the problem with foreign women appears to be their purported propensity to lead Israelite men to worship other gods.¹³⁵ However, the prospect of an exogamous marriage seems to have been an economically advantageous option.¹³⁶ In this way, religious commitments may have stood at odds with opportunities for greater financial security and social mobility.

¹³² W.M. Johnson, 35.

¹³³ Lau, 167-170, cf. Carol Meyers, “Returning Home: Ruth 1:8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth,” in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Ruth*, 94-99.

¹³⁴ Lau, 183.

¹³⁵ Lau, 181-3. Lau notes the intertextual allusion in Ez 9:1 to Deut 7:1-4 which prohibits intermarriage on the grounds that it will lead to religious apostasy (181).

¹³⁶ W.M. Johnson, 24-26.

Another site of liminality Lau does not explore is the “mother’s house.” In her survey of the concept of the *bêt ‘ēm* in the Hebrew Bible, Meyers highlights its function as both a spatial and social construct. While the mother’s house refers to the domestic setting, it also refers to a social institution that seems to have had social equivalence to the *bêt āb*. Meyers’s study reveals that women in the ancient world would likely have had an active economic role that transcended the private and public realms. As such, a mother’s sphere of influence seemed to extend to matters of marriage.¹³⁷ It is probable, she contends, that women “had a role equal to if not greater than their husbands in arranging the marriages of their children.”¹³⁸ Given the political dimensions of marriage in Yehud, an Israelite mother, therefore, could wield significant power.¹³⁹

It is not hard to imagine how the mother’s house could have been experienced as a liminal – indeed choratic – space for Israelite children, particularly daughters. If one purpose of the *bêt ‘ēm* was to prepare young women for marriage, it formed the context for their socialization as women. While the Song of Songs idealizes the “mother’s house” as a place of safety (3:4) and maternal instruction (8:2), no doubt it was also a space of acquiescence and resistance to maternal authority as shaped by the broader patriarchal values of the community.

Lau goes on to name additional forms of liminality in Yehud, such as the changing roles of religious leader (e.g. Ezra is both priest and scribe)¹⁴⁰ and the shifting consciousness regarding the Davidic hope.¹⁴¹ He also highlights the ways in which the Ruth narrative attempts to equip everyday people to respond to their liminal condition by encouraging them to take

¹³⁷ Meyers, 110-112.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Lau, 163-165.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 185-188.

initiative, act beyond conventional roles and treat one another as legitimate kin.¹⁴² “In social identity terms,” he contends, “[Ruth’s *hesed*] corresponds to the individual cultural orientation of allocentrism. When faced with making a decision between personal and collective goals, Ruth subordinates the former to the latter.”¹⁴³

To counterbalance Lau’s emphasis on Ruth’s altruism, I would add that her struggle to individuate from Naomi metaphorically reflects the ongoing efforts of individual peoples to establish a certain measure of *autonomy* in the midst of a liminal existence. Her woman-identified relationship with Naomi has tremendous resonance in this regard. Broadly speaking, what ancient audiences of Ruth and contemporary lesbian daughters share, as we have seen, is a longing for independence, but also integration; the balanced realization of one’s own desires with a need for security and inclusion. In Yehud, such desires would have manifest themselves on a variety of levels and in a number of contexts – individual family relationships, interactions with foreigners, relationships between the remnant community and returnees, negotiations between religious leadership and Persian officials, and so on.

Ruth the Moabite may have paradoxically functioned as a cipher for the ambivalent Yehudite struggling to understand her place in an increasingly pluralistic world, where home may have seemed home in name only. If, once again returning to Clines, the text functions as a dream, then Ruth’s return to the “mother’s house” offers us significant insight into returnees’ complex attitudes toward the motherland of Zion. There is in fact a strong sense of the Kristevan in the way in which Zion is depicted in the book of Isaiah. While Zion is always understood as female, it is difficult to distinguish whether she is being cast as a mother or a daughter. In Isaiah’s final vision of restoration (66:7-12), she is clearly and powerfully depicted as a mother

¹⁴² Ibid., 165-167, 171.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 110.

who gives birth to the people and suckles her young. In 66:13, Trito-Isaiah writes, “You shall find comfort in Jerusalem (*bîrûšālam*).” Commenting on the double meaning of the *bet* preposition, Christl M. Maier writes:

While most translations assume localization – “you will be comforted *in* Jerusalem” – the preposition can also be interpreted as instrumental – the comfort will be mediated *by* or *through* the personified Mother Zion. Thus, Jerusalem becomes the mediator of divine blessing and salvation. The personified city not only provides a space for communication with God by hosting the temple, but also provides a sentiment and atmosphere for her female gender and motherly role.”¹⁴⁴

In many instances Zion is referred as *bat-šîyôn*, which may be translated as “daughter Zion” or “daughter-of-Zion.”¹⁴⁵ While, the JPS avoids the question by eliding the two possibilities and rendering her “Fair Zion,” in fact both translations are simultaneously possible. This suggests that Zion is *always already the mother* even when she is imaged as daughter. The returnees’ relationship to Zion then can be understood as symbolic of the choratic union of daughter and mother. In the very expression of *bat-šîyôn*, the people of daughter Zion are indelibly linked to Zion the mother, yet also separate.¹⁴⁶ In the depiction of Zion as both daughter and mother, the prophets evoked the language of maternal relations and the possibilities of abjection.

While the book of Ruth makes no explicit mention of Zion, the resonating call of “return” that characterizes Ruth’s journey suggests a great deal about the narrative’s psychological function for the post-exilic community. Kristeva likens literature to a kind of playground in which subjects could safely explore the experience of abjection. “On close inspection,” she writes:

all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases)

¹⁴⁴ Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 203-204. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁵ See for example Isa 1:8, 16:1, 37:22, 52:2, 62:11; Jer 4:31, 6:2, 6:23, Mic 1:13, 4:8, 4:10, 4:13; Zeph 3:14; Zech 2:14, 9:9; cf. 2 Kgs 19:21; Ps 9:14; Song 3:11; Is 3:16-17, 4:4; Lam 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 13, 18, 4:22.

¹⁴⁶ I am grateful to my Drew colleague Paige Rawson for illuminating this point.

where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.¹⁴⁷

The book of Ruth might be thought to function as a choratic space in which post-exilic audiences might explore their conflicting emotions with regard to their return to Mother Zion.¹⁴⁸ Just as Ruth must confront the realities of invisibility and alienation in the “mother’s house,” the threats of absorption and expulsion were daily realities for returnees.

The second generation Babylonian exiles’ “return” to Zion reflects the paradoxes of Ruth’s journey homeward as they, much like Ruth, found themselves “returning” to a place they had never been. Rather than reconstituting individual and communal identities of the past, new identities – “double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” – had to be forged. This perhaps best explains why Ruth, a foreigner, might have served as a paradigmatic Israelite returnee. As one who merits inclusion despite her social and cultural displacement, Ruth stands on the “fragile border” of post-exilic identity. In telling the story of her heroic “return” in the face of marginalization, returnees could safely work through the repressed elements of their own alienation as they made the paradoxical journey homeward. As literary theorist Catherine Belsey writes, “Desire is the effect of the lost needs: loss returns and presents itself as desire.”¹⁴⁹ No doubt Ruth’s experiences of loss resonated strongly with those returning exiles who had lost relatives or been separated from family members remaining in Babylon. If Ruth is a cipher for the returning exile, then her experiences may reflect the sense that mourning was impermissible. As Bonnie Honig observes us, “Ruth is not given cultural, juridical or psychological permission

¹⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 207.

¹⁴⁸ Nehemiah 11:1-2 attests to the ambivalence toward Jerusalem. Self-sacrifice is implied: “The people gave their blessing to all the men who willingly settled in Jerusalem” (v. 2), though, ironically, the decision is made through the casting of lots.

¹⁴⁹ Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories*, 57. See Chapter One, note 119 on Lacan and the relationship between desire and need.

to mourn Orpah-Moab;”¹⁵⁰ neither is she invited to integrate her own cultural traditions into her new life in Bethlehem.

In the next chapter, we will look once again at Ruth’s complex relationship to Naomi and its significance to the mourning process. Ruth’s losses would not have been the only facet of her story to speak to returnees, however. Philosopher Fanny Söderbäck reminds us that Kristeva understood return as cyclical, a simultaneously looking backward and forward. The return to the mother(land) is never unidirectional, as Ruth’s cyclical journey to and from the “mother’s house” makes clear. The expression of abjection through literature is a transformative (*r*)evolution where new meanings are generated. Kristeva, she writes:

seeks out and underlines early (preverbal) traces as they emerge in avant-garde modern literature – the ways in which poetic language allows us to return to a presymbolic space-time, one that transcends and threatens language and yet is internal to and necessary for it to emerge and transform.¹⁵¹

Here we recall within Ruth those “queer traces” discussed in chapter one, which indeed transcend conventional meanings and threaten the stability of language. Kristeva intriguingly uses the language of “doubling” that is so key to Ruth’s undecidability and subversiveness: “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.”¹⁵² As a space of return, Ruth paradoxically suggests new beginnings and new possibilities. Through its transgressive language and its perpetual potential for deconstruction and reinterpretation, the narrative expresses desires for forbidden love and for belonging, for the ability to exist, almost literally, in the spaces in between.

¹⁵⁰ Bonnie Honig, “Ruth the Model Emigrée: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration,” in *Ruth and Esther: Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 71.

¹⁵¹ Söderbäck, 68.

¹⁵² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

Ruth's transformation on the threshing floor constitutes the pivotal moment of revelation in the narrative. What, one might ask, is the historical significance of such a singular moment? Again, the answer lies in the meaning of Ruth's return. It is not, in the final analysis, a return to origins in any nostalgic sense. Within the Kristevan space of the maternal, identity finds its origins *in the spaces of difference and differentiation*. On the threshing floor, Ruth experiences herself changed. "The moment a woman takes action to shape her world for her own sake she comes to the point where she knows herself to be a creative force in it," writes Joan D. Chittester.¹⁵³ Kristeva imagines such a revelatory moment as a "flash," an "instant of time or of dream without time."¹⁵⁴ In this moment or "flash," differences are not suppressed, but rather revealed.¹⁵⁵ Kristeva's "flash" bears remarkable resemblance to the narrator's revelatory pronouncement, "*Hinneh!*" As Adele Berlin explains, the use of *hinneh* in the Hebrew Bible typically indicates a sudden shift in narrative perspective.¹⁵⁶ It is not just that Boaz finds that there is a woman at his feet; he recognizes Ruth her in otherness, that is, in her individuality and agency.¹⁵⁷ With "*Hinneh!*" the narrator also draws our attention to Ruth's singularity as she literally and figuratively emerges from the shadows to take hold of her future.

¹⁵³ Joan Chittister, *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 75.

¹⁵⁴ Kristeva, "Stabat Mater." In Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*, 162. Essay original published as *Hérétique de l'amour*, "Tel quel" 74 (Winter 1977): 30-49; Cf. Kristeva, *Powers*, 8-9.

¹⁵⁵ As Söderbäck explains, within Kristeva's conceptualization of maternal time, she avoids Hegel's teleological synthesis of two opposite terms, and rather embraces a "double time" in which heterogeneity is sustained (76). Cf. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8-9 and Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*, 187-213. Originally published as "Le Temps des Femmes" in *34/44: Cahiers de Recherche de Sciences des Textes et Documents*, 5 (Winter 1979): 5-19.

¹⁵⁶ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 62.

¹⁵⁷ The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas understands the related Hebrew term, *hineni*, "here I am," as an expression of human ethics and our responsibility to one another. In stating "here I am," one makes oneself vulnerable and responsible to the Other in her alterity. For an overview of Lévinas's understanding of the relationship between the self and the Other, see Emmanuel Lévinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 83-110. My thanks for Danna Nolan Fewell for this reference.

Situated on the threshing floor between the figures of her past and her future, Ruth expresses the post-exilic desire for self-determination. And yet it is also the case that Ruth experiences this revelatory moment in Naomi's "presence" and that after her encounter with Boaz she once again returns to Naomi. Ruth demonstrates that the mother's house is integral to the sustenance of one's identity even if that identity is ever evolving. Söderbäck explains:

The [Kristevan] maternal is no brute matter waiting to be penetrated and impregnated. She is the space from which time unfolds, the locus of birth and new beginnings. Marked by motility, ever-changing in nature, she is time and generates temporal beings – a living rhythm to which we must return if we want to nourish a culture of life and change rather than one always already marked by repetition and death.¹⁵⁸

The mother, for Kristeva, is the bearer of our histories. She is the home to which we are called to return again and again in the course of life, not in order to revive the past but to help us make meaning in the present. Ruth's return offers a message of hope to the exilic returnees: *Zion – bat-š'iyôn* – is not only the place we are formed, but also where we are *transformed*. Return is a way of life, and home is what one creates in the present.

Yet questions of home and return remain complex. While our reinterpretation in this chapter has furthered our understanding of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, there is still yet still more to glean from their story. In our final intertextual analysis we read Ruth alongside the film *Golem, The Spirit of Exile*. Considering once again how and why the text obfuscates the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, we uncover a hidden history of loss that connects the past to the present.

¹⁵⁸ Söderbäck, 74.

Chapter Five
Re-engagement: Ruth and *Golem, The Spirit of Exile*

*And she will always carry on
Something is lost
But something is found
They will keep on speaking her name
Some things change
Some stay the same*

- Meg Keene

Desire is what is not said, what cannot be said.

- Catherine Belsey¹

But some of these lost figures do not want to be found. What then?

- Heather Love²

The reader-oriented approach we have pursued thus far suggests new possibilities for Ruth as a historical witness. In the previous chapters, we investigated the indeterminate and psychodynamic elements of the text with the help of intertextual analysis and arrived at a more nuanced understanding of Ruth and Naomi's complex relationship. Out of these explorations arose what we have termed "historical gleanings" from which we have attempted to reconstruct some of the social and psychological concerns shaping the community of Yehud.

In this chapter, we turn to an intertext that is most like Ruth in its subject matter. Amos Gitai's 1991 film *Golem, The Spirit of Exile* (hereafter *Golem*) relates the plight of two contemporary women refugees traveling from France back to Israel. While the film conveys a

¹ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories*, 76.

² Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37.

great deal about the experience of exile, it also points to the traumatic underpinnings of history, and thus history's relative *unknowability*. In particular, *Golem* illuminates the melancholic nature of the grief that accompanies the exilic experience. Uncovering this world of loss, *Golem* sheds yet further light on the ambiguous relationship between Ruth and Naomi and ultimately on the biblical narrative's inability to bear out their love for one another.

In this chapter, our "historical gleanings" take on a different valence as we confront how we ourselves are implicated in Ruth's history of invisibility. Here we take up the task of re-engagement, which Guest defines as the "commitment to making a difference." Re-engagement is notably separate from the task of reclamation. While I have highlighted one means by which lesbian-identified readers may re-appropriate the book of Ruth (as a lesbian daughter's story), this only partially redresses Ruth's history of invisibility as a woman-identified figure. In order to make a difference, we must bring to light Ruth's hidden history of trauma. If Ruth is "our Queer ancestress," then her hidden past is a part of our "family history" that continues to shape us in the present.

Golem, The Spirit of Exile

Golem offers a modern day retelling of the Ruth narrative set in contemporary Paris. While the major characters and general storyline conform to the biblical story, *Gitaï* does not present the narrative in a conventional mode. Rather, the characters "tell" the story by way of reciting and playing upon diverse biblical passages.³ The myriad texts employed mirror the diversity of the film's actors (e.g., Israeli, British, French, Italian, Malian-Burkinabé) and the languages spoken (e.g., Hebrew, French, English, German, Arabic). The Ruth storyline is framed

³ The specific texts cited are from the following, as noted in the opening credits: Gen 1, 5, 9, 12; 1 Sam 17; Isa 2, 6, 9, 19, 55; Jer 4, 14; Amos 3, 5, 6; Jonah, Song of Songs 1-6, 8; Ruth; Eccl 1-4, 6, 8; Sefer Yetzira 1, 2. While most recitations are verbatim, *Gitaï* manipulates their presentation, omits portions and sometimes changes the text in order to avoid specific mention of God (Koosed, 129, 131).

by an opening and closing recitation of the David and Goliath story (1 Sam 17) as well as the mystical creation of the Golem or “Spirit of Exile,” formed to protect outcasts and wanderers.⁴

The theme of exile permeates *Golem*. Koosed observes, “It is the rare viewer who would be able to watch the movie without subtitles, thus the linguistic alienation of the immigrant is at least in part reproduced in the viewing experience.”⁵ The use of “wandering” biblical passages forms the backdrop for Ruth and Naomi’s nomadic journey and likewise accentuates their displacement as we the viewers attempt to follow Gitai’s textual meandering.⁶ Narrative, prophecy, and wisdom texts are interwoven in evocative and provocative ways.⁷ Gitai’s choice of sacred texts reflects his desire to celebrate the influence of immigrants and exiles across cultures, those, in his words, who create “texts as beautiful as the Bible.”⁸ He asks, “Is human civilisation constructed only by people who stay permanently on their own land, or are nomads also responsible for some of the great contributions to civilisation?”⁹ Gitai’s use of the Bible also points to a desire to reclaim ancient mythologies overshadowed by modernity’s ideology of

⁴ The term *golem* is derived from Psalm 139:16 (*galmi*, meaning “my unshaped form”). The figure of the golem as it is understood in Jewish lore originates in the Talmud and is discussed in later Jewish texts, including the Sefer Yezirah and Ashkanazi folktales. Created from mud, the golem was believed to be animated by various divine forces, including the ritualistic recitation of the Hebrew alphabet. In Gitai’s film he draws on (and universalizes) the story of the Maharal of Prague (Judah Loew ben Bezalel, 1513-1609) who was believed to create a golem to protect members of the Prague ghetto from anti-Jewish violence. For more discussion of Gitai’s appropriation of the golem, see Alberto Farassino, “Gitai: The Nomadic Image,” in *The Films of Amos Gitai: A Montage*, ed. Paul Willemsen (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 18; Cathy S. Gelbin, “Towards the Global Shtetl: Golem Texts in the New Millennium,” *European Review of History*. 18.1 (Feb. 2011): 9-12; Koosed, 129; Stephan Levine, “The Spirit of Exile: Interviews with Amos Gitai and Henry Alekan,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* 38/39 (Mar 1992): 106-107; Markus and Simon Stockhausen and Marco Melani, “Golem-L’Esprit De Exil”, in *The Films of Amos Gitai: A Montage*, ed. Paul Willemsen (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 65.

⁵ Koosed, 131.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ As examples: excerpts from Jeremiah 14 are used to announce the “famine” of Naomi’s and Elimelech’s poverty in Paris; quotations from Ecclesiastes 3 function as prophecy in the mouth of the Spirit of Exile as she foretells the brutal murders of Mahlon and Chilion; the reference to the chaste “little sister” in Song of Songs 8 is invoked as Orpah makes her decision to return to her mother’s house.

⁸ Levine, 100.

⁹ Ibid., 99.

progress.¹⁰ Film critic Paul Willemen writes, “[Gitaï’s films] engage directly with questions of physical displacement in terms of exile and migration and of discursive displacement in terms of the life of myths and legends in apparently technicised societies.”¹¹

Gitaï’s personal history is one of chosen exile, and his choice of France as the setting for *Golem* suggests a strong autobiographical impulse.¹² As a young man, Gitaï served in the Israeli army during the 1973 Yom Kippur War during which he nearly lost his life. Around the same time he began making experimental and documentary films (though he had previously studied architecture).¹³ Many of his early films were critical of Israel’s foreign policies, including *Field Diary* (1982) for which he was shunned by the Israeli film industry and governmental organizations. Gitaï then moved to France for the next decade, where he avoided making documentary films directly addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁴ However, with his turn to fiction (beginning with *Esther* in 1986), he continued to express his political philosophy and commitments through story. In the early 1990’s Gitaï returned with his family to live in Israel, mirroring Ruth and Naomi’s journey homeward.

Drawn to the worldwide experiences of displaced peoples, Gitaï made several films in France known collectively as the “exile films” [*Esther* (1986), *Berlin-Jerusalem* (1989), *Birth of a Golem* (1990), *Golem*, *The Spirit of Exile* (1991) and *The Petrified Garden* (1993)]. Gitaï

¹⁰Paul Willemen, “Preface,” in *The Films of Amos Gitaï: A Montage*, ed. Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 2. Willemen adds, “The most pertinent conflicts in Gitaï’s films are not really people. Those conflicts are presented as eminently avoidable even though they keep occurring with distressingly lethal regularity. The real conflicts are between time and space, that is to say, between the temporalities at work within and imposed upon geographical spaces. Whereas institutions such as governments, corporations, armies and so on seek to homogenize and synchronize life on the terrains they control, people, as carriers of memories and dreams, must, if they are to remain truly alive, resist the Procrustean rigours of homogeneity and synchronicity (or ‘Gleichschaltung’, as the Nazi programme put it)” (2-3).

¹² Ray Privett, *Amos Gitaï: Exile and Atonement* (New York, NY: Cinema Purgatorio, 2008), 36.

¹³ Gitaï emphasizes Parisian architecture throughout *Golem* as a part of his critique of modernity and mechanization in the face of exilic displacement. For more analysis, see Gelbin, 9-12; and Serge Toubiana and Baptiste Piégay, *Exils et territoires: Le cinéma d’Amos Gitaï* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinema, 2003), 152-156.

¹⁴ Privett, 12-13. Gitaï broke with this decision with *Wadi: 1991* not long after which he returned to Israel.

challenges his viewers to reframe the exilic experience as part of the human condition. As will become evident in further discussion of *Golem*, the filmmaker is less interested in his exiles' arrival home than in their engagement on the journey from place to place. In 2010, he spoke transparently about his ideological objectives:

On a political level, peace will come when the two societies or communities don't so exclusively recognize their roots or their origins, and when they accept the new identity that they have created together on the basis of that experience of displacement. We must look for something other than the narrowly defined origin of each entity, whether it is Israeli or Palestinian. It is that universal experience that my films try to pose as a hypothesis."¹⁵

Gitai's refusal to idealize his (or any) native soil is, furthermore, an intentionally subversive stance. As film commentator Ray Privett observes:

Consider the inherent quality that [the ancient and medieval texts employed by Gitai] are about or from exile. For a modern Israeli to valorize such stories, and to plead for the protection of nomads and wanderers, without invoking the necessity of establishing a homeland for them, is itself a provocation. This is because Israeli nationalists often conceive of the establishment of Israel as an antithesis to life in the Diaspora. Israel is seen as a dialectical step forward in Jewish history, which had been marked by exile for millennia. For them, to celebrate the life of nomads and exiles, Jewish or otherwise, is a step backward. These people tend to celebrate Jewish nationalist-religious stories, both as the state flourished under David and others in ancient times and as it was reestablished under David Ben-Gurion. So by featuring Biblical stories of exile, as well as legends like that of the Golem that were developed in the Diaspora, Gitai valorizes a tradition many Israeli nationalists neglect or disdain.¹⁶

The opening and closing references to David and Goliath in *Golem* illumine Privett's point. Not only does the mention of David remind viewers of David's relationship to the foreigner Ruth, the allusion harkens to a time when David was himself an itinerant. Unlike in the book of Ruth, where the closing genealogy links her to the great king, Gitai's more oblique allusion connects Israel to its own nomadic past.¹⁷

¹⁵ Robert Sklar, "Israel without Mythology: An Interview with Amos Gitai," *Cineaste* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 24.

¹⁶ Privett, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

There are significant congruencies and notable disparities between Gitai's version of Ruth and the biblical narrative. Gitai chooses Ruth because of the vital role of women. He states:

The Bible is supposed to have been written by men. But I find its female protagonists particularly interesting. In spite of the heavy patriarchal traditions which establish the role of men, the women-characters [*sic*] are rather central to the text. In a way, women play a revolutionary role because they provoke the social order which is then settled by the men. Men are the kings, the warriors. They impose a certain structure, an order. In Biblical terms, the role of women is to be the keepers of human memory. After all, the Bible is about memory, about keeping memory alive.¹⁸

Gitai also chooses Ruth for its emphasis on displacement and return, noting that it "can function like a mythological envelope for the stories of exile and immigration."¹⁹ Gitai stresses the subversive utility of such envelopes, which allow the storyteller to concentrate on a microcosm of society in order to make a larger political statement.²⁰ Nonetheless, he adopts many of the anti-didactic tendencies of the original narrative. Human agency is stressed over the will of God,²¹ and ethnic conflict is handled with "a fragile sense of balance" that parallels the veiled treatment of Moabite prejudices in the biblical text.²²

Golem's most significant divergence from the biblical story is his ending. Naomi and Ruth never arrive in Israel; instead they appear destined to wander the seas forever. Major elements of the biblical story that take place at "home" in Bethlehem occur instead during Ruth and Naomi's meandering journey on a barge that is used for grain transport. In the midst of their journey, they encounter Boaz (who is notably gleaning on the waters through what appears to be

¹⁸ Levine, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁰ Sklar, 24.

²¹ Privett, 35. In the opening and closing recitation of the David and Goliath story, Gitai changes David's words to Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:45b from "I come against you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied" to "I come to you armed only with my beliefs." The change has the effect, argues Privett, of "emphasizing the power of ideas in the face of everything else" and reminding us of "Gitai's own status as an intellectual facing great odds" (38).

²² Levine, 106. Though Gitai notes that certain elements of the film (the violent deaths of the Mahlon and Chilion, for example) reflect "today's reality," he cut out of the film a more overtly racist scene because "it diminished the film in some strange way, making reality seem too simple, which it isn't" (Levine, 105).

refuse), and he and Ruth are wed along a riverbank. The difference between the exile and the national is blurred, as it is indistinguishable as to which characters are guides and which are making a return journey.

Golem ultimately suggests the impossibility of return. In a closing scene, Naomi lies in a bathtub and cuts her hair in act of mourning.²³ Meanwhile, Ruth and Boaz pace the floor in the steam room below, arguing, in the only major divergence from the biblical text, about the relationship between understanding and acceptance. Finally, given the voice she is denied in the Bible, Ruth rails, “I’ve had enough of this wisdom, of being told how others behave. I want to be how I am!” Eventually the argument ceases, but their pacing does not, heightening further the endlessness of their wandering.

Gitai stresses the elusiveness of home. Reflecting on the significance of Jerusalem in Gitai’s imaginary, film critic Mikhail Iampolski argues:

Jerusalem is not present in *Golem: The Spirit of Exile*, but in this film there is the sense of a journey, of a movement towards a mystical site. There is a slow metaphorical movement along the underground canal towards the light shining in the distance That the film was shot in France, partly in Paris, doesn’t matter: again we have a film about a return, a movement, a pilgrimage organised around an invisible and unimaginable point

This mythical point cannot be reached by way of a simple, linear movement. *Granted, it is located at the end of road, but you can’t ever reach it because it is imaginary.* Long sequence shots and complicated traveling shots play a major role in Gitai’s films but they generally appear in moments when space has become totally deformed, when you think you have groped your way towards an exit leading to a place where people can’t set foot.²⁴

Gitai himself acknowledges that it is his intention that Ruth and Naomi should not arrive anywhere.²⁵ Rather, in focusing on their expulsion from France, he makes the inherent point that

²³ This scene mirrors three others; the first in which she shares a bath with Elimelech, a second in which she bathes with Ruth, and finally a scene in which she cuts her hair just following the death of Elimelech.

²⁴ Mikhail Iampolski, “The Road to Jerusalem,” in *The Films of Amos Gitai: A Montage*, ed. Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 19-20. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Levine, 103.

every return is preceded by an uprooting; home is not a monolithic entity.²⁶ “Not only Jewish history,” observes Koosed, “but all human history is a play between expulsion and return, leaving and longing for home, however that home is defined.”²⁷ In refusing to resolve the dialectic between exile and homecoming,²⁸ *Gitaï* places the question of the meaning of “exile” and “return” back upon the viewer.

Love in Exile

Gitaï's strong suggestion of the impossibility of return may provide yet more light on our understanding of Ruth and Naomi's ambiguous relationship in the biblical narrative. Like *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Golem* mimics the strategic ambiguity of the original text. While Ruth and Naomi's interactions are sexually charged, *Gitaï* presents suggestive scenes with a comparable “plausible deniability” that allows viewers to ignore the implications. Yet given the overtly sensual nature of these scenes, *Gitaï*, perhaps unconsciously, highlights yet another dimension of the exilic experience as woman-identified sexuality is foreclosed upon alongside the loss of family, home, and national identity.²⁹

The suggestion of an erotic attachment between Ruth and Naomi in *Golem* begins slowly and crescendos in the course of the film. After their expulsion from their home, Naomi and Ruth

²⁶ Koosed, 132.

²⁷ Ibid. Koosed is not suggesting that experiences of exile are universal, only the motif. As with *Golem*, stories of expulsion and return challenge romantic or conventional narratives of migration and the stability of the concept of “home.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ In what should now be a familiar response to the ambiguous portrayals of Ruth and Naomi's relationship, film blogger Matt Page [“*Golem, l'esprit de l'exil* (*Golem, the Spirit of Exile*),” *Bible Films Blog*, November 16, 2007, <http://biblefilms.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/golem-lesprit-de-lexil-golem-spirit-of.html>.. Accessed November 17, 2014)] writes of *Golem*, “There's also an unusual nude scene between Naomi and Ruth. This could be interpreted as a love scene, especially as Song of Songs is quoted at the time, but there's little indication, at least from the acting that this is the case. Some scholars have speculated that Ruth 1:14's use of the word translated *clave* (traditionally used to indicate marriage e.g. Gen 2:24) suggests this, but personally I'm unconvinced. The book does indicate a strong attachment between these women, and the intimacy and tenderness of the scene, whilst clearly beyond the realm of the text, does bring that home.” Here again, we have an instance of “protesting too much” as, humorously, Page points to many of the film's indicators of an eroticism between Ruth and Naomi, even pointing to the biblical basis for this interpretation.

ride in the back of a flatbed truck holding hands. In a variation on the biblical text, the women reverse positions; Naomi looks lovingly at Ruth while Ruth repeatedly turns her head back. As if to accentuate the question of their togetherness, one of the sailors, upon encountering them, asks, “Two women, can they be together if they have not met?”³⁰ As in the biblical narrative, we know little of their relationship prior to this journey, only that they share in the experience of harrowing loss.

Soon they encounter Boaz. Naomi, guided by the Spirit of Exile, suggests that Ruth and Boaz marry. But the scene is enigmatic. Naomi smiles, but at the same time she seems despondent, as if this is the way things have to be. She draws very close to Ruth, who, with sadness in her eyes, paraphrases Song of Songs 1:5-6:

I am dark but fair, daughters of Jerusalem
Like the dark tents of Kedar
Do not scorn me for being dark
For I am touched by the sun
My brothers have made me watch over the vineyards
But I did not watch over my vineyard

Whom does Ruth believe will scorn her? Boaz? Naomi? Since Boaz (played by the Malian-Burkinabé actor Sotigui Kouyaté) possesses skin darker than her own, she seems instead to be speaking directly to Naomi. Possibly she blames herself for losing Mahlon (not watching over her own vineyard) and views a marriage to Boaz as an act of disloyalty to her mother-in-law.

And yet, these words from the Song of Songs are also words spoken to a lover. In the scene that follows, a nude Naomi and Ruth bathe one another, citing parts of Song of Songs 7:

Naomi: How lovely are your sandalled feet, o prince’s daughter!
Your thighs are like jewels, carved by a skilled craftsman
Your belly is a heap of wheat, set amongst the lilies
Your breasts are like two fawns, twin fawns of a gazelle
Ruth: Your neck is like an ivory tower
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon, by the gate of the city

³⁰ A variation on Amos 3:3, “Can two walk together without having met?”

Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus
Your head upon your body is like Carmel
Your tresses are like silk
A king is held captive by you
Naomi: How lovely and entrancing you are, beloved, daughter of delights!
You are as stately as a palm tree
Your breasts are clusters of grapes

They touch each other lovingly and embrace. The scene is not only suggestive for its eroticism, but also because it follows an earlier bathing scene between Naomi and Elimelech. In another instance of virtual *ménage a trois*, Naomi's vitality is restored through an act of intimacy with Ruth that was once similarly shared with her late husband. Ruth, too, appears revived.

Ruth and Boaz's relationship is presented as a loving one, and they, too, recite words from the Song of Songs. However, their courtship is presented in more chaste fashion. The biblical words they speak to one another are on the whole less suggestive, and they are always fully clothed when together. After the birth of their child, their relationship falls into discord, and their future is called into question.

Neither is it clear what becomes of Ruth and Naomi. After the child is given to Naomi, Naomi and Ruth appear one last time together lying close on a dock, expressionless. After, we find Naomi in the final bath scene, cutting her hair as she did just after the death of Elimelech. Speaking into a mirror, she alters the words spoken to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, "Go back to your country and your kindred, to your father's house, and you shall be a great nation." Observing the irony of this revision, Koosed writes:

In the Bible Abraham goes into exile in order to settle the land of Israel. Later the people of Israel will be forcibly exiled from the land of Israel, exiled back to Abraham's homeland. In the contemporary world the exile ends with the creation of the state of Israel. On the one hand, Abraham's command is reversed – go back in order to become a great nation, the nation of the modern state of Israel. Naomi does have a home to which she can return. On the other hand every return is still predicated on exile – to return to Israel one has to leave somewhere else. Who is in exile? Where is home?³¹

³¹ Koosed, 132.

For the exile then, the impossibility of homecoming is predicated on *the deeper impossibility of home*. If we take Naomi's reversal of Abraham's command as Gitai's own commentary on the fate of those who wander, then to "return home" is *to mourn*.

Losses Denied

Yet *Golem* is a film that is both conscious and unconscious about the mourning that it reflects and performs. Before elucidating this point further, we need to examine Freud's concept of melancholia. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud distinguishes between successful mourning and unsuccessful mourning, positing a theory of unresolved grief. The successful mourner is one who is able to recognize and accept a loss and then move on to attach to new objects. Mourning turns into melancholia when the mourner is unable to accept the loss. Refusing (or unable) to grieve, the melancholic incorporates the lost object into her own ego in order to sustain an identificatory connection and compensate for the loss.³² However, now haunted by that loss, she directs her feelings regarding the lost object onto the self and oscillates ambivalently between love and hate for it.³³ As psychoanalytic critic David L. Eng explains, "the turning of the lost object into the ego not only marks a turning away from the external world of the social to the internal world of the psyche; it also simultaneously transforms all possible ambivalences and reproaches against the loved object into ambivalences and reproaches against

³²Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (1917) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 244-245; cf. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 177-178; David L. Eng, "Melancholia/Postcoloniality: Loss in *The Floating Life*," *Qui Parle* 11.2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 139-140, 148; In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud regards melancholia as pathological, that is, a failure of the individual psyche to properly mourn. However later scholars have challenged this view, arguing that the causes of melancholia (e.g. racism) are often socially determined. Freud himself seems to hint at this possibility when he references "environmental influences" at work (243). See David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 670-671; Eng, "Melancholia/Postcoloniality," 139-141.

³³ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 249, 251-252, 256; Cf. Cheng, 9, 178; Eng, "Melancholia/Postcoloniality," 140; and Eng and Han, 672.

the self.”³⁴ According to Freud, the melancholic experiences “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings.”³⁵

Mourning and melancholia can occur not only in response to the loss of another person, but also in reaction to a lost belief or ideal.³⁶ On one level, Naomi’s expression of grief in *Golem* is a sustained lament on the losses associated with her physical and emotional upheaval. As Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han explain:

The experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning. When one leaves one’s country of origin – voluntarily or involuntarily – one must mourn a host of losses both concrete and abstract. These include homeland, family, language, identity, property, status in community – the list goes on.³⁷

But what transforms Naomi’s mourning into melancholia? According to Butler, the inability to properly mourn typically occurs *when the loss is itself disavowed*, that is when the object to be mourned is obscured or denied by others. On a societal level, we enact melancholia when we refuse to mourn the deaths of those who are deemed as not fully human, such as unnamed casualties of war, the victims of AIDS, and sexual minorities.³⁸ In turn, victims of oppression are unable to mourn the losses associated with their oppression because such losses are denied or effaced by the very structures of domination which sanction them.

This latter point becomes clearer when we examine the intangible losses that often occur in the course of assimilation. Naomi’s articulation of home as an impossible ideal points to the paradoxes experienced by many immigrants. As Eng and Han explain, to assimilate “means [to

³⁴ Eng, “Melancholia/Postcoloniality,” 140.

³⁵ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 244.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁷ Eng and Han, 679-680

³⁸ Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 30-38.

adopt] a set of dominant norms and ideals . . . often foreclosed to [the one assimilating].”³⁹ When racial minorities immigrate to the United States, for example, they are called upon to espouse the values of liberty and equality that are subsequently denied to them. Yet the mythology that surrounds the universality of these values engenders ambivalence and denial. In order to confront the acts of racism levied against oneself, one must come to terms with the fallacy of the democratic ideal. Yet rather than admit one has joined a racist society, the loss (disavowed) is often turned inward and transformed into a mixture of bitterness and self-abnegation.⁴⁰ In the same way, Naomi’s reversal of God’s command to Abraham points to the elusiveness of the Promised Land and the lost ideal of the covenant. Repeatedly she speaks of the promise of becoming a great nation, all the while cropping her hair in an act of self-mutilation. In turning her grief onto herself, she embodies the melancholic.

Yet there is some suggestion of “successful” mourning in Naomi’s expression of grief in *Golem*. Eng argues, drawing on Butler, that there is “a nascent political protest” at the heart of melancholia’s “tenacious attachment” to lost objects.⁴¹ In holding on to a reality that others refuse to acknowledge, the melancholic offers “a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of loss ungrievable.”⁴² Indeed, in giving voice to Naomi’s pain, Gitai bears witness to her protest. Through her vocal bitterness, she in fact echoes the disposition of her biblical counterpart when she speaks against Shaddai and insists the townswomen call her Mara (1:20-21). The root of Mara, *mrr* is similar in sound and appearance to the root *mrđ*

³⁹ Eng and Han, 670.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 675, 684-687; cf. Stanley and Derald W. Sue, “Chinese-American Personality and Mental Health,” *Amerasia Journal* 1.2 (1971): 36-49.

⁴¹ David Eng, “Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Signs* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1280.

⁴² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 185; cf. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 147-148.

meaning, “to rebel.”⁴³ While Gitai’s Naomi is despairing, she is nonetheless capable of the protest inherent in lament.

Heterosexual Melancholia, Redux

That said, there are deeper signs of the melancholic evident in the film that may even surpass the conscious intentions of the filmmaker. While Gitai may have been cognizant of aspects of Naomi’s grief, the nature of melancholia is the ineffability of that which is grieved.

Butler writes:

Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost. So when one loses, one is faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of the loss. If mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia originally meant, to a certain extent, not knowing), then mourning would be maintained by its enigmatic dimension, by the experience of not knowing incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom.⁴⁴

What then is “lost within the recesses of the loss” in *Golem*? Here we turn back to the question of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship in the film. Again we ask, why does Gitai depict their erotic relationship ambiguously, essentially reproducing the indeterminacy of the original text? The independent and controversial filmmaker presumably has little motivation to create a strategically ambiguous film to appeal to mass audiences. It is also hard to imagine he is unaware of homoerotic readings of Ruth. When asked if there is a love story in the film between the two women, he states:

There is an affinity between them. They feel very close to each other and they want to preserve this kind of intimacy in the face of this world. That’s also why they don’t enter into battle against the rest of the world. But they also want to preserve their voyage itself. I changed the arrangement of the Biblical story, which is put together in a different way:

⁴³ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 59. Boyarin argues that the episode of the bitter waters of Mara (Ex. 15:22-27) involves a play on these words, interpreting v.23 to read “They could not drink water from Mara, because they were rebellious, and that is why it is called Mara” (65); cf. McAvan, 6.

⁴⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21-22. Emphasis in original.

it starts from the arrival in the country of exile and cuts to them arriving back in the country of origin. I was much more interested in the process of transition, in the long voyage back, which the Bible ignores. I put Boaz as one of the waystations on this trek back which for me is some sort of conceptual voyage at the end of which you don't actually arrive anywhere. In that sense, the affinity between them is even more important. They have this voyage together during which they observe and experience many things together.⁴⁵

Like the film itself, Gitai's response is evasive. However, it is revelatory at a second glance.

Gitai likens Ruth and Naomi's intimacy to a safe haven; they take refuge in one another in order to avoid battling the world. But their asylum is static, even stagnant as their depressive dispositions attest. They embark on a voyage in which time is paradoxically suspended. There is a shared affinity in which "you don't actually arrive anywhere."

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler identifies heterosexual melancholia as one variety of "melancholy, the unfinished process of grieving, [which] is central to the formation of the identifications that form the ego."⁴⁶ Building on Freud, she argues that among the "objects loved and lost" within the melancholic ego are homosexual attachments themselves.⁴⁷ The loss of homosexual attachments relies upon the assumption of stable gender categories of "male and female" and normative heterosexuality. She explains:

If the assumption of femininity and the assumption of masculinity proceed through the accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality, we might understand the force of this accomplishment as mandating the abandonment of homosexual attachments or, perhaps more trenchantly, *preempting* the possibility of homosexual attachment, a foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Levine, 103.

⁴⁶ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 135. Emphasis in original.

The establishment of a heterosexual identity is therefore tenuously predicated on the disavowal of homosexual feelings. In order to sustain this disavowal, the individual must continually shore up her gender identity; thus, the ego itself assumes a gendered character.⁴⁹

According to Butler, it is important to recognize that whereas Freud once believed that successful mourning involved breaking with the lost object in order to foster new attachments, he later revised his thinking to suggest that a successful mourner instead incorporates the lost object into the ego as a precondition for letting it go.⁵⁰ “If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally,” writes Butler, “and that internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss.”⁵¹ She goes on to argue that this is in fact what happens with regard to homosexuality: with society’s predisposition towards heterosexual attachments, homosexual desire is disavowed in the individual *though not entirely abandoned*. Instead homosexual desire is driven underground and suppressed through the continual reinforcement of one’s heteronormative gender identity.

Yet for some (closeted lesbians and gay men and those who identify as “strictly straight”)⁵² the inability to mourn what society has deemed an ungrievable loss can lead to

⁴⁹ Ibid., 133-136. Cf. Butler, “Imitation,” 13-31. Here Butler is building on her earlier theory of gender performativity in which she argues against the essential nature of sexual identities, asserting instead that the categories of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are only constituted their opposites and do not exist as “original” or “natural” forms. The assumption of stable sexual identities is inherently linked to notions of essential male and female genders, therefore sexual identity must be continually reinforced through the performance of gender. Butler writes, “Heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself – *and failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (“Imitation,” 21, emphasis in original).

⁵⁰ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 133-134.

⁵¹ Ibid., 134.

⁵² Ibid., 146-147.

internal conflict, depression and denial.⁵³ Challenges to gender or sexual identity must be quelled or circumvented in order to avert the terror of being labeled as gender deviant. As Butler writes,

The fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity, that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman, that if she is not quite a man, she is like one, and hence monstrous in some way.⁵⁴

Again she reminds us that such struggles take place on both an individual and social scale: “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.”⁵⁵ Emily McAvan observes that Ruth’s vow to Naomi is excessive and even irrational precisely because it “is outside of the cultural intelligibility of a heterosexual woman.”⁵⁶ Willing to abandon her entire life for Naomi, Ruth’s “identification with a beloved Other becomes intensified to the point of eroticization.”⁵⁷

In her analysis of the book of Ruth, McAvan interprets the relationship between Ruth and Naomi through the lens of heterosexual melancholia. Drawing on Butler, she argues that one way to read the queer traces of the text is to probe “what kinds of losses are being avowed and disavowed, what kinds of mourning are possible, what attachments are formed and unformed.”⁵⁸ She underscores the revealing way in which Naomi incorporates her own losses into herself by taking on the new name of Mara, almost as if she is literally swallowing a bitter pill. Naomi’s bitterness suggests as much about what she is unable to mourn as it does about her spoken losses. When faced with Ruth’s excessive vow, Naomi is confronted with the (im)possibility of same-sex desire, a prospect which threatens to undo her. It may be no surprise that Naomi can only

⁵³ Eng, “Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century,” 1278.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 136.

⁵⁵ Butler, *Prekarious Life*, 20.

⁵⁶ McAvan, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

react to Ruth with aversion and silence and that she when she finally does act, it is to secure a husband for Ruth. That is not to say that she does not experience feelings toward Ruth, only that she must repress them. “One of the *costs* of this loss-to-healing narrative,” writes McAvan, “is a queer love of which only traces remain.”⁵⁹

Butler’s and McAvan’s insights provide yet another perspective into how we might understand the *ketiv* of 3:3-4. As we observed in the two previous chapters, Naomi’s insertion of herself into the scene at the threshing floor is suggestive on many levels. In a certain sense, Naomi clandestinely reciprocates Ruth’s clinging by becoming one with her and consummating their union. Naomi’s “clinging” to Ruth at this moment is ironic given that it is here that Ruth most clearly begins to individuate into her own separate person. Naomi’s materialization at the very moment Ruth commits herself to Boaz suggests her ambivalence about the future before them. In the cover of night, Naomi’s reveals a desire to remain close to Ruth that cannot be expressed in the light of day.

On the other hand, Naomi also seeks intimacy *with Boaz* on the threshing floor, though it is only a phantasm. McAvan asserts that although traditional sexual arrangements endure in the book of Ruth, the object of loss here is ironically heterosexuality itself. Because Naomi is unable to acknowledge the loss of Ruth as a potential partner, she cannot move on to new love objects.⁶⁰ (Indeed the question of why Naomi herself could not marry Boaz, though rarely addressed, is a legitimate one). Naomi experiences what Butler calls the “double disavowal” (i.e., “I have never loved her, and I have never lost her”) of heterosexual melancholia whereby her relationship with Ruth cannot be authentically acknowledged or mourned.⁶¹ If Naomi cannot come to terms with the “irrational” feelings she has for Ruth, as Brenner envisages, then it will be difficult for her to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 8. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 7-8, 10.

⁶¹ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 139-140; cf. McAvan, 10.

consider loving another. If we read allegorically, even the birth of Obed does not appear to provide Naomi with the solace he so promised, as his name (“servant”/“slave”) suggests. Obed is the consummate reminder that “there is no path to survival without heterosexuality,” and at the same time (as he is Ruth’s child with Naomi), that heterosexuality is founded upon ungrivable losses.⁶² Having experienced a radical alternative to the “usual heterosexual-patriarchal economy of life,” Naomi is now consigned to a life of queer impossibility and forestalled grief.⁶³

At this point we have a clearer understanding of what is taking place in *Golem*. Gitaï takes the biblical story to its logical, tragic conclusion as we watch Naomi sink (almost literally in the tub) into a permanent melancholic state. The site of deep intimacy with Ruth (and with Elimelech before her) becomes a site of lament. Reflexively, it seems, Gitaï has reproduced the heterosexual melancholia of the original text. Not only can Naomi not realize her desires for Ruth, she cannot embrace the future offered to her by way of Ruth’s attachment to Boaz. Though Ruth does produce a child who is ceremoniously given to her mother-in-law, we never see Naomi with the infant after its birth. Having “never loved, never lost” Ruth, Naomi can neither mourn the past nor embrace the future.

And what of Ruth in *Golem*? Like Naomi, she expresses a mixture of melancholy and defiance. While the argument she has with Boaz is full of emotion, the subject of their quarrel is tellingly obscure. She rails against Boaz’s insistence that she think and act a certain way. She avows “I want to be how I am,” to which Boaz responds, “I’m not asking you to be like me.” “Yes you are,” retorts Ruth. But what is it that she does not wish to be? Does she know? As with Naomi, we never see Ruth with her child after his birth as we might anticipate. Is it the expectations of motherhood and marriage which she resists? Having loved Naomi in an intimate

⁶² McAvan, 10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 8.

way, has she now awakened to a part of herself she did not know before? In yearning to be “how I am” she intimates un-lived possibilities that now seem foreclosed to her.

Loss upon Loss

The heterosexual melancholia of *Golem* is co-constitutive with the larger melancholic losses associated with exile and assimilation. Ruth and Naomi, having “never loved never lost” one another, physically embody the inertia that often accompanies displacement as they listlessly float down the river. Ruth, having also “never loved, never lost” the land of Israel, an ideal coterminous with Naomi herself, will never reach her destination. Naomi can only repeat the endless refrain to return to her country and become a great nation, though her future appears as stagnant as the bathwater she lies in. Boaz, too, seems to recognize that an irrevocable injury has occurred. As the film closes, he utters the anti-creation narrative of Jeremiah 4:23-25. Their collective inability to embrace the child, the symbol of their future, is indicative of their inability to attach to new love objects, be it newborn or nation.

Further illuminating the compound nature of melancholic loss, racial injury also features in the depiction of Obed’s birth. One of the most poignant reversals in the film is that Boaz, instead of Ruth, takes the position of the racial/ethnic Other. Yet, while Boaz has black skin, the child born is a white child. The child’s skin tone is indicative of the dialectic of incorporation-exclusion by which racial minorities are assimilated into dominant cultures.⁶⁴ In the film, the sense of racial absorption is exaggerated by the fact that the women who give the child to Naomi are also white.

As a symbol of lost origins, the child’s skin color is suggestive of yet another disavowed loss. In the story world of *Golem*, the birth of Obed connects Israel to both its past and its

⁶⁴ Cheng, 10.

future.⁶⁵ In the modern day context of the film, Obed is David's descendent, though biblically he is also his predecessor. In depicting the newborn infant Obed as white, the film metaphorically denies Israel's multiethnic origins, while foreclosing upon future possibilities. We encounter yet another kind of "double disavowal," as Israel itself is shown to have "never lost, never found" that which is foreign within.

We cannot be clear about Gitai's intentions with regard to the baby's complexion, if any. One might wonder if the child is meant to resemble Naomi, played by the Israeli actress Ophrah Shemesh, who has olive skin. If the child is understood to be the offspring of Ruth and Naomi (recalling Koosed's dictum that "in the world of fiction anything can happen"), this would make sense. The words of Ruth 4:15, lauding Ruth's procreative role in Naomi's restoration, are invoked. Yet given that the child never appears with Ruth and Naomi together, Gitai's embrace of a queer reading here seems unlikely.

Given the heterosexual melancholia revealed in the film, the child functions, almost literally, as a ghostly reminder of losses unmourned. Freud referred to the melancholic object in apparitional terms as a "shadow" that falls across the ego and perpetually haunts it.⁶⁶ If Ruth's ungrieved loss of Naomi forestalls her desire for Boaz, then Obed's ghostly countenance is a manifestation of her inability to accept Boaz and his offspring. As Freud argues, the melancholic vacillates between love and hate for the object of loss, and this ambivalence extends towards other objects and experiences associated with the loss.⁶⁷ Ruth's difficulty with the notion of acceptance expressed in her argument with Boaz may point toward her ambivalence regarding Obed.

⁶⁵ The only other black African actor in the film is Malian actor Bakary Sangaré, who narrates the story of David and Goliath. While speaking in French, Sangaré's physical presence accentuates the otherness of David as the product of mixed ethnic origins.

⁶⁶ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 249.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 251, 257.

Grief thus plays a constitutive role in Obed's formation, and his body becomes, to use Jeff Berglund's terminology discussed in Chapter Three, a symbol of secrets or marked absences. Loss amasses upon loss as homosexual and racial repressions amalgamate. The intersection of heterosexual and racial melancholia in *Golem* offers additional insight into the reasons for Naomi's disavowal of Obed's Moabite heritage in the biblical narrative. Returning to Chapman's analysis discussed in Chapter Two, we recall that Naomi's breastfeeding of Obed may have been thought to confer insider ethnicity on the child. If this is indeed the case, the taint of Obed's Moabite ethnicity is expunged, at least by virtue of cultural practice. But why does Naomi go to these lengths to suppress the child's ethnicity when Ruth is publically declared as the child's mother?

Looking at the question through the lens of heterosexual melancholia, we can view Naomi's actions as a dramatic response to the insinuation that she and Ruth have shared something more than a platonic relationship. Recalling LaCocque's argument that the public proclamation of Obed's birth took the form of a typical birth announcement *to the father*, Naomi's act of nursing serves to defensively reinforce her status as a maternal figure, and therefore properly female. Naomi appropriates the child as her own not only to confer upon him Israelite status, but also to quell the community's innuendos. If she cannot embrace and mourn her attachment to Ruth the Moabite, then how much less can she embrace Ruth's Moabite child? As in *Golem*, Obed must bear the unspoken history of heterosexual melancholia by way of the denial of his own ethnic past.

The issue of breastfeeding bears one final point. If we read intertextually, Naomi's actions are symbolic of Judah's shifting relationship with "the nations" after the exile. Mangrum argues that the story of Ruth is told not only to promote the inclusion of foreigners within the

new community of Yehud, but also to promote an ideology whereby the nations (represented by Ruth) are said to bring fullness and restoration to Judah.⁶⁸ The nations are the instrument of Judah's exultation.⁶⁹ This ideology, he argues, provides a convenient rationale for the presence of so-called foreigners in the community.⁷⁰ Strikingly, it also entails a reframing of the Abrahamic call in Genesis 12:1-3, somewhat like the one articulated by Gitai's Naomi. Judah would be restored through "a centripetal ingathering of the nations to Jerusalem."⁷¹

Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah offer images of Jerusalem feeding at the breasts of kings and princesses (Isa 49:23)⁷² and sucking the milk of nations (Isa 60:16).⁷³ These images contribute further to the ideology of centripetal nationalism: royal breast milk is thought to contain status-confirming power,⁷⁴ and the nations are believed to provide exilic returnees the nourishment needed to restore their former glory. However, Chapman highlights how this ideology stood at odds with the belief that breast milk also confers ethnic status. In Isaiah 66, Jerusalem herself is described as a mother who gives birth to an entire nation in one day (v.8). It is Jerusalem who gives suck to her children, and her milk is abundant (v.11). Later, YHWH and Jerusalem are equated with one another, each as a mother who comforts her children (v.13).⁷⁵ Now, the nations are gathered to look upon Jerusalem's glory (v.18b).⁷⁶ Chapman writes:

⁶⁸ Mangrum, 63. This ideology is expressed in both prophetic and wisdom texts. Mangrum identifies three central ideas within this ideology: "(1.) the nations flock to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh (e.g., Ps 22:27; 72:11; 86:9; Isa 56:7; (2.) the nations come bearing gifts to Israel, contributing to the Temple treasury, or offering their wealth as an 'inheritance' (e.g., Ps 68:29; 111:6; Isa 60:5; 61:6; 66:12); and (3.) the nations come to Jerusalem to be judged by the universal King, who sits on the throne in the Temple (e.g., Is. 2:4; Amos 1:2-2:16)" (65).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 64-65.

⁷¹ Ibid., 65.

⁷² While the NRSV refers to the kings to as "foster fathers," Chapman argues for a translation of the masculine form of the word *ōmenet* as "wet nurse" to describe kings breastfeeding, See Chapman, 12-13, 36-38.

⁷³ Chapman, 11-13.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8-13.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁶ It is curious that Chapman doesn't comment on this verse given that she is trying to argue for Jerusalem's superiority over the other nations here. There is also further evidence of ethnic enmity in the chapter that would bolster her argument. Verses 15-18 foretell the coming judgment of YHWH against Zion's enemies, among them

Here, one might imagine that the exiles return to their homeland carrying the foreign stain of Babylonia. Only through a rebirth by their capital city and through ingesting the milk of Jerusalem's breast can they regain their ethnic status as the new Israelites marked by "glory," a repeated epithet of Yahweh's royal power. Yahweh and Jerusalem will co-parent the new Israel; she will give suck and carry, and he will comfort."⁷⁷

Here Chapman, her reference to YHWH as male notwithstanding, highlights an incredible image of YHWH and Jerusalem as *co-mothers* to the exiles. That Chapman divides each co-parent by gender and with separate roles of nursing and comforting is curious given that YHWH is directly named by analogy as "mother."⁷⁸ Furthermore, nursing imagery is used to describe YHWH just prior in verse 12 ("For thus said the Lord: I will extend to her prosperity like a stream. The wealth of nations like a wadi in flood; and you shall drink of it. You shall be carried on shoulders and dandled upon knees"). Here the wealth of the nations is transformed into sustenance flowing from YHWH.

While the image of YHWH and Jerusalem as co-mothers is compelling for woman-identified readers, it comes at a cost. YHWH and Jerusalem offer the exiles succor but at the expense of a positive relationship with the nations. While the text foretells of the gathering of the nations, it also points toward the rancorous suppression of foreign influence. The children suckled at the breasts of YHWH and Jerusalem will be purged of the taint of nations, just as Obed is purged of Moabite ethnicity. The very same tension that is expressed in Ruth is found here. The foreigner brings fullness to the nation of Israel, but these offerings must be reconstituted to come from within.

foreigners "who sanctify and purify themselves to enter the groves, imitating one in the center, eating the flesh of the swine, the reptile, and the mouse" (v.17; cf. Isa 65:3-4; 66:3-4).

⁷⁷ Chapman, 13-14.

⁷⁸ Christl M. Maier is correct that initially YHWH is depicted as a midwife who opens the womb of Zion (one of the traditional roles of God in conception) (66:9; see Chapter Two, note 106). However, the image shifts to YHWH as mother because "the empathetic and loving Mother Zion offers a role model for YHWH . . . [which in turn] reinforces the idea of a compassionate and forgiving deity" (203). See Maier, 202-203.

Reading psychoanalytically, Trito-Isaiah's prophecy reveals the same racial/ethnic melancholia we have seen previously in *Golem* and *Ruth*. The restoration of Zion is predicated on a loss that is curiously disavowed. In order for Jerusalem to once again rise to prominence, it must break with the nations. Yet, despite some vitriolic rhetoric, Trito-Isaiah cannot seem to stop talking about the nations. No doubt the return from exile would have entailed a disruption (if not end) to interethnic relationships for returnees; however, one imagines these relationships would have been difficult to mourn in the face of exclusivist rhetoric.⁷⁹ The exclusion-yet-retention of the nations in the Israelite imaginary recalls the vacillation between love and hate that Freud posited the melancholic feels for the lost object. It also reflects the specific form that racial/ethnic melancholia can take, where the other is suppressed in plain sight. Psychoanalytic critic Anne Anlin Cheng writes:

Teetering between the known and unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious – naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space. It is precisely the slippery distance between loss and exclusion that racial myopia effects. Part of the central dilemma of dominant racial melancholia – since its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by this system of the suspended other – is that *it does not really want the lost other to return (or demand its right of way)*.⁸⁰

In the biblical narrative, Ruth is constituted as a “suspended other,” a marked absence through which the biblical writer(s) fulfill a narrative vision. In Gitai's film, Ruth more visibly demands her right of way. Yet in the end, the forces of melancholic loss perpetuate her exile, thus illuminating the struggle of her biblical sister to find her way home.

Historical Gleanings: A History of Loss

⁷⁹ However, the idea that the nations would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem bearing gifts had popularity late into the Second Temple period. See, for example, Tobit 13:11 (Mangrum, 66-67).

⁸⁰ Cheng, 16. Emphasis added.

In her study of the interethnic marriage dilemma in Ezra 9-10, Willa M. Johnson posits that Yehudite men who chose to marry outside of the clan could be understood as attempting to preemptively overcome the losses associated with exile. Drawing of the work of trauma theorist Robert Jay Lifton, Johnson writes:

There may be grave consequences for converting trauma too rapidly and thereby creating ‘false witnesses’ or ‘designated victims’. The idea of ‘converting’ trauma instantaneously is problematic because it is equivalent to ‘blocking out elements’ of death, separation, or loss. According to Lifton, this creates false witnesses. In turn, these false witnesses develop designated victims – groups off whom these parasitic creatures establish economic prosperity and the psychological sense of worth.”⁸¹

Johnson believes many *Golah* men married exogamously in order to advance their own economic interests, leaving *Golah* women (their “designated victims”) without husbands and economically vulnerable. As “false witnesses,” they ignored the fissures in their own ethnic community created in the wake of exile.⁸²

Arguably, the converse was also true: Ezra’s edict requiring that *Golah* men divorce their wives can likewise be understood against the backdrop of trauma. The scapegoating of so-called “foreign” women was no doubt a dramatic reaction to the broader social and religious changes in the wider community. Likely, the propensity to “convert the trauma too rapidly” manifested itself in a variety of ways. The list of designated victims could be extended include many others. As our analysis has demonstrated, Ruth’s return is predicated upon a series of unmourned losses. While the book of Ruth posits a path to her inclusion and Naomi’s reincorporation, their return comes at a great cost. *Golem* goes as far as to suggest that such a return is impossible, that theirs is a future of wandering.

⁸¹ W.M. Johnson, 19, internally citing Cathy Caruth, “An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 138-139. Contra Johnson, Southwood argues that the *Golah* men may have been in an advantaged social position relative to their foreign wives (165). If, as I go on to argue, the foreign wives were in fact in a social disadvantaged position, *divorcing* them is an alternative expression of “converting trauma too rapidly,” and the basic thrust of Johnson’s argument still holds merit.

⁸² W.M. Johnson, 19-20.

But can Ruth return to us in the present? In our intertextual analyses with *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Oranges* and *Golem*, we have explored the traces of her woman-identified identity from several vantage points. Arguably, in Chapter Three we “prevailed” over the strategic ambiguity of the author(s) uncovered in Chapter Two by revealing another way of conceptualizing Ruth’s proto-lesbian identity, that is, as a woman-identified daughter. In this chapter, we have illuminated the dynamics of heterosexual and racial melancholia to understand the presence of a queer love in the text that is disavowed, though nonetheless (we have avowed) *real*. Can woman-identified readers finally then bring “our” Ruth out of the shadows?

It might be possible to bring Ruth home to us save for the fact that Ruth’s melancholic losses impact us as well. Our search for Ruth reveals a history of trauma in which we, too, are implicated. In this light Gitai’s notion of women as “the keepers of human memory” takes on a different valence. Memory and mourning, it seems, are inscribed on women’s bodies, as well as their psyches. Returning once again to the triumphant imagery of Isaiah 66, we notice at second glance that it is the *mourners* (v.1) who are encouraged to nurse at the breast of Zion. If Zion bears the weight of losses spoken and unspoken, then they are transmitted onto her children. Centuries later, we continue to carry the hidden losses of exilic displacement into the present.

Before we explore this matter further, let us turn to the relationship between melancholia and trauma and what it means to read through a hermeneutical lens of trauma. Melancholia and trauma each point toward the missed nature of an event. Yet whereas melancholia describes a particular experience of unmourned grief, trauma reflects the ongoing, repetitive re-experience of that loss. Trauma, explains psychoanalytic critic Cathy Caruth, “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor

later on.”⁸³ She theorizes that trauma bears the marks of “a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*,” since trauma reveals a tension between one’s encounter with death as well as a confrontation with one’s own survival.⁸⁴ All of our histories in some way entail a coming to terms with the incomprehensibility of trauma’s survival, therefore the study of history is the endeavor to listen to the wounds of others.⁸⁵

Melancholia, we might argue, is a particularly subtle form of trauma since there may be no direct “evidence” that a loss occurred. When we approach a text that we believe bears the marks of trauma, we place ourselves in the position of witnesses. However, due to the nature of trauma, the story that the text tells is rarely direct in relating the injuries it reflects. A survivor’s memory can be psychologically inaccessible, repressed, fragmented, culturally coded, and immobilized by fear.⁸⁶ Reading for trauma, then, one must pay attention to “fissures in language, puns, wordplay, and multiple levels of meaning.”⁸⁷ Certainly we could place the queer traces of Ruth and their suggestion of melancholia in this category. Yet, while we can look to those traces to uncover suggestions of repressed woman-identified love, we also find a great deal that continues to be inscrutable. To read through the lens of trauma is to grapple with the *unknowability* that attends trauma. Theologian Shelly Rambo writes:

Reading through the lens of trauma, my readings press the edges of . . . [conventional] frameworks, blurring the lines of logic precisely because the phenomenon of trauma draws us to the enigma of what remains. In the end, the handing over and reception of these texts (their interpretation) is more tenuous. If they do not yield what we expect, what do they yield? It is precisely at the edges of comprehension, the places where

⁸³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 7. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-9.

⁸⁶ T.G. Ashplant, Natasha Burchardt, Graham Dawson, and Selma Leydesdorff, “Introduction Trauma and Life Stories,” in *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, eds. Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Dawson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12-17.

⁸⁷ David Garber, Jr., “Trauma Theory,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Seven L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 422.

comprehension fails, that something else emerges and the possibility of something else arises.⁸⁸

When we look through the “shattered lens” of broken language, Rambo continues, we must be open to whatever we find, even if what we discover is beyond our realm of comprehension.⁸⁹ But if the “something else” to emerge out of queer reading of Ruth is not a reading of Ruth as “lesbian,” what is it?

Concluding her argument for reading the book of Ruth through the lens of melancholia, McAvan observes, “Heterosexual melancholia . . . is a compelling way to register the traces in Naomi and Ruth’s relationship without recourse to misleadingly certain signifiers like ‘lesbian.’⁹⁰ For McAvan, a lesbian-identified reading of Ruth entails more than simply labeling Ruth or Naomi as “homosexual.” “Indeed,” she writes, “their very *being* human is conditioned on queer impossibility.”⁹¹ Ruth illustrates a world devoid of a cultural space to name, celebrate and grieve alternative forms of love of which only vestiges linger. From this vantage point, a queer reading seeks not to bring Ruth out of the shadows, but to better understand why she remains there.

So what does this suggest about the task of literary historiography with which we began? Can we no longer look to Ruth for evidence of queer desire in any “positive” sense? Considering the elusiveness of queer figures in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, queer theorist Heather Love argues for a turn from effective to affective history. She explains:

Recently, long standing debates about gay and lesbian history have shifted from discussions of the stability of sexual categories over time to explorations of the relation between queer historians and the subjects they study. The turn from a focus on “effective history” to a focus on “affective history” has meant that critics have stopped asking,

⁸⁸ Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11, 37.

⁹⁰ McAvan, 10.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

“Were there gay people in the past?” but rather have focused on questions such as: “Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?” or even, perhaps, “What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?” Exploring the vagaries of cross-historical desire and the queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead, this work has made explicit the affective stakes of debates on method and knowledge. Mixing psychoanalytic approaches with more wide-ranging treatments of affect, they have traced the identifications, the desires, the longings, and the love that structure the encounter with the queer past.”⁹²

Love challenges historians and queer critics to become more honest about the investments that often accompany queer historiography, particularly the desire to forge an emotional connection across time. While queer historiography is a worthwhile task, the desire to rescue “gay” or “lesbian” figures from a nameless past is an endeavor fraught with dangers. In celebrating queer icons, scholars risk minimizing the anguish and shame those figures may have endured in order to transform their ignominy into pride.⁹³ When critics do acknowledge such suffering, it may be to seal those experiences off from the queer present, that is, to deny our own struggles in the now (“That wouldn’t happen today”).⁹⁴ In order to secure a more stable identity for ourselves in the present, we co-opt queer figures of the past into a narrative of progress, sometimes losing sight of the more troubling continuities between the past and present.⁹⁵

The ultimate danger of an effective approach to queer history is that we reenact the traumas of the past through a continual search for those “like us.” As Traub observes, “Despite the common invocation of how homosexuals have been ‘hidden from history,’ there has been little investigation into the effects on the collective *lesbian* psyche of the systematic denial of historicity.”⁹⁶ Love also notes the heightened sense of loss that attends queer history, which is filled with stories of failure, impossibility and loss. “While contact with the dead is impossible,”

⁹² Love, 31.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁶ Traub, 350; Cited in Love, 41. Original emphasis in Traub.

she writes, “queer history is marked by a double impossibility: we will never possess the dead; our longing for them is also marked by the historical impossibility of same-sex desire.”⁹⁷ The sense of loss is particularly acute when queer historical figures “refuse” our attempts at rescue.⁹⁸ Figures like Ruth and Naomi evade our attempts to bring them into the light, making our relationship to the past a more complex and painful one.

What would it mean to face this history honestly, in the words of Love, “to approach the past as something living – as something dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present”?⁹⁹ If we are to “feel backward,” she asserts, we must be willing to live with wounded attachments and bear the burdens of a “disqualified” identity.¹⁰⁰ If we come to think of ourselves as melancholic subjects willingly haunted by the ruins of the past, we can transform the figures of history from objects to subjects in their own right. And if we allow them to turn their backs on us, ventures Love, we may even find our way into a different future.¹⁰¹

Golem is a work of affective mythology. Gitai does not seek to exalt or redeem the biblical story of Ruth; rather, his film confronts us with the wreckage of disqualified identities that result from a legacy of exile. From this perspective, we may recontextualize some of *Golem*'s more dissonant aspects. The unrealizable love between Ruth and Naomi, the inability of Ruth and Boaz to bear a son that resembles them, and the incapability of the Spirit of Exile to see them all home together belie the promises of return. Resisting a seamless ending, Gitai allows these stories of loss and desolation to run their course. In doing so, he discourages us from “converting the trauma too rapidly.” Rather, he challenges us to honor Ruth's legacy in a more

⁹⁷ Love, 21.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4, 42.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 43.

meaningful way by interrogating the ideologies and structures of oppression that afflict the displaced.

To become a melancholic subject, argues Love, is to transform grief into grievance.¹⁰²

Allowing ourselves to be haunted by the melancholic past confronts us more squarely with realities of suffering in the present. Reflecting on the political usefulness of the vulnerability evoked by death, Butler writes:

If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another? To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.¹⁰³

We can choose to disavow our own mourning or embrace the historical lessons of loss. In shifting the question from why it matters if Ruth is a “lesbian” to why it matters *to us*, we may come closer to the “something else” that Rambo invokes. In our journey with the book *Ruth*, we have come to come face to face with the personal and collective trauma that attends bearing a disqualified identity. As we become present to our own pain, the experience enlarges our capacity to recognize and respond to the traumas of others. If we can remain vulnerable to the text in all its complexity, we can move from victim to witness and live a more “livable, lovable, grievable life.”¹⁰⁴

When scholars ponder why the book of *Ruth* was included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, its traumatic origins are rarely considered. We understand the story of *Ruth* to be a tale of successful return that would have resonated with the *Golah* returning from Babylon. But underneath that basic narrative is an unspoken account of shame, resentment, fear, and

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

¹⁰⁴ McAvan, 4.

renunciation. To draw an analogy, Cheng contends that the corpus of American literature is melancholic because it “excludes what it cannot forget,” that is, it is shaped by a legacy of race relations that it may deny but from which it cannot extricate itself.¹⁰⁵ In a similar way, Ruth carries forward a history of unassimilated losses born of social strife, ethnic tension and repudiated love. If listening to the wounds of others is to serve as the basis of history, then we must listen for what the story Ruth does not tell between the lines on the page.

Our search for Ruth ends where it began, with the precarious nature of our own desire. But if some things have been lost, something more has been found. Inscribed in the book of Ruth is a legacy of loss and a call for healing that demands witness. Our desires bear the marks of trauma, but in bringing them to the light, we have found a way forward. And our *tikvah* to Ruth has not been severed.

¹⁰⁵ Cheng, 12-13. Cheng is drawing upon Toni Morrison’s argument for an examination of the ways in which the presence of African-Americans within the white American psyche has shaped much of its literature. See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Conclusion (Un)final Gleanings

*Keep beckoning to me
From behind that closed door
The maid and the mother
And the crone that's grown old*

- Meg Keene

Writing about desire: compulsive, a challenge, self-indulgence, anxiety...above all, a project that defies completion.

- Catherine Belsey¹

At the end of Norma Rosen's "Dialogue on Devotion," the women offer up an extemporaneous prayer, speaking one line each in succession. When it is Becky's turn to speak, she implores, "Help us to remember the secret syllables that revive our encounter on the threshing floor . . . ," and then later, "Yet who knows whether we might, after irretrievable losses, encounter once more. . ." ² Her words, expectant, yet elusive and fragmented, are suggestive of trauma. Having wrestled with the text, she seems to emerge stirred by the encounter, and possibly wounded. In closing, her fellow participant, Sharon draws on the words of Naomi to articulate their collective wistfulness, "How is it with you, my daughter?" "Who are you, my daughter?" "What is my answer?" ³

While I hope that my readers find themselves more enriched than wanting, Susan's question reminds us of the personal and collective issues of identity that form the backdrop of our study. Whilst desire is always deferred according to Lacan's model, Gemma López asserts

¹ Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories*, 3.

² N. Rosen, 367.

³ *Ibid.*, 368.

that, as readers, we come closest to achieving desire in the formation of *agency*.⁴ As Catherine Belsey likewise reminds us:

Desire itself is split between the quest for satisfaction in the real, “a refusal of the signifier,” on the one hand, and the desire of (for) the Other, the origin of meaning, which entails “a lack of being.” This must be so because if the subject longs to find the real again, it also yearns to find the self which is perpetually created and destroyed by the signifier.⁵

The pursuit of desire is a re(de)fining process that is empowering to the degree that it gives us insight into our evolving selfhood. “One object of desire,” Belsey avers, “. . . is identity itself.”⁶

The quest for identity may be most safely explored through the encounter with fictional narrative. As a Lacanian mirror, fiction is an imaginary and “utopian” site where the reader may confront her desire for the Other.⁷ Narratives are transformative spaces where one can experience herself as a “subject in process”:

An understanding of subjectivity in poststructuralist terms proposes a subject constructed within language, rather than reflected by it. A far cry from the Cartesian, unified, coherent, and rational subject, the subject of poststructuralism is a stranger to itself, produced within discursive practices and, as such, multiple, *discoherent*, and constantly in process.

Within this proposal desire plays a major role in the construction of subjectivity. Desire, a phenomenon which “eludes final definition” and is “unable to name itself,” but the omnipresence of which is universally felt, is recognised by psychoanalysis as the central presence/absence around which subjectivity is shaped. The seduction of the Other (of desire) prompts the subject to mutate, to be generative of another, thus laying bare its inherent multiplicity and incoherence. The subject who desires, therefore, is a subject in process.⁸

While possession of the Other (desire) is unattainable, the utopian world of fantasy allows us to provisionally occupy various subject positions, to see ourselves in the process of becoming. “A

⁴ López, 253-260.

⁵ Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories*, 60. Belsey is citing Lacan, *Écrits*, 166.

⁶ Belsey, *Poststructuralism*, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25, 270-273.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 266. Emphasis in original. López is quoting Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories*, 3, 75.

story is a place where the subject . . . can play at being ‘Master,’ however temporarily,” writes López.⁹

The mirror of fiction may reflect back to us multiple and even conflicting desires. Yet, as Stephen Moore contends, even if we experience this fragmentation, it is worth revealing our “selves” in order “to communicate, imperfectly but adequately, with other selves, and thereby effect change in the material conditions of [our] existence.”¹⁰ The character Jeanette, as case in point, “increasingly textualise[s] her circumstances and her subjectivity, in an attempt to come to terms with the more troublesome aspects of her own reality through fantasy.”¹¹ We as her audience are transformed through her narrative(s) of becoming.

As we recall from the introduction, the guiding principle for our work has been *subjectivity*. One experiences herself as a reading subject as she embraces her vital role in the creation of meaning. We have journeyed with the book of Ruth from resistance and rupture to reclamation and re-engagement. The intertextual works we have engaged have themselves provided a critical mirror for Ruth, revealing the multifaceted desires of both the book and the character that bear its name.

With narratives, there is always the risk of seduction. While Brooks’s male plot of ambition has all the signs of an androcentric theory,¹² his work nonetheless accurately

⁹ López, 26. López’s reference to “Master” is an allusion to a conversation between Humpty Dumpty and Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. He tells Alice he may apply meanings to words in any manner he sees fit; the only question is “Which is to be Master?” The image of Humpty Dumpty is appropriate, of course, because of his propensity to both speak his truth and fall into pieces.

¹⁰ Stephen Moore, “True Confessions and Weird Obsessions: Autobiographical Interventions in Literary and Biblical Studies,” in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (Norwich, U.K.: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2009), 158.

¹¹ López, 269.

¹² Brooks’s idea of the “female plot” (notably tucked away in a footnote) as “a resistance” (presumably passive) and “what we might call an ‘endurance’: a waiting (and suffering) until the woman’s desire can be a permitted response to the expression of male desire” is disheartening, to the say the least. Brooks, 330n.

illuminates the ways in which ideology inheres in narrative structures. To withstand seduction, we must become resisting readers. Fetterley writes:

The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us. The consequence of this exorcism is the capacity for what Adrienne Rich describes as re-vision – “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” And the consequence, in turn, of this re-vision is that books will no longer be read as they have always been read and thus will lose their power to bind us unknowingly to their designs.¹³

In Chapter One, we saw how pioneering scholars like Jeannette Howard Forster, Celena Duncan, Mona West and Rebecca T. Alpert brought new sets of lenses to the book of Ruth. Exorcizing the heterosexual mind, they gave voice to lesbian and bisexual perspectives on the text that only visual artists had insinuated a century earlier. Because of their re-vision, queer perspectives are now a mainstay within Ruth scholarship.

While my reading of Ruth has challenged the stability (though not the validity) of their woman-identified interpretations, I hope I have carried on their spirit of resistance. In Chapter Two, we refrained from the temptation to smooth out of all the text’s irregularities, ironies, manifold meanings and uncomfortable episodes. We refused to acquiesce to the male plot of ambition and set aside the idyll for a “leaner, tougher story.” Our careful analysis of the text’s ambiguity complicates previous lesbian-identified interpretations. At the same time, by calling attention to the strategically ambiguous treatment of the Ruth-Naomi relationship, we better understand how the erotic connection between them, while carefully depicted, is nevertheless a constituent aspect of the text.

During the trial against Idgie and Big George in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Ruth Jamison is asked by the prosecuting attorney, “Why would a respectable Christian woman go anywhere

¹³ Fetterley, xxii-xxiii. Fetterley is citing Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” *College English* 34 (1972): 18.

with this Idgie Threadgoode?” Ruth responds, “She’s the best friend I ever had. And I love her.” At that moment, Idgie appears stunned that Ruth has spoken these words aloud. When I first watched the film as a young woman, it was here that I knew for sure this was a love story between two women. Having fallen in love with more than one close friend myself (as budding lesbians often do), I saw my reflection in these characters. Yet it was also an early lesson in equivocations and half-truths. One could possess a deep emotional and physical love for another woman; naming that love outside the context of friendship was another matter.

Nonetheless, the queer traces that line the stories of Ruth and Naomi and Idgie and Ruth are palpable enough to remind woman-identified women that they are not alone. And if narrative design (even the strategically ambiguous kind) tells us something about the history of sexuality, then the male plot of ambition relates only part of the story. Literary theorist Susan S. Lanser reminds us, “Literary critics have long acknowledged that form is (a kind of) content and, as such, socially meaningful.”¹⁴ Lanser, tracing the narrative form of European fiction from the pornographic writings of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries to the domestic novels of the Victorian era, argues that the heterosexual stories within these narratives are largely dependent on “the structural deployment of same-sex desire,” a kind of “sapphic dialogics.”¹⁵ Positing a form of diachronic “sapphic-literary history,” she demonstrates how the heterosexual stories are filtered through homoerotic forms of narration, in which critiques of the patriarchal status quo are often embedded.¹⁶ We may draw a loose parallel here to the “perverse middle” of Ruth, which both strengthens the heterosexual story (à la Brooks) and subverts that same story.

¹⁴ Susan S. Lanser, “Sapphic Dialogics: Historical Narratology and the Sexuality of Form,” in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, eds. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 186.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

Could we in some way trace this “sapphic-literary history” back to Ruth? Perhaps no, due to the great historical divide and the limited availability of ancient texts. We may nonetheless claim Ruth as part of the “sapphic-literary” *canon*, given the fruits of our intertextual analyses.¹⁷ As Fewell writes, “Texts echo other texts, and as such can be understood as ‘echo chambers.’ In an echo chamber – that is, in a literary context for echoing – any text being echoed will *sound* differently than it has elsewhere.”¹⁸ With each new intertextual reading, our analyses have allowed us to hear the tale of Ruth and Naomi in new registers, further bolstering the significance of their woman-identified story.

Moreover, our intertextual investigations have produced considerable historical gleanings. Where previous queer readings of Ruth illuminated the erotic dimensions of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship, none have offered a compelling rationale for *why* a woman-identified, proto-lesbian story would have been produced for an ancient audience. Here we have affirmed that a lesbian-identified approach is not simply an interesting contemporary “take” on the text, but critical to understanding the text’s post-exilic function. The strategy of “revealing and concealing” the eroticism between Ruth and Naomi offers historical insight into the diverse make-up and divergent desires of and amongst the people of Yehud. Despite an “economy of secrets,” it appears that the author(s) of Ruth strategically employed the relationship between Ruth and Naomi as a way of negotiating communal boundaries, making appeals to diversity and

¹⁷ Elizabeth Freeman proposes a similarly synchronic approach to literary history, which she terms “erotohistoriography.” “Erotohistoriography,” she writes, “is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid” [Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 95]. Freeman’s emphasis on the ways in which the present is inflected with the past is another useful means of thinking about how queer subjects carry the trauma of queer invisibility from the past into the present. My thanks to Paige Rawson for pointing me toward the concept.

¹⁸ Danna Nolan Fewell, *Reading Between Texts*, 21. Emphasis in original. The theory of echo was developed by English scholar John Hollander in *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). At times echoes between texts are absolutely uncanny, as the with the overlapping connections between Idgie Threadgoode, Winterson’s cat’s cradle, and the Hebrew notion of *tikvah*.

inclusion while upholding patriarchal ideals. Ancient readers from different walks of life (divorced and widowed women, patriarchal heads of households, men and women of mixed ethnicity, women-identified women and so on) could all look to the book of Ruth to, in one way or another, affirm their values and experiences.

It also appears that the book of Ruth may have functioned as an exploratory space, or in Clines's terminology, a "dream," in which its author(s) and readers/listeners could express and reflect upon their complex emotions regarding the return to Zion. Through vicarious identification with Ruth and her complex, woman-identified relationship to Naomi and to the "mother's house," those in Yehud could safely exercise their desire for agency in light of the social pressures they faced. Ruth's struggle to individuate, reflective of the contemporary negotiations between lesbian daughters and their mothers, suggests how those in Yehud may have found themselves on the "fragile border" of abjection where threats of invisibility, alienation, absorption and expulsion were daily realities. In Kristeva's own brief reading of Ruth, she remarks that the connection between David and Ruth is itself suggestive of a struggle to make sense of a heterogeneous identity. "If David is *also* Ruth, if the sovereign is *also* a Moabite, peace of mind will then never be his lot, but a constant quest for welcoming and going beyond the other in oneself."¹⁹ Though Ruth the foreigner may embody "that which is cast out (ab-jetted) of the self and considered loathsome," her borderline identity makes her "dangerously

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 76. Emphasis in original; cf. Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 100-103. To our deficit, Kristeva does not read the relationship between Ruth and Naomi in light of her theory of abjection. She writes, "Always obedient to her mother-in-law, Ruth becomes the representative of her desire" (Kristeva, *Strangers*, 73). Nonetheless, Kristeva seems to recognize the significant dialectic between assimilation and individuation that take place in the book of Ruth. For a helpful evaluation of Kristeva's view of Ruth as the ideal immigrant, see Honig, 66-70.

attractive.”²⁰ Naomi’s query to Ruth, “Who are you?,” is a question that likely reverberated in the ears of all those who heard them in the ancient audience as they considered who they were within the changing world around them.

To come to terms with the return to Mother Zion also seems to have necessitated grief. However, as we saw in our intertextual analysis alongside *Golem*, the book of Ruth provides historical witness to grief forestalled and losses disavowed. In our investigation into the heterosexual and racial melancholia that lines the narrative, we observed most clearly the “unsayable” nature of desire. Yet, in bringing those disavowed losses to light, we have a better understanding of the thwarted relationship between Ruth and Naomi. At the same time, we draw an important lesson about the limits of queer historiography, or more precisely, what the aims of queer historiography might be as we seek to re-engage the present.

Queer history is, at least in part, the unfinished process of grieving. If we wish “to furnish desire with a history,” argues Belsey, then we must “trace the constraints and resistances of desire in their historical discontinuity.”²¹ This not only entails being attentive to ways in which queer figures of the past resist heteronormative ways of life, but also the ways in which their desires are forestalled, rendered subversive and forced underground. If we wish to name Ruth our Queer ancestress, we may have to come to terms with the queer impossibilities that attend her history and resist the urge to shore up our identity on her shoulders. Belsey writes, “The struggle . . . to establish a happy and wholesome sexual relation, to satisfy what might possibly be an insatiable desire, keeps us quite literally off the streets.”²² If our sexual relation to the past prevents us from recognizing our shared histories of trauma in the present, then we have converted the trauma prematurely and missed the opportunity to connect our present losses to the

²⁰ Landy, 228.

²¹ Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories*, 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

suffering of others. As theologian Laurel Schneider writes, “Identity is really a communal designation, never an individual one *How* for instance, does being lesbian make me a better, more whole person working toward a better more honest and peaceful world?”²³

“Everyone who tells a story tells it differently,” exclaims Jeanette, “just to remind us that everybody sees it differently.”²⁴ If our analyses of Ruth has given new perspective on the sociohistorical circumstances of the text’s production, they have also proffered new insights into the issues of narrative form and content with which we began. As we saw in our initial analysis of Ruth with *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the realization of the male plot of ambition and Freud’s satisfying sexual story entails the suppression of sexual difference and even the erasure of a story’s principal character(s). When we succumb to the lure of male emplotment, the “perverse middle” gives way to the end. Judith Roof sums up the problems with this “end-all and be all” approach to stories:

What Freud does in shifting the end from Sophoclean suffering to knowledge²⁵ parallels the way we tend to assume that orgasm, rather than death or another story is a more fitting end. Making the end a higher high seems to provide a more exciting justification for the story, but the end’s modern displacement from suffering to mastery is determined by more than just a need for good kicks or a right to a return on our narrative investment. Any rhetorical emphasis on the end – the end where knowledge is located according to some ideology of narrative – may distort its magnitude and make it difficult to see the importance of the story’s other parts and their possible relation to sex and death. Where the end represents some sense of a story’s totality or wholeness, criticism relating the parts to the whole also tends to focus on the end, not as the subject of, but as a precondition to criticism, even while the parts themselves are equally important. But if an emphasis on the end is a product of the ideologies by which the story is formed in the first place, it is difficult to find meaning in the rest of the story without reference to the end.²⁶

²³ Laurel Schneider, “What if It Is a Choice? Some Implications of the Homosexuality Debate for Theology,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 91, no. 3 (2001): 30-31. Emphasis in original.

²⁴ Winterson (1985), 93.

²⁵ See Chapter One, note 84.

²⁶ Roof, 13-14.

If an emphasis on the end is the very “precondition of criticism,” then our readings will always be circumscribed by the ideological demand for closure. Only when we attend to those strategies which *precondition us* to read for the ending will we be able to break out of the cycle of narrative manipulation and delve into deeper layers of the story.

After interrogating the seductive valences of the idyll and the male plot of ambition, we turned to appropriations of the Ruth story which displace and decenter the conventional focus on Ruth’s end. In different registers, *Golem* and *Oranges* “echo” the perverse middle of Ruth through their depictions of homoerotic love and the identities that are formed in the movement from exile to return. *Golem* disrupts Ruth’s linear plot by calling into question the very notion of a final return. As Gitai’s characters wander from place to place, we encounter the concealed presence of heterosexual and racial melancholia. *Golem* helps us to understand the narrative of Ruth as a story of arrested grief and presses us to move backwards from the end to re-interrogate the conditions of exile with which the story begins. Gitai successfully disavows us of the notion of reading Ruth as an idyll, confronting us with the stark realities of a nomadic existence.

By reimagining the nature of Ruth’s woman-identified identity in light of the relationship between Jeanette and Mother in *Oranges*, we opened yet another new window onto her story. Where previous lesbian-identified interpreters contemplated Ruth’s sexual subjectivity solely in romantic terms, our rereading in light of the experience of contemporary lesbian daughters enables us to view Ruth as a *kallāt* in the term’s full sense, as Naomi’s daughter-in-law and bride. We can now embrace in a fresh way the textual ambiguities surrounding Ruth and Naomi’s relationship, understanding Ruth’s struggle to *uncling* from Naomi as one expression of a multifaceted woman-identified identity.

The narrative style and open-ended conclusion to *Oranges* encourages us to think differently about the relationship between structure and content in the book of Ruth. At first glance, Ruth's tightly-wrought organization appears to have little in common with Winterson's eclectic assemblage of semi-autobiographical chronicles and re-worked fairy tales. In the introduction to the 1991 Vintage edition of *Oranges*, Winterson describes her book as:

an experimental novel: its interests are antilinear. It offers a complicated narrative structure disguised as a simple one, it employs a very large vocabulary and a beguilingly straight-forward syntax. This means you can read in spirals. As a shape, the spiral is fluid and allows infinite movement. But is it movement backwards or forwards? Is it height or depth? Draw several, each drifting into each and all this will be clear Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway, every turning yields another turning, not symmetrical, not obvious. Not chaos, either. A sophisticated mathematical equation made harder to unravel because X and Y have different values on different days.²⁷

While Ruth's chiastic structure is more apparent, the reader is likewise propelled backwards and forwards in a spiraling movement as the text makes, unmakes and remakes meaning through its many instances of doubling. And while Ruth displays a clear investment in linear outcomes, it also betrays its ambivalence toward those same outcomes by virtue of Ruth's ambiguous departure from the narrative. Just as we do not know the full implications of Jeanette's return to the house of Mother, we are not privy to how Ruth's personal story unfolds. In our midrashic imagination, we hope for many more accounts of survival and courage yet to be narrated.

When we turn back to the biblical narrative, do these reconstructions help us to overcome or altogether abandon the male plot of ambition? No and yes. Undoubtedly, as chapter four opens Ruth's narrative of self-discovery is subsumed into the overarching patriarchal story. On the surface, the narrator's desires for a satisfying heteronormative ending may appear to trump our desires to see the relationship between Ruth and Naomi flourish. However, as Jeanette

²⁷ Winterson (1991), xiii.

professes, “No emotion is the final one.”²⁸ By foregrounding the traces of homoerotic love and Ruth’s emerging subjectivity, we subvert the male plot. As a result, narrative agency appreciably shifts from the narrator to the reader in the libidinal economy of narrative desire. Woman-identified interpreters themselves are afforded a renewed measure of subjectivity in relation to the biblical text.

And while readers have lamented Ruth’s disappearance in chapter four, her pivotal moment as a “subject in process” disrupts the temporal movement of the narrative. Powell, Jones and Kim write:

In a story purportedly about Israelite history (being in time), Ruth occupies space. She neither presses forward nor backward but calls “the now” into being. This is not to say the moment has no bearing on the future, only that Ruth resists the teleological pressures that would define her. Where Naomi and Boaz seek to order their worlds through the mastering of time, symbolized in the promises of procreation and land redemption, Ruth commandingly declares her presence in the now. Unencumbered by her foreignness, rival redeemers, or the possibility of future progeny, she calls upon Boaz to help her obtain a livable present

[Ruth] interrupts the male plot of ambition by upsetting the hierarchy of the narrative’s end over the middle. She redirects our attention away from the (re)productive climax long enough to insist we look her in the face. *Hinneh!* Even then, no ultimate truths are unveiled. Perhaps that is the point. The *irreducibility* of Ruth’s desires reminds us that narrative desires are not univocal and the possibilities for the story’s end are not singular.²⁹

Jeanette similarly reflects on the multiple and even overlapping possibilities of time:

I have a theory that every time you make an important choice, the part of you left behind continues the other life you could have had. Some people's emanations are very strong, some people create themselves afresh outside of their own body. This is not fancy. If a potter has an idea, she makes it into a pot, and it exists beyond her, in its own separate life. She uses a physical substance to display her thoughts. If I use a metaphysical substance to display my thoughts, I might be anywhere at one time, influencing a number of different things, just as the potter and her pottery can exert influence in different places. There's a chance that I'm not here at all, that all the parts of me, running along all the choices I did and didn't make, for a moment brush against each other. That I am still an evangelist in the North, as well as the person who ran away. Perhaps for a while these

²⁸ Winterson (1985), 49.

²⁹ Powell, Jones and Kim. Emphasis in original. On reflections on temporal and spatial identities, see Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

two selves have become confused. I have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something I might have been, playing itself out.³⁰

By confounding the dictates of linearity, Winterson reminds us that stories, like people, have manifold potentialities and may go on to impact the lives of others in ways that far exceed the limitations of narrative structures. In author(iz)ing their own stories, Ruth and Jeanette, each in their own way, undermine narrative finality.³¹

Lastly, our exploration of textuality and identity has confronted us with the idea of the text as mother.³² If our engagement with the written word is an expression of our desire for the Other, it is also a desire for the textual (m)other. Kristeva's theory of abjection offers insight into the nature of the reader-text relationship, in which the reader continually asserts and yields to the mother text. This is an especially apt image for readers of the Bible. Particularly for those who were taught to view it as sacred, the Bible is a thread tugging at us and a mother to which we cling and uncling. Through our passionate engagement with her, we enact *jouissance* and learn to tell the story of our own subjectivity. Yet in doing so we also find that the mother text is not just a mirror to our own perfect reflection. The (m)other possesses her own subjectivity, her own desires, and she "too needs separation as well as merger."³³ Perhaps in this light, Ruth's response to Naomi's question is, or should be, this: "Who are you, Naomi?"³⁴

³⁰ Winterson (1985), 169.

³¹ While I have not engaged the work of Bakhtin directly, his concept of "unfinalizability" is applicable here. With unfinalizability, Bakhtin means that our knowledge about any character or person, and by extension the plots which include her or him, are provisional. He writes, "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future, and will always be in the future." [Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 166]. Bakhtin's narrative theory has figured in Fewell's recent scholarship, as well as that of my colleague Christy Cobb, and I am grateful for the insights shared.

³² For more on the concept of the text as mother and its implications for criticism, see Jane Gallop, "The Monster in the Mirror: The Feminist Critic's Psychoanalysis," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 13-24.

³³ Gallop, 23.

³⁴ Spivak writes, "However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman?" See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies*, no. 62 (1981): 179; cited in Gallop, 24.

As I draw to a close, I am grateful that the mother text has not succeeded in pressing us to leave her. She has born our resistance and survived. Ruth is, after all, a book about survival, a text where displaced women must obstinately face each day anew, relying on their own strength and ingenuity. Through it, I am cognizant of my own endurance, my own will to find sustenance. I glean until my hands are raw because sometimes, at the edge of bitterness, plenty exists.

If Ruth is my Queer ancestress, it is because she transcends unthinkable circumstances. If her story is lined with harsh truth and throbbing memory, she is my sister. If she loves herself and others with abandon, I (sometimes) see my own volatile reflection. If her transcendence is incomplete or even effaced by the constraints of narrative, it serves as a reminder that my own narrative of becoming goes on, and my transcendence – if I have her courage – will be surpassed only by my demise. I am a lesbian, a daughter, a mother, a woman. I do desire so much from this story. Ruth seduces me, and I am compelled into the frame, out of the frame and into the spaces in between.

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