

# "with by committing herself to an older woman

[Art & Culture](#), [Comedy](#)



“ With respect to the requirement of art, the probable impossible is always preferable to the improbable possible.

” These words of Aristotle perfectly describe the book of Ruth. Just like the Genesis stories of Rachael, Leah, and Tamar, the Naomi story subverts the cultural norm, undercutting the patriarchal order to achieve a female-driven agenda. Nehama Aschkenasy in *The Book of Ruth as a Comedy: Classical and Modern Perspectives* agrees that “ A comedic reading of Ruth coincides with a feminist one, because it empowers women and exposes male weaknesses in a culture where this was unexpected.” The book of Ruth was written with a feminist view intending to appeal to women in a male-dominated culture by telling the story with female main character supported by a comedic structure, the opposite of a tragedy. In chapter one (1: 1-22), the introduction gives no indication of the central role that women will play. The book opens with “ a certain man of Bethlehem-Judah,” giving the impression that his sons and wife are only minor characters. But our expectation that Elimelech will be the hero of the story is soon shattered, since the story eventually proclaims his death (1: 3). The reader may think perhaps his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, will be the heroes of the story, but they die too.

The only characters left are three widows: Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Ruth stands alone, without support of human or divine. Moreover, she reverses the traditional system of male superiority by committing herself to an older woman instead, Naomi, in a world where everyday life depends upon men. Furthermore, two women, Ruth and Naomi, occupy center stage. Alongside them are secondary female characters,

<https://assignbuster.com/with-by-committing-herself-to-an-older-woman/>

Orpah (1: 4-14) and the women of Bethlehem (1: 19; 4: 14-7). In fact, a women-centered reading of Ruth grants women a clear and direct voice.

Aschkenasy elaborates further that "The book of Ruth elevates the female figures to the role of the eiron, the conscious creators of the comic spirit, rather than its victims." The beginning of the story succeeds in following along with Greek drama. Greek drama grew out of the worship of Dionysus, the god of fertility, and that the theme of fertility, both of the soil and of the women, is pivotal to this story. Chapter one describes a "famine in the land" forcing Elimelech's family to leave it. It opens with childless women with no prospect of becoming mothers. The book will later end with Ruth giving birth to a son. This comedic element, reverse tragedy, moving from distress to happiness, gives hope to its female audience.

On the other hand, one may fault Ruth for being compliant, ordered around and practically a pawn of Naomi. This is a logical argument. Aschkenasy points out that "The storyteller never comments directly on Ruth's loyalty or other meritorious qualities, nor is anything said about Naomi's gratitude to Ruth, her anxieties, or her somewhat devious plans.

"However, chapter two (2: 1-23) portrays Ruth taking the initiative to find food. Therefore, Ruth is a strong, independent woman regardless if she is loyal to another woman. To continue, by chance (divine) Ruth comes to the field of a prosperous man named Boaz, a relative of Naomi, "of the kindred of Elimelech" (2: 1-3). He asks, "Whose damsel is this?", a patriarchal question. The servant's answer fails to give her name but identifies her as "

the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab" (2: 6).

It separates her identity by her strangeness and from another woman. Here it is cryptically mentioned that this is the season of plenty, the beginning of harvest time. Aschkenasy adds " Thus, the cycle of nature, leading from winter to spring, is paralleled by the cycle of women's lives, which move from death and emptiness to rebirth and the fullness of life." Boaz also allows Ruth to glean in his field and arranges for her safety. A truly significant reversal of fortune, a component of the comedic structure, that entertains an empowering thought of the possibility of a happy ending. If chapter two portrays Ruth's survival struggle, chapter three represents her cultural struggle (3: 1-18). It entails a bold demonstration of persistence, potentially dangerous and compromising.

At the request of Naomi, Ruth agrees to pursue marrying Boaz. The plan is for her to visit him on the threshing floor after celebrating the harvest and fallen asleep. She is to uncover his " feet," presumably a euphemism for genitals, and then he is supposed to tell her what to do. Ruth's actions elicit a question from Boaz asking for her personal identity: " Who art thou?" (3: 9). Ruth answers with her name. Then, contrary to Naomi's assurance, Ruth tells Boaz what to do: " spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman." A foreign woman calls an Israelite man to responsibility. Ruth challenging patriarchy, even while trapped within it, is a significant event.

One that should elicit commemoration from any woman of the time if women power, so to speak, is an honorable demonstration from the women's point of view. Aschkenasy says that Ruth " offers humorous perhaps rebellious critique of law." On the contrary, some people may think that Ruth is just used to espouse the patriarchal values of marriage and progeny, and then discarded. This makes sense because at the most basic level, Ruth is used in a way that fits within the patriarchal values of marriage and progeny. However, Ruth has more meaning than that because Aschkenasy resuscitates the recognition that " Naomi is looking for more than a material solution to their problems... she looks for a redeemer who will provide more than just the comforts of a husband and a home." Naomi's quest for redemption thus gives a spiritual turn to her search for material security and survival. In chapter four (4: 1-22), Ruth, like Naomi, is talked about rather than doing any talking herself. Boaz describes the situation to the unnamed man with the male elders at the city gate, essentially the community gathering place.

When this man learns that his obligation to purchase land from Naomi entails the marrying of Ruth, he refuses (4: 1-6). Boaz is now free to do be a redeemer. The elders that were there for the transaction call Ruth " the woman" and " this young woman", they never use her name. Then they compare her to the ancestral mothers Rachel, Leah, and Tamar.

The elders think of Ruth as fulfilling the traditional values of fertility and the continuation of a male lineage (4: 7-12). Levirate marriage is the obligation of a surviving brother to marry the widow of his brother if he died without

having sired children. According to Aschkenasy, " With Ruth's subtle help, Boaz broadens his conception of the levirate obligation to include not only the widow's brother-in-law, but also her more distant relatives. Ruth teaches Boaz a lesson in the humanitarian interpretation of the law, which he readily accepts." Following along, Boaz takes her as his wife, they conceive a child, and she births a son (4: 13). In effect, Ruth got her way by telling the man what to do, rather than being subservient to him.

Ruth can be seen as an ideological hero for the Bible's women audience. Ruth " offers humorous perhaps rebellious critique of law... The reversal of accepted norms makes the book funny," according to Aschkenasy. " The women's subtle and clever use of language is a means of self-empowerment, of creating a happy reality for themselves out of a situation of hopelessness and emptiness." To emphasize, a clear deviation from the biblical convention of tension and hostility between two women fighting over the same man is illustrated by the combination of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Perhaps this is a deliberate response to Leah and Rachel.

Naomi is the one who fosters the relationship between Ruth and Boaz, teaching her daughter-in-law how to behave with Boaz at night on the threshing floor (3: 2-4). She does so because she desires Ruth's well-being, as she explains from the outset: " My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be will with thee?" (3: 1). Ruth is fully compliant with her mother-in-law, since marrying Boaz would not only enable her to perpetuate the name of the deceased, Naomi's Mahlon, but would also maintain the relationship between her and Naomi. Boaz is the ideal candidate to provide

refuge for both Ruth and Naomi since he is the redeemer and related to Naomi. To repeat, the emphasis the elders gave Boaz," The Lord make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in Bethlehem: and let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bare unto Judah, of the seed which the Lord shall give thee of this young woman" (4: 11-2), illustrates a parallel between Ruth and Naomi and the female figures in Genesis, the matriarchs Rachel and Leah, and Tamar. While the patriarchs are mentioned numerous times in other books in order to lay emphasis on the continuity of God's blessing, this is perhaps the only case where matriarchs are used as an example and especially for the future of the house of Israel.

Moreover, the conundrum of why the book of Ruth emphasizes the attribution of building the house of Israel to two matriarchs, and the connection there is between this and the case of Ruth can be resolved if the blessing is extended to Naomi. Just as Rachel and Leah together built the house of Israel, so will Ruth and Naomi build the house of Boaz together. The book of Ruth presents a different model of relationships between two women. Consequently, this comes to correct a flaw in the Genesis story of Rachel and Leah, who were tense to the point of hostility to each other.

One of only two books in the Bible named after a women, Ruth's relationship with Naomi makes clear that rivalry is not necessarily a predominant feature in relationships between women, even in types of relationships that are particularly prone to conflict. This is a relationship triumph and a good

example for women. In Aristotle's Poetics, he distinguishes between the genres of "poetry" in three ways. One of them being "Subjects", he further elaborates on comedy as "treats of less virtuous people and focuses on human 'weaknesses and foibles'". This is precisely how the author of the book of Ruth was able to appeal to their women audience.

By using Boaz, or perhaps more broadly men, as showing a rather humorous weakness, that being as Aschkenasy describes, "during spring celebrations, men become so intoxicated that they are unable to return home to their own beds and therefore must remain overnight in the open field," women can see themselves as set upon a pedestal because there is only mention of this happening to men, not women. Without this weakness in men, Naomi's and Ruth's scheme never would have worked. To sum up, the book of Ruth as a comedy empowers women and exposes male weaknesses. The book doesn't even require a feminist interpretation as it can be seen as already a deliberate and substantial gift to women. Through the use of a comedic structure consisting of unity of plot as required by Aristotle, a pyramidal structure, and Aristotle's primary tragic elements with the exception of moving from distress to happiness, the book of Ruth ought to appeal to women in ways the no other story included in the Bible can. Maybe even considered rebellious, the book of Ruth might have been authored as a way of encouraging women to challenge the status quo.

As Muhammad Ali puts it, "No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men."