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## **Rhetoric, Saliency and the Reader in the Saddle: A Response to James Phelan**

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Having followed with great interest James Phelan's extension and, perhaps, completion of Wayne C. Booth's rhetorical poetics of narrative, I read "Authors, Resources, Audiences" with great admiration, but also with the uncomfortable feeling that Phelan has mischaracterized audiences as attentive but essentially passive partners with the author on their journey together. It has been my sense from the history of biblical interpretation that readers have a tendency to get into the saddle and determine by their own concerns the saliency of the narrative details. Along the way, I would like to respond to the "Probable Impossibilities" section with what I hope is an improvement on Phelan's analysis of the way readers ignore features of a text that would render its progression realistically impossible, or worse, incoherent.

The "Expenses of the Month" narrative discussed by Phelan in pp. 21-27 is a comic if crudely sexist joke at the expense of a fictional philandering boss. But it is a potentially incoherent narrative, because it works only if the reader (let us call him Reader One) ignores the extratextual fact that it would be impossible for the stenographer to become pregnant by her boss and learn that she was pregnant within the timeline of the expense diary. A different reader (let us call her Reader Two) who focuses her attention on the dates in the expense diary can create a different narrative, about a feckless but enterprising stenographer who, having become pregnant by another man, seduces her new boss in order to blackmail him into paying for an abortion. But that narrative is also incoherent because it requires the boss to be as clueless about biology and about dates as Reader One is.

Phelan resolves this paradox through what he calls the Meta-Rule of Dominant Focus, which seems to be related to what Peter Rabinowitz called in *Before Reading* "Rules of Notice." By convention, Phelan argues, we pay attention to *sequences* and *contrasts* in the

expense diary, we note the fact that the boss pays the stenographer weekly salaries that go from \$45 to \$60 to \$75, that the boss takes his stenographer to the theatre but his wife to the movies, because those sequences and contrasts are *salient*, they lead us to *inferences* about the growing intimacy of the boss and the stenographer. But we are not really paying attention to the precise dates as such, and so we do not ask the possible question “How did the stenographer learn she was pregnant so quickly,” just as we ignore other questions without salience, like “Did her boss give the stenographer Columbus Day off with pay?” or “Why did the stenographer get paid on Wednesday her first week but on Friday the next two weeks?” With few exceptions fictional dates are not salient, although Henry Fielding appears to have worked out the calendar of *Tom Jones* with the aid of an almanac.<sup>1</sup>

For actual narrative readers, the salience of narrative details may depend on the particular way they frame the narrative, which in turn will depend on their interests in what is going on in the real world, a world that may not bear much resemblance to the world that inspired the actual writer of the narrative. Let me illustrate this with a text written more than two millennia before the ones Phelan discusses, the biblical Book of Ruth.

Ruth is a brief text set “at the time when the judges judged,” before the Israelite monarchy. Because of a famine, Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons journey from Bethlehem to Moab, where the two sons marry Moabite girls named Orpah and Ruth. In the course of the next ten years, Elimelech and the two sons die; Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are all left widowed and childless. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, as the famine is over, and she suggests to her daughters-in-law that they

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<sup>1</sup> Wilbur Cross asserts that the description of Tom Jones leaving the Whitefields’ inn at Gloucester around 5:00p.m. just at moonrise, and walking to Mazard Hill by the light of what is described as a full moon suggests not only that Fielding consulted an almanac for the phase and rising time of the moon, but that the date is November 28–29, 1745 (*History of Henry Fielding* 2:189–190.)

return to their fathers' houses. Orpah does so, but Ruth insists on staying with Naomi, and speaks the famous verses "Whither thou goest I will go, where thou lodgest I will lodge, thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die and there will I be buried." So Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest, and Ruth gleans barley from the unrealed corners of the field of Boaz, a wealthy relative of her late father-in-law Elimelech. Boaz treats Ruth kindly, and Naomi advises Ruth to continue to glean there, to go to the party held after the threshing of the grain, and to lie down near Boaz after he has eaten, drunk wine, and fallen asleep. Ruth does as she is told, and when Boaz gets up during the night, he not only notices Ruth but explains that he has plans for her. The next morning Boaz goes to the city gate, where public business is transacted, and buttonholes a kinsman more closely related than he is, explaining that the land belonging to Elimelech and his sons is for sale. The relative is at first eager to buy it, but refuses when he learns that he will have to marry Ruth into the bargain. Having established himself as the closest male kinsman who is willing, Boaz buys the land and marries Ruth. They not only live happily ever after, but their son, Obed, becomes the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David the anointed king of Israel.

Contemporary readings of Ruth tend to emphasize the gender issues that the story raises. For Phyllis Trible, Ruth's vow to Naomi reverses "sexual allegiance . . . One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel" (Trible 258). The book as a whole "suggests a theological interpretation of feminism . . . Ruth and the females of Bethlehem are a paradigm of radicality" who are "women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture. What they reflect, they challenge" (279). For Lori Lefkowitz, "The main metaphors in the book of Ruth are food and sex. The book of Ruth begins with famine in the land and barren women, and it ends with plenitude, a successful seduction in fields of waving barley, and an unusually promising baby on Naomi's, his grandmother's, lap. As in many stories in the Hebrew Bible, the individual

female body, the land of Israel, and the body politic symbolically stand in for one another – alternately barren and fertile, depleted and blessed – and it is the individual who perseveres to satisfy life’s hungers who moves humanity forward on the road to ultimate redemption” (Lefkovitz 143). Mieke Bal, working the less-visited side of the gender street, enters this story through a metatext, Victor Hugo’s poem “Booz endormi,” which features neither sisterhood nor female fecundity, but rather the masculine fears of age and impotence implicit in the wishful dream of the elderly childless Boaz. The dream of an oak tree that grows out of his belly and becomes the tree of Jesse represents the Lacanian phallus, born of the empty pit of need that he must fill. Within the biblical story, similarly, Bal concludes that “if Boaz is a hero, it is because he dares to assume the point of view of the woman, because he has understood that it is in his interest to do so” (Bal 87). Whether the primary issue is Ruth cleaving to Naomi, the sexual attraction between Boaz and Ruth, or the need within patriarchal culture for the sons through whom land is transmitted, the salience of gender seems overwhelming.

But the salience of gender issues might have been less clear to a reader who lived around the time when the book of Ruth was composed. Although it is set in an era before the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, and in Christian Bibles placed between Judges and 1 Samuel, the position of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible is among the Writings rather than the Law or the Prophets, indicating that this is a late text. Most of it is in simple classical Hebrew, but phrases influenced by Aramaic suggest a date in the middle third of the fifth century BCE, when what used to be the kingdom of Israel had become a province of the Persian Empire. The exiles had returned from Babylon, the Temple had been rebuilt and rededicated, and under the leadership of Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the provincial governor the walls of Jerusalem rose again.

But other walls were rising at the same time. During the Davidic monarchy, anyone living in Israel was the king’s subject and implicitly part of the nation, but for the

Achaemenid emperors of Persia the Israelites were merely an ethnic group, and ethnic groups maintain themselves over time by endogamy. The last chapters of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are primarily concerned with this issue; Ezra demands that the Israelites divorce their non-Israelite wives (Ezra 10:10–12) while Nehemiah insists on the same rule, and in fact punishes those who resist (Nehemiah 13: 23–25). And the people agree, though not unanimously, as the book of Ezra grudgingly concedes.

If we read Ruth with the issue of ethnic purity in mind, what we will notice is nationality more than gender. We will notice that Ruth is referred to, not just once but no less than seven times in this short text, as “Ruth the Moabitess.” And the Moabitess was the quintessence of forbidden fruit. It was the women of Moab with whom the Israelites sinned in Numbers 25, and in Deuteronomy 23 we are told that “no descendant of . . . a Moabite may enter the Assembly of the LORD to the tenth generation.” Lasciviousness was in their national origin: the Moabites descend from Lot, whose daughters got him drunk, seduced him, and had children by him after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19: 30–38).

So the story of Ruth, the narrative of her loyalty to Naomi and her loving kindness to both Naomi and Boaz, her exemplary character as a convert to the life and religion of her mother-in-law’s people, was constructed as counter-propaganda to the ethnic cleansing demanded by the ethnarchs Ezra and Nehemiah. And at the end we are reminded that Ruth was a great-grandmother of the anointed David. The name of Ruth does not appear in any other biblical book that mentions King David’s ancestry, but David surely had Moabite connections. We know this because he caches his parents across the Jordan in Moab when he is on the run from King Saul (1 Samuel 22:3–4), and he himself flees across the Jordan into Moab before the temporarily triumphant armies of Absalom (2 Samuel 17:22). Deuteronomy to the contrary notwithstanding, David not only led the “assembly of the LORD” but danced before the ark of the covenant. In one final ethnic note, as the elders at the city gate bless Boaz’s union with Ruth, they pray:

“Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Judah” (Ruth 4: 12). The story of Tamar in Genesis 38 is of a Canaanite woman, widowed by not one but two of Judah’s sinful sons, a woman so determined to have sons with a rightful share in the blessing handed down by Abraham that she seduces her father-in-law Judah and bears him twins. So Boaz of Bethlehem too has a non-Israelite ancestress, one whom Judah was forced to admit was “more righteous than I.”

Like character–character dialogue in Phelan’s essay, the Book of Ruth is also Wittgenstein’s rabbit-duck. Constructed in an age when new rules of ethnic purity were being adopted, it would have been understood as a text about nationality, about the tolerance we need to show for the virtuous foreign wives of ethnic Israelites. Read in an age when gender roles were rapidly changing, it becomes a story about female agency and the need for patriarchal males to accept, indeed to embrace, the new world that will result.

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