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Ruth and Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin's thematization of humor and the comic has made him popular in postmodern critical circles precisely because his studies expand the theory of carnival beyond a single folk event and identify the carnivalesque as a semiotic cultural code, signifying more than just texts which focus on the specific popular tradition in medieval Europe. Bakhtin's theory of carnival, manifest in his discussions of Rabelais and "forbidden laughter" in medieval folk culture, argued that folk celebrations which allowed for rowdy humor and the parody of authority offered the oppressed lower classes relief from the rigidity of the feudal system and the church and an opportunity for expressing nonconformist, even rebellious views. The carnivalesque spirit, therefore, is a form of popular, "low" humor which celebrates the anarchic and grotesque elements of authority and of humanity in general and encourages the temporary "crossing of boundaries" where the town fool is crowned, the higher classes are mocked, and the differences between people are flattened as their shared humanity, the body, becomes subject of crude humor. Bakhtin saw in carnivalesque humor a social force that allowed a text to enter a sociopolitical discourse, while enjoying impunity, and thus bring about cultural transformation.

A Bakhtinian reading of Ruth uncovers the subversive elements in this ancient Hebrew masterpiece and highlights the semantic and

semiotic codes of cultural exchange between authority and the marginalized inherent in it.¹ The Bakhtinian paradigm also centralizes the end-of-harvest celebration, followed by the climactic scene between Boaz and Ruth at the threshing floor, as a mini-carnival in which existing structures are mocked and parodied, bringing about a social, psychological, and theological transformation.

Indeed, the tale as a whole, framed by the spring festivities, is narrated from a carnivalesque perspective in two ways: First, the language of heteroglossia is evident in this tale, giving voice to multiple and contradictory points of view expressed across a broad spectrum of dialect, from high to low, from elegant and euphemistic to direct and physical. The voice of the sub-class is also heard here, embodied in (though not limited to) Ruth who is thrice a stranger by virtue of her ethno-religious origins, gender, and socio-economic status.. Secondly, the spirit of revelry, mockery, and defiance underlies the entire Ruth narrative and is not limited to the night of drinking and merry making. The comic element appears as the subtle strategy of the numerous minority groups represented in the tale, the seasonal field workers, the poor of the town, women of various social and economic groups, and the religious and ethnic other. The comic view also offers explanations to several puzzling elements in the text and in Boaz's conduct that have not been adequately addressed so far.²

While there is no indication in Ruth that its narrator(s) aims at radical cultural transformation, the tale represents several cultural adjustments undergone by the Beth-Lehem community, such as the acceptance of the foreign wife, the condoning of women's sexual

trickery, and the expansion of the meaning of the familial redeemer to include a kin other than the brother in law.

The barley celebration of the Beth-Lehem community functions as a mini-carnival in the Bakhtinian sense. Naomi, a native Beth-Lehemite, knows that on the night of the winnowing of the grain there will be communal festivities with excessive drinking that may turn Boaz intoxicated and vulnerable, unable to return home to his own bed (3:3). Indeed, Boaz is described as not only satisfied, but actually that “his heart was merry” after he ate and drank. While the terse narrator of Ruth does not elaborate on the festivities (perhaps because the details of the custom were known to the audiences of this tale), several of Bakhtin’s elements of the carnival are present here: there is a democratizing spirit in process: Boaz, the venerable, wealthy pillar of the community sleeps in the field among his laborers, and thus the public celebrations bring about an inversion of the social hierarchies established early in the tale. Boaz and the other men are under the influence of wine (otherwise Ruth could not have sneaked unobserved to his side), and there is a spirit of bawdiness and some breaking of rules that occurs, which allows Naomi and Ruth to risk their feminine reputation in such a dangerous scheme.³ Bakhtin’s sense of the “liberating” and “pluralizing” force of the carnival is also in evidence, as both Naomi, an older, respectable woman, and Ruth, a stranger who is constantly at risk in a hostile environment, become bold enough to engage in such a plan. Naomi may also count on the general feeling that on this particular night of public tumult and reveling, psychological boundaries are also broken and some

lawlessness is tolerated, so that both Ruth and Boaz will be freed of the shackles of convention and act more boldly than usual. A crudely physical humor is introduced when the elderly Boaz, startled (by his own nakedness or by the exposed woman lying next to him, as will be explained later) becomes disoriented and fails to recognize Ruth. The events of the threshing floor, meant to take advantage of Boaz' already loosened inhibitions, thus agree with Bakhtin's definition of the carnival as an arena where social decorum is rejected and violated and scandalous behavior is overlooked, providing release from oppressive etiquette.⁴ Another element of the carnival manifest in Ruth, the valorization of Eros and the life force, makes Ruth's success and the submission of Boaz to her scheme possible. In fact, the tale ends with the birth of a male child to Boaz and Ruth, the foreigner, thus confirming Bakhtin's notion of the power of Eros to destroy boundaries and create "misalliances." This male child, perceived as a substitute (grand)son for Naomi's dead son by the joyous community, highlights the intertwining of life and death that characterizes carnival celebrations and marks the triumph of life over death in the communal sense. Thus the death of Naomi's son becomes the Bakhtinian "cheerful death" because the birth of the child assures the survival of the people.⁵

The crucial night that marks the height of barley celebrations, when prevailing rules are suspended, identifies the carnival at the heart of Ruth and offers, to use Bakhtin's language, "a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of men, and of human relations."⁶ It also directs us to review

the total narrative of Ruth in light of the comic tone underlying it and uncover the subtle tension that exists in this community between high and low, rich and poor, resident and alien. These oppressive distinctions call for a carnivalesque perspective on life and society (not limited only to the time of official festivities) to alleviate their harsh impact both on the benefactors of this hierarchical system, the ruling class, and its victims, the poor and marginalized.

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque emerges in those moments in history when an oppressive system begins to crack and the “decentralization of a culture has undermined the authority of social establishments.”⁷ The biblical narrator places the tale of Ruth during the period of the judges (1:1), perhaps the most unruly and chaotic time in ancient Israel. In this respect, the carnivalesque unmask the forces of upheaval and lawlessness at work in the seemingly solid, God-fearing, charitable society depicted in this tale. The carnival threatens the very fabric of established society, but since it allows for the venting of all rebellious and oppositional sentiments, it also brings about social harmony and peace, such as that described at the end of the tale. The date of the story’s composition is even more relevant to its Bakhtinian nature and the antinomian inherent in it. Several scholars have argued that the story of Ruth, the Moabite convert to Judaism, was composed during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, when a fierce debate was raging between those who returned to the land with foreign wives and the nationalists who wished to cleanse the community of foreign influences.⁸ Thus the marriage of the foreigner to the pillar of the community is a semiotic support of a political view that opposes

official “monologic” policy and enforces a dialogue with the other. According to Bakhtin, “monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities. . . . With a monologic approach . . . another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. . . . Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word.”⁹ On the other hand, “the dialogic means of seeking the truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth.”¹⁰

The locus of the carnival in *Ruth* is the open field on the night of the barley feast, yet from the very opening of *Ruth*, its carnivalesque subtext is evident, allowing counter-hegemonic, subversive and mocking voices to run parallel to the official, serious, and pious tone of the ruling class. This tone emphasizes heterogeneity and misalliances, puts social decorum and norms to mockery, and sanctions the comic release of the forces of disorder, thus reaching at the end a state of collective healing and communal union. The constant presence of the community and its diversity of voices create the Bakhtinian heteroglossia, mixing in their tenor and tone the lofty and the low, the serious and the mocking, the sympathetic and the condemning, the masculine and the feminine, the higher classes and the field laborers, the landowner and the poor, the judges and the street crowds. The opening words of the tale bespeak famine, desertion, and death, yet their tone is easily recognizable as carnivalesque; that is, the storyteller is the communal voice, the folk, relishing the subversive elements in a familiar tale, told in anticipation of public seasonal

celebrations, or during the actual festivities. Jewish tradition assigns the reading of the Book of Ruth during the holiday of Shavuot, the Day of the Giving of the Torah, but behind the sacred event lies the seasonal holiday, dating back to pagan times, which celebrates nature's bounty, fertility, and Eros; thus the setting of Ruth as a tale orally transmitted is undoubtedly the public square. If the story of the untimely death of all males in a family is horrifying, it is being told and retold within the framework of merrymaking and groups partying, thus allowing the communal body to overcome its fear of death and destruction even while narrating the catastrophic events that befall the family. The storyteller(s)' voice is heard in the sons' rhyming names, which appear to be contrived, a concoction of a comic/macabre mind: *ma ḥlon*, which may be translated as "a little illness," and *kilyon*, "destruction." These names sound more like nicknames given by the mocking collective narrative voice in retrospect, after the sons' demise, than names given by loving and hopeful parents. There is more than a shade of dark humor here, setting the tone of crudeness and farce that travels through the narrative. It becomes clear that the teller of the tale is not one, but many, an amalgam of the many voices of community people who transmitted the story orally through the ages, so that the narrative fabric bears the marks of multiple voices, men and women. The chilling name-giving is the common people's commentary on the selfish aristocrats, but it is also in line with the spiteful carnivalesque spirit which laughs in the face of death. In fact, a satirical or even farcical view of people's names continues in the tale: Orpah's synecdochic name is also comical (suggesting *oreph*, the back

of the neck that Orpah showed her mother-in-law when she turned to go back home), for we will forever see her not as a full human being, but as a “back of the neck” disappearing into the horizon. This, too, may very well be an after-the-fact nickname given by the flippant voice in the public square, using a measure of humorous “poetic license” while recounting the family’s saga to the audience gathering for the festivities.

At the end of the tale, the near-kin who refuses to redeem Ruth also gets a carnivalesque treatment by the story-teller(s): he is not deemed important enough to be named, or he is punished for his failure to do the right thing by being referred to with the comic moniker *peloni ‘almoni*, “so and so.”

Naomi plays with her own name in a carnivalesque manner when she says to the women of Beth-Lehem not to call her Naomi (sweet, pleasant), but Mara (bitter one; 1:20). On the face of it Naomi argues that her name should be altered, but she actually challenges God to change her situation so that there will be agreement between her name, denoting comfort and pleasure, and her fate.¹¹ There is no denying the bitterness in Naomi’s voice, yet it seems as if, in the midst of her sorrow, Naomi realizes the irony or even comedy in her name and momentarily engages in self-ridicule, essentially parodying the discrepancy between the optimism implied in her name and her dire current situation.

The spirit of carnival permeates the scene of Naomi and Ruth’s arrival in Beth Lehem in the midst of barley harvesting. It seems that the town’s streets are bustling with life, and the whole

community is in the open square, enjoying the spring season. So while the community is abuzz about Naomi and the changes in her circumstances and her looks (1:19), it cheerfully confirms its own good fortune. The presence of women suggests the marketplace, which, according to Bakhtin, always had a carnivalesque nature: (The) “marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained ‘with the people.’”¹² Naomi expresses her grievances to the town’s women in a tone that is at once tragic and comic. The scene she envisions, of the heavenly court that sits down in judgment of her (1:20-21), may reverberate with Jobian echoes, but it is also so exaggerated that the discrepancy between the miserable woman and the august court that has been convened to deal with her case becomes comical¹³.

The fields of Beth-Lehem, like the open streets and the marketplace, are public domains where diverse economic, gender, and ethnic groups are present. When Boaz appears there, the Bakhtinian contrast between the carnival as the feast of the people, and the monologic authority of the governing class is in evidence: Boaz’s stock address to his laborers is serious, official, and standard, evoking the highest authority, God, and thus subtly reaffirming the hierarchical nature of life.

Boaz’s role within the carnivalesque scheme of things helps explain some of the puzzling elements in his conduct throughout the tale and opens a window to a deeper understanding of his personality.

Studies of the nature of comic types, the origins of laughter, and the Christian/ Humanistic tradition of the fool complement Bakhtin's conception of carnivalesque humor. Northrop Frye discussed the Saturnalia, named after Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture, as a site of chaos that is characterized by the breaking of all boundaries, merrymaking, and indulgence in food and wine; often, one of the participants leading the festivities assumes the role of the Lord of Misrule.¹⁴ It is undeniable that throughout the narrative Boaz represents the heights of seriousness in language and manners, yet it is equally possible to view him as a comic character. Traditional commentary on Ruth sees Boaz as a dignified, composed, and staid pillar of the community, but in a carnivalesque reinterpretation of Ruth, posited on the overturning of social norms, Boaz joins the revelries like one of the commoners, or even leads them. Without the atmosphere of unrestrained revelry that is expected to envelop all celebrants during the spring festivities, the scheme of Naomi and Ruth would never have worked. Indeed, Naomi must be acquainted with the custom of reversal of normal behavior during the harvest festivities, when the most respectable and disciplined citizen of the community becomes the leader of rowdy celebrations and loses control of his senses.

In his early appearance, Boaz, the elderly patriarch, seems immune to the carnivalesque; yet he is actually seen as a somewhat comical figure long before Ruth manipulates him at the threshing floor. Henri Bergson has suggested that the comic writer uses several tricks including discrepancies, deceptions, misunderstandings, mistaken

identities, the unexpected, and stock comic types.¹⁵ The latter are embodied in the three main protagonists in Ruth, appearing as variations of the conventional types featured in classical comedy and in comic narratives in general. Boaz plays the *senex*, the comic old man; Ruth is the *virgo*, the young girl often inaccessible for a variety of reasons; and Naomi is the *servus callidus*, the clever slave, or the *servus delusus*, the crafty servant whose inspired planning and improvisation bring about the happy comic resolution.¹⁶

The discrepancy in age and status between Boaz and Ruth, reflected also in the marked differences in their speech, is rife with comic promise. The attraction that a young woman holds for an old man has often been used by writers and tellers of popular jokes for its hilarious, farcical possibilities. When the older Boaz notices Ruth among the people in his field, it is because he finds the young woman interesting, unusual, or perhaps even attractive. Furthermore, Boaz's lofty rhetoric, imbued with the concepts of morality, goodness, and charity, contrasts with his inaction through most of the story. I read Ruth's words to Boaz during their initial encounter, when she asks him why he has singled her out from among the poor gleaning in his field, as filled with a playful, even teasing tone, under their thankful facade. The old man embarks on a lengthy speech about how he has already heard of Ruth; his stilted, effusive language contrasts amusingly with Ruth's easy and straightforward tone. We can only imagine Boaz's young workers laughing and sneering at their old master behind his back. Further, Ruth gently extricates from the unsuspecting Boaz the admission that he has known for some time about her arrival in Beth-

Lehem with Naomi, his kin. It appears that Boaz' public image as a benefactor of the poor clashes with the neglect he displays when it came to his two female relatives. Boaz emerges as a pompous old man for whom talk is easy, but who is awkward and hesitant when it comes to interaction with a young woman that he obviously likes. In public, he praises Ruth for her good deeds, but he is reluctant, perhaps afraid for his good name, to visit the women's home in private. For all his respectable standing in the community, the carnivalesque voice identifies in him a "comic flaw" which is an excessive concern with his public image, an inclination to make grand public gestures on which he does not follow through. To further his comic role, one may locate his flaw more specifically in his timidity with women, his sexual shyness, which creates a comic discrepancy between his status as a wealthy, powerful figure and his diffidence with women in private. Ruth and Naomi use these weaknesses to their own advantage; like all oppressed minority groups they are revealed to be attuned to the carnivalesque possibilities in the high and mighty and to the farcical side of life and of people which co-exists with the serious.

Boaz's stale and rigid style adds to his comic stature. He uses a set format of greetings, addressing his workers with the conventional formula of "God be with you," to which they respond with "God bless you" (2:4), and customary blessings ("May God grant you due recompense"; "May your payment be full from the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge," 2:12). The old man sounds like a puppet repeating familiar formulae, rather than expressing his

own original sentiments. This renders him mechanical, robotic, and therefore comical in the Bergsonian sense.¹⁷

In his discussion of comic types Frye distinguishes between the *ieron*, the creator of comedy, and the *alazon*, the butt of it.¹⁸ The *ieron*, according to Frye, may often be the heroine, who brings about the dramatic resolution through disguise or some other trickery. According to this description, Ruth is the perfect *ieron*. Frye also speaks of the *ieron* as “the type entrusted with hatching the schemes which bring about the hero’s victory,” often a female confidant; in Ruth this type of *ieron* is Naomi.¹⁹ In this comic scheme of things, Boaz plays the *alazon*, so that while he holds so much power over people, his workers, the poor that he allows into his field, and his female relatives, the narrative’s carnivalesque spirit positions him at the same time as the comic victim and the butt of jokes in his environment.

Ruth’s strategy of gently embarrassing the old man, who is so obsessed with his status in the community, culminates in the scene at the threshing floor which displays a classic example of the comic situation known as the “bed trick,” or the fooling of the powerful male.²⁰ This, again, reinforces of the inversion of hierarchical distinctions between the ruling class and the marginal, the patriarch and the woman. The *alazon*, says Frye, is often the “heavy father” or a surrogate of this character (Boaz addresses Ruth as “my daughter”) who often displays “gullibility.” Frye further describes the *alazon* as a “man of words rather than of deeds.”²¹ As noted, Boaz often uses a highly rhetorical language, lauding charity and good works, and yet he stays within the realm of speech, not that of deeds; it is the women

who drive him to action. The climactic moment at the threshing floor, while carrying serious risks for Ruth and Naomi, can easily develop into physical farce as the old man, usually buttoned-up and proper, wakes disheveled from his drunken stupor, alarmed to find a strange woman at his feet in the open field. Ruth, on the other hand, is sober, controlled, and purposeful; she asks, in fact orders, the old man to “redeem” her. The comic possibilities envisioned by Bergson are numerous here. We find disguise, pun, comic repetition of verbal formulas, inelasticity of the body, and manipulation of one person by another so as to appear “as a mere toy in the hands of another.” Ruth expands on her mother-in-law’s initial plan. Naomi had instructed Ruth to wait for the man to speak when he discovers her, but Ruth says more than the man’s question warrants. In response to Boaz’s startled “Who are you?” Ruth not only identifies herself, but makes an almost audacious suggestion: “I am Ruth thy handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt [or wing] over thy handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman [or, a redeemer]” (3:9). A woman asking a man to marry her reverses the norms of patriarchal society and is inherently comic.

The seasonal festivities usually ended with the expulsion of a comic scapegoat, a ritual whereby, as Frye explain, society purges itself of the spirit of chaos that has temporarily seized it. With moderation and harmony reestablished, according to both Frye and Bakhtin, a far better and well- integrated society emerges from the one it experienced before.²² We find evidence of this in Ruth in the scene that takes place at the city gate (4:1-12), which concludes the tale. Here we witness a public ceremony in which Naomi’s male kin draws

off his shoe, signaling that he wishes to excuse himself from performing the rite of *yibbum*, thereby “expelling” himself, if not from the community at large, then from his role as redeeming kinsman. This nameless man, humorously referred to as *peloni ‘almoni*, quickly disappears and his departure ushers in the festivity in which the elders and the crowd gather at the gate to bless and embrace Ruth.

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue is also useful in illuminating the narrative art within which the biblical idea is couched. The story of Ruth is in many ways an ideal example of Bakhtin’s dialogic paradigm because of the many levels of dialogues it offers. First, Ruth provides an arena for polyphony of voices across the social, economic, and ethnic spectrum. Further, there is a constant internal discourse among the idioms, metaphors, and utterances that make up the fabric of the Ruth narrative, as well as external dialogues between Ruth and other biblical narratives. One such discourse is between Ruth and the Genesis stories of the fooling of Lot by his daughters (Gen. 13) and of Judah by his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Gen. 38). These three biblical tales revolve around central scenes of drinking and merry-making which reduce the elderly patriarchs, Lot, Judah, and Boaz, respectively, to bumbling fools, ruled by their sexual needs, and taken advantage of by younger women. The stories are also tied genealogically: Ruth is a descendent of Moab (“from the father,” Moab being the issue of the incestuous relations between Lot and his daughter), and Boaz is a descendent Peretz (one of the twins born to Tamar from her incestuous sexual encounter with Judah).

Structurally, all three stories consist of the same narrative elements, starting with a patriarch separating himself from his group (Lot departs from Abraham, Judah from his brothers and Elimelech from the Beth Lehem community); the later two tales are concerned with the Levirate law and the redemption of women. From a woman-centered viewpoint, each tale culminates in the triumph of the young woman over the family patriarch. The tales of Tamar and of Ruth record community festivals which punctuate the rhythm of country life. Judah's and Boaz' intoxications are connected to seasonal public celebrations, sheep shearing in the case of Judah and the conclusion of barley harvest in Ruth; while Lot is made drunk with wine by his conniving daughters, probably taking advantage of the shock he suffered from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and his wife's turning into a pillar of salt.

Studying literary patterns in the Bible which are imbued with covenantal significance, Harold Fisch has strung together these tales by focusing on the diachronic trajectory from the two Genesis tales to Ruth, which clearly displays an evolutionary cultural line.²³ It starts with the crudest possible story told rather graphically, in the Lot case, where the daughters, under the impression that all life has been extinguished, find shelter with their father in a cave and behave like barbaric cave people. The diachronic track moves up to the somewhat more civilized ambience of the tale of Judah and Tamar (Judah, at least, commits incest with his daughter in law, not his daughter), and culminates with the "cleaned up" tale of Ruth's successful efforts to make Boaz recognize his familial responsibilities and "redeem" her.

Thus we move from incestuous relations to covenantal marriage, from illicit sexual encounters occurring at night and in secrecy, to a marriage ceremony conducted in public with the blessings of judges and the entire people. Fisch persuasively suggests that while Boaz redeems Ruth, and the newborn son redeems Naomi, Ruth herself “is the redeemer of the unnamed ancestress who lay with her father,” and that the story of Ruth offers a tale of “salvation history,” purged of the unseemly elements of the two previous tales, and “looking forward to what is to be disclosed of the house of David.”

The diachronic track follows the progress from Lot’s daughters, acting out of a blind biological urge to procreate, to Tamar, driven by the same feminine need as well as economic necessity, to Ruth, who aspires to enter the Hebrew family through the biblical law of *yibbum*. Boaz commends Ruth for not going after the young men who have shown an interest in her, but looking for a “redeemer” instead (3:10), thus making it clear that Ruth wished for more than material and feminine salvation.. The ascending line from Lot’s daughter to Tamar to Ruth becomes emblematic of the human evolution from barbarism to civilization, from sex as a mere physical act that appeases the man’s physical desires and the woman’s sense of emptiness (to use Eriksonian language), to the spiritual and religious union of a divinely- and communally- sanctified marriage²⁴. It starts with the breaking of taboos and ends with adherence to God’s laws and social norms, impelling the reader to leave behind the early precedents and look towards the redemption and healing offered at the end of the tale.

The genteel language of the encounters between Ruth and Boaz stands in contradiction to the graphic and crude lexicon of the two precedents and thus points towards a more cultured and advanced society. In the Lot tale the daughters discuss that there is no man left on the earth “to come in unto us” and therefore they “lay” with their father” to “preserve” his “seed” (Gen. 19:30-35). In the Judah and Tamar tale, the woman dresses, acts, and talks like a prostitute; she asks Judah: “What will thou give me, that thou mayest come in to me” (Gen. 38:16). Ruth, on the other hand, asks Boaz to spread his “wing” over her and be her “redeemer” (Ruth 3:9). Thus semantically as well there is progress from a graphic, debased depiction of the sexual act, to the elegant, metaphorical, and covenantal semantics of the story of Ruth.

But if we read the three tales side by side, synchronically, the opposite occurs: the physical semantics of the two early tales reverberate and echo in Ruth’s actions and language, and transform the Ruth text to a different text altogether. Bakhtin emphasized the importance of the body and its physicality to carnival’s challenge of authority, pointing out that Rabelais wanted to “return a reality, a materiality to language and to meaning.”²⁵ The body brings the world back to a physical level, moving it away from dogma and authoritarianism.²⁶ Indeed we see that Ruth (perhaps more subtly than her two predecessors but as daringly), introduces carnival physicality to her exchanges with the reluctant patriarch, who is late in joining the carnival spirit and suffers shame when he wakes up from his drunkenness. The standard translation of Ruth 3:7 suggests that

Ruth came secretly to where Boaz was lying, uncovered his legs [or feet], and lay down. The euphemistic meaning of uncovering the legs in the Bible is clear: Ruth uncovered more than the man's feet. But an alternative reading of the Hebrew verb *vategal* would be "she uncovered herself," with *margelotav* indicating where this action takes place, at his feet, rather than functioning as the syntactic object, his feet.²⁷ Thus Ruth, together with the jubilant story-teller(s) and her (their) festive audience, engages in a Bakhtinian dialogue with the Lot and Judah texts and creates a new text; the semantics of her vocabulary are euphemistic but the semiotics are not. Ruth makes a bold physical move: she uncovers her body and exposes herself to the man. And when she tells (in fact, commands) Boaz to "spread" his "wing" over her, her language may again seem metaphoric but its semiotic code points to the literal and physical. She uses the word "wing" not only as a metaphor of protection, the way Boaz used it in an earlier scene, but in the physical sense of "the corner" of his blanket, or robe. Plainly put, Ruth insists on the physicality of the moment and brazenly suggests to Boaz that he take her under his blanket. Ruth is somewhat mischievous when she repeats the ceremonious phrase that Boaz himself had uttered earlier--"under [God's] wings" (2:12)--and jokingly alters the overstated, abstract "God's wings" to the word's literal meaning, "wing" as the corners of a garment or a blanket. Bakhtin has pointed out the dialogic nature of the word or utterance, "the word . . . weaves in and out of complex interrelationships . . . and all this may crucially shape discourse . . . may influence its entire stylistic profile."²⁸ Ruth's use of "wing" displays this: first, it harkens

back to Boaz's previous "God's wings" in his blessing of Ruth, critiquing it as too lofty and insubstantial, and implying that the only wings that matter to Ruth in her present predicament are not the esoteric "God's wings" but Boaz's "wings," meaning the protection that he can give her through marriage. It further peels the metaphoric shell of "wings" and brings it down to earth, to the literal, physical meaning of Boaz's blanket or robe, suggesting physical contact.

In the spirit of the carnival, Ruth reduces the "high" concept implied in Boaz's "God's wings" to the crudely physical. Bergson has suggested that a comic moment occurs when "our attention is diverted to the physical in a person when it is the moral that is in question" (and when a person is "embarrassed by his own body," which applies if it is Boaz who finds himself naked).²⁹ Ruth's linguistic manipulation agrees with Julia Kristeva's assertion that "carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest"³⁰ Boaz attempts to regain his status as the figure of law and authority by ignoring Ruth's semantics of the body and engaging, again, in a flowery speech, blessing and commending her profusely. But in spite of this we are now aware that Boaz's "monologic" language has been broken and entered into a dialogue with Ruth's carnivalesque language. The comedy of the body continues when Boaz, in a theatrical gesture, measures out a significant portion of barley and tells Ruth to hold up her apron so that he can fill it up (3:15). Boaz' commendable action is reduced to physical farce: one can only imagine the bawdy

visual possibilities, the semiotic signification, of Ruth returning home with her apron bulging provocatively.

Ruth the woman emerges as the breaker of etiquette; Naomi sends Ruth to glean, but Ruth oversteps her boundaries and enters into dialogue with Boaz. Naomi instructs Ruth to uncover Boaz's legs and wait for the man to talk; Ruth (most probably) uncovers herself, and when Boaz asks her who she is, she does not merely identify herself, but proceeds to name Boaz a "redeemer," although technically he is not her redeemer since he is not her brother in law. By reassigning a new meaning to the term "redeemer" and broadening it to a near kin, Ruth dissolves a fixed legal term and engages in a form of Bakhtinian "dialogic heteroglossia" which resists the idea of a unitary language. The woman Ruth teaching the patriarch a lesson in the humanitarian interpretation of the law is a carnivalesque reversal of roles, a universal comic element, akin (to use Bergson's own examples) to a student teaching his teacher or the criminal chastising the judge.

Naomi, too, engages quite early in the tale in creative manipulation of language combined with a challenge to authority, in fact, the ultimate authority, God. Even before her dialogue with the women of Beth-Lehem, Naomi displays irreverence to the established meanings of words and a tendency to explore the heteroglossia of language, the multiple voices that exist in human utterance. Indeed, from the moment Naomi opens her mouth she displays bitter humor that consists of both protest and mockery, and wreaks semantic havoc on established terms.

Naomi is first heard when she pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' homes. In two quite elaborate speeches (1:8-9, 10-13) she thanks them for their past kindness, urges them to leave her and turn back, and wishes them well. Her explicit argument is that she is past her childbearing years, that therefore her daughters-in-law cannot be redeemed by any son of hers. But Naomi elaborating on the impossible is so outrageously exaggerated that it points to a subtext quite different from the point that is ostensibly being made. Her protestations create an imaginary world in which the unlikely might indeed come true; behind the language of seeming desperation lurks the vision of a potential miracle. Naomi's comically absurd scenario of sleeping with a man that very same night and immediately becoming pregnant and producing "redeemers" to her daughters in law is a moment of grotesque comedy, but it reveals her hidden desires and hopes for a miracle.

Moreover, while dismissing the possibility of a levirate marriage for Ruth and Orpah, Naomi in fact introduces the concept into both the tale and the consciousness of the reader. To further build up her vision of the possible, to enhance her subliminal message, and to create a world out of the word, Naomi names the relationship between the two young widows using a term that technically does not denote the link between women whose husbands are brothers. Naomi tells Ruth to follow Orpah, who has taken Naomi's advice and headed back to Moab. In the Hebrew, Naomi does not use the term "sister" or "sister-in-law" (the standard translations) but rather the term *yebamah* to describe the familial relationship between Ruth and

Orpah. In biblical Hebrew, this noun designates the childless widow in relation to her dead husband's brother, not to her sister-in-law. He is the *yabban*, the levirate redeemer, and she is the *yebamah*, the feminine form of the same noun. This misnomer should not be taken as a slip of the tongue, a careless mistake on the part of a distraught woman. Naomi has taken comic liberty with the language, using the noun *yebamah* sarcastically, in an improbable context (as we would call an idiot "genius"). But in the process, she has created a new frame of reference within the tale by filling the dialogue with intimations of *yibbum*, levirate marriage, thus mitigating the language of the unattainable. Naomi creates a world with the force of her tongue; her semantic malapropism is a semiotic code that transmits her true desires. As in the case when she protests the inappropriateness of her name to the women of Beth-Lehem, the literal meaning of Naomi's speech, that her name should be changed, is in fact a semiotic message to God that He should make her life pleasant again, in conformity with the meaning of her name. Thus, in terms of Bakhtin's dialogism, both Naomi and Ruth force their own language on the official lexicon and adjust the specific meanings of semantic terms, which carry well-defined cultural significance, to fit their own needs.

Applying Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to a biblical narrative does not suggest reading the Bible as a postmodern "indeterminate" text. Bakhtin defined great works as those which continued to live in the distant future by virtue of the dialogic quality of their utterances: "Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past

centuries . . . will change in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue.”³¹ In a way, Bakhtin’s dialogism employs the same premise that the ancient Jewish rabbis adopted when they opened the way for an exegetical elasticity with their famous phrase “turn it [[the biblical text]] and turn it, for all is in it.”

Further, a carnivalesque reading should not be mistaken for an irreverent look at a sacred book. Bakhtin and others have shown that humor and comedy, while producing laughter, are very serious business. The comic view illustrates the absurdities of the human condition and the pretentiousness of humanity; it is produced by very important and essential human needs to cleanse inner demons, control existential fears, make life under oppression possible, and protest against injustice. This essay is not meant as a validation of Rabelais’ or Bakhtin’s worldviews, nor is it a blanket endorsement of Bakhtin’s ideas of the “unfinalized” nature of humanity. It certainly does not mean to suggest that the Book of Ruth is exclusively Saturnalian in nature. Scholars have pointed out the ethical and humanistic problems of Bakhtin’s Saturnalian laughter and the limitations inherent in Bakhtin’s glorification of carnival dialogism as a tool of breaking down hierarchies.³² Extricating Rabelais’ world from its own specific time and culture and placing it side by side with the biblical world represented in Ruth is undeniably problematic as well. We may also criticize Bakhtin for not adequately addressing the danger that exists when festive misrule turns from harmless activity into deadly riot and anarchy.³³ Yet Bakhtin’s wide-ranging ideas, by their very nature, have opened up for contemporary critics, including biblical

theologians, interesting avenues of discoursing with the ancient text, one of which is exemplified in this essay. Ruth may represent the benign and healing impact of the carnival, where the boundaries of transgression are clearly delineated and are held back by the overall purpose of the story; where a certain amount of misrule does not lead to chaos and anarchy but offers a kind of a safety valve that channels protest and rebellion into a redemptive vision, thus assimilating the narrative into the larger biblical meta-story.

Notes

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin developed his theories of the carnivalesque and the dialogic imagination in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (ed. and trans. Carl Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Helene Iswolsky; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), and *The Dialogic Imagination*, (ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: U of Texas P, 1981). For illuminating analyses of Bakhtin see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of Prosaics*

(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) and Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990).

² Several biblical scholars have suggested Bakhtin's dialogism as a useful paradigm for biblical theology. For a good summary, see L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Theology," In *JBL* 122/1 (2003), 127-144. The most comprehensive discussion of the applicability of Bakhtin's theories to biblical scholarship so far is offered in Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000). Green focuses on speech and the dialogic rather than on Bakhtin's theory of the comic. Green also offers a succinct summary of Bakhtin's philosophy and his literary ideas, focusing on those especially of interest to the Bible scholar. The only application of the theory of carnival to the Bible so far is presented in Kenneth M. Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

³ Jack M. Sasson discusses the role of inebriation in this context as well as its link to the impregnation of women in ancient folklore in *Ruth: A New Translation* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 73.

⁴ For a helpful summary of the basic characteristics of Bakhtin's carnival, see M. W. Smith., "Embracing 'other': Dialogism and the Carnavalesque in Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature*" in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39:1 (Fall 1997), 41-8.

⁵ *The Dialogic Imagination*, 198.

⁶ *Rabelais*, 6.

⁷ *Rabelais*, 37.

⁸ Campbell is in favor of an earlier date. For a summary of all arguments regarding the date of composition, see Campbell, "Introduction," 23 – 28.

⁹ *Dostoevsky*, 292-93.

¹⁰ *Dostoevsky*, 110.

¹¹ For more on Naomi's and Ruth's language as a source of female empowerment, see Nehama Aschkenasy, "Language is Power" in *Woman at the Window*, 145-156

¹² *Rabelais* 153-54).

¹³ For more on Naomi's Jobian language and stature, see *Woman at the Window*, 148.

14. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957), 171; see also Caesar J. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 15, 36.

¹⁵ See "Laughter," in *Comedy* (ed. Wylie Sypher; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 79-86.

16. See Robert S. Miola, "Roman Comedy," in *Shakespearean Comedy* (ed. Alexander Leggatt; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002), 18. Also: John Creaser, "Forms of Confusion," in *Shakespearean Comedy*, 82.

17. See "Laughter," 79-86

18 *Anatomy*, 172-75.

19 *Anatomy*, 173.

²⁰ See Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenantal History," *Vetus Testamentum*, 32:4 (1982): 425-37.

²¹ *Anatomy*, 172.

²² *Anatomy*, 165.

²³ Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenantal History." See also Nehama Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 85-88.

²⁴ See Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 261-94.

²⁵ *The Dialogic*, 171.

²⁶ *Rabelais*, 3.

²⁷ See von Wolde, "Intertextuality," 444, 45.

²⁸ *The Dialogic Imagination*, 279.

29. The three citations are from Bergson, "Laughter," 111, 135, and 93 respectively.

³⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 65.

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Vern W. McGee; Austin: U of Texas P, 1986), 170.

³² For a skeptical view of Bakhtin's helpfulness to the basic premises of feminism, see Wayne C. Booth, "The Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work* (ed. Gary Saul Morson; Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1986), 145-176. On some of the ethical

problems and limitations inherent in Bakhtin's theory of carnival humor, see Michael Andre Bernstein, "When the Carnival Turns Bitter," in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, 99-121.

³³ Among the studies dealing with this problem, see Hilda Hollis, "The Other Side of Carnival: Romola and Bakhtin," in *Papers on Language and Literature* 37:3 (Summer 2001): 227.