

# An Interview with Biblical Ruth

INTERVIEWER: . . . dispense with “preliminary pleasantries.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I have an agenda, a few topics on which I hope to elicit your considered and respected response. It was merely that on occasion it has been quite dramatic to allude to—or to ask my biblical interviewee to identify—some scholar whose commentary or interpretation has seemed especially outrageous or wrongheaded. Thus, I thought my mention of May and Carmichael might have sparked some lively retort.<sup>2</sup> Why, you should have heard—or should read—the tirades with which Delilah, Aaron, and Daniel began their interviews when—

RUTH: Your agenda, sir?

INTERVIEWER: Indeed. You’ll forgive, I am confident, my enthusiasms? Well, then, let me see. Ah! My notes remind me that I had hoped, were you amenable, for some dialogue on your relationships with your mother-in-law, your husband, and, to be sure, your God. And, if it please you, I might even cajole you into shedding some light, along the way, upon some of the riddles which have for so long vexed scholars of your book?

RUTH: Riddles? “Out of the eater came something to eat?”

INTERVIEWER: Ah! Well, not exactly riddles like that of Samson’s. Ought I rather call them puzzling questions? One instance: How old *was* Boaz when he pledged himself to you on the threshing-floor?<sup>3</sup> A second: Had Boaz and Naomi never met before she sent you to the threshing-floor? Another: Did Boaz ever explain to you—perhaps in, ahem, conjugal intimacy—why he had waited so long for the *go’el* to honor his obligations? A last: How did Boaz learn of Naomi’s plan to “sell” her field, if there had been no meeting between them?<sup>4</sup>

RUTH: Only four questions? A gentlemanly interviewer? Do you unduly curb your curiosity, sir? Really. Have you no wish to know as well, say, whether chance, providence, or my own design led

me to Boaz's field to glean that first day?<sup>5</sup> Whether it was necessary for me to glean at all, seeing that Naomi had a field of her own? Whether Naomi was truly ignorant that a nearer kinsman stood between her and Boaz?<sup>6</sup>

INTERVIEWER: Well, indeed: answers to those would be splendid! Even answer to why it was that townswomen—rather than you and Boaz—named your son? And whether your son's name was actually Obed.<sup>7</sup> And, if this not be prying beyond discretion—what actually transpired between you and Boaz on the threshing-floor? How it must amuse you—does it not?—to read your commentators on *that* question!<sup>8</sup>

RUTH: Amuse? Disdaining the issue as one of utter irrelevance (a response common to prudes), the stuffy may be as bad as the salacious, who ferret away at cabalistic symbols, or, as common, natter like gossipy townswomen. But seriously, sir, do you sincerely expect me to answer any of the questions we've enumerated? You'll permit me to imagine, won't you, that answers would rob my history of some of its allure? More, answers from my lips would be suspect by scholars, wouldn't they? Like lawyers, your kind surely would roll skeptical eyes upon my reconstruction of past events, would discount my answers as apologia, would certainly discredit my observations: "stained by subjectivity."

INTERVIEWER: Ah. Indeed. They might look upon your answers—we would be disingenuous to ignore the possibility—as rationalizations. We must admit that hazard. You would have me, then, return to the pathways of my agenda? Nevertheless, worthy woman, allow me to forewarn you (for well do I know my frailties) that I am not above endeavoring to tease such answers from my biblical interviewees *en route*.

RUTH: The matter of my relationship with my mother-in-law, sir, came first, I believe? Which one did you have in mind?

INTERVIEWER: Which one? Why surely you had not been wife to some husband prior to Mahlon, had you? Oh! Shortsighted of me to forget: marriage to Boaz made you daughter-in-law to *his* mother, too. Odd that her existence was ignored. Well, I see I must be on my toes with you, my good woman. But allow me to illuminate the significance of your relationship with Naomi. It has caused no little wonder at and respect for you, inasmuch as your

devotion to her is quite untypical of traditional mother- and daughter-in-law relationships. More common, as you must know, is resentment and rivalry between the two, some disdain on the part of the mother-in-law toward her son's wife, a woman whom the mother usually regards as unworthy of *her* son, as an interloper whose interference erodes the mother's and son's long-wrought chain of filial affection. Perhaps you might wish to comment on either what it was in Naomi's character which inspired your loyalty, or what it was in your background, values, or perceptions which taught you to assign such worth to her? After all, one of the marvels of your story is what would now be called "the bond of sisterhood" which you forged with her.<sup>9</sup> How that bond developed, apparently through your initiative, would be most instructive, for it overcame obstacles of age, ethnic background, cultural differences, and religious training.

RUTH: There was no bond.

INTERVIEWER: I beg your pardon? My hearing is not what it once was.

RUTH: I said, "There was no bond."

INTERVIEWER: Come, come, worthy woman. Would you have me disregard your renowned oath to her, and your other six loyal acts: of accompanying her return to Bethlehem, of bringing home to her the remainder of the meal you took in Boaz's field as well as your bushel of gleaned barley, of continuing to lodge with her all during the harvest (when you could have lodged with Boaz's other gleaning girls<sup>10</sup>), of obeying her instructions to visit Boaz on the threshing-floor, of impressing upon him his need to redeem her rights, and of allowing her to take Obed to her bosom as *her* son? Surely there's some bond of sisterhood in those seven acts, agreeing as they do with numerological symbolism.

RUTH: There is certainly some merit in that construction of my behavior and statements.

INTERVIEWER: *Some* merit? Is there a better construction?

RUTH: I suppose it depends upon the purpose of such constructions? Maybe we ought to ask whether that construction is even defensible, is without major flaw?

INTERVIEWER: Now surely your radical decision to pledge yourself to Naomi, to her people, and to her God must have some basis in a bond you made to her. Indeed, your break with family, country, and faith—

and your commitment to an old woman rather than to a man—must signify your decision to link forces with her and, together, seek to shape your future.<sup>11</sup>

RUTH: My famous pledge. My renowned oath. It has certainly hornswoggled my scholars, hasn't it? Could we set it aside and return to it after we look at my mother-in-law? We might glean some grains my scholars have overlooked in their harvesting.

INTERVIEWER: Certainly. You will find me always obliging. Any place you wish to begin?

RUTH: It matters little, one place as good as another, for though her statements are laced with ambiguity, when assembled they expose a tendency in her that may, in turn, suggest what lies within my pledge. Perhaps the scene of my return from the first day in Boaz's fields?

INTERVIEWER: Agreed. You had taken up the bushel of barley which you had gleaned, had returned to Bethlehem, and Naomi saw how much you had.

RUTH: Yes. And she said what, upon seeing the bushel?

INTERVIEWER: She—ah, indeed—she asked where you had gleaned.

RUTH: A correction, may I? Upon seeing the bushel, she said nothing. She didn't ask where I'd gleaned until after I'd also given her the leftovers I'd saved from my meal.

INTERVIEWER: Ah. Indeed. Quite correct you are. And so?

RUTH: And so? And so? Had you stood in her place, sir, might you have made some remark—shown some gesture of surprise or appreciation—at seeing the bushel I'd gleaned?<sup>12</sup> Does it strike you odd that she'd ask where I'd gleaned only *after* I'd given her the leftovers? Or shall we disregard her omission—*this* silence—as sign of my historian's art, his wish to keep my story briskly paced?

INTERVIEWER: Well, you are quite right to observe—such is your implication, is it not?—that Naomi is no gushy sentimentalist, refrains from rhapsodizing over other's accomplishments.

RUTH: Are her blessings without rhapsody? She's not above conferring them, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Indeed, indeed. Twice she here blesses Boaz. Once as simply the man who kindly took notice of you. Once after you identified

him as the man in whose fields you worked. Both blessing he deserved, I believe, don't you?

RUTH: Yes. I've no quarrel with that. My point seems to have evaded you: if Naomi and I had some bond of sisterhood, then might she not have bestowed a blessing upon me, the person who grubbed hard all day to gather that bushel?

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. I do see what you mean. She did appear to express no appreciation of your day's work, promptly seconded his instructions that you continue to glean with his girls, and only in his fields.

RUTH: Seconded his instructions, you say? Or countermanded them? Do you ignore the difference between Boaz's statements before and after mealtime? Before, he adjured me to keep close to his girls, to glean *behind* them. After, he allowed me to glean among the sheaves—that is, *behind* the male reapers but *in front of* the female gleaners.<sup>13</sup>

INTERVIEWER: So it is, so it is. But countermanding his instructions—to stay close to his men—implies that Naomi had some reason for so doing. And that reason must have been her punctilious concern lest you be viewed as forward, lest you violate some custom of propriety or decorum: “a gold ring in a pig's snout?”<sup>14</sup>

RUTH: A proverb-spouter might even allow—mightn't he?—that by countermanding Boaz's instructions Naomi intended for my circumspection to increase her kinsman's notice of me?

INTERVIEWER: Why, indeed. Which goes to show that her thoughts of seeing you “happily settled” began at the end of your first day of gleaning, rather than at the end of the barley and wheat harvests. Thus we see her sustained concern for you, her wish to trouble herself on your behalf, her bond of sisterhood to you.

RUTH: Trouble herself? *Did* she trouble herself on my behalf? Little wonder at the riddles you earlier spoke of. To someone slow at picking up hints, at gleaning dropped grains, there must indeed be a bushel of riddles!

INTERVIEWER: May I remonstrate that—

RUTH: No. No protests yet, please. To continue to pussyfoot on the matter of Naomi, I realize, will keep us here for hours. My scholars seem to have missed a few signals that my historians

and scribes so carefully recorded. Allow me to put the matter bluntly, to call Naomi (in modern parlance) by the name which her reputation on the Moab plateau had garnered for her: a self-seeking bitch.

INTERVIEWER: Not to “mince” matters, as they say? But assuming the correctness of your term (for which I will be required to find an euphemistic substitute, when I edit our interview), how am I to account for your mother-in-law’s solicitousness: she bid you and Orpah return to your mothers’ homes, asked the *Lord’s* blessings upon you, wished you the security of new homes and husbands, and, then, kissed you.

RUTH: Solicitousness? Or a ceremonial ritual for public consumption? Well, it takes in the simple—Orpah and my scholars. Clearly they understand the ambiguous significance neither of bidding a widow to return to her mother’s home nor of wishing one the security of a new husband’s home.

INTERVIEWER: Am I in error to assume that Naomi’s reference to “mothers’ homes” indicates the widowed status of both your and Orpah’s mothers (*rather* too coincidental, I will agree)? Or if not that, then am I in error to be persuaded that Naomi’s reference is to the place best able to comfort a widow?<sup>15</sup>

RUTH: One of my scholars notes that a “mother’s house” locates the symbolic place where marriage matters were hatched.<sup>16</sup> But he ignores the pattern of Naomi’s insults, of which this is an early example. So he fails to see that she here imputes to Orpah and me the motive of eager interest in scurrying back home to brew up new marriages, to find fresh flesh of new husbands to cleave to, and to end the fruitlessness of our wombs. Queer that my scholars haven’t considered the resentfulness in Naomi’s farewell. After all, the ten years’ barrenness which both Orpah and I suffered was, in Naomi’s eyes, an indictment of *us*, not her sons. In fact, while I can’t speak for Orpah, can you imagine my being made to feel that the death of Mahlon was a consequence of his marriage to me, an “alien?” A double curse though we might have been in Naomi’s eyes, she dared not privately or publicly express such a sentiment, cautious that we might have recourse in recrimination, I suppose. And so her ceremonial farewell: it allows for sincerity, if read with no awareness of the patterns of her behavior. But it allows for sarcasm, if read with full awareness of them.

INTERVIEWER: Well! Now that is, I must confess, an original—albeit quite idiosyncratic—theory.

RUTH: Theory? Your condescension implies that still you fail to discern the pattern of her self-centeredness. Consider, then. Did Naomi, after the deaths of her sons and husband, choose to return to Bethlehem *because* she felt guilt for having abandoned her homeland during its famine over a decade earlier? Or is there opportunism in her choice to return “because she had heard while still in the Moabite country that the *Lord* had cared for his people and given them food?”

INTERVIEWER: Since you ask, I—

RUTH: Did she adjure Orpah and me to return home when the three of us still dwelt in “the place where she had been living,” or only when we were on “the road home to Judah”—that is, sir, after we were no longer useful to Naomi’s journey?

INTERVIEWER: Surely—

RUTH: After Orpah and I wept and insisted upon returning with her to her people, did she pause to reason with us, to explain the difficulties of being aliens in Bethlehem? Or did she abruptly begin to insult us? Did she impugn us for expecting her to find or bear us new husbands? Did she insinuate that we were too lascivious to restrain our appetites until two new sons, whom she could give birth to, could, in turn, marry us? Did she mock us as creatures of little patience and less sexual restraint?

INTERVIEWER: If you will be so good as—

RUTH: Did she, in her alleged “mordant self-deprecation,”<sup>17</sup> show concern for our recent loss, the freshness of our grief? Or did she—heedless that her womb had yielded two sons and ours none—rub salt into the disgrace of our childless marriages by claiming that her lot was more bitter than ours?

INTERVIEWER: Uh—

RUTH: Please. Save your interruption until I’ve finished! Did she acknowledge my existence or plight when we reached Bethlehem and met her townswomen? Or did she harp again on God’s bitter treatment of only herself? Was she stoical? Or did she belly-ache about His pronouncements against herself, the disaster He had let fall upon herself? And those six measures of barley,

which Boaz sent me home to Naomi with, after my night on the threshing-floor: Did they symbolize his marital pledge or his knowledge of her reputation for acquisitiveness?

INTERVIEWER: A veritable litany of rhetorical questions!

RUTH: And to end them, Naomi's *third* silence (the *second*, recall, was when I arrived with that bushel of barley): When Obed is entrusted to her care and her own future security is guaranteed, her townswomen proclaim that her daughter-in-law, me, "has proved better to you than seven sons." Did Naomi admit this to be true? Did she make any gesture, say anything my history records? Was her silence to acknowledge the obvious truth of the women's proclamation? Or was it of a piece with her cold, ungrateful, proud self-centeredness?

INTERVIEWER: Quite an eruption, I might call it? But given all of this feeling—shall it be termed "exhumed acidulousness"?—toward Naomi, esteemed by some as your story's heroine,<sup>18</sup> your oath to her (we may now return to it, may we?) is quite, well, irrational. Were she the self-centered female canine whom you identify, then your pledge to her makes no sense at all. Surely you must see that.

RUTH: My words to her on the road to Judah: Are they to be read only as a commitment of affection, an emotion quite at odds with my "eruption?" Are my reasons for such an oath so incalculable, truly as hidden as Abraham's thoughts when he was about to sacrifice Isaac?<sup>19</sup> Has it never occurred to you to attempt to read my oath as a curse, to consider that it answers Naomi's insults? No. Please, no answer. Can you so quickly forget her impugning Orpah and me with her slurs, brush aside her making light of our bitter lots, ignore her insensitivity to our tears of grief over our recently dead husbands and over the harshness and abruptness of her rejection of us? In the face of such insults can't you imagine the explanation behind her *first* silence—after I spoke my "oath?" Was she silent because of its respectfulness and modesty? Or because in articulating it I revealed some unexpected resoluteness, because it bordered on being radical, and because I spoke it with an ambiguous solemnity to cause her to wonder whether it was a pledge or a curse? Might her silence have acknowledged her astonishment at my determination, behind which—do you further suppose?—might have lurked an unarticulated vow to make her eat the imputation of her words? Were someone to consider you a leech, an

obstacle impeding his or her future, sir, might your injured pride be tempted to retaliate with an oath?

INTERVIEWER: Of course, of course. But now you thoroughly compound my confusion. To think you would attach yourself to a woman you deeply disliked; well, I must say that it strikes me—and may strike others—as perverse.

RUTH: Mechanistic logic? Because I disliked Naomi's egotistical bitchery, must it follow, QED, that I would shun all contact with her, that I should have found in her, therefore, no qualities deserving emulation?

INTERVIEWER: A normal conclusion, I think I can safely say. Or am I to understand that in her you recognized value?

RUTH: Her value lay in her pluck—brass, to some. After all, from the statements my historian, storyteller, or scribe assigns to Naomi, even you must see that she was no passive, submissive woman. Even before I became her daughter-in-law she had agreed to the risky venture of leaving Bethlehem during its famine, showing that she was game to wrest with, rather than meekly submit to, fate or providence—much less to some domineering, patriarchal husband. My oath, part curse that it was, also contained a pledge to what Naomi represented: her aggressively irascible independence.

INTERVIEWER: Thus, in your oath resides not one iota of a pledge of obedience, I am to understand? In it is no vestige of your very son's name, no commitment to being a servant?

RUTH: Of course there's commitment. But to a woman whose disrespect and defiance represented personal values that challenged custom, law, people, and God. Why within seven verses (more numerology, sir!) she complained that the Lord had "been against" her, had sent her a "bitter lot," had brought her back to Bethlehem "empty," had "pronounced against" her, had "brought disaster on" her. You'd be naive, sir, to think that these outpourings were the first time she'd expressed such irreverence within my earshot. Uttered with impunity, they should begin to suggest what it was in Naomi's character which won my loyalty. In my oath was a pledge of obedience—to a principle of assertive independence.

INTERVIEWER: I believe I begin to wish your mother-in-law had never left the Moab plateau. Your view of her begins to give me some

intellectual heartburn, if you will. Indeed, I begin to have some reservations about you as well, begin to suspect you of no little art in your relationship with Boaz, begin to reassess my well-schooled dismissal of the scholar who first broached the silly notion of you as a wily woman,<sup>20</sup> begin, I confess, to find you less to my liking than I had expected.

- RUTH: As if I'd clamored for this interview, sir? As if my agreement to suffer it had also stipulated that I seek your admiration? But I've entertained you with my correctives on Naomi's character, and both you and I know that "Whosoever loveth correction loveth knowledge."<sup>21</sup> So why not correct me with your suspicions of my artful relationship with Boaz? Proceed. Please do.
- INTERVIEWER: Curious that I had pooh-poohed that off-putting translation. It now begins to make sense, especially the rendering of the first verses of chapter 2.
- RUTH: You'll be so good, of course, as to recite the translation you're referring to?
- INTERVIEWER: The better to see you with, my dear: "Now Naomi knew of an acquaintance of her husband, a property holder who belonged to Elimelech's clan; his name was Boaz. Ruth of Moab said to Naomi: 'Should I go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, in the hope of pleasing him?'"<sup>22</sup>
- RUTH: Yes. A translation which finally allows that Naomi was not senile, which clarifies that she knew she had some rights due her through her husband's family, and which discloses that I had some reason for immediately gleaning in Boaz's fields. But even that translation, sir, perpetuates the interrogatory, casts me as the supplicating alien, violates my careful use of the ambiguous cohortative.<sup>23</sup>
- INTERVIEWER: I quoted the verses, worthy woman, to emphasize none of the features to which you attend. I quoted them, rather, to point to the emphasis on which they end: your design to "please" Boaz, *'aḥar 'āšer 'emṣā-ḥēn be 'enāyw*, (literally, "to find favor in his eyes"). For suddenly a vision of truth crests upon my consciousness: Indeed, although you set out on a double mission—to glean and to please Boaz—the former was merely the means to the latter end. *There* is opportunism! And to that pair of motives add another. I refer back to your *own* information! To your design in asking permission not only to glean, but to "gather grain

from among the sheaves behind the reapers.” That double petition, as you—ha!—have taught me to see, sought not merely to ask for the right which was customarily granted to all aliens and widows, to glean *behind* the gleaners and the reapers. It also sought special permission to glean *in front of the gleaners!*

RUTH: You will, won't you, comment likewise upon Boaz's notice of my presence in his field? For that, too, reflects upon my artfulness, notes that in my subject position I displayed frequent—not just sometime—autonomy.<sup>24</sup> I guaranteed his notice by more duplicity—for I gather that your use of “doubles” drifts, not very subtly, toward that term. And so I wore to the field my Moabite dress (didn't I?), certain that it would catch his eye, even though no commentary observes it. And I made a point of arriving at his field at daybreak (didn't I?), confident that Boaz would have an overseer who could remark my display of industry and report it to him.

INTERVIEWER: And thus, most worthy woman, the scholar correctly construes your “luck”—the “happenstance” which, by “chance,” brought you to Boaz's field; for your “luck” lay merely in your not “*wasting precious time searching for it.*”<sup>25</sup> Which is to say that there was no luck at all in your arrival at his field, that you had planned to glean in no field other than his. How it must have amused you—did it not?—when Boaz immediately began to instruct you to glean in no other field, to stay in his! Was it easy to suppress your mirth, tempting to throw a wink to the overseer?

RUTH: I doubt you'd entertain any suggestion that in female volition and human luck might be some residue of divine intentionality?<sup>26</sup>

INTERVIEWER: It is customary for a temptress, I have long observed, worthy woman, to solicit fraternal magnanimity when her snares have been discovered. Oh, how transparent your schemes are now. Of course it was contrivance which prompted you to prostrate yourself in false gratitude to Boaz, even though he had denied your petition to gather immediately behind the reapers. And naturally it was calculation when you, pressing for an advantage, altogether avoided expressing the least gratitude to Boaz (and *you*, I recollect, faulted Naomi on that very score?). Moreover, you instead asked (and with what coyness I can now imagine!) why it was that he “favored” you, or how it happened that you “pleased” him, and what it was that caused him to take special “notice” of you. And giving him ample time to let the shaft of

your subtle coquetry sink deeply into—and stir!—his nether parts, you cast that last bait, that false humility, calling yourself merely a foreigner. You are too skilled in such art for your father to have been other than a fisherman.

RUTH: You will not allow, I gather, that my question, and my admission to being a foreigner, were straightforward? Their intent could not have simply been to break through his formality, to have him own up to whether he truly knew who I was?

INTERVIEWER: Perhaps. But quite unlikely when put alongside the artful loquacity of your next speech.

RUTH: Verse 13?

“May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord.  
Because you have comforted me  
And because you have spoken to the heart of your maid-servant.  
Why, as for me I am not even as (worthy as) one of your maid-servants!”

INTERVIEWER: As I could have predicted, you prefer that rendering to one which denies you the pretense of politeness in your opening request, which refuses you the ambiguity of the optative because your ability to elicit “acts of kindness from Boaz” obviated any need for you to resort to it: “I must have pleased you, my lord, since you have comforted me and have spoken tenderly to your maidservant. Yet I am not even considered as one of your maidservants.”<sup>27</sup>

RUTH: Quite good, sir! Correctly noted: I had no need for the optative, for I sought to express not a wish but a fact. Plainly I pleased Boaz. But in expressing that, can I disclose only artfulness, never candor?

INTERVIEWER: Was it candor for you to commend Boaz for speaking “tenderly,” to your “heart?” Certainly you knew that embedded in your expression was the meaning of sexual enticement.<sup>28</sup>

RUTH: And certainly you will have it—to anticipate your bishop’s sweeping move—that I was already snaking my way up the social ladder by inveigling Boaz to consider me not as a foreigner but as a maid-servant, a term I knew I’d find a better substitute for at a later time.<sup>29</sup>

INTERVIEWER: If not that, good woman, then why did you not end your speech at just that point? Hmm? Hmm? Why did you repeat the word

*šiphāb*, if not to call to his attention the dilemma into which you wished to put him, of whether he would continue regarding you as merely a maid-servant or would elevate your status? And oh! how you knew to call his attention, by sincerely declaring, in artful modesty to be sure, that you were not even considered one of his maid-servants.

RUTH: Wouldn't you prefer a different translator here, despite his naive commentary about my "deferential terms" for myself, my "greater expression of humility?"<sup>30</sup> After all, you could certainly find impudence and coy double-dealing in "Why, as for me, I am not even as (worthy as) one of your maid-servants." For did that not make Boaz—like my oath to Naomi—altogether speechless, soliciting him either to say nothing or to gallantly declare that my reputation had made me worthier than a maid-servant? Maybe you'd prefer yet another translation, one that has me asking Boaz to treat me both better than—and not at all—as a maid-servant: "May I ask you as a favour not to treat me only as one of your slave-girls?"<sup>31</sup> Love that "only." Would you like it again? Spoken with more sauce or more steam?

INTERVIEWER: What I would like is to see the act you put on at mealtime. After slaking your thirst with a drink from the jars of water, which Boaz's men had filled and from which he had invited you to drink, what did you do, worthy woman, to elicit his command that you draw near and share in the communal meal? Had you deliberately brought nothing to eat, counting upon someone's charity or pity to fill that lack? Had you conspicuously removed yourself entirely from all groups of the harvest hands, isolating yourself so as to call attention to your alien status? Surely you did something which caught Boaz's eye and played upon his susceptibility.

RUTH: In your eyes even modest withdrawal for rest and contemplation is humbuggery, the artful ploy of a designing woman? "Some men, like bats or owls, have better eyes for the darkness than for the light."<sup>32</sup> Is Boaz to be credited with no initiative, a victim to the mesmerizing force of my actions? My soulful eyes won from his hands a heap of roasted grain? My birdlike delicacy won from his mouth the instructions to the reapers that I be permitted to glean behind them without rebuke or innuendo?

INTERVIEWER: Setting me up for the threshing-floor scene, are you, in which he discloses how fully he has thought out the moves he must

make? Well, I will not go so far as to deny him all initiative. For I find merit in the view of Boaz as trickster, a view which necessitates forethought and initiative.<sup>33</sup> But surely now you shrewdly try to sidestep your most duplicitous act—the betrayal of your vow, “I will do as you say,” after Naomi instructed you to go to Boaz at the threshing-floor. Yes, you hope—do you not?—to draw me into debate over whether Boaz was tool or trickster.

RUTH: It is a worthy debate, is it not? For in debating it, we well might weigh the tendentiousness of the trickster commentary. To see each segment of my tale compartmentalized, its functions classified within the thirty-one available to every folktale! And to what end, if its pre-charted course leaves no unresolved complications and no ambiguous characters, completely satisfies every expectation—as though every folktale were a meal one chewed and swallowed, by the numbers, from hors d’oeuvre to dessert!<sup>34</sup> As if my tale’s symmetry were merely esthetic architecture, its unifying plan were devoid of any psychological disposition.<sup>35</sup> As if our dialogue has brought forth no unresolved complications, has burnished no ambiguous characters, has burdened us with no unsatisfied expectations! Pish! Had my tale fully satisfied *your* expectations, I doubt that you’d have sought me out for an interview, have ever broached the question of what “transpired” on the threshing-floor, no? If I must choose between a formulaic folklorist and a fairy-tale Freudian, give me the latter, every time.<sup>36</sup>

INTERVIEWER: Disregarding your reference to some biblical scholar whose work has escaped me, I must admit that the debate would be profitable, if only to question whether you, putative heroine, were also a trickster, and to question whether, then, morphologists of the folktale err in assigning characters static functions, in denying them psychological reality of their own. But all of this, I repeat, is a distracting ploy to sidestep your treachery, the violation of your word to Naomi that you would do what she told you to do when you reached the threshing-floor. No translation glosses your storyteller’s declaration that you did everything “exactly” as Naomi told you. But clearly, instead of waiting for Boaz to “tell you what to do,” *you* told *him* what to do. Indeed, upon his waking to find you at his feet, you scarcely gave him time to ask who you were before you identified yourself to him as his “hand-maiden” (*’āmāh*) rather than as a “maid-servant” (*šiphāh*) as you had in the fields, insinuating your eligibility to aspire to marriage with him!<sup>37</sup> Then you immediately instructed him to spread his

skirt over you, perfunctorily explaining that he must do so because he was next of kin. Willing as you were to go along with Naomi's stratagem—proof one of your scheming nature—you improved upon it—proof two.

- RUTH: What would you have had me do? All of your previous accusations gather here, for pure and simple they fault me for refusing to be a passive woman, condemn me for saying and doing things that try to exert some control over the shape my destiny took. So now, sir, should I have disputed with Naomi and unleashed a pack of complaints that now even I was against her? And should I have waited for Boaz's instructions, unsure of whether he'd repulse me as some malevolent Lilith or seize me as a vessel to pour more of his seed into?<sup>38</sup>
- INTERVIEWER: You should have honored your word, done as you told Naomi you would do. In a word, obeyed her.
- RUTH: Can't you see that my betrayal of Naomi's instructions was necessary to my own well-being and to my respect for Boaz? Can't you see, for that matter, that I'd disobeyed them even before Boaz awoke? Naomi had instructed me to wait until he'd finished eating and drinking, to observe where he went to lie down, and *then* to approach him, bare his legs, and lie down *when he lay down*. But exactly when did I bare his legs and lie down? "Then." But *when* is "then?" He awoke about midnight. But did I lie at his feet as Naomi had instructed, *when he lay down*, *when*, sir, he was full of drink and food and his wits were not at their sharpest? Or did I wait until *after* he was fast asleep, hopeful that when he awoke he'd have slept off the muzziness of drink and fatigue?
- INTERVIEWER: I do not recall *that* issue ever having drawn commentary, I will admit.
- RUTH: And, sir, while it is true that I instructed Boaz, can't you see that my instruction was artful only in telling him succinctly that while he might wish merely to spread his skirt over me and take me, as mistress or concubine, into his *familias*—to fulfill his pleasure—he should weigh my request on the scales of his levirate relationship—to fulfill his obligation as kinsman? Could such a double-barreled statement be said with sauce or steam?<sup>39</sup>
- INTERVIEWER: I must acknowledge that before the city gate Boaz fires both of those barrels—in reverse order—inducing the nearer kinsman to agree to fulfill the levirate obligation but to balk at "spreading

his skirt” over you. And in that neat inversion Boaz seems to honor the segments of your careful threshing-floor speech. Ha! Even responds to the first segment by vaulting your status from handmaiden to wife! But whether your artfulness is defensible, my latter-day Tamar,<sup>40</sup> hinges upon whether you knew Boaz to be, in fact, your nearest kinsman. For if you knew that he was *not*, why then, worthy woman, your cunning act of using that label exposes the culpable multiplicity of your self-seeking motives: exaggerating his status so as to heighten his interest in you,<sup>41</sup> bribing him with the enticements of your body to find means to supplant the nearer kinsman, and soliciting his pity for yourself, who had no legal rights to claim levirate responsibility from him. To think that in that single labeling you could rouse his pride, lust, and compassion!<sup>42</sup>

RUTH: I tolerate your tests of my patience. But I weary of your slights to my ethical integrity. Can you think me ignorant that manipulating a person, as an object to use or agent to turn, constitutes a form of impiety, injures the soul? *Suppose* I had learned of a nearer kinsman who was married, had a family, and was the kind of man who'd snap up a chance to acquire Naomi's property but hang back from honoring Elimelech's family name. And *suppose*, sir, that I learned this through no sleuthery of mine, but simply from the gossip among the harvesters, for whom I was an object both of curiosity and marriage offers. Should I have “instructed” Boaz, “Even though I know you aren't Naomi's nearest kinsman, please take pity on me and spread your skirt over me anyway?”

INTERVIEWER: Given your suppositions, that would have been the honest thing to do, I believe?

RUTH: But it also presumes that I had no self-respect, that I went to the threshing-floor out of disappointment, that I had glumly watched the harvest end without Boaz showing much more of his hand than he had on that first day. And it forgets that I was sent there to precipitate some action from Boaz on Naomi's behalf, mortified at having to stoop to such action, but resolved to escape from it with the least harm to my own dignity, with no appeal to Boaz's pity.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I see that I must grant you that much: you never ask for pity, never thank anyone for it; you thank Boaz for his kindness, his notice of you, his not treating you as a maid-servant. But to consent to a design to precipitate Boaz into action served you as well as Naomi, make no mistake about that.

RUTH: Could I have been entirely selfless under the circumstances? Should I have had no regard for my own dignity? Please look, sir: I chose to carry out her instructions in my way, a way that wouldn't insult Boaz. Don't you see? Had I been the one to declare that I knew the existence of a nearer kinsman—supposing I *did* know—then I would have been rebuking his failure to have acted earlier. But by declaring only what everyone knew, that he was Naomi's kinsman, I tried to show my respect for him: I left to him the choice of revealing what he knew. And what he revealed was that he had not been inactive in his wish to solve a complicated problem. For he proceeded to show not only that he had weighed my acts of loyalty to Naomi and had attended to my refusal to seek after any young man, but also that he had learned of Naomi's rights to a plot of land and had discovered the identity of a nearer kinsman than he, whose values and daily habits he had made himself thoroughly acquainted with.

INTERVIEWER: Daily habits? To what do you now refer?

RUTH: The nearer kinsman's habit of passing in and out the city gates. Or do you think it accidental that he just happened to show up when Boaz sat down at the gates? In a word, sir, whether I knew the existence of the nearer kinsman is beside the point. The point, instead, is that I knew enough to identify Boaz as *a* kinsman and to let him answer the insult which Naomi's strategy of sending me to him on the threshing-floor accused him of—the insult of having done nothing to redeem her situation. His answer, both in his pledge to me and his acts at the city gates, showed he'd not been idle, even during that busiest of times of the year.

INTERVIEWER: Then his industry—observing your conduct during the harvest, ascertaining the identity and values and habits of Naomi's nearer kinsman, and devising a strategy with which to flush out the nearer kinsman's self-centeredness—all of this demonstrates that Boaz resembled the Naomi whom you have portrayed and the Ruth whose artfulness I have portrayed, does it not?

RUTH: I believe it does, for the three of us were resourceful, independent, and determined to exert some control, as I have said, over the shape of our destinies.

INTERVIEWER: Not quite the terms I had in mind: self-centered and devious. Indeed the three of you—ah! indeed, flanked by Orpah and the nameless nearer kinsman, too—make quite a despicable

group, plotting and planning schemes to serve your own ends, determined, as I perceive it, to defy God's designs, as much as you were able. Why now it is even clear to me why you and Boaz allowed Naomi the rights over your son. Indeed, your act did perpetuate her husband's name and line. But it immortalized you two. Your scheming selflessness guaranteed you the immortality of history, won enshrinement in religious text.

RUTH: Our acts guaranteed immortality? Had Obed been a nonentity, wouldn't all four of us have disappeared from human memory? Could we so shape our destinies as to impress God or scribes to fit us into a genealogy important to religious people?

INTERVIEWER: Which should bring me to the last item in my agenda: your relationship to God. But I believe, worthy woman, that from what you have revealed to me and what I in turn have discovered, *your* relationship to God would also differ significantly from what "religious people" have thought it. Ha! I can even imagine, now, that you had no faith in Yahweh, merely feigned belief, used it to win yourself a wealthy husband, a man of substance.

RUTH: And to what end, sir? Domestic ease? Maternal status? Material wealth? Conjugal pleasure? Matriarchal power? Alien ambition?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I can imagine a truly outrageous end toward which all of your actions were aimed. Shall we name it a widow's love? Shall we hypothesize that your deepest loyalty was—a trumpet fanfare, please—to your first husband, Mahlon? Shall we conceive that all of your actions were to serve his memory by marrying someone whose son by you would perpetuate his family's name?

RUTH: Sir! You amaze me with your—

INTERVIEWER: I amaze myself! But my scenario of your love story requires that it was in deference to your love of Mahlon that Boaz agreed—indeed, during those nocturnal hours on the threshing-floor, I would wager!—to the masterstroke (which *you* must have planted in his head!) of obligating the next of kin to perpetuate Mahlon's patrimony. But God—ha! or the scribes—undid your love story. For the genealogy entirely omits Elimelech and Mahlon, inserts Boaz and his father Salmon instead. There's impiety, worthy woman, injury to a soul, the manipulation of you as an object to use, an agent to. . . .<sup>43</sup>